

RIANA UNVEILED

Tyler Blackwood



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By
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Prologue

*March, 1980
Denver, Colorado*

Dominic de Santo had never seen anything so beautiful in all his life. Riana's dark hair was a mess. The makeup she been wearing mingled with her sweat and slid down her cheeks in dark rivulets. The bed she lay in was a sopping-wet disaster. She'd nearly bitten his head off twice, but he couldn't have cared less.

The new child in her arms and the light in her green eyes was a magic he'd never seen before.

Nic looked at the boy. "What's his name?"

"Alexei," she said, touching the babe's cheek. "I should probably name him Willis, after my favorite uncle, but I think Alexei fits him better, don't you?"

"Yeah, it's a nice name." Nic had assumed all babies were born bald, not that he knew. This one had a head of jet black hair, just like his mother.

The midwife, Megan, appeared in the doorway and tapped on the wood. "Pardon the interruption. I've cleaned up, so if there's nothing else, I'll go now."

"I'll walk you out," Nic said with a smile.

He kissed the top of Riana's head then followed the blonde down the stairs to the front door.

She was young, by their standards--only three hundred years old. Considered the finest midwife in the Northern part of the country, Megan could charge a hefty price for her services. Nic had wanted the best money could buy, so he'd happily paid it. Nothing was too good for Riana.

At the door, Megan stopped and looked at him. "You have a very handsome son, Nic. You must be so proud."

"I am." Nic reached up to smooth Megan's hair. She was beautiful in a plain-Jane kind of way and he genuinely liked her. Her father, at one time a great Defender, had saved Nic's ass more than once. Nic still owed him for that, but doubted the debt would be repaid.

In fact, he was sure of it. He'd lived a fast life, and as Riana liked to remind him, you live fast, you die faster. His past was always just a breath away from catching up with him, so he didn't have the luxury of hanging around. Not that he feared death or even had much interest in living a long time. He just wanted it on his own terms, when he was damn good and ready.

For his purposes today, he had no choice but to modify Megan's memories. No one among their kind could know the truth.

Locking his gaze to hers, he quickly captured her mind and held it. They called it the sen-ilendi, in the ancient language, the mind lock. He just called it the Eskarian version of hypnosis. That's all it really was. Had she been older, he probably wouldn't be able to do this. Seasoned Eskarians could feel the ilendi right away, but Megan had

studied herbs and everything that went with delivering babies and motherhood.

Her telepathic skills were negligible.

Nic ran his thumb across Megan's bottom lip. Completely under his spell, Megan could only gaze up at him and wait for his command. Too bad he didn't have time for something a little more ... interesting.

"Megan, Riana and I are benekedas. You know, perfect mates. We belong together. No matter what anyone else tells you, you will always believe what I've said is true."

She blinked and then nodded, a sweet smile on her face. "You two make a good-looking couple. I'll bet you hear that a lot."

"All the time." He released her, physically and mentally. "Thank you--and thank you for your hard work today. Have a safe trip home."

He closed the door after she left.

Returning upstairs, he found Riana on her side, her head propped on her elbow. She was watching her son sleep. She looked so amazing, lying there, with her dark hair over one shoulder. How this woman could capture his heart and soul, so completely, was beyond his understanding.

She blinked away tears before looking up at him. "Are you going to stay with us?"

"For a while. I don't really have anything pressing, so yeah, I can stay."

She smiled. "Good. I'm glad."

"Yeah, me too." He took a chair near the bed and kept an eye on her until she grew tired enough to sleep, little Alexei curled up against her.

Nic had no family himself, and hadn't for several hundred years. He knew nothing about what qualities made for a good mother, but suspected that whatever it was, Riana had it in spades.

He let out a slow exhale. Too bad she'd never be allowed to keep the boy.

He felt bad about that, but the Plan had been made almost two thousand years ago, and the child was crucial to its success. That's all that mattered. The life of one woman--albeit an immortal one--did not. And while he'd loved her for as long as he could remember, he couldn't let that affect his decisions or cloud his judgment, a choice he'd regretted from the beginning.

His gaze returned to Riana. He liked watching her sleep.

Slouching in the chair, Nic laced his fingers together and rested them on his stomach. A moment later, with thoughts of Riana tumbling around his mind, he drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

A knock on the door downstairs jolted him awake.

Riana and the child were still asleep.

He scrubbed his face then pushed both hands through his hair. Pushing off from the chair, he started for the front door at a casual pace.

He knew who waited on the other side and, in fact, had expected the visit.

At the front door, Nic took in a deep breath. He never had liked dealing with these people. Their blatant and irresponsible use of magic chafed him--not that he was much better, but at least he only took life when necessary. Well, most of the time it was necessary.

But these people, these Falcons, they planned to destroy thousands. The ramifications gave him pause. And he hesitated at very little.

Opening the heavy wood door, Nic gave a tight smile. "Lovely to see you again, Cody."

The blond man sneered. "Save it, Defender. Where's the mother?"

Nic tilted his head toward the stairs. "Upstairs, sleeping, the son is with her."

Cody took a step forward. "I'll take the boy back to Calizimar with me. You do that mind thing you're so famous for and make the mother think ... I don't care. Make her believe whatever you want."

Nic stopped Cody with a palm to the Falcon's chest. "You're not taking the boy today."

"Why not?"

"Because you people don't have the knowledge to raise an Eskarian child," he lied. "You'd kill him with your stupidity. I'm sure Dane didn't consider that one tiny fact in his Plan, did he?"

Cody thought a moment and then shrugged. "Apparently not."

"He didn't. I can tell you that for a fact. If you do this now, I guarantee your Plan will fail. Eskarian children have different needs. They're not like humans, and they sure as hell aren't like you. She needs five years to raise the boy. Go tell Dane you'll come back here in five years. Show up sooner and I'll break your neck."

Cody took several steps back. "He's not going to like it."

Nic shrugged. "He'll like it even less if his Plan goes to shit. Now go. I'll watch over her. If anything changes, you'll be the first to know."

He had no intention of sticking around that long, but whatever it took to get Cody out of his hair and away from Riana for a while, that's what he'd say. He couldn't protect the child forever but figured a few years were better than none.

He could only hope she'd agree.

* * * *

April 10th, 1985

Riana thought someone was talking to her. Or maybe she was still dreaming. She couldn't be sure. Her head was pounding and every muscle in her body hurt like hell.

She felt gravel against her cheek. *Great.* She was face down in the driveway.

"You have to get up, girl."

Nic?

"Where's my son?"

No answer.

The fog that had shrouded her brain was starting to lift. The smell of sulfur and grapefruit was so strong it burned her nostrils.

Aw, damn, she knew what that was.

Along with it came the fear of what could happen, of possibilities that shouldn't have been.

Magic.

The Order of the Red Falcon had come.

They'd said they wanted her son, her son for God's sake. They wanted to take him away ... said he belonged to them.

Like hell, he did.

She'd refused and had drawn her dagger, prepared to defend her son, her home and her life. Then they'd blasted her with magic so powerful it had nearly turned her inside out.

She wasn't sure what happened after that. Nic had appeared out of nowhere and somehow chased the Falcons away. If he hadn't, she was certain the Falcons would have Alexei now, and based on how she felt this very moment, she probably wouldn't have survived."

"Nic, where's my son?"

Again, no response.

Lifting her head off the gravel, she brushed away the rocks that clung to her wet skin and looked around.

Nic was gone, and Alexei was right beside her.

Thank the gods.

The magic had affected him, too. His dark, curly hair was wet and stuck to his forehead. His little body trembled.

He rolled onto his side and opened his amber-colored eyes. "Mama, I don't feel so good."

* * * *

April 20th, 1985

Cozumel, Mexico

"Are you certain this is what you want?" Aleeta asked.

Riana nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Yes, I'm sure. I can't lose my son. They have such powerful magic. I just can't fight it alone and have no one to turn to for help."

That bastard, Nic, had bailed on her days ago. Her attempts to contact him had gone unanswered, her pleas ignored. He was her last and only hope. Her own people would shun an unbound mother and her half-breed son.

She didn't know what else to do.

"Ah, yes," Aleeta said, toying with her braids. "I know of the Falcons. Their magic is quite powerful, second only to ours."

Aleeta was Nitooki, a tribe indigenous to another dimension. Her chocolate-colored skin matched the long, braided hair, a shocking contrast to her purple eyes. Like amethyst, her eyes glittered with power, as if the magic thrummed through her small body.

Aleeta's people had come here thousands of years ago, bringing with them a magic more powerful than anything Riana had ever experienced.

Perfect for her needs.

Aleeta studied Riana's son. "The boy is not what he seems. He is both human and animal."

"Yes," Riana admitted. "We call that the duality of being. We can take either form whenever we want."

"His animal side is feline."

Riana hadn't known that. His Primal wouldn't emerge for another fifteen years, after he reached adulthood. "Feline. Like me."

“Like you and the father,” Aleeta amended. She went to the work table where several glass jars held the potions she used to create her magic. She picked up one, a thick, milky solution, and poured it into a small paper cup. She turned to Alexei.

Like the father....

Fresh tears burned her eyes. Damn it. Shouldn't have been like this.

“Drink this, boy,” Aleeta said. “I won't lie to you, the stuff tastes horrible. Drink it all down anyway.”

Alexei did as he was told while Aleeta whispered words Riana didn't understand.

When he finished, he made a sour face. “Blech.”

“It is done.” Aleeta nodded in satisfaction. “He will remain the same forever, always a little boy on the inside, but an animal on the outside, as if he were frozen in time. What's his name?”

Riana snuffled, and pushed away the overwhelming sorrow. She hated what she'd had to do, just to save her son's life.

Yet, ahead of them was a new life, away from the Falcons, away from everyone, a chance to begin anew.

“Willis.”

Chapter One

Vashon Island, Washington, May 2004

“Okay, this is the place.” Riana said, swapping her sunglasses for a Stetson. Now that the sun had dipped below the tree-lined horizon, she didn’t need them. Here, no one would question the way her eyes glowed when they caught a sliver of sunlight. Here, they would be safe.

Probably.

Valeriana Secundinus looked at her son. “I guess I might as well get this over with.”

She got out, plucked her denim jacket from the back seat of the convertible, and shrugged it on.

Willis nodded, his attention focused on something in the forest across the street.

He was still quiet today, but better than yesterday, definitely better than the day before. At least he was talking again. After the Falcon attack, she was terrified she’d lost him forever.

Twenty five years ago, she’d dropped out of Eskarian society, hoping to stay as far away from her people as she could. Immortals didn’t forget much, especially when it came to scandals. It seemed like someone always wanted to see you fail.

Riana wasn’t stupid enough to believe she could hide indefinitely, but with some luck and planning, she’d thought she might manage a hundred years, maybe two.

“No such luck,” she muttered.

In all fairness, they hadn’t found her. She’d sought them out because she had no choice. The Falcons had found them again. This time, they stole her son and set her home ablaze--with her still inside.

Her stomach twisted into knots.

No choice at all.

A quick snap of her wrist opened the cell phone. Pulling a tattered scrap of paper from her breast pocket, Riana looked at the name, the telephone number, then the name again. She was still astounded he’d been in the phone book.

If she could call anyone a friend, it would be Griffin McCallum. He’d been her commanding officer eons ago, and she’d hated him then. His harsh discipline left her ego bruised and her feelings hurt, but eventually she got over it. Later still, she came to rely on his strong, protective instincts.

They’d fallen into an uneasy alliance, born out of a mutual need to belong. Riana needed that sense of security. What Griffin got out of their arrangement, she didn’t know. He wasn’t the kind to share, and she’d been unwilling to ask.

Some things, like family and friends, you tried to keep for as long as you could.

She’d taken a huge risk to come here. She’d known that when she’d made the phone call two nights ago, but at the time she couldn’t see that she’d had much of a choice. Fear could do that--make you forget to look at the whole picture.

Even if she had, would her decision have been any different?

She didn't think so, and that's what bothered her. For all she knew, her people would laugh in her face, call her a whore, and toss her out on her ear. Add traitor to that, and her day would be complete.

But her son had to come first. For him, she would risk the contempt of her people.

Looking at Willis, she blew out a breath and momentarily entertained the thought of getting back in the car. They could go to a hotel or even another town. They could go anywhere.

"Ugh," she said, realizing she'd be stupid to even try. The Falcons wouldn't be fooled so easily.

She faced the mansion again. What she needed was inside those walls, her people.

"Come on." She glanced at her cell phone. Nothing was going to make this any easier. "Call. Get it over with."

Her birth family had shunned her when she'd chosen to become a Defender. Her parents had been horrified. Eskarian women became doctors, lawyers, professors, scientists.

Not Defenders. No woman was suited to that kind of life. Why would she want something so chaotic, so dangerous? They didn't understand. Didn't she want a family? A home?

Of course, she did, just not at that particular time. She had eternity to find her benekeda, her true mate. That part would come someday. As far as she knew, she didn't have a benekeda.

Her friends thought she'd gone nuts. There'd been days when she'd wondered the same thing, but then, she'd realized the adventure appealed to her, as did the danger. In the end, she was proud of what she'd become, a Defender, a soldier in an immortal army, the only woman in Eskarian history to do that.

Yeah, *major* accomplishment.

Then, one day, the Fates turned against her, and she became pregnant before she'd found her benekeda. Disgraced, embarrassed, she never told anyone. Had she remained, she would've brought shame to her family. She couldn't bear to hurt the people she loved, couldn't tell them.

Or Griffin.

Or Jason, her best friend from her days in Malanaya, once the Eskarian homeland in Basque. Long ago.

Because of that, she simply disappeared. Poof. Like a Ghostcat. Gone.

Now, here she was with her humiliation still fresh after twenty-five years. Strange how events like that could hang suspended in time. She'd forgotten about it all these years, and now here it was, when she least expected it, powerful as ever.

She punched in Griffin's number with trembling fingers.

He picked up after the second ring. "M'Callum."

"We're here," she said, "at the front gate."

Riana leaned against the side of her red Corvette and let her tired eyes close a moment. She'd parked the car just past the entrance to the vast estate with its rolling lawn, protected by the surrounding forest. The black iron security gate was wide open, but if she had to guess, she'd say no intruder ever made it to the house without running into trouble, lots of it.

“Be there in a minute.” *Click.*

“Uh,” she said, looking at the phone. “Okay. Still the master of conversation, aren’t you, Commander?”

She snapped it shut and faced Willis. “Griffin’s coming for me. I want you to stay here while I talk to him. You’re safe now. You can feel them all around you, can’t you? You’re totally protected.”

He nodded again, not bothering to look at her.

Well, after what happened, she couldn’t really blame him.

“It’ll be all right. You’ll see. These guys will help. They’ll make sure no Falcon ever touches you again.”

He looked at her a moment, his brow furrowed, then turned back to the forest.

Okay, he said.

Riana hated that look. Whatever she had to do to erase the fear from his handsome little face, that’s what she’d do. Coming here was a start. Killing every Falcon on the face of the planet would make it better. If she could have accomplished that by herself, those Falcons would already be dead, and she wouldn’t be here now, groveling for help. That their wretched kind spanned the globe was the only reason they were still alive.

Bastards. For what they’d done to her son, they’d pay.

She stretched over the convertible, brushed his furry little cheek.

“Maybe we’ll go for some pizza later. What do you think?”

His gaze swung to hers. He smiled a gleaming display of small, sharp teeth. *With pepperoni?*

“Absolutely,” she said, grinning.

Okay.

Willis could eat regular food and pizza was his absolute favorite, especially when it included pepperoni or sausage and extra cheese.

“Okay,” she echoed.

Good. He was finally starting to act like himself.

Relieved, she resumed her study of the estate. Piled stone markers flanked the long driveway made of brick. To her left, the lush, verdant forest provided a natural barrier, and afforded some soundproofing from potentially noisy neighbors. The mansion was a Georgian-style beauty, painted soft slate blue with cream-colored shutters. Though it had more rooms than most people would ever need, it appealed to her just the same. It looked comfortable and inviting, like home.

Like the one they didn’t have anymore.

“Christ,” she whispered, looking at her trembling hands.

Anger and resentment welled up inside her. As it was, she’d barely escaped the burning house, only to find Willis gone. *Gone.* Goosebumps raced over her skin at the thought.

Then her skin chilled thinking about what she’d done.

A day after they’d left, she called her ranch manager, Dale, and asked that he handle whatever needed to be handled; police, firefighters. Whatever, it didn’t matter. She hadn’t been prepared to handle anything then, and knew Dale could. Though he was human, he knew the risks and would make sure no evidence of her kind remained.

It was the same with the Falcons.

Not that anything *had* been left behind.

The investigating authorities would rule the blaze an accident and that would be the end of it. She'd done the only thing she could to ensure Willis's safety.

But now that she was here, she was afraid to face Blair and whoever else might be hanging around. Afraid of what they'd say about her. And she knew they'd talk. They'd all wonder how she could come back after what she'd done.

You just didn't break the rules and expect no repercussions. And she hadn't.

Thinking about all that made her head hurt. She rubbed the tender spot between her eyes with her fingers then, turning to Willis, put on as bright a smile as she could muster.

"Are you looking forward to meeting other Eskarians?"

No.

Her smile faded. For most of his life, it had been just the two of them. Their lives had been good--happy and peaceful, at least up until two days ago, and he'd enjoyed hearing stories of his Defender brothers. "Why not? I thought you wanted to meet others like us. I told you my friends Griffin and Jason were big, strong Defenders. Don't you want to see them?"

He glared at her. *No, I don't. I want to go home.*

"You might like them. Why don't you meet them first? If you don't like them, then we'll talk about going home, okay?" She hoped that would buy a little time.

Okay. He returned his attention to the forest.

"I think you'll like them. They have lots of cool weapons."

He nodded.

He'd withdrawn again. Maybe she'd wait a few minutes and then try to draw him out again.

The sudden image in her mind of Willis shrieking in terror, his small bobcat form writhing in the grip of a laughing Falcon, solidified her resolve to protect him.

She shuddered.

The memory of the Falcon's dead body was much easier to handle, and the fact he never saw her dagger coming gave her a perverse sense of satisfaction. Vengeance wasn't really her way, but she couldn't find a reason to deny herself this one small indulgence.

Anyway, the bastard deserved it for trying to hurt her son.

The Falcon's death, however, drew the attention and ire of the other members of his assault team, and they'd come after her. She'd fled to the only car that hadn't been torched, Willis cradled in her arms, and driven like a madwoman to get here.

Another shiver ran down her spine.

If she was lucky, no one else was around, and she could get in and out of the house without too much trouble. The fewer people she saw, the better, the fewer questions, the better. Her life was no one's business anyway.

Riana took a deep, calming breath and tugged the brim of her cowboy hat a little lower. Maybe they wouldn't recognize her.

Snorting, she mentally laughed at that. Since she hadn't changed at all in hundreds of years, she thought it unlikely. Better to hope they were all out chasing Razor demons or subterranean sand dragons.

The tiny hairs on the back of her neck lifted with the whisper of electricity in the air. They weren't alone anymore.

She looked at Willis.

“Griffin’s here. Wait for me, okay?”

Yes, Mama.

As she started forward, a lion padded out from the nearby trees. The great beast lumbered to the middle of the driveway and blocked her path to the house. Instinctively, she reached behind her for the sheathed dagger tucked into the back of her jeans.

The lion watched with dangerously glittering silver eyes and a curious tilt of his head, as if waiting to see what she’d do.

“Oh, crap, sorry, Griffin.” She released her grip on the hilt and offered a thin smile. She hadn’t shifted to her Primal, the primary animal shape that was an inherent part of every Eskarian, since she’d dropped from Eskarian society, and had grown unaccustomed to people having that duality of being.

The lion watched her a moment, then shifted from animal to man. The eyes always stayed the same, no matter what form the body took.

“Valeriana,” he said. “Good to see you again. What, you forgot about our ability to shift?” He gave her a lopsided smile.

“Griffin.” She shrugged. “It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has. I’d heard rumors you’d died in some great battle. Apparently not.”

He shifted his weight to one leg. He looked relaxed and casual in his faded denim jeans, white T-shirt and black blazer, but she knew better. One wrong move and he’d have her up against the car, his hand at her throat. Then all he had to do was squeeze and it would be over.

Nothing casual about this one, he was power and control, all wrapped up in one great, hulking wall of a man.

She cleared her throat. “No, my last battle was with an Enterran tarmeiser. I think I lost that one.” She shrugged.

He lifted a brow. “You think? You’re not sure?”

She looked away so the heat seeping into her cheeks wouldn’t be too obvious.

“Well, I was in bad shape, took a claw across the throat,” she said as she touched the base of her neck, beneath her shirt a long scar trailed from that point to the middle of her collarbone, “and a spike through the chest. After that, I didn’t really care what happened to the Tarmeiser. Healing took a long time.”

“I see.” He tilted his head, curiosity in his liquid-silver eyes. “How long ago was that?”

“Ten years.” Another shrug.

“Long time.”

“Maybe it was a long time for humans, not us.”

Griffin chuckled. “True. I meant it’s a long time for a Defender to be inactive, too long, really. You’ll have to train again before I can reinstate you.”

Ah, the thought nearly made her shiver. “I didn’t come here to be reinstated.”

“Oh. I see.”

The spring breeze lifted strands of his auburn hair. Odd that he’d finally cut it to shoulder length. As long as she’d known him, he’d always worn it halfway down his back, often in a tail. When had that happened?

“About thirty years ago,” he answered aloud. “I did it mostly to keep up with the times, even got rid of the braids.”

He turned his head to the side. For so long, two thin braids had trailed down his

back. He adorned them with colored threads and, occasionally, rings of gold or silver.

“Those are gone, too.”

Riana’s eyebrows shot up. How easily he’d read her mind. She normally kept her thoughts closed to everyone but Willis. Effortlessly, it seemed, he’d blasted through all her safeguards. But then, Griffin honed his mental abilities as much as the physical ones.

“After so many centuries, what made you do that?”

He smiled. “A little wolf named Annalissa.”

“A wolf?” She frowned. “I hope you’re not talking about a demon wolf.”

“No, I’m not. Lissa is my mate.” He paused to look at Willis and then gave her one of those knowing smiles that often made her nervous. “Well, I’m sure you didn’t come here to listen to my blather. Is Blair expecting you?”

She dropped her gaze to the ground and studied the dirt on her boots. “Ah ... no, he isn’t.”

“Won’t be a problem, he’ll welcome you home anyway, I’m sure. Come then,” he said, tipping his head toward the house. “I’ll take you to him. Bring your friend.”

She glanced back at Willis. “I thought it would be best if--”

“Bring him.” Griffin lifted one beautifully arched brow.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

She’d left her home almost a thousand years ago and hadn’t seen Griffin since, but Eskarian memory was an amazing thing. It didn’t seem like so much time had passed.

She remembered her Defender training, remembered how she’d spent more than a little time face down in the mud, rain pelting the back of her head, Griffin hovering over her like a winged demon Delivering orders in a silken voice that dripped with menace, the kind that made your toes curl in abject fear.

Now, *that* seemed like moments ago, not centuries.

Christ. She shouldn’t have come back.

Wiping her damp palms on her jeans, Riana thought again about just getting in the car and leaving. She would’ve, but the fear on Willis’s face and the promise of another Falcon attack kept her here. Kept her standing in front of the man whose fierce disposition and quick temper made the people around him jumpy and irritable.

Gathering her faltering courage, she went to the passenger-side door and opened it. “Guess you’re making an appearance right away.”

The bobcat hopped out of the car and took his place beside her. She prayed the spell would hold, and that no one would realize what he really was. Or, more importantly, who he was. His anonymity was crucial now.

She followed Griffin to the old Georgian, silently appreciating the details. The front lawn was thick and verdant. To her right, a garden bursting with flowers of every color surrounded a large bubbling fountain. Beautiful rose bushes flanked the walk to the front door.

Griffin opened the heavy oak door and stepped aside. She took the two steps to the porch, past the white marble lions. One held a crystal ball under its clawed foot, and the other stood over a cub. The baby pawed at its mother.

Riana smiled. A cub. Family. Love. Home. Her stomach fluttered at the thought. Her home had been demolished.

She turned to make sure Willis was still behind her. “You doing okay, buddy?”

He smiled his toothy smile. *I guess so. How long are we going to be here?*

“I don’t really know yet. Do you remember what I told you?” She knelt and brushed his cheeks with her thumbs.

Yes, Willis said. Be good and don’t get into trouble.

“And?”

He snorted and then licked his nose.

“And,” she repeated, to ensure she had his complete attention.

Be patient.

“That’s right. Remember, these are my friends,” she said, glancing toward Griffin. “They can help us.”

Okay, no trouble.

“Good.” She straightened and stepped over the threshold. “Stay close to me.”

Taking off her hat, she smoothed her hair and scanned her surroundings.

They were in the foyer, which opened into a great room. The far wall contained a built-in bookshelf that went from floor to ceiling. Statues and artifacts from different periods in history adorned many of the shelves. In the center was a saltwater aquarium. Small sharks and blowfish patrolled the perimeter of the massive tank while smaller fish sought the safety of anemones and coral.

Tall windows let afternoon sun in, bathing towering Ficus trees and leather furniture in golden light. It was beautiful.

“Come,” Griffin said.

He led her and Willis down a long hallway to the study. Opening a tall, wooden door, he stepped back so they could enter.

“Blair will see you in a minute or two.”

She faced him, dipping her head. “Thanks, Griffin, ’preciate it.”

He nodded back, giving her a little smile. “Welcome back.”

He closed the door without giving her a chance to respond.

“Hmph,” she said to the heavy wood. “Good to see you, too.”

Not that she meant it.

Sorry I have to come here and beg for help.

That was the truth.

I never wanted to see any of you again.

Also true.

Smells musty, Willis said, sniffing at the curtains. Like old socks.

“Like old books and leather,” she corrected.

Books and socks, he said, grinning. The leather is good. Smells like home. When can we go home?

Riana set both hands on her hips, shaking her head. He’d been too traumatized to realize their home was on fire. She’d covered his face with her coat and rushed him to the car and was grateful he hadn’t asked why her clothes had smelled of smoke.

“I’m not sure. Depends on what Blair says. And what did I just tell you about patience?”

I don’t know.

“Yes, you do,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

Willis huffed out a breath. She heard his singsong laughter inside her head and smiled. Knowing he felt better went a long way toward lifting her spirits.

Bookcases stretched from wall to wall on either side of her. Behind her, a huge picture window offered an exquisite view of the rear courtyard. In front there was a large brick fireplace and the door to the hall. Two cream-colored leather couches faced the fireplace, flanked by large leather chairs. It was easy to imagine Blair spending hours here, either strategizing how to defeat the latest threat or simply reading and enjoying a bit of quiet time.

A moment later, he opened the door. She felt the brush of his mind against hers and the resulting bewilderment when he found it closed.

“Riana. You’ve come back to us.” Blair Atkinson drew her into his arms, gave her a warm hug, and gently patted her back. “Welcome home.”

Immediately, she relaxed. Maybe she’d been afraid for no reason.

“Thank you.” She pulled from his embrace. “How have you been?”

“Fine, fine,” he said, going to one of the chairs. He extended his hand toward the couch. “Please, sit. Be comfortable. Griffin says you don’t wish to be retrained. Is that true?”

She dropped to the couch. Willis instantly sat atop her feet, claiming her as his possession. Not only was it a very cat-like thing to do, it was also an Old World male shifter tradition. The younger ones didn’t bother, as she recalled, but it did make her wonder how Willis came to know about it. When they had a minute to themselves, she’d ask.

Looking at Willis, she again prayed the spell would hold. If it did, she might just get through this unscathed.

“I’m afraid it is. I may as well get to the point. I’ve come to ask for help.”

“Oh?” His gaze sharpened as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

Asking for help from the First Commander was not something you did lightly. Or often. Or ever, if you could help it.

“What sort of help?”

Her nerves spiked. Blair had the blackest eyes of anyone she’d ever known. There had been times he’d truly shaken some of the rookie Defenders with that look. Long ago, she’d been one of them, and more than once. Now she felt like a rookie all over again, terrified of what he would say or do next. He had so much power. A single thought from him and she could be gone, vaporized.

If she’d been doing anything but asking for help on Willis’s behalf, she would’ve left right there and then.

“Ah ... I need protection for Willis. I need help keeping him alive.”

Blair’s icy gaze lowered. Willis had been idly looking around the room, but once he realized he was the focus of everyone’s attention, his eyes grew wide, and he froze and laid his ears flat against his head.

“This is a shifter? He looks like a bobcat. Nothing more,” he said, once again leveling his gaze to hers. “I see only his Primal.”

Good. The spell was working. She had to sound convincing, even knowing she couldn’t answer all the questions he’d ask.

“There is no other form. He’s very special to me. I can’t lose him.”

Blair cocked his head. “Why would you?”

“Someone is after him. A group of people known as the Order of the Red Falcon have made it clear they want him, but for what, I don’t know. I’m afraid for him. Two

days ago, they came and burned my home to the ground with me inside. They tried to take him from me, Blair. We're both lucky to be alive."

He nodded his understanding. "Do you think they mean to kill him?"

"Possibly" she lied. "I don't know."

"I see." He paused. "So, you have no idea why they want him?"

"Not really. They didn't say a word, and I, regretfully, was not in a position to ask."

The translation of that was--one burning house, one dead Falcon, and one terrified child. Too many reasons to forego conversation.

She shifted on the couch, painfully aware she sounded like a blithering idiot, at least in Defender terms. Some questions just couldn't be answered. Not yet.

He shook his head, a subtle gesture she nearly missed.

Damn. He wasn't going to help.

She'd failed. Her reluctance to tell him everything had cost her the help she needed. While that didn't completely surprise her, she had no idea what to do now, besides run. The Falcons couldn't chase them forever, could they?

"No, I can't spare any Defenders to baby-sit a shifter, if that's what it really is. Are you sure there isn't more you want to tell me?"

"I don't know what I'd say," she said. That much was the truth.

Willis tilted his head back so he was looking at her upside down.

I'm not just a bobcat, am I?

"No," she said. "Hush, now."

Riana returned her attention to Blair.

"I'm asking for only one Defender to help me get rid of the Falcons. One Defender. Are you telling me they're all so busy they can't be bothered with so small a task?"

He stood. "I've made my decision, Riana. It stands."

She shot to her feet, startling Willis.

"Fine," she snapped. "Thanks for your time." She headed for the door. How stupid she'd been to think her brethren would help her. Of course they wouldn't. She and her little shifter weren't important enough for them. "Fine," she said again.

Chapter Two

“*Riana.*”

She paused, sighed, and reluctantly turned to face him. He gave her that glare; the one that made chills shimmy up her spine.

“I suggest you not take that attitude with me in the future. I am still your superior officer, even if you’re no longer active.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Ach, Christ, the words tasted bitter. She wasn’t sorry, damn it, she was desperate for help. Because of that, and *only* that, she backed down.

In her own mind, she’d left Service when she’d left her people. In all fairness, Blair was right to believe she still reported to him. Maybe she still did, technically, since she never bothered to inform anyone.

A minor detail.

Maybe disappearing without a trace hadn’t been the best decision she’d ever made, but at the time, she’d thought it her only choice. In their world, rules had to be followed. You just didn’t get pregnant by whoever was handy. There were consequences, not only for her but for her family. Her parents had wealth and status in the human world, and her brother...

Older brother Ian led the Eskarian nation.

No, she’d had no choice. If she had to do it over again, she’d make the same one.

“See to it,” he said, one corner of his mouth turning up.

She turned her gaze to the window before he could read her reaction. *See to it.* Yeah, she’d see to it ... by leaving. And this time, she’d make sure it was forever.

Riana clenched her teeth. Damn his arrogant, Eskarian-male, high-and-mighty attitude. It chafed, and now, after his decision to deny her the help she needed--the *one time* she really needed it--well, it made her angry.

After twenty-five years, she’d gotten used to answering to no one except Willis and, occasionally, her ranch manager. Other aspects of her life might change, but that wouldn’t. Riana loved her independence. She wasn’t willing to give it up without getting something back.

“It’s been a long time,” she said, purposely omitting the *sir*. “I’m not the same.”

An understatement.

Clearly, a chasm had grown between her and her kind. She didn’t want to believe she and Willis weren’t worthy of Defender protection. Eskarians believed in family and loyalty. Where was Blair’s loyalty, damn it?

She knew the Falcons would return for Willis, and if she didn’t tackle this problem now, they’d be running forever. Or worse, they’d find Willis in an unguarded moment and take him.

“None of us are,” Blair said, offering a little smile. “I said *I* can’t spare any Defenders. Go talk to Griffin. He might be able to help. He knows better than I what the boys do with their downtime. Someone might volunteer to help out.”

So, there was still hope. Good enough. She headed out the door. “Thanks, Blair.”
“Riana.”

She looked over her shoulder at him.

His brow furrowed. “Do you always keep your mind so closed?”

“Yes. I value my privacy.”

“You know,” he began, his expression turning wistful. A little smile came to his mouth. “When you first came to Malanaya from Rome, you were just a little thing. Four years old, as I recall. Even then I knew you were a fighter. You had such fierce passion inside you and stood out from the rest of the children--especially the girls. You were quick to defend your territory, no matter what game you played or with whom you were playing.”

She leaned against the doorway. “What’s your point, Blair? I don’t think I’m following.”

He cocked his head, like a mental shrug. “I sense something different about you. You’re concerned for the welfare of your shifter and your home--or what’s left of it. I understand that. But, there’s more, and I can’t see it. Whatever it is, it’s stolen your passion. Perhaps you should spend some time with the sendagi.”

Riana’s brows shot up. “A healer?”

“Might do you some good.”

As if.

No way was she spending time with a healer. She wasn’t sick and didn’t need any kind of counsel. Once the Falcons were out of her life forever, she and Willis could go home, and all would be well.

“I assure you, I’m quite passionate about my ... companion’s safety. Nothing’s been stolen, Blair.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Your passion for life ... you used to be so much a part of the world. I don’t see that now. You seem to be outside of it, as if you’re waiting for something. Perhaps the sendagi can help you discover what you want--or need.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. “Sure. As soon as I get this thing with the Falcons behind us,” she lied. “Be happy to.”

“Good. I’m sure you won’t regret it.” He gave her a satisfied nod.

Since she had no intention of giving it another thought, Riana was certain, too.

She turned to her son. “Let’s go.”

Heading for the door, she let out a slow exhale. She doubted Blair was fooled by the lie. She could only hope he’d take a hint and realize she had no interest in exploring the subject.

She really *didn’t* want to explore it, at all. Get in, get out, and get gone. Go back to what she knew, like her ranch in Montana.

“Come,” she repeated to Willis, even though he was right behind her.

He followed her out. She closed the door, leaving behind Blair and a life she felt had ended long ago. Taking a deep breath, she forced her mind to quiet and her body to relax, and then sent out her telepathic feelers to find Griffin.

There he was. Outside.

“Griffin,” she whispered, calling audibly as well as telepathically. “Need you, old friend.”

She wandered past rooms that dripped Old World luxury. From the ancient

weapons adorning the walls of the living room to the huge kitchen where stainless steel pots hung from the ceiling, Blair's home spoke of power, strength, and safety, attributes she loved. His mate Anastasia had chosen warm, contrasting colors--maroon, hunter green, and mustard--to achieve that. It was strong, like the man who owned the home.

Perfect for the First Commander of the Defender forces.

Finally, she came to the sliding glass door that separated the dining room from the huge enclosed patio.

Her shoulders and neck ached from tension. She wanted to feel safe here. She needed that but felt like she was heading straight into a viper pit. With no way out.

Lovely.

"Stay close to me, okay?" she said to Willis.

Sure. Are you okay? You feel funny.

"I'm a little nervous. I haven't seen these guys for a long time." She smiled. "Since before you were born."

I smell lots of different stuff. Shifters. Are they bad? He lifted his nose, sampling the air like she'd taught him.

"No, not at all. They're like you and me."

The Griffin is coming, Willis said. He smells like Christmas.

"Christmas?" She frowned, thinking about that. "Oh, like vanilla. Eggnog. Yes, he does. All shifters have a naturally sweet smell like that. That's part of how we recognize each other."

What do I smell like? His ears twitched with feigned casualness.

"Roses," she said, smiling. "Beautiful red roses."

That wasn't completely true. For the last twenty years, since the Nitooki priestess laid her spell on him, he'd smelled like nothing more than an ordinary bobcat, dusty and faintly sweet. Before that, when he was her handsome, dark-haired boy, he'd smelled like roses.

Willis beamed.

Griffin trotted up from the yard through the patio to the glass door and opened it. She was still amazed a man that large could move with such grace, but then, his Primal was lion. The characteristics of the animal were the characteristics of the man.

"Come. Sit," he said. He pointed to a maple table and chairs with thick forest-green cushions. "Tell me about these Falcons."

He knew already? Great.

"News travels fast, doesn't it?" she said, sinking into the surprisingly comfortable chair. Willis took his place atop her feet.

Griffin lowered himself into the other chair and leaned it back on two legs. His golden skin gleamed with a thin layer of perspiration. Errant strands of auburn hair clung to his forehead, cheeks, and neck. The center of his white T-shirt was wet and stuck to his skin. He was the consummate Defender. Untamed, free, strength incarnate.

"If it's important it does."

If it was so blasted important, where was *her* Defender?

Riana leaned forward, elbows on her knees. She rubbed her eyes with both hands.

"Here's the thing--they want to take Willis away from me, but I don't know why. What I do know is that I'll fight to keep him with me, no matter what. I really could use some help, Griffin. He means everything to me."

“I understand.” He brought the chair back upright and rested his elbow on the table, brushing his chin with the pads of his fingers. “Do you want to tell me what happened to your shirt?”

Her gaze dropped to her shirt. A dull brown splatter marred the pristine white of her button-down shirt. “The night I called you, we were attacked by the Falcons. You know they set my house on fire, but what I didn’t tell you is that they also took Willis. I hunted and found the guy who took him. He was holding Willis by the scruff of his neck.”

She closed her eyes.

His voice softened. “Go on when you can.”

She hated this memory. “The Falcon was laughing. Willis was sc-screaming ... he was terrified.”

Griffin took her hand. She looked at his long fingers curled around hers. Somehow, that gave her the courage to continue when all she’d wanted to do was either cry or lash out and break something.

She swiped non-existent tears from her eyes. “The Falcon threw Willis against the side of the barn and walked away and then....”

“And then?” Griffin prodded.

“And then I looked into his eyes and killed him.” There. She said it. “I put my dagger in his throat, and, as you can see, his blood splattered all over me. Even got it in my mouth, which made me dizzy and sick to my stomach for some reason. When he was dead, I torched his ass, like he torched my home.”

She was shaking.

He patted her hand and spoke as if addressing someone younger. “It’s over now. Let go of your anger. Let it go.”

She didn’t think she ever could, not until every last one of them was dead. God, how she wanted them dead.

Warmth flowed from Griffin’s hands into hers.

“Close your eyes, Riana.”

She did.

“We’ll make this right. For now, know that you and Willis are safe. The anger you feel is justified but serves no real purpose. Let it flow from you, like water flows down a mountain stream, like the tide ebbs from the shore. Find your center again.”

Her entire body responded to his soft voice. The tension in her shoulders lifted then disappeared altogether. The hostility toward the Falcons was gone, replaced by the calm certainty they would be held accountable for what they’d done.

Griffin’s power settled over Willis and her like a protective shield. No matter what happened, they would be safe. This was what she needed, more than the assurance that the Falcons would pay.

She took in a deep breath and slowly let it out. Griffin released her hands. A moment later, she opened her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Feel better?”

She nodded, reaching down to brush Willis’s head. She took comfort knowing he was so close. Safe. “Yes.”

“Good. Now,” Griffin said, leaning back again in his chair, “there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Oh?” She could only hope he’d decided to assign her a Defender. Once she had the additional protection she needed, she wanted to return to Montana and start rebuilding her home. Maybe Griffin and his boys could figure out what to do about the Falcons.

The patio door opened and slammed shut. Riana looked up to see a tall, amber-eyed man with long black hair tied in a tail. He was muscular, like Griffin, with long, thick legs. His denim work shirt was damp with sweat, and his black jeans were scuffed with grass stains and dirt.

Holy cow.

She sat up in her chair. Who was this? She stared blatantly as he crossed to stand between her and Griffin. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, rippling muscle over every inch of his luscious body. He was her definition of The Perfect Man.

Well, she amended, *perfect-looking*.

Like Griffin, his golden skin glistened from outdoor work. His scent, a mixture of jasmine and thyme, appealed to her. She took in another deep breath to let it fill her. Then another and another. Nice. So very nice she could lose herself, become addicted to such a scent.

“Riana, you okay? You’re looking a little glassy-eyed.” Griffin had an odd little grin on his face.

She hauled her attention from Mr. Perfect back to him. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

He smirked, lifting one brow.

She narrowed her gaze. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said with a shrug. “Just making sure you’re all right.”

She leaned forward. “I said I’m fine. What else do you want to hear?”

Mr. Perfect interrupted by clearing his throat. “Excuse me. While it is loads of fun listening to you chat with your mistress, I don’t have the time.”

He had just a hint of an accent. Mediterranean, maybe?

“I just wanted to let you know I’m done.”

Wait a minute. What was that?

Mistress?

Riana leveled a glare on Mr. Not-So-Perfect.

Griffin found this even more amusing. He grinned like the damn Cheshire cat. “She’s no mistress. Never will be.”

Well, thank the gods for that. What a thought.

Griffin studied her while he spoke to his friend. “You got everything taken care of?”

“Yeah, I took care of it,” the man said, clearly pissed off. “He had aphids. *Aphids*, Griffin. Why he summoned me is beyond my understanding. He could easily have called some pest control company or someone. Anyone but me.” He shrugged. “It was hardly a crisis. I swear, sometimes I think the man has lost it.”

Griffin looked at Riana and smiled. “Blair’s a little funny about his Livendum garden. He grows it out back in a greenhouse and gets bent out of shape when things like this happen.”

Mr. Perfect snorted. “That’s an understatement. You know, he didn’t have this problem when he grew it underground. Maybe he should move the greenhouse to his basement or something.” He spun his index finger in a little circle over his temple. “Loco,

man.”

Riana covered her mouth with her hand to hide her smile. She wasn't entirely certain Blair was the only one who was loco. Mr. Prima Donna certainly didn't like anyone impinging on his oh-so-precious time. The thought nearly made her laugh.

“Lighten up, Sendagi. We have a guest,” Griffin said, nodding toward her.

Sendagi.

She'd known a sendagi apprentice once.

Jason.

Skinny, obnoxious punk. They'd been best friends at one time. He'd had a crush on her that went on forever. In fact, part of the reason she'd left Malanaya was to get away from his neediness. He was convinced they were benekedas, but not once had she ever felt that attraction. Much as she tried, she couldn't convince him they weren't meant to be together. In the end, she tried to let him down easy, but he'd made it hard for her. Really hard.

He'd been just a kid. What was she supposed to do? They *weren't* benekedas.

The sendagi stepped back, glaring at Griffin.

What beautiful eyes he had. Amber, like Willis's.

A second later, he looked at her and tipped his chin up in an informal greeting.

“Sorry. How you doing?”

“Fine, thanks,” she answered, giving him her warmest smile.

“Great. Nice to meet you.” He turned back to Griffin, dismissing her like yesterday's trash.

Her smile faded, much like her esteem for the good sendagi.

“I'm gone for the next three days,” he said. “Irena and I have plans. Call Leah if you need a sendagi.” He narrowed his eyes. “You hear me, Commander? I'm taking some time off. Leah knows where I'll be. You won't. I intend to keep it that way.”

“Jason, calm down.” Griffin ordered, a mischievous grin on his face. “Surely you remember Riana.”

Oh, no.

All the blood drained from her face.

The skinny, obnoxious punk had grown up. And filled out. And become gorgeous. “Jason? Velazquez? From Malanaya?”

“Yeah.” He frowned for a few seconds then relaxed. The smile that came to his face was genuine, and the light in his whiskey-colored eyes told her he really was glad to see her. “Riana? Christ, I didn't recognize you. Jeez, how long has it been?”

She managed a smile. “Almost a thousand years, I think. The last time I saw you, you were just a skinny kid. You've grown.”

Jason looked down at himself. “Yeah, a little, I guess. Has it really been that long?” He didn't wait for an answer. “What are you doing here?”

“She needs a bodyguard for the bobcat,” Griffin told him.

Jason finally noticed Willis. “What for?”

“The Order of the Red Falcon wants him. Ever heard of them?” Griffin clasped his hands behind his head. He still seemed amused by something, but damned if she could figure out what it was.

Jason shook his head. “I've seen Red Falcons before, usually around the dead. Until now, I've had no reason to consider them a threat. Has that changed?”

“Not yet. We don’t have any information on them.”

“Hmm. Okay. Let me know what you find out.” Jason headed for the house.

“Nice to see you again, Riana. Good luck finding a bodyguard. *Hasta.*”

Griffin cleared his throat. “Jason, take Riana with you. She and Willis need a place to stay for a bit.”

Jason spun around. “What?”

“What?” Riana echoed, aghast. Stay with Jason? No. No way. Unacceptable.

“What?” Griffin scowled. “Did I just stutter? No. What’s the problem?”

“I can’t take Riana with me. Irena would have a fit.” Jason shook his head. He turned to her. “No offense, but this isn’t a good idea. Really.” He looked back at Griffin. “I don’t need the stress, Griffin. *Really.*”

She chimed in. “We don’t want to cramp anyone’s lifestyle. It’s okay. We can stay in a hotel for a few days.”

“Nonsense,” the commander said. “You’ll stay with Jason. He’ll keep Willis safe.”

“*What?*” Jason glared at him. “Since when am I a babysitter for some damn fuzz ball?”

Willis sprang to his feet. *I am not a fuzz ball!*

Jason turned an icy gaze on him. “Shifter, then.”

Riana bent and patted Willis’s head. “Calm down. He didn’t mean anything by it.” She looked up at Jason. “May I introduce Willis, my companion? Willis, this is Jason.”

Willis bared his teeth. *I am not a fuzz ball.*

“I’m not a babysitter.” Jason crossed his arms over his chest, looking defiant and annoyed.

I don’t need a babysitter. I’m not a baby. Willis wrinkled his nose to further expose his teeth, his idea of looking fierce.

Jason extended his fangs, leaned forward, and glared. A soft growl came from the back of his throat.

Willis’s eyes widened in shock, and then narrowed. His ears flattened against the top of his head. *You’re mean. I don’t like you.*

“Should I give a fig?” Jason snorted and retracted his fangs. “Some shifter. He’s more like a little kid with fur.”

He tilted his head to regard the bobcat.

“Are we done trying to intimidate each other yet?” Griffin asked.

Jason shot him a fiery glare. “I wasn’t trying to intimidate him. He’s a forty-pound cat, for Christ’s sake.”

“Ah,” Griffin said with a chuckle. “My mistake.”

As Willis sat down again, Riana stroked the back of his neck, focusing on the soft fur there. He had such beautiful fur. Everything about him, physically, was pure bobcat, but inside, he was still a little boy. Until two days ago, she’d thought him safe from the Falcons. “He’s a lot like a kid. He more or less found me about twenty five years ago. We’ve been together ever since.”

“Huh.” Jason shrugged one shoulder in obvious disinterest. “Well, I have things to do, so if you’re staying with me, we need to hit the road.”

“I’ll drive you,” Griffin offered. “I need to stop by Christopher’s anyway.”

“Who’s that?” she asked.

“One of our Defenders,” Jason said. “I trained him a couple hundred years ago, right after he was converted. He’s strong and fast. One of our best. He was almost killed by a demon wolf, and now that’s his Primal. How’s that for ironic?”

“And he’s one of your better Defenders? Impressive.” Riana stood up, nudging Willis off her feet. “Do you live far from here?”

He shook his head. “Nah. A bunch of us live here on the island, all fairly close to each other. It’s just a few minutes away.”

She looked at Griffin. “Like Malanaya, then?”

Malanaya was the hidden city deep in the Basque mountains, once a refuge for the Eskarian nation. Now, with planes and fast ships, they were scattered across the globe.

Griffin nodded. “Smaller. Ian and his entire family still live in London.”

“I see.” She turned to find Willis scowling at her. “What’s wrong?”

I don’t like the Griffin.

Riana bent to caress his ear. “He’s a good man to have at your back. Give him a chance.”

He pulled out of her grasp.

I don’t like Jason, either. Maybe we should go home.

Now was not the time for *that* conversation.

Spinning about, she started for the front door. “Do you want to take a boat ride while we’re here? Let’s pretend we’re on vacation, shall we? You can have pizza!”

Okay, let’s be on vacation! He did his little happy dance, rocking from back legs to front.

She smiled. “It’ll be fun.”

“Pizza? You feed your shifter pizza?” Jason asked as he reached for the front door. He allowed them to pass through first. Willis danced across the driveway to the front lawn.

“He loves it. His favorite is pepperoni or sausage, with extra cheese.”

Willis was crow-hopping on the lawn. *Pizza! Pizza! Pizza!*

Jason shook his head. “Excitable little guy, isn’t he?”

Riana looked at her son. “A little.”

A black Land Rover rolled to a stop a few feet away.

Jason smiled. “Our ride.”

“Nice rig,” she said, giving the SUV an approving nod.

She still couldn’t believe she’d run into him after all these years. He’d changed so much since she’d last seen him. No longer a gangly teenager, he was striking, his presence commanding. His golden skin was flawless and his mouth ... he had such a perfect mouth. Full, soft. Inviting. His amber eyes captivated her completely. Expressive, fringed by long black lashes, those eyes could be her undoing.

“Shall we go?” He opened the rear door, flashing a wide grin.

He was devastatingly handsome when he did that, another seductive attribute she would ignore if she were smart. After all, she wasn’t here to get horizontal with anyone, least of all another Defender.

Yet, as she got in the car, she let her gaze slide across broad shoulders and thick biceps, down a narrow waist to perfect, slender hips. As he closed the door, she faced his crotch.

Was he *aroused*?

She looked away, her heart suddenly thundering.

Mama? Willis was looking at her, his soft eyes questioning.

“I’m fine, baby. Everything’s fine. Lay down beside me.” She patted the seat.

He stretched out on the seat beside her and laid his head on her lap.

The chauffeur had left the car running. Griffin came around to the driver’s side and got in. Jason took the passenger seat.

She needed a distraction. Jason’s erection had her thinking about ... erections. Specifically, his.

“Griffin, how is Cassandra?” she asked, resting her hand on Willis’s shoulders.

A long moment passed before he turned around to answer. “She journeyed to the Ethereal Plane many centuries ago. Not long after you left, in fact.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

He nodded, giving her a thin smile. “Thanks. It’s all right now. The gods have once again blessed me with a mate, the lovely Annalissa.”

“Ah. The little wolf. Is she still a wolf?”

“No, she was bespelled by a dimension shifter. Nasty fellow. The guy had a real hard-on for her.”

“I’ll bet. And how is Annalissa handling your,” *wicked temper*, “you?”

He put the car in gear and started for the main road. “The woman has no fear, I swear. I’ll have to tell you the story of how we met sometime. Assuming you’re going to stay for a while, of course. What are your plans, by the way? You’re not going to just disappear again, are you?”

“Griffin,” Jason snapped, “give her a chance to get settled before you start grilling her, would you?”

Griffin scowled at him. “Relax, Sendagi, we’re just talking.”

“Jason, how long have you been sendagi?” she asked, grateful for the chance to dispel potential tension.

He turned to face her. “Mathias trained me, if you recall. Been doing it since about 1150 or so.”

“He’s pretty good at it. A natural healer, I’d say. He took very good care of Lissa when she got hurt,” Griffin added. “So, will you be hanging around?”

“I don’t know, honestly. After the Falcons came, all the plans we had for our lives just went in the toilet.” She wrinkled her nose at that thought and went back to studying the scenery.

Willis raised his head to look at her, fear again in his beautiful eyes.

Mama, will that man come back?

Riana stroked his cheek. “No, that’s why we’re here. My friends will help me keep you safe. Don’t be afraid.”

Okay. He laid his head back down on her lap and expelled a soft sigh. A minute later, he was asleep.

“So, tell me more about the shifter,” Griffin prompted.

“Like what?”

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror. “What is he, exactly?”

She couldn’t tell him, exactly.

“He’s a bobcat with highly developed telepathic ability.”

“And he calls you Mama.” He lifted one arched eyebrow.

“Well, he’s young.”

“Mmm-hmm.” He glanced at her again. “Do continue.”

Griffin’s telepathic abilities were advanced, even by Eskarian standards. He knew things when he shouldn’t, and now she suspected he’d figured out a thing or two about Willis. It had been only a matter of time. She’d known all along, even as she’d made the phone call that night, it would come to this.

She took in a sharp breath. “Griffin, damn it.”

He studied the road. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

“It’s not important, really,” she said, stroking her son’s fur. “All that matters is that the Falcons want him, and they can’t have him. He belongs to me. I killed a man to protect him.” She’d killed more than one that night. “I’ll do it again if I have to, for as long as I have to.”

Jason turned around, empathy in his eyes, and reached to grasp her hand.

Instantly, she felt heat. His hand lay over hers, and beneath it, her skin burned.

Burned.

Like the suteka, the heat generated between perfect mates. Benekedas.

She gasped as her gaze shot up to his. How was this even possible? She’d known him since he was a kid. How could she not have felt this before now?

He looked down at his hand, then snatched it back and faced the front of the car.

Griffin looked at him, his brow furrowed. “You okay?”

He looked out the side window. “Fine.”

Griffin glanced in the rearview mirror. “You said they wanted Willis. Why did they hurt him if they wanted to take him from you?”

“I don’t know,” she said, stalling. If she wanted their help, they might need to know. But if they knew what she’d done, would they still help? She had borne a son by someone other than her true mate, which was wrong in the eyes of her people and potentially deadly to the offspring.

Her hand still tingled where Jason had touched it. Much as she wanted to believe her imagination was playing tricks on her, she knew that wasn’t true.

She understood fully what had happened. She’d just found her benekeda.

Her stomach protested the thought of admitting anything, of laying herself open to ridicule and contempt. She was happy with her life and proud of her son. The spell she’d purchased to protect him was working perfectly, disguising him from even the strongest of her kind. Or so she had to believe.

He was safe, for now, so she didn’t need to admit a thing. More importantly, she didn’t need her own people passing some narrow-minded judgment on her son, or the way they’d lived. She had no respect for those stupid social customs, and she wasn’t all that interested in a mate. Especially with Willis needing her as he did. Once this problem with the Falcons was over, they would simply head back to Montana to rebuild and that would be the end of it.

No way would she risk her son’s life to stay with Jason.

Another long moment passed.

She studied the back of his head. “They just showed up and demanded him without telling me why.”

“Out of the blue, these people came and tried to take your shifter away?” Griffin

asked. “That makes no sense. Why would they torch your house if all they wanted was the shifter?”

Riana cleared her throat. When she’d imagined coming here and asking for help, in her fantasy, her people had been more understanding. After all, Eskarians valued family and loyalty above everything else. But she realized now desperation had colored her memory of them and how far they’d go to help someone like her, an outcast.

An exile.

“They were looking for something I’ll never let them have,” she answered.

“Riana, you’re not telling us everything, are you?” Griffin was watching her in the mirror. His silver eyes glittered with what she thought was complete understanding, as if he knew exactly what she’d done. Given his abilities, he really could know, damn him.

Jason, on the other hand, hadn’t looked at her for several minutes. If he was truly her benekeda, her mate for life, she might have made a terrible mistake by coming here. Jealous mates whose Primals were feline had been known to kill another sire’s offspring to complete the binding ritual. Feral cats did it when the dam was in heat. She’d seen it happen in her world twice. Both times, the battle ended in needless bloodshed and destroyed too many lives. Destroyed families.

The little hairs on the back of her neck stood up. If Jason’s Primal was feline--lion, cougar or leopard--both she and Willis could be in serious, serious trouble.

Chapter Three

No, she wasn't telling them everything. She had no intention of spilling more than what was required. "Not exactly." Riana's throat felt so tight, she feared she might suffocate. The cheetah within her screamed in protest that Griffin had so quickly backed her into a corner. She needed to shift, to express her rage.

Her gaze dropped to her trembling hands. For the second time in her long life, sharp claws poked out from between her fingers, wholly against her will. The last time, that damned Falcon had stolen her son, and the time before that, she'd been too young to know how to control the Primal.

Inhaling sharply, she fought to soothe the maelstrom of emotion, to reclaim her inner balance. She wasn't really trapped. She was actively choosing not to answer questions. Huge difference.

Griffin narrowed his eyes. "Riana, you came to us for help. We can't unless we know exactly what we're facing. You know that."

Griffin wasn't the kind of man to hunt a threat without a solid plan. If she truly wanted help, she'd have to give him something to work with, but how much? She didn't dare tell him anything about Willis.

"Yeah, I do."

Her instinct was to turn tail and run, but she understood that wouldn't work. The Falcons still wanted Willis, and she still had no home to which she could run. Even if she wanted to back out, she doubted Griffin would let her.

Christ. Her only option was to trust him. As long as they didn't find out the truth about Willis, she'd probably be okay.

Once she made that decision, her shoulders relaxed. A moment later, her claws retracted. She took in a calming breath and let it out. What she'd give now for a pot of the Eskarian herb, Livendum. The silver-tipped leaves were used to center the mind, enhance telepathic communication, and strengthen telekinetics.

She preferred to burn the leaves like incense, in pots, strategically placed throughout the room. Jason, as she recalled, liked to smoke it in a pipe.

She'd settle for a pipe or a pot or loose. At this particular moment, as long as she got some, she didn't care what form it took.

She idly rubbed her sore knuckles. Returning here meant she'd have to face both her past and her people, but damn ... the thought of making peace with either terrified her. Not enough time had passed. She doubted a thousand years would be enough.

"Some things you don't need to know, Griffin. I'm giving you what I can. Maybe you could just trust me?"

"Sure I could, if I were so inclined. I'm not. This secrecy concerns me. Based on what you've given me so far, I can't see why I should risk my men for you."

Maybe not, but no way would he accept the real reason.

She turned to watch the scenery whiz by. "Yeah, I know."

Griffin let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay, what can you tell me about the Order?"

“Not all that much. I don’t know where they come from or what their purpose is. They can change their shape, like us, but I don’t think they’re shifters. They don’t have that naturally sweet smell true shifters have. Why they’re after Willis, I don’t know, but since they want to separate us forever, it can’t be good.”

“They said that?”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “More or less. I think their exact words were ‘We’ve come to take what is rightfully ours, Riana. Release him into our care and you may live.’ The implication was that if I didn’t give him up, they’d kill me. Well, I didn’t give him up, so later that night; they came back, took him, and then torched my house.”

Griffin frowned. “How did they get in without your knowledge?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “Magic, I presume. Their magic leaves a residual smell, like sulfur and grapefruit, but I don’t remember now if it was there. I just woke up and knew Willis was gone. Honestly, I went a little ballistic. I had only one thing on my mind.”

“Of course. The Falcon was a threat to your family.” Griffin glanced in the mirror. “Do you think they know what you are?”

Riana remembered how all eyes had swung to her as she burst unharmed from the flaming house. Using preternatural speed and her exceptional sense of smell, she’d found the Falcon with Willis only seconds later. In the blink of an eye, every one of those damned Falcons were dead, and she and Willis were in the car and gone. All that remained was the fluttering remnants of the rooster tail she’d kicked up when she spun out and eight piles of fine gray ash.

“They probably do now. I’m not sure they did when they first showed up.”

“What use could they possibly have for a bobcat?” he asked, slowing the car down to allow a raccoon family to cross the road.

“I don’t know.” She looked out the window. “He means something to them. I just don’t know what.”

Griffin blew out a breath. “I’d feel better if we knew more about what we’re dealing with here.”

So would she. “I don’t really have more to give you. I do think they could be a threat. I’ve seen them before, in their Falcon shapes, hovering over dead people.”

Jason turned around. “People they killed?”

“I’m not sure. Every time I’ve seen them, they were just sitting nearby, as if waiting for something. The first time I saw them was probably thirty years ago. Initially, I thought they were vultures. Later, I realized they were red falcons. Later still, I discovered their ability to shift.” She trailed her hand along Willis’s back.

Jason turned to Griffin. “We should find their lair and study them for a bit.”

He nodded. “Absolutely. We need to know if they’re any kind of threat to humanity.”

“Now wait a minute,” Riana snapped. “*Study* them? What the hell? Send someone else to study the bastards.” She jabbed a finger in Griffin’s direction. “You volunteered Jason to help me, Griffin. You can’t just take him away like that. They’re not a threat to humanity; they’re a threat to Willis! You can’t do this!”

Griffin’s eyes glittered in the rearview mirror, a silent challenge. “You know perfectly well I can do it, if duty requires.”

More than two decades had passed since she’d last seen him, and now, inside of

an hour, she wanted to choke the life out of him. She slammed the inside car door with the side of her fist in frustration.

Willis awoke with a start. *Mama?*

"It's all right, sweetie," she said, struggling to rein in her anger. "I'm sorry for waking you."

Okay. He yawned. *I'm hungry.*

"We'll get you something in a few minutes, as soon as we get to Jason's."

Okay. He lowered his head to her lap.

She rubbed the little furrows between his ears. Renewed fear for his life turned her stomach upside down. "Thank you so much, Griffin."

"Relax," he told her. "I said I can, not that I will. I have every intention of helping you find a solution. You have to understand, though, that we're not going to napalm an entire species because they want your shifter. There's a reason they want him, and I suspect you know much more than you're telling us. You could make our jobs a little easier by sharing what you know, so let me ask this--" He offered a thin smile. "--is there any possible way he could belong to them?"

"No," she snapped. "He belongs to me. *Only* me." The anger she'd been trying to contain heated her cheeks. Her voice quivered, which annoyed her further. She despised looking weak around her peers. "Never. They'll never take him from me."

Griffin nodded. "I see. Then let us hope the Falcons are reasonable people. In the meantime, consider Willis under Defender protection."

"I agree," Jason added, without looking at her. "We'll protect him and help you get through this."

"Yeah, okay." Her shoulders hurt from the tension. She reached back, rubbing the little knot that had formed there above her left shoulder blade. "Thank you."

"But," Griffin warned, "if we find out the Falcons have a valid reason for what they did, you will make restitution. Your superior strength cannot be used for personal gain. Until we uncover the truth, I will assume you fully understand this."

Riana glared at the back of his head. Eskarian males were so accustomed to taking on heavy responsibility; they didn't even know they were doing it. They learned it early in life and, once they reached adulthood, assumed command without conscious thought. Though she understood all that, she bristled every time one of them asserted his authority. She was no child. The last thing she needed was a reminder of the Code by which they lived.

Damn, his comment insulted her, yet as much as she wanted to express her displeasure, she knew nothing good would come from it. He had every right to say it, and she just had to deal. She and Willis would go under Defender protection unconditionally when he uncovered the truth. Nothing more would be said, and waiting for an apology for the false accusation would be pointless. Wasn't going to happen. Her best course of action was to accept it and move on.

"Thank you for your help."

"No problem," Griffin said. "We're glad to do it."

The insult still chafed, but Riana set it aside for now.

Stroking the back of Willis's neck, she listened off and on to Griffin chat with Jason about Lissa's pregnancy. He was clearly devoted to his mate and genuinely happy about the coming of their child--a daughter. They'd already named her Pia. Riana thought

it a lovely name, of both Italian and English origins, like her parents. If the light in Griffin's eyes was any indication, Pia was already well loved and very much wanted.

She looked down at Willis, who had rolled onto his back and had all four feet in the air. He smiled his toothy bobcat smile, looking wild and precious at the same time. She returned the grin.

"What are you smiling about?"

He touched the underside of her chin with his paw. *Jason thinks you're pretty.*

She bent closer to him. "I think you're getting to be very good at reading minds, but maybe we should talk about that later. What do you think?"

I think you're pretty, too.

She loved the sound of his laughter inside her head.

"Thank you, sweetie." She rubbed his belly and went back to studying the scenery.

"Lissa's hormones have gone crazy," Griffin was saying. "She was ripping me a new one this morning. I was only too happy to leave." He shrugged. "And when I come back, she'll be thrilled to see me. It's beyond my comprehension, frankly. I never know from one moment to the next if my shirts are going to be tossed out onto the front lawn and the deadbolt set or what." He chuckled and shook his head.

Riana smiled. "Griffin, I imagine you'll make a good father."

"Thank you, Riana. She'll have everything her heart desires, as all children should. Wouldn't you agree?" His gaze swung to the mirror again.

A chill spiraled up her back and shoulders. The niggling feeling that he knew Willis was her son came back.

She set her elbow on the window ledge of the car door and propped her head on her palm, trying to look calm and relaxed. Until two days ago, she had forgotten how much power fear could have over someone.

For centuries, she'd battled and defeated threats so terrifying, vicious, and malevolent, there was no earthly comparison. She'd fought beside strong male counterparts, and had seen some of them fall. Sometimes they died, and sometimes she was there to hold them, to watch the life-force ebb from their bodies.

After all that, after centuries of that kind of bloodshed and destruction, she felt little or no fear. Most of the time, she felt nothing at all.

Only now, here, this moment, when the life of her son was at stake, did she come to know true, debilitating fear. The kind that made you feel cold, desperate, made you lose sight of the boundaries of reason. Made you take a life when maybe, *maybe* you shouldn't have.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

Jason looked back at her.

Now she had his attention. Great. What if they both knew? Riana was no fool. It was possible they knew everything. Her ability to shield her thoughts was advanced. She'd done it for so long, it was second nature and part of the reason she'd remained hidden from her people.

But Griffin had abilities no one could match.

"Everyone does the best they can, given what they have to work with," she said. "I think a warm, safe home is the best thing to give a child. A haven where he can learn to stretch and grow. A place without fear."

“I agree.” Griffin lifted a brow. “You and Willis will stay with us for a little while.” He said it gently, as if it were not a command but a premonition of things to come. “Spend some time with Sendagi. You feel too much.”

She nodded. “Perhaps we could.”

“You could,” he assured. “And you will.”

“We’ll have to see how it goes.” If she got lucky, the Falcons would be destroyed quickly and easily, and she and Willis could go home.

All this testosterone was making her tense. The need to watch every word she said was strong, but it was also hard. She wanted her own space, away from the scrutiny of her brethren.

His silver gaze fixed on hers. “You will.”

Riana ignored him.

Her thoughts drifted back to the day she’d achieved Defender status. Griffin had taken her aside and placed his hand on her shoulder. He nodded to the group of newly initiated Defenders, all males. *You’re one of them now, Valeriana. They’ll expect you to give your life for them, should it become necessary, he’d said. Hesitate, just once, and you’re done. You do not get a second chance. No special treatment because you’re the only woman to get this far.*

For so long she’d battled threats at their side. The link between them had been strong. They’d shared blood, friendship, sorrow. More than once she’d awakened and known that some of them would not come home again. Still, she’d gone in and fought as best she could.

The battle would never end, and they would never truly win. Mankind’s greed, power, and penchant for violence attracted beings who sought to use those qualities for their own benefit. The invisible war had ravaged her kind since the dawn of time. Probably always would. They were servants to humanity. Expendable. Immortal, yet few Defenders lived more than a few thousand years.

Riana’s world turned upside down on March 17th, 1979.

The day started out like any other. She’d been training a Friesian yearling, which had been going well, but that morning, he wanted nothing to do with her. His normally genial temperament gone, he’d fought the halter, kicked her once, and refused to lunge. She’d tried everything she could think of to coax him out of his foul mood, but he wouldn’t have it. Eventually, she returned him to his stall, thinking she’d start again in the afternoon.

She never got the chance.

By early afternoon, she’d felt out of sorts. Something in the air, she was certain, had given her a whopper of a headache. Thinking she’d feel better once she fed, she’d focused her energies to prepare to shift.

And then her world went black.

A full day later, she’d awakened in the barn to Dominic de Santo’s concerned face.

“What happened?” he’d asked.

She’d tried to sit. “I have no idea. What am I doing in the barn?”

Nic had shaken his head. “You passed out, apparently.”

“What are you doing here? I thought you were living in Tuscany.”

“I was, until last year. Decided to travel a bit and was on my way to see Randy in

Quebec. I just thought I'd stop by to see how you were doing. Good thing, too, since you were passed out on the floor. How do you feel?"

Pregnant.

Absolute terror had shrieked through her body. How could this have happened? She'd blacked out, not passed out, and evidently, she'd found some man and....

She'd covered both hands over her face. "Oh, my God."

Nic's brow had furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Nic, please go. I'm fine, but I need you to leave." She'd pushed off the barn floor and without another word, hurried to the house and burst into tears.

She'd spent days there, sobbing and trying to figure out what had happened, and how. You didn't do this sort of thing out of bondlock, and now that she had, she'd become a disgrace to her family and to Eskarian society.

She hadn't seen her parents for centuries but had spoken with them via telephone only last month. How would she tell them?

She wouldn't and hadn't since that day. To spare her family humiliation, she'd stepped away from everyone she loved.

Everyone.

Now, here she was, as if no time had passed at all, still a disgrace and still terrified of what they would say.

A decidedly feline snort startled her from her thoughts. Willis was looking at her, his eyes soft and questioning.

"Are you all right?" she asked, brushing his ears with her fingers.

He nodded. *Are you sorry you had me?*

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Never. You're everything to me."

Okay, good. He smiled and rolled onto his side.

She wondered if her family was still in Malanaya. By the turn of the last century, many Eskarians had left. The new world offered exciting opportunities and a chance to blend with a new mix of people. Many found it too enticing to resist.

As the car pulled into another long driveway, Riana realized she was thirsty. She hadn't fed since leaving Montana, and now the stress of too many things was catching up with her. She'd have to leave Willis with Griffin or Jason or find a nearby donor.

Jason's gaze felt hot against her profile.

She faced him. "Why are you staring at me?"

"I was wondering if you plan to stick around."

She thought about Griffin's mandate. "Evidently, I am. Why?"

"It's been a long time since I've seen you. I thought maybe we could catch up."

He looked uncomfortable. "Why do you keep your mind closed off?"

Eskarians, especially benekedas, often shared thoughts and feelings. She suspected he wanted to do the same.

"I prefer to keep my life private."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I see. And you intend to keep it that way?"

"Probably." Had things been different, she might've let him in. Since they weren't, she kept her thoughts shielded. Knowing she had a mate was enough of a shock, thank you. Her plans did not include starting a life with him. Get in, get out, and get gone.

She didn't want to think about a life with Jason, even if he did have a great body

and gorgeous eyes.

She turned her focus to Willis, but that just brought her back to Jason. What if he found out about Willis? He was more than a thousand years old, so the attributes of his Primal would be very strong. If he was feline, her worst fear was that he wouldn't be capable of protecting Willis once he knew the truth. The whole situation was a disaster waiting to happen.

She didn't want to think about that, either.

Her traitorous gaze found its way back to him. His eyes were dark, unfathomable, a slight furrow on his brow. He sat with one elbow resting on his knee, head resting in the palm of his hand, watching her. Long hair cascaded over his shoulder in silken waves. Such gorgeous, glistening softness made her want to thread her fingers through it.

Bad idea.

"What's your Primal?" The question came out before she could stop herself.

He shrugged, sending more waves of glossy strands tumbling over his shoulder. "Black leopard, though I seldom take it. Why?"

"I didn't know and was curious." Great. The only way it could get worse would be for the Falcons to take Willis and she didn't want to think about that.

She swung her attention back to the scenery. No harm in trees and shrubs.

"You?" he asked.

Riana let out a soft exhale and answered without looking at him. "Cheetah."

Life had an odd way of becoming complicated precisely at the worst possible time.

* * * *

The car stopped in front of a gorgeous pale yellow mansion made of stone and rustic wood. The dark-green metal roof, peppered with skylights, was capped on one end by a large rock chimney. The surrounding landscape, thick with Willow and Maple trees, was similar to the terrain in Malanaya, down to the riot of color along brick walkways and lush creeping vines scaling stony walls.

"I bought this house a while ago after having lived in Phoenix for years," he said, stepping from the car. "By the time I came up here, I was so tired of the desert. After a few days, I decided not to go back and bribed Griffin into transferring me. I like the cooler temperatures and greenery, even if it does rain a lot."

"So, who's in Phoenix now?" she wondered aloud.

He gave her a mischievous grin. "Randy."

Randy had lived in Canada for a century, at least, claiming a preference for snow and cold. "Poor guy. You think he's melted by now?"

"I don't know. He's still not talking to me. Make yourself at home."

The room was both warm and comfortable, with multiple skylights, peach-colored carpet, and plush, garnet-colored leather furniture. Soft ferns and lush greenery, suspended from the ceiling and in large pots on the floor, created a small rainforest inside his home. Large photographs of Northwestern landscapes adorned his off-white walls. Livendium burned in small cups scattered throughout the room. It spoke of love and healing, in a uniquely masculine way. The way of a sendagi.

Willis padded in behind her, stopping to examine the plants, the couch, the chairs, whatever was in his path. *Mama, I like this house. Smells good.*

He grinned, looking at her as he sniffed delicately at a pair of boots near the

doorway between the living room and the kitchen. *But his shoes are stinky.*

Riana gave him a look. *Don't embarrass me.*

Okay. Willis moved on to inspect the kitchen.

Jason bent to adjust a switch near the fireplace. At once a small blaze erupted inside the hearth. The perimeter of the glass enclosure bore a frosted etching of Celtic knots, which surprised her. Her own gas fireplace at home was nearly an exact replica.

"How are your parents? Are they still in Spain?" Riana had always liked his parents. They were warm and funny, kind people.

Jason looked away. "No. Unfortunately, they made their transition to the next plane many years ago."

Riana gasped. "Oh, no. What happened?"

He stood up and leaned against the mantel, crossing his arms over his chest. "Griffin had assigned me to the Yucatan in Mexico, along with Josh and Nic. It was more a vacation than work, really. Between the three of us, there wasn't that much to do. Mostly we just hung out in the sun and watched the girls. We did that a lot."

She shed her coat, tossing it over the back of the couch. "Sounds like a great vacation."

"I was bored stiff," he said, shrugging.

Boring sounded nice. Boring meant no Falcons, no fear, no worries, no looking over her shoulder. How could this be bad? She gave him a little smile. "If you say so."

Jason crossed the floor and settled in a plush leather chair near the fireplace, stretching well-muscled arms across the back. "I do, but I guess you had to be there. Anyway, after a few months, my parents decided to come out from Spain for a visit. They bought passage on a ship and everything started out well enough. Halfway across, two Pliadian Star Demons ambushed the ship. Why they did it, I don't know. My parents were killed before anyone knew what was happening. They never called for help. Nothing. Gone, just like that." He snapped his fingers. "There wasn't a damn thing I could do."

"I'm sorry. How awful for you."

"Thanks." His gaze lowered to the small fire.

Riana shivered and moved closer to the fireplace. Her body temperature had dropped, which meant she'd have to feed soon. Willis would need to eat, too. The moment he finished his inspection of the house, he'd remember how much his tummy had growled. She faced Jason.

Immediately, his gaze collided with hers. There, she saw smoke and flame, simmering lust, and the unspoken promise of a thousand nights of passion, all rolled up into one gorgeous, well-muscled, ancient Spaniard.

She took in a sharp breath and held it. She could feel him now, feel his desire for her, and as time passed, the connection would only grow more intense. His body dripped with sexual hunger that called to her on a level nearly impossible to resist.

The call of one's perfect mate.

"Willis needs to eat," she said, hoping to break his seductive spell. She fought to tamp down the fierce need to answer, unwilling to let any emotion blossom now. Maybe later, when the Falcons were gone and Willis was safe. Maybe.

Disappointment clouded his eyes, a second before he turned back to the fire. "We have human food here. Angela's probably upstairs in her room now. I'll have her come

down and make something for him.”

“Thank you. We appreciate your generosity.”

His gaze remained on the fire. “It’s fine. I’m glad to help out.”

A moment later, Griffin sauntered into the house, stopping to pat Willis on the head. “Riana, I can tell you need to feed. Shall I presume you’re going to do that soon, or do we need to have a little talk?”

She remembered the last talk they’d had.

Defender training in Malanaya. She’d smarted off and he’d let her have it. Again. She’d ended up face down in the mud. Again.

She quickly tired of doing push-ups while another Defender leaned on her shoulders.

“No, we don’t.” She faced him. Those silver eyes were unsettling as ever. Eerie, with almost no color at all. “Nor do I need you to tell me when to feed. I’ve been alive longer than you, and somehow I’ve managed to survive without you or anyone else nagging me.”

He dropped to the couch. “You know the laws. Take care of it. Now.”

At once, her patience dissolved. “Griffin McCallum, I stand here surrounded by two very capable warriors. If a threat were to drop through the roof this minute, I know the two of you will move with more speed than I could ever hope to attain. By virtue of your physiology, you will always be faster and stronger. My lack of strength at this moment is irrelevant. Further, I haven’t been in Service for several years, which means I don’t actually work for you. Get off my back.”

“No, you don’t work for me,” Griffin shot back. “But you do have a responsibility to protect your kind. You must still maintain your health and strength.”

Jason interrupted. “Commander, relax. Riana’s fine for the moment.”

Riana ignored him. She was no damned novice and didn’t need anyone interfering in her battles. “And I will, but I’ll do it when I’m ready and not one second sooner.”

Griffin, evidently ignoring the healer as well, was on his feet in a heartbeat, a flurry of male testosterone and aggression. “You’re risking our people, and I will *not* have it.” His voice was so low and whisper soft, she felt the menace as surely as if it had been a blade against her throat. “Take care of it, now, or I will force your compliance.” He loomed over her, hot, angry and ready to battle.

She nearly melted into the stone fireplace, but then, what had she expected? His Primal was lion. He was accustomed to compliance and would force hers without a second thought, just as he had during her training.

Jason stood up. “Knock it off.”

Griffin glared at him. “Stay out of this.”

Riana wanted out of Griffin’s space. She tried to scoot around him and had nearly escaped when his hand shot out to catch her shoulder.

“You’re not going anywhere, Little Cat.” He studied her face, those silver eyes blazing with leashed fury. He’d always been protective of his people. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing, but she hated being on the receiving end of all that aggression. “You need to feed. Jason will help you.”

She shook her head. “I can do it myself, as I said I would.”

A throaty growl startled Riana.

Leave Mama alone. Willis was poised at her side, ears back and teeth fully bared.

His amber gaze was locked on Griffin.

“Willis, no.” Adrenaline shot through her veins, so thick she tasted it on her tongue. She didn’t know what Griffin might do with a direct threat like that and didn’t want to find out. “Move, baby. Now. It’s all right. Wait for me by the front door. Go on.”

His ears shot forward and twitched. He understood the urgency in her voice. He’d learned that lesson well two days ago. Lowering his head, he trotted off to sit by the front door.

Jason bulldozed his way between Griffin and her. As she slipped from the titan’s grasp, Jason snagged her and brought her back against the warmth of his body. “That’s quite enough, Commander. This isn’t a matter that should burden a great Defender, certainly not the second in command. I suggest you leave Riana’s well-being to me and focus on matters more suited to your temperament and training.”

Griffin’s eyes narrowed. “Did you just insult me?”

Jason shook his head. “Of course not. Now, go bite something. Leave me to my work.”

Another moment passed while Griffin gave the matter some thought. He then turned and left.

Riana sidled out of Jason’s grasp. She wondered again if coming here had been the best choice. Clearly, Griffin was too dangerous and Jason too ... seductive, and the call of his body was damn hard to ignore. If she stayed, eventually that call would have to be answered, and while the thought appealed to her, she didn’t think now was the best time to bind with a mate.

He caught her wrist. “You’ll feed within the hour. Understood?”

“I can’t...,” Riana breathed. Can’t leave Willis alone. Can’t stay.

His jaw tightened. “You can and you will. I’ll fill a cup for you.”

Her gaze dropped to his long fingers, curled around her wrist. Beneath them, the sutekan heat flowed through her body until she nearly purred. Perfect warmth. “Um....” She lost her thought. “Okay.”

“Good.” He raised her hand and pressed it to the center of his chest. She felt his heart beat, strong, steady. The heat between them swirled, vibrant and alive. He looked down at her, those expressive eyes a mixture of desire and sorrow. “Do you know what I remember most about you?”

She shook her head.

“Your eyes. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a shade of green quite like yours. Like Chinese Fluorite. Have you ever seen it?”

Again, she shook her head.

“It’s a beautiful light green stone. If you hold it up to the light, sometimes you’ll see rainbows deep within the stone. With some, you’ll see darker crystal-like formations on the inside and sometimes it doesn’t look like crystal at all. It’s complex and gorgeous. I have a Chinese dragon made from it, which I’ve had for years. It always reminds me of you.”

He actually thought about her? “Why are you telling me all this?”

He lifted his brows and dropped his gaze to the ground. “So that maybe you won’t just disappear again. I’d like you to stay.”

Yet another thing she’d forgotten. “Disappear? When did I disappear?”

He released her hand. “When you left Malanaya in 1130. I remember it well.

Griffin had assigned you to Hong Kong, and I was furious with him. He didn't care, of course. So, off you went and that's the last I saw of you. Until today."

"Ah," she said, calling back long-forgotten memories. She'd asked to be transferred because she'd thought Jason's feelings for her were nothing more than a simple crush.

He'd been right all along.

She shook her head, still baffled about why he knew and she didn't. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. That's just how it worked out."

After all these years, he'd changed. The awkward, gangly youth she'd left ages ago simply didn't exist any more. The man before her now was strong, confident, and knew his place in the world.

Of course, he'd changed. Hundreds of years had passed since she'd last seen him. Change was a fact of life.

Beneath the dark blue T-shirt, cords of muscle rippled along bronzed forearms and well-defined pectorals. Every plane of his sleek, languid body was sculpted, from the thick biceps down to long thighs snugly wrapped in black denim jeans. He was no longer the skinny, hyperactive boy she'd known in another life.

Indeed, he'd grown into a fine example of masculine perfection, one that simply oozed sexual heat.

He faced her, moving with the natural grace of his Primal. Curling one hand behind the nape of her neck, he drew her so close she felt warm breath against her neck and shivered. "Did you ever miss me, Nukita? Maybe just a little bit?"

Sunlight. Riana let her eyes close. She hadn't thought about him or the sweet name he'd given her at all. At the time, she'd thought him little more than an infatuated young man, one with so much life ahead of him. "Jason, I can't do this."

He bent closer. She retreated until her back thumped against the wall. "You haven't even given me a chance." His voice was soft, with just a hint of that rich, ancient Spanish accent she loved. His hand dropped to her shoulder, then skimmed down her arm with a touch so light it raised chill-bumps.

"Jason, I haven't seen you for almost a thousand years. I don't know you anymore. Do you expect me to simply drop everything because of this?" Taking her hand from his grasp, she raised it to his face, wiggling her fingers before curling them into a fist. "I don't even know what *this* is."

Mama?

Riana's gaze swung toward the front door. Willis sat there, as he'd been told, looking lost and upset. She brushed past Jason to Willis. Kneeling, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"What's wrong, baby?"

Willis whimpered aloud. *Why is Sen-doggy being mean to you?*

"He's not, sweetheart," she said. "I've told you about our people before. How we all have someone that's perfect for us? Well, Sendagi is perfect for me...."

NO, he shouted, flinging himself from her grasp. *He isn't perfect for you at all! No! No! No!*

"Willis, please."

He's mean! Willis began to hop, distress on his face. *He's mean! No Sen-doggy! Just us! Just us!*

Riana caught him and pulled him tight against her body. She wiped the tears from his face, and then buried her nose in the sweet-smelling fur along the back of his neck. “No, baby, hush now,” she soothed, caressing the side of his neck. “Just forget about Sendagi. We’ll go home as soon as we can. Forget about him. He doesn’t matter, baby. Just forget.”

She closed her eyes and held him tight, clinging to the only thing that made sense at the moment.

Willis shivered against her. His tears fell upon her bare arm, wrenching her heart as nothing else could. She held him, waiting until they finally subsided and only raw snuffles remained.

She glanced back at Jason, who watched with a wary eye. He’d be the first to figure it out. They all would, eventually. With any luck, she’d be long gone by then.

When Willis was quiet, she wiped his nose with her thumb, and then gave him a kiss on his cheek. “Are you okay?”

He nodded, his brow furrowed.

“Good. Give me just a minute to talk to Sendagi, and then I’ll get you something to eat.”

We’re on vacation, so I get to have pizza, right?

“Not this late, no. You can have something light.” He needed his rest. Heavy meals late at night did not sit well in his little tummy and kept him awake.

His eyes lit up. *Waffles?*

“No, still too heavy. Chicken salad.”

Ignoring his pout, Riana rose and crossed to where Jason stood, arms folded over his chest.

She reached out to touch his arm, but changed her mind midway. Best to just let this go. Let it die before anyone gets hurt. “I have to go.”

He studied her a moment, his brow knitted. “I understand.” Leaning against the stone fireplace, he rested one arm against the mantel. Like his leopard Primal, he was relaxed and ready at the same time. She wouldn’t have thought it possible, but now that he’d filled out, he was even more beautiful than when he was younger. Eyes the color of topaz, rimmed by thick midnight-colored lashes, set above high cheekbones, full, rounded lips, and framed by threads of long, black silk.

Gorgeous.

“But I’m not giving you up,” he warned.

Riana let her eyes close. She remembered the night she’d said goodbye. The gangly boy had implored her to stay, and the desperation in his voice had frightened her. When he got down on one knee and begged, a piece of her had shattered. She’d thought him so young and confused about what he’d felt. She’d thought it only a passing fancy.

Now that he was grown, what chance did she possibly have? If he asked again, was she heartless enough that she could walk away? He’d been strong as a young man, but now....

That much power should be reserved for the gods.

She opened her eyes. “You know what they say about trying to give up something you don’t have, right?”

Jason’s gaze was focused on her mouth, his lips parted and wet, the fire in his eyes hypnotic and seductive. “I don’t care what they say. You’re here now, and I’m no

longer that stupid kid who let you get away the first time.”

He shifted from one leg to the other, calling her attention to the rippling muscles of his broad shoulders, tapering deliciously to small hips.

Desire rushed through her veins, heat pooled low in her belly and warred with her need to keep Willis safe. If she had any sense, she'd turn this very minute and leave. Gather Willis and leave, just *leave*.

“Like what you see?” His eyes glittered with dangerous intent, the black leopard within him ready to pounce.

Riana willed her feet to move, and yet they remained firmly planted. She couldn't look away from those spellbinding eyes or move away from the heat of his body. She didn't trust herself to speak. She wanted to say no, but with his musky scent all over her, she couldn't think of anything but yes. Her body tightened as she thought about lying beneath him, fingers tangled in his hair, his mouth on hers. Sweat mingling between them.

Now she did step back. “The timing is all off. I'm not ready, and neither is Willis. I can't change any of that, so I guess it doesn't matter if I like it.” She thought about what she'd said. “Or don't like it.”

“Is that right? You and that little shifter are pretty tight, aren't you?” Jason dropped onto the couch and retrieved a small wooden pipe and clear bag from a drawer in the coffee table. Unrolling the bag, he withdrew several sprigs of Livendium, stuffed them into the pipe, and lit them. Leaning back, he inhaled deeply and held his breath.

She ignored the question. “You still smoke too much, don't you?”

“Define too much.” He blew a smoke ring and watched it dissolve. “No, don't bother. I have a good reason for needing a little help. It's not every day your mate strolls into your life and summarily rejects you.”

“You know, I didn't come here to hook up with a mate,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck. Ah, that was too harsh. “I'm sorry.”

He watched her over several tiny smoke rings. “So am I, Riana. You really have no idea how much.”

“Maybe not.” She fixed her attention on her shoes, not really sure what else to say.

He was angry. While she understood that, she couldn't help how he felt. She couldn't help how she felt either, or that no room existed for him in their lives. Willis had been through enough lately. Riana wasn't so selfish she'd put her own needs ahead of her son's. She mentally shrugged, knowing this was simply how it had to be. Willis came first.

Her rationalization didn't make anything easier, nor did it ease the turmoil in her mind.

She'd had enough of this day. “If it's not too much trouble, I would appreciate it if you could show me to my room. I'd like a bath. We drove hard and fast to get here. I'm really tired.”

He nodded absently. “Sure, no problem.”

Griffin returned with flushed skin. He'd just fed, reminding her that she needed to do the same.

He shrugged out of his coat and leaned casually against the doorway. “Jason, take care of Riana. I can watch over Willis.”

Jason shot him a heated glance, snuffed out his pipe and straightened. "Come," he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

She turned to Willis, who watched from his perch near the front door. "I won't be very long."

Willis looked at her with plaintive amber eyes. *I want to go home now.*

Her heart melted every time he gave her that look. She wanted to go home too. "Not yet, sweetie. Soon." She looked at Griffin. "He needs something to eat. Not pizza. It'll give him a tummy ache this late at night. I'd prefer he had something light, like chicken salad. Can you help him with that?"

Griffin smiled at the bobcat. "I'd be happy to."

Riana narrowed her gaze. "Will he be safe with you? I mean, I know how much patience you have. Or don't have, as it were."

"You worry too much, girl. Go take your bath." He waved dismissively. "Willis, would you like to hear a story about Riana? Jason and I used to tease her when we were younger..."

Riana rolled her eyes and shook her head. This wasn't the first time he'd embarrassed her with stories of their lives in Malanaya.

Willis nodded, all too happy to hear the story. She gave up. No matter the species, somehow the males would always bond with each other and it would always involve disgusting things.

With a sigh, she left Willis in his care.

Jason led her down the hallway to a bedroom washed in moonlight from twin skylights.

She looked around. "This is beautiful."

He glanced at her, flicking on the light. "Thanks."

The walls, divided by wainscoting that spanned all four walls, were split between pale yellow on top, and natural wood on the bottom. The four-poster bed was huge, with thick, sunny quilts and two rows of small, square pillows.

"Just a sec," Jason said over his shoulder. He rounded the door to the bathroom. A moment later, she heard water running.

Chapter Four

The only sound the small black falcon made when it glided into the room was the soft click of talons against the hardwood floor. Immediately, the bird shifted into a fully clothed man, reminding Julian Richards, again, of the vast differences between his species and theirs.

Julian's people needed magic to shift. Dominic de Santo, an Eskarian, shifted between the human and animal world with amazing ease, and seemed quite comfortable in either. Nic had gone on the lam several years ago, the result of some misunderstanding, or so he claimed. Julian didn't believe it for a minute, though he didn't have a shred of evidence to support guilt or innocence. Nic was the kind of guy who lived by his own rules and trouble just happened to follow.

An immortal, Nic had not only the power to shift but telekinetic abilities as well. If Sadaarin magic hadn't been so powerful, Julian might've been concerned the Eskarian couldn't be controlled. As it was, the protection the Falcons offered was enough to secure Nic's compliance, at least for now. The rogue might be useful at some point in the future. If nothing else, should some part of their Plan go awry, he would make an excellent scapegoat.

Not bothering to look up, he said, "You found her, I take it."

Nic dropped into the chair in front of Julian's desk and slouched. "Yeah."

Now Julian lifted his gaze. His anger spiked. He despised the punk kid, hated that sulky demeanor and snotty attitude. No wonder Nic was marked for death by his own people. His very presence was offensive.

"And? You and eight of my best men spent a week back there. Tell me you have more to report."

They'd finally gotten a lead on the woman who'd disappeared almost twenty years ago, after the first time they'd tried to take the son.

Their poor tracking skills embarrassed Julian and made him look bad to the shiema, Sepheus, the leader of the Red Falcons. Ridiculous that a woman, even if she was immortal, had eluded them for almost two decades.

"Your lead was good. Took us a day to find her ranch. That night, two of your guys went in to kill her. The plan was that they would do her first and then take the son. It was supposed to be a clean, easy deal."

Julian didn't like the way this was sounding. "So what happened?"

Nic smiled, an eerie sight when so much long black hair hung over equally black eyes they were barely visible. "Riana happened."

"What, exactly, does that mean?"

"You didn't tell them she was like me, did you?"

Julian shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't see any reason to tell them, not that it's any of your business. Now, out with it, Nic. What the hell happened?"

"Your idiot minions set her house on fire without killing her first. Apparently they thought she wouldn't wake up and smell the smoke. So your guys, in their infinite

wisdom, decided to have some fun with her bobcat. They thought the ranch manager was her son. They were wrong.”

“What are you saying?”

“First, the ranch manager is just some guy who works for her. Second, the bobcat is her son, and finally, you should know that your boys just pissed off the only woman in Eskarian history strong enough to achieve Defender status. They ain’t coming back home, Jules. She woke up, saw that her son was gone, and launched.”

“Launched ... what is launched?”

“She found Carlos messing with her son and ripped his throat out. The rest of the guys saw what happened and went after her. One by one, she killed them too.”

“All of them? Wayne? Darryl?” His men were seasoned Falcons. How could this have happened?

“Cinders.” Nic laughed. “The good news is that she and her little bobcat are here in Washington, on Vashon.”

Finally, information he could use. He got to his feet and began slowly pacing around his office.

“Is that so? Do you know where?”

Nic nodded. “She’s staying with Jason Velazquez, an old buddy of mine. I can’t go there, if that’s what you’re thinking. They’ll kill me on the spot. You know, kill first, ask questions later.”

Julian thought about what he’d been told. “So where were you while all this destruction was going on?”

“I was doing exactly what you told me to do--staying out of sight and observing. Letting your guys do their job.”

Julian nodded. That had indeed been the order. “You said cinders. What do you mean by that?”

“Well, Jules, here’s how it works--when we take care of a threat, we make sure no evidence is left behind. Most of us will just torch the thing with our telekinetics. One quick flash and it’s gone. That’s what Riana did to your men. Poof. Like magic. There aren’t any bodies to find.”

Julian shook his head. “Where’s the ranch manager now?”

“Now?” Nic said, scowling. “How the fuck would I know? After Riana went off and started ripping throats, the manager came out with a loaded shotgun. Guess she wanted all the fun to herself, because as soon as she saw him, she sent his ass to sleep. He was still out cold when I left.”

“Maybe someone needs to go back and take care of him.”

Nic rose to his feet. “Use your head, Falcon. Somebody had to stay behind to pick up the pieces after your idiots demolished her home. You know, things have changed since you and I first hooked up. We have police who ask questions. Insurance companies who ask questions. Everyone will want to know what happened. Someone has to be there to answer their questions. Otherwise, they start digging around for clues.” His eyebrows lifted. “And they’re very good at finding them. None of us can risk discovery, Jules. You need him there. You screwed up, big time, so did your men, and they paid the price. Now it’s your turn.”

Julian huffed out a breath. “You don’t know that.”

“Oh, but I do. It’s only a matter of time before she finds out about this place and

comes for you. One bit of advice.” He smiled again. “Don’t underestimate her power. And don’t fool yourself into thinking your magic is superior. It isn’t.”

“Get out,” Julian snapped. “I’ve had enough.” He jabbed a finger at him. “Remember who you work for, Defender, and who offers you protection. You belong to us--mind, body and soul. How do you think she’d feel about you, knowing you were the one who changed her life?”

Nic waved him off. “Don’t even try to pull that psycho-babble shit on me. Riana won’t find out. The spells you put on her are working just fine, and since the only way to break them is never going to happen, I’m not worried.” He started for the door. “Think about this, moron. Riana and her son are now surrounded by some major muscle, which makes your job harder. Seems to me you’d be better off trying to figure out how to separate them. Dane’s not going to be happy if your little part of the Plan fails. I’d be trying a little harder if it was me, but you do what you have to do.”

Julian blinked. What the hell did that mean?

Dane Maxim strode into the office just as Julian returned to his leather chair. Immediately, Julian shot back to his feet. He’d learned long ago not to cross the elder.

“Dane.”

“Julian.” Dane nodded. He leveled a cool stare at Nic. “You were just leaving, I believe.”

“So I was. You girls have fun now. Don’t forget to play nice.” Nic grinned, put his hands into the pockets of his grimy black jeans and sauntered out of the office. The door slammed shut, courtesy of his advanced telekinetic ability.

Dane took the chair Nic had left. “I despise that man.”

Everyone despised Nic. The man had an uncanny ability to bring out the worst in people.

Following Dane’s lead, Julian returned to his chair. “What can I do for you?”

“What can you tell me about the son?”

Julian leaned back in his chair and inhaled. Dane held enormous power at his fingertips and was, given that he considered all life expendable, the most dangerous man Julian knew. Nic had his moments, but he never forgot the value and importance of humanity.

“The son is living as a bobcat--a spell, I’m assuming. My men were told to take him and kill the mother. They...,” Julian paused, wishing he had someone more positive to offer, “failed on both counts. Presently, they are here in Washington, on Vashon Island, living with some of Nic’s people.”

Dane nodded, nostrils flaring. Julian knew Dane well enough to read the man’s body language. He was furious.

“Where are your men now?”

Julian was almost glad they were dead. Dane had no tolerance for failure. Death was not the worst thing that could happen to a man. Whatever atrocities Carlos and the others had suffered, it was faster and more humane than what they’d get from Dane.

“Dead.”

Dane’s brows lifted. “Dead. Dead, how?”

“According to Nic, she cut their throats and then incinerated them. She evidently has advanced telekinetic ability, like Nic.”

Dane smiled. “Eight men, incinerated. No one escaped?”

“Sadly, no,” Julian replied. “Nic claims she’s quite strong, that she’s the only woman to ever become one of those warriors.”

“Intriguing. Here’s what I want you to do. Take Cody and go down to the Ritual Room. Your magic needs to be strong before you face either the mother or the son. Nala will be waiting for you. I want her to work on you personally, so I know you’re ready. We can’t afford to lose more men, nor can we let some psychotic warrior woman ruin our plans. Not when we’re so close.”

Julian nodded. “How is the shiema?”

“Still alive, unfortunately. He is concerned that his heir has not been brought before him yet, but he’ll just have to wait. Each day he draws closer to death, and that brings us closer to our goal. He, and all our people, must believe the son is the rightful heir to the shiema’s power. It has to stay that way, Julian. If he finds out the son is a fake, he’ll use Kodiak to prolong his life until a new one can be produced. We can’t have that, Julian. Lord Vox is anxious to return to the underworld. I am anxious to bury that idiot Sepheus and serve the true god. Tell me you’re able to do your job.”

Julian didn’t care for the exiled leader of the underworld. In fact, he finally realized he didn’t care for any of this. Too much had changed. Dane had become a little too over-zealous, and the Plan...

The Plan had morphed from simply sending a broken man home to causing worldwide chaos and destruction. Julian could no longer believe in what he was doing.

“I am quite capable of handling my duties.”

“Then bring me the son,” Dane snapped, rising from his chair. He slammed both palms on the desk and glared at Julian. “If you can’t do it, I’ll find someone who can, someone who wants to be a part of the new world.”

“I will do it,” Julian said, lowering his head.

The elder had so much power. He couldn’t afford another mistake. Dane’s position in the shiema’s court was far below Julian’s, but that had little to do with reality. For some unknown reason, Dane had the shiema’s ear. Julian did not. Reality.

The oppressive weight of what he still had to do bothered him. So few could be trusted, and now, after centuries of having time on their side, the lack of it felt much like a noose tightening around his throat.

“Cody will help you in any way he can. Use him as you see fit.” Dane headed for the door. “Just make sure you don’t fail again. Sepheus expects to see an heir. By God, you’d best give him one, or I’ll make sure your death is very slow and very uncomfortable. Do you understand me?”

Julian nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” Dane left, not bothering to close the door behind him.

Grateful for the silence, Julian finally let his guard down a little. He sat back in the leather chair and took in a deep breath. What might’ve been seen as relief was actually acceptance of the inevitable. In his long, rather tiresome life, he’d made so many mistakes. Just ... so many. Maybe this was the culmination of every one of them. Little doubt existed in his mind that Dane would soon take his life.

He leaned forward, resting his head in his palms. He longed for a simpler time. His life had been good until the moment he’d taken up with Dane. It had never been perfect, but he’d enjoyed many good times. He’d had a wife. A daughter. They’d been human, and so they’d passed centuries ago.

Much as he hated to admit it, life had held little meaning since his daughter's death, more than seven hundred years ago. What kind of man spent that many years in a self-imposed purgatory? More to the point, why had he allowed himself to sink so low?

When Dane approached him hundreds of years ago and spoke of returning a damaged man to his home, Julian had willingly accepted the lies, accepted his fall from grace.

Coward.

Horrible word. And yet that was the answer to all his questions.

It was true. If he had an ounce of courage, he would tell Dane what to do with his Plan.

He let out a long sigh, lifted himself from the chair, and left his office. Someone needed to rein in Dane and his absurd plan. Someone should do it, but he knew he couldn't. He didn't have it in him.

Coward.

Julian found Cody in his personal quarters, away from the hub of Falcon activity. Like Julian, he valued privacy. He wouldn't appreciate the intrusion. Julian would've been happy to slither back into his own space, but Dane expected results.

"I take it you heard," he said, leaning against the doorway.

Cody looked up. He sat in a beige canvas chair in one of the dark corners of his chambers.

"I heard. I get to endure another friggin' ritual. Lucky me."

Julian felt just as blessed. The incense Kodiak and her apprentices burned during a ritual made his nose burn, and the smelly black tonic that got poured down his throat tasted like tar, or so he imagined. Both nauseated him for hours and made him want to do nothing more than crawl into bed to sleep it off.

"At least you don't puke your guts out afterward."

"Only because I lived in Sadaar most of my life. Still got the purple eyes," Cody said, pointing to his face. "But that ritual tears me up every time."

Everyone who lived in Sadaar used magic to some degree, which was why the air always smelled like sewer water and long-term residents had purple eyes.

"Shall we, then? This isn't going to get any easier." Julian headed for the door.

Spread over nearly three thousand acres near Crystal Lake, the Falcon compound resembled a small, self-contained community. A chapel, several barns, silos, a general store and small homes and apartments nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains. They'd learned long ago that blending in was the only way to survive. The tunnels and underground ritual rooms remained hidden from the human world. Falcon scouts patrolled the perimeters daily. No one knew about the shape-shifting community or the gates it protected.

Every building had access to the tunnels. Julian opened the door and waited for Cody to pass through first. He followed, locking it behind him. It was hardly necessary. The scouts would warn of an intrusion long before the perpetrator found the world within a world.

Torches gave light to the tunnel system and provided some warmth. Julian was cold anyway, nervous about the ritual. Beside him, Cody shivered and stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets.

No one liked this part of Falcon life, but they tolerated it to keep the magic.

Rounding the last corner, they entered the room Julian had come to hate. Sure enough, just as Dane had promised, Nala was waiting for them.

Kodiak was there too.

Unusual. She seldom left the underworld for these routine infusions of magic. From her perch on a low stool that was too tall for her plump little legs, she waved them in.

“You need da extra magic, hey?”

Julian looked at Cody then her. “Yes, extra magic.”

“Ya, da big magic.” Nodding, she waved a chubby dark-skinned hand toward two large wooden tables in the center of the room. “You come, den. I give you da good magic. Make you strong.”

Cody grunted.

Julian couldn't get his feet to move.

“You 'fraid of Kodiak, hey? I be good to you. I take da sickness dis time. You come.”

Hopping off the stool, she waddled over to stand between the two tables. Her long salt-and-pepper braid swung in time with her slow gait.

“Here, now, you no be 'fraid.” She patted the table. “Come now.”

* * * *

Julian's legs were broken.

He lay at the foot of the gates to the underworld ... but he was on the wrong side. This wasn't right. He was in Sadaar. Sentenced to the underworld for treason.

He remembered now. The moment he'd stepped inside the gates, they'd ambushed him and smashed his legs with baseball bats. Death was right around the corner. He'd bleed out before anyone came to help.

“Julian?”

His eyes snapped open. He sucked in a deep breath, realizing he'd been dreaming. Dreams should not feel that real. Even now, his legs ached, and he distinctly remembered the dull thud of wood against flesh. He relived each painful blow in slow motion, heard again their hoots and hollers and mindless laughter. Felt his body go numb.

“Where am I?”

The pretty young apprentice smiled. “You're in the number-two ritual room. How do you feel?”

Scrubbing his face with both hands, Julian blinked and scanned the underground room. His gaze came back to the apprentice, Nala.

“Where's Cody?”

“Kodiak sent him to his quarters,” she said, helping him sit upright. “You didn't answer my question. How do you feel?”

He studied her a moment. Nala was nearly as tall as he. Her slender, athletic form appealed to all the young male Falcons. They liked her large brown eyes and creamy dark skin, but Nala had more interest in magic than men. Julian didn't think she had any idea how she affected those boys.

“Like I could throw up.”

“You should rest.” After a quick scan of the room, she leaned forward and pressed something cold into his palm. Her expression turned serious. “This is a special serum from Kodiak. Give it to Cody and tell him to use it on the mother's companion.”

What companion?

His gaze dropped to the vial of milky fluid. "What is it, and why am I supposed to use it?"

Nala shrugged. "I don't know. She told me to give it to you and tell you how it was to be used. I didn't ask why. She knows things. Sometimes it's just better to not ask. Trust her, though. She does know things."

Julian dropped the vial into his trouser pocket and hopped off the table. "Thanks, Nala."

"Anytime. Go home and rest."

Sure. After he threw up.

The path back to his quarters seemed longer and more difficult, but eventually he made it to the front door of his little abode. Just as he was inserting the key, one of Sepheus's young assistants rushed up and nearly tackled him. The lad, Andreas, couldn't have been more than twelve, but he'd already served the shiema for three years as a general assistant and runner of errands.

"Sepheus wants to know where the son is," he said between breaths.

Leaning against the door, Julian crossed his arms over his chest. He really needed to lie down.

"I don't have that information yet. Sepheus will have to wait a few more days."

The boy's purple eyes grew wide. "He said you'd say that."

"Then why did he ask?"

"He said to tell you this--you have three days to find the son. The transfer of power from the father to the son must be completed as quickly as possible. Without the shiema's power, you know what will happen."

Julian nodded. "Yes, the gates will open."

Andreas poked him in the chest with a spindly little finger. "Then you know you can't fail."

"I know," Julian said, knowing good and well that's exactly what was going to happen.

The boy spun on his heel and scampered back toward the Great Hall, where the shiema, the leader of the Red Falcons, waited to die.

Julian entered his quarters. He dropped down to the couch, took in a deep breath and exhaled loudly. Exhausted, he could only lie down and wait to feel better.

He was utterly, without question, in over his head. Dane had threatened his life, and now the shiema was indirectly doing the same thing. No matter how he looked at it, he was a dead man.

Rising from the couch, he crossed to the small desk, cluttered with papers and old photographs, left over from another life. From the side drawer, he pulled out two very important items. The first was a drawing of his late wife and daughter, created in a time long before cameras. The drawing had been done by his best friend, a man who died almost fifteen hundred years ago.

The second item was a .38 caliber revolver, a gift from Dane.

Julian took both items back to the couch. He positioned them on the wood floor at his feet, making sure each was perfectly aligned with the other.

If he ended this now, Dane's Plan might fail and the gates might not open. If the heir didn't show, maybe Sepheus would decide it was time to produce another, and the

world would be spared.

No matter how he looked at it, he came to the same conclusion. If he died now, the rest of the world would live. Yes, it was true he could send someone to retrieve the son, or drive there himself and take the lad, whether he wanted to go or not. He didn't believe in the Plan anymore and, in fact, found it repulsive and wrong and well ... evil. What sane man thought about unleashing a dark underworld upon an inherently good, decent, and essentially innocent species?

Julian hadn't intended to become a martyr, but he was certain it was for the best. His family was gone. What the hell did he have to live for?

He picked up the revolver.

Chapter Five

"I'll be there in just a minute," Jason said over the running water.

"Take your time. I'm fine." Riana was finally starting to relax. Willis was safe with Griffin, and the Falcons were, at least, for the moment, gone.

She crossed to the dresser. Made of oak, it was wide, low and, she suspected, very old. Several photographs in wood and metal frames adorned the top. One in particular caught her attention. She picked it up and studied the grainy image.

Jason's parents. Neither smiled, yet the placement of their hands on each other's body spoke of a deep love and friendship. Though not all Eskarians who mated were benekedas, Jason's parents had been. She'd known them long ago and even then had been envious of the kind of relationship they had.

She smiled, trailing her fingers lightly across the glass. So much time had passed since she'd seen her own parents. She missed them, and wondered if it were possible for them to accept a little boy bespelled into the body of a bobcat. Could they accept her after what had happened?

"They always liked you."

She whirled to face him. He leaned one hip against the dresser, arms folded over his chest. A terrycloth robe hung over one shoulder.

"You startled me," she said. "I didn't hear you come back."

He shrugged and lifted one brow. "Didn't mean to. What were you thinking about?"

Riana looked at the photograph. "Your parents. Mine. I haven't seen my family for a long time. Not since you were just a snot-nosed kid."

He laughed. Taking the photograph, he studied it a moment, a little smile still on his mouth.

"My parents were good people. We had fun. They let my brothers and me be kids until we were ready to be something else."

She smiled. "My parents were like that, too."

He set the photograph back on the dresser.

The terrycloth robe slipped off his shoulder. He caught it and draped it over his forearm, picking at nonexistent errant fibers.

"They'd always hoped for grandkids."

"Your brothers didn't give them any?"

"They did, but I was the oldest so I was expected to produce the Velazquez heir. For a long time, they tried to pressure me into choosing someone--*anyone*--to mate with so our traditions could be properly passed on. Dad even used that word properly to me and my brothers. I couldn't do it, of course. Pissed him off something fierce."

He rattled off several Spanish words in hot succession. She translated--*For thousands of lifetimes we have done this, Jason. The father passes both knowledge and the old weapons of the dark warrior to the son.*

"Never the second son, he said. Always the first. Since the beginning." Jason

smiled. "Of what, I have no idea. I'll probably never know now. My brothers and I kind of drifted apart after my parents passed. Haven't seen them for years."

"I'm sorry. It must've been very difficult." She laid her hand on his shoulder, and then let it drop when the suteka warmed her palm.

"Yeah, it was." He nodded absently. "I knew you were pregnant. When I came back from Mexico ... I knew. Griffin knows, too. He's the one who told me."

"Uh...." Riana's heart dropped into her stomach. She moved to the bed and sat before her legs gave out. "And neither of you said anything?"

"No, we never told anyone. In fact, this is the first time I've ever talked about it."

Riana was astounded. All this time, they'd both known. She'd tried so hard to protect her secret, to avoid subjecting herself, Willis or her family to humiliation or worse and now she found out Jason and Griffin had known.

Christ.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He studied her face a moment, his dark amber eyes unreadable. His jaw tensed just before he looked away.

"Jason?" she prodded. "Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

Her shoulders tensed as she waited for an answer.

"Put this on after your bath," he said, tossing the white robe on the bed. He went into the bathroom, turned the water off, and strode to the door. He stopped in the doorway. "To answer your question, I never said anything because you weren't around. I hadn't seen you for so long, I'd forgotten what you looked like. Yeah, I could've searched for you, but I didn't want to do that. I didn't want anything to do with you. Mostly, I didn't want to think about you fucking some other guy. Seriously, think about it. What should I have said? Congratulations?"

He slammed the door behind him, leaving her to stare after him.

Great. That went well.

Riana lifted the soft robe to her nose. Closing her eyes, she breathed deep, admitting, finally, that she liked Jason's scent, that Willis's reaction to her true mate hurt, and that she had no idea what to do.

She didn't want to let Jason go.

Willis had always come first, and that wasn't going to change. Jason's re-entry into her life introduced a dilemma she couldn't figure out how to resolve. The connection between them was strong, and the call to mate even stronger. She could see now why Ian had decreed that children should not be born outside bondlock. Given the facts, she couldn't make a decision without hurting someone she loved.

Tossing the robe over her shoulder, Riana entered the bathroom, only to stop in the doorway. Such a huge, beautiful bathroom. The caldariums of old Rome were big enough to allow many bathers to gather and socialize. Even the private baths were large, like this. The tan-and-black-colored tiled walls welcomed her, the steam from scented water beckoned. Ferns hung suspended from the ceiling near the large, frosted glass window. The black marble floor glistened in the soft, incandescent light.

She felt like she'd come home.

To Jason.

Just that quick, the tears came. Pressing her fingers to her mouth, she closed her eyes and battled the flood of anger and resentment. She needed him. To survive. To keep

Willis alive and well. For a million other reasons that had nothing to do with the fact he was her benekeda, she had to stay here. She drew in a shuddering breath and held it. Swallowed. Shivered. Waited for all that suffocating emotion to wither.

Given enough time, most anything could be resolved. She could only pray the answer would come soon.

“Cito,” she pleaded, in her own language. *Soon.*

Riana set the robe across the back of the vanity chair and shed her clothing. As she started for the tub, she caught a glimpse of her nude reflection in the full-length mirror.

The scar across her chest and neck was all that remained from a battle with an Enterran Tarmeiser that happened years ago. The beast had nearly killed her, forcing her to seek the healing properties of hot salty water. For three days she’d lain in a pool of swirling, steamy water while she’d healed, asleep, blissfully lost in dreams.

Beneath the golden skin, another common feature of her kind, long cords of muscle rippled and flexed. Her strength was her most valuable attribute, because it meant she could defend Willis from most anything.

She trailed her fingers down the sides of her hips and thighs, intrigued by the eruption of gooseflesh that followed. Her skin was warm and soft, and yet she felt strangely detached from it. From her own body. From life.

Blair’s words came back to her. He’d said she looked like she was waiting for something.

Maybe she was.

The nagging little voice inside her head called her a betrayer of her own kind. An abomination. Not only had she bore a child out of bondlock, but she was also now turning away her benekeda. Her people celebrated the union between mates.

She didn’t belong with her own kind.

Outlaw, it cried.

“Proscribere,” she echoed in her own language.

Misfit, it screamed.

“Insurgo,” she repeated. “I know all that. It is my choice, and yet not a choice at all.”

A knock on the door made her jump. She scrambled for her robe, donning it quickly before opening the door.

Jason stood, a large cup in his hand. His mouth opened, but he said nothing. He studied her face a long moment before his gaze lowered.

The robe hung off one shoulder, exposing the soft swell of her breast. Ah, she regretted not securing it before she opened the door.

He just stared. Hungry. Needy. Aching for relief.

Like her.

The stark, raw sensuality emanating from him was overwhelming. She stepped back, astounded and mesmerized by the powerful aura that surrounded him. His gaze, hot and ravenous, roamed over her face, her hair, her breasts, down to her toes and back again. His body cried out for hers, pleaded for the warmth of skin against skin. They were of the same essence. He needed to bind himself to her, now and for all time, as she did with him. Nothing but the sacred words and conjoining of flesh and blood would ease the pain. Her complete surrender was his salvation.

His surrender was hers.

Another step back. She felt naked, despite the plush material surrounding her. Her cheeks heated to the point of discomfort.

“Jason?”

He said nothing. Seconds passed before he reached out to pick up a lock of her hair. She watched him sift his long fingers through it, felt the magnetic heat of two immortals perfectly matched to one another. In spite of her need to put it behind her, she did feel the call of his life-force, the cry of a soul abandoned by its mate.

Before she could stop herself, she curled her fingers around his muscular forearm, and then skimmed long fingernails down the length of it. A mistake she realized too late.

He took in a sharp breath. His eyes darkened, and the pupils enlarged.

“Riana,” he whispered, his voice thick and low. “I’ve waited for centuries. Don’t walk away from me again.”

He’d hungered for her, had waited all these years for her while she’d blindly gone about her business, unaware she even had a mate. Worse, she’d unwittingly changed the rules. She already had the love of her life, which left no place for Jason.

“I can’t...” She took a step back from the hands that could’ve caressed her skin, the soft mouth that would’ve taken hers again and again.

From the hard body aching to weld itself to hers.

His dark gold eyes, laced with bitterness, shot back up to meet hers.

“Drink,” he said, handing her the cup.

She took it and looked at the contents. Blood. His blood. She saw the freshly healed cut on his wrist. He’d given her a precious part of his life and asked for nothing in return.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He spun and slammed the door.

Again.

Atrox, the voice whispered.

“Yes, cruel,” she admitted. “I don’t mean to be. What else could I have done?”

She wasn’t fool enough to expect an answer. Turning to lean back against the door, she held the cup between both palms.

“Thank you,” she repeated in a whisper, emptying the cup in two swallows.

Then she closed her eyes and waited for the warm fluid to awaken the secondary system within her body, the one that manufactured what she needed to survive.

Riana disrobed and returned to the black tile tub. Stepping over the edge, she sank into the deliciously hot water.

And promptly burst into tears.

She’d wanted to push him away, and, by God, she had. She’d wanted to give him a reason to find someone else, though she hated the thought. He deserved better. A family. A woman who loved him more than life itself. A home filled with peace, laughter. Children. She couldn’t give him those things.

Her son had made the choice for their lives, and she would honor it. That was how they’d lived all along, by give and take. She would never force a life change on him, no matter the consequence to herself.

But here, alone, she could admit that she wished there were another way.

An hour later, she emerged from the bathroom, freshly scrubbed, warm inside her

plush robe and rejuvenated.

And still immersed in sorrow, guilt, and regret for what she'd not yet done.

An unfamiliar sound drew her down the long hallway to the living room. There, she stopped to listen to a sound she hadn't heard for ages.

Willis lay squirming on his back, all four feet in the air. Griffin was tickling his belly. Odd, high-pitched chirps came from the bobcat. It took a moment to realize what he was doing.

Laughing.

Willis was laughing aloud.

Her heart nearly burst right there in the living room. She closed her eyes to savor the sweet sound she'd not heard in so long. Her son was laughing.

"Thank you, Griffin." She couldn't help but grin, wide and open and happy.

He looked up, his silver eyes alight with the joy of play. "You're welcome."

Jason sat at a table, tools and weaponry laid out in a perfect arc around his workspace.

Each Defender developed expertise with a specific weapon. Riana's was knives.

Jason's weapon of choice was a very small custom-made crossbow with dozens of tiny arrows that auto-loaded from a small magazine. He was dipping arrows into a small vial of milky-white liquid. He then set them upright in a glass container to dry before meeting her gaze.

"Did you enjoy your bath?"

She smiled. "I did. Thank you."

"No problem. It was nothing." He shrugged.

It was not just *nothing* to her. She was grateful for the time, for the relief from the Falcons, and, most importantly, for Willis's laughter. That she'd never forget.

Willis rolled over onto his stomach. *Mama, you look so pretty.*

Griffin sat back. "Yes, quite."

She beamed, thrilled by their attention. Many years had passed since someone had said such nice things to her. She'd forgotten how good it felt. "Thank you."

Rising from the table, Jason approached and placed his hand at the small of her back.

"We should get you something besides a robe to wear, don't you think? Angela is washing your clothes, but I suspect it's going to be a few minutes yet."

"Okay," she said, glancing at him. His hand against her back felt good. Even through the thick material, the sutekan heat penetrated. She liked the warmth and comfort, and steadfastly refused to give any thought to consequences.

He led her to the walk-in closet in his bedroom. Rummaging through a vast array of suits, shirts, jeans, and trousers, he finally selected something.

"The only thing I have that might fit you is this T-shirt and these old jeans. Try them on."

She took them to the bathroom. Crap. The jeans were entirely too big, and the T-shirt too baggy. She looked like a little kid in adult clothes. Great. This would have to do, since she had nothing else to wear.

She left the bathroom. Jason took one look at her and burst into peals of laughter. She set her hands on her hips and glared.

"Oh, come on. It isn't that bad, is it?"

That made him laugh even harder.

Her cheeks grew hot. She didn't know what to do, so she stood, arms folded over her breasts, feeling awkward and foolish.

"Are you, by any chance, done yet?"

"I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry." Jason wiped his eyes with the back of one hand, giggling at the same time. "You can't go out looking like that. I'll have some clothes brought to you."

* * * *

Almost an entire day passed before Riana got any time to herself. She and Willis had slept late. After they'd awakened, they spent a long while relaxing and talking. She sent her thanks to Jason and Griffin for the protection they'd given.

For years, the Falcons had forced her to constantly look over her shoulder. Only now did she realize how much they'd affected her life, even though they'd only shown up three days ago. She'd known they'd come, sooner or later, and that threat was what kept her awake nights and made her jump at any odd little noise.

Before they emerged from the bedroom, she'd taken a long, hot shower. Willis had jumped in after she'd finished, laughing when she'd aimed the seven jets and doused him with hot water. She'd dried him with a big fluffy towel and told him what a handsome bobcat he was.

He'd looked at himself in a mirror and decided he was a *very* handsome bobcat. His infectious enthusiasm only reminded her that he'd once been a very handsome, energetic little boy.

After breakfast, she told Griffin and Jason everything she knew about the Falcons and how quickly they'd destroyed everything she owned. They nodded sympathetically and assured her they'd find out the truth.

Riana really didn't care about the truth anymore. She just wanted the Falcons out of their lives.

The sun was just beginning to set when she finally ventured out for a stroll. Jason had an enormous amount of waterfront property, which faced the Puget Sound and Olympic mountains. His home sat near the water, amid the verdant forest common to this area. Nearby, a small creek carried fallen leaves and twigs to the sound. A long yacht waited at the end of a wooden dock.

Jason had made a good decision when he moved here. She could easily see Willis and her falling in love with the cold water, the sweet scent of pine in the air, and the snow-capped mountains on the horizon. It was peaceful and beautiful.

She stepped off the back porch, dipping her hands into the pockets of her new denim jacket just as a chill wind kicked up. Pine needles and leaves swirled all around her. Carried on the wind was the remnant of a scent she'd hoped to avoid forever.

Magic.

The scent was unmistakable. A mixture of sulfur and grapefruit, tangy and pungent, even this subtle remnant made her eyes water. More importantly, it set every part of her on full alert, made the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

"Something's up, guys," she said. "I smell magic."

Griffin answered. *Keep us informed.*

"Oh, hell, yeah." Riana mentally geared up for battle. She loved this part of the job. The tension, the excitement, and the anticipation, she loved it all. Mostly, she loved

engaging threats and kicking their scaly, furry, or sometimes bare asses. At one time, she'd lived for this thrill. Maybe she still did. She'd forgotten how much this meant to her.

Tucked into the back of her jeans was an Eskarian dagger, a forked beauty she'd had made especially for her smaller hand. She could throw fast and accurately. No one could match her. Certainly, no human could. No Defender ever had.

Oh, yeah, she was so ready for this.

Overhead, the bird circled again, calling to its mate.

Falcons.

"Jason," she said. "Protect Willis at all costs. If I fail, someone will come for him. When they do, kill them."

What's happened? Jason's concern echoed in her head.

How stupid she'd been to think they wouldn't find her this quickly. As hard and fast as she'd driven to get here, she'd thought they'd be safe, at least for some time. Yet, here they were again, damn them.

"Take care of him if I don't come back."

She slammed her mind shut. No distractions, no discussion, no compromise. She wanted to end it, once and for all. Was ready, and needed to end it.

She drew her forked dagger and flipped the hilt, bringing the blades flush against the underside of her wrist and forearm. She'd lived in fear for years and was damned tired of it. Willis was safe, under Defender protection. The time had finally come to make her stand, and she welcomed it. Once the Falcons took their human forms they were men. Just men, which meant they could be killed. She'd wait for them to land, and then she'd strike. Hard, fast, and final.

She looked up. A single Red Falcon hovered over the treetops. More would arrive soon. They'd come for her and try to force her to hand over Willis.

Never.

Before she allowed the Falcons to take either Willis or her, she'd give her son into Jason's care and go to her death. With any luck, she'd take a few Falcons with her.

Riana scanned her surroundings. Large houses dotted the landscape. The canopy of trees would best serve her needs now. She looked up again to see that a second Falcon had joined the first.

She darted under the cover of giant firs and maples, heading away from Jason's home, away from Willis. She wanted to lead the Falcons to an isolated place of her choosing. Then she would step out into the open, dagger at the ready, and the battle would begin.

The first to land would be scouts. They'd be the expendable ones. Once they spotted her, one would take to the air again and report his findings to the group. Then the hunt would begin.

A little chill rolled down her spine. The anticipation of her retribution and subsequent freedom was delicious. She loved the fact that the tables were about to turn in her favor.

The Falcons had exceptional eyesight and would track her easily, even under the dense canopy. Riana felt confident, ready, even excited to see the first two finally land. She heard their calls and laughed as she ran. The birds were adept hunters, and even if she lost them completely, it wouldn't be long before they found her again, now that they

knew where to search.

She'd make damn certain they found her.

She circled away from the waterfront now, farther from Willis. Heading inland, she found the concentration of housing much greater, more difficult to traverse. The homes along the waterfront had been open, but many of these had fences. She propelled herself over them using her advanced telekinetics, though it weakened her each time she used it.

The Falcons followed. She heard their calls behind her, and then ahead of her. She laughed again, knowing they were closing in.

Soaring over a tall wooden fence, she found herself on an open lot. Clear of trees and brush, the center would be perfect for her final confrontation. Ah, she loved the thought. The Final Confrontation. Freedom. She could almost taste it now.

Far above, the angry call of another, different bird of prey announced that the Falcons had breached territorial boundaries. Riana stopped beneath a thick patch of trees. She blew errant strands of hair from her face and waited to see what happened.

And then she felt the shift in the air, and her moment of glory dissolved.

Jason burst through the trees, his dark-blue T-shirt clinging to hard muscles and soaked in the center with his sweat.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

He rested his palms against his knees a moment to catch his breath. His dark hair, wild and tangled with leaves and pine needles, fell around his face. He glanced upward then caged her with an icy glare. "Your Falcons, I presume?"

"Yes, they're...."

A vicious fight broke out above.

Both Riana and Jason looked up to see a large black raptor attack two Falcons at once.

"Is that Griffin?" Alarm streaked across her skin.

Jason watched a moment. "Yes."

She stepped back, glaring at him with all the fires of hell behind her.

Her world ended.

"You. Left. Willis." She was shocked. Sickened. Horrified. "Alone."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I left him with Angela."

"Is she human or Eskarian?" Riana already knew the answer. She felt it in her bones. Knew it like she knew the sun would come up tomorrow.

For everyone but her.

"Human," he answered.

Riana bolted, shifting into a long, lithe cheetah as she ran. She needed the speed, though in her heart she knew it was too late.

Too late, damn it. Too late.

Damn those Falcons. Damn Jason and Griffin for leaving Willis alone. Damn all of them for making her believe she and Willis were safe with them.

Seconds later, she sailed through the plate-glass window, shifting from cheetah to her human form. Skidding on the hardwood floor on hands and knees, she ducked her head to let the shards of glass tumble over and finally off her body. She slammed against the far wall, scrambling to her feet without feeling anything. Her skinned knees and hands healed as she searched the house.

“Willis! Where are you?”

No answer.

She scoured the first floor without bothering to clothe herself.

Nothing.

Willis, answer me!

Silence.

She raced upstairs, snatching her robe as she darted past the bathroom.

He wasn't in the house. She ran from one room to the other, frantic for any sign of her son.

Nothing.

Finally, she skidded into her bedroom and saw the destruction at the hands of the Falcons. The smell of magic made her eyes burn. When she saw the atrocity, she fell to her knees.

“*WILLLLLLISSSS!*” she screamed.

In a pool of blood, the housekeeper's body lay twisted and broken. Written on the wall, presumably in that same blood, was one word.

Ours.

* * * *

Riana raised her head when Jason entered the room. She was dressed in the terrycloth robe he'd given her earlier, lacking the will to dress herself.

She had disposed of the maid's body in standard Defender fashion. Using her telekinetics, she'd lifted the body and detonated it outside, wincing from the white-hot flames that had reduced it to gray ash in mere seconds. Then she simply found the edge of the bed and sat down to wait, a box of tissues at her feet.

“He's gone,” she told him, sniffing. *And it's your fault.* “You need a new housekeeper, too.”

“Riana, what's going on?” Jason sat down beside her. Pine needles tumbled from his hair to his lap. Irritably, he brushed them aside, then raked a hand through his hair, scattering more needles, which he then ignored. “What happened to Angela?”

Bringing a soft tissue to her nose, she dabbed, sniffed again and thought about how to tell him what the Falcons had done. “They turned her body inside out with magic. I smelled it when I walked in the room.” Among other things. “They have powerful magic. I didn't know exactly how strong it was until today.”

“So why did they take Willis?” Jason asked.

Griffin sauntered into the bedroom and leaned against the wall.

“Yes, Riana, do tell us why you protect him so fiercely.” He smiled, cocking his head to one side and lifting an elegantly arched brow.

Riana wiped the tears from her face and sighed. Willis had been the biggest reason she hadn't told them and now he was gone.

“You'll recall I said that Willis was very special.”

“He's a shifter,” Jason supplied. “But I can't tell if he has another form.”

She shook her head, studying the pads of her fingers, wet with a thousand tears.

“No one can. For all intents and purposes, the bobcat is his only form, but that's not what he really is.” She paused, trying to keep the tears at bay. “I should never have come here. In a matter of hours, what I've protected for years has been destroyed.”

Jason frowned. “Why would you say something like that? Riana, come on, tell us

what this is all about.”

Well, why not? What did she have to lose at this point?

“Those Falcons aren’t just birds. They’re not shifters either, as I’ve said.

Whatever else they are, as people, they’re members of the Order of the Red Falcon.

“Willis was born twenty-four years ago. When he was five years old, something happened.” She hated going back to that dark time in their lives. Closing her eyes a moment, she struggled to continue. “My son was taken from me. The Order found us, and they took him. If it hadn’t been for Nic...”

“*What?*” Griffin’s gaze turned to ice. “Did you say *Nic*?”

Jason’s mouth dropped open. “Nic? De Santo? That asshole’s still alive?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Dominic. He came out of nowhere and saved both my life and Willis’s. If it hadn’t been for him ... I don’t know what would’ve happened to us. When I woke up, every last Falcon, and Nic, was gone.

“The Falcons use some amazing magic, guys. And they’re damn good at it.” She scrubbed her face with both hands. “And I really hate that I’m indebted to that son of a bitch.”

“Fuck!” Griffin spat, rising to his feet. “I should’ve killed him when I had the chance.”

Riana continued. “I don’t really know what happened. One minute the Falcons were closing in on me, the next I was face down in my driveway and Nic was telling me to get up. And then, I guess he left. I didn’t see either the Falcons or him ... until three days ago.

“After Nic saved my ass, I called a sorceress friend of mine. She put me in touch with a priestess who said she knew just what I needed. I paid her a lot of money to freeze Willis, so to speak, in his Primal. He’s still just a little boy, only five years old, though he’s lived there for almost twenty years.

“I’ve been looking over my shoulder ever since. I feared they’d come again, and I wouldn’t be able to fend them off. You can’t imagine the kind of magic these guys wield. I’ve never felt anything like it in my life, and, God help me, I never want to feel it again. It was truly terrifying.

“You guys know I can hold my own. Well, I didn’t hold anything when they came that day. They kicked my tail and left me for dead. If I hadn’t been immortal, I’m sure I wouldn’t be here right now.” She paused, certain she’d lost their respect for the admission of weakness. Searching their faces, she saw neither man seemed more than curious about her story. Neither had judged her as weak. Yet. “Anyway, they still want Willis. Until two days ago, they didn’t know I’d had him bespelled. For the last nineteen years, they’ve been looking for someone who doesn’t exist anymore.” She shook her head. It felt like a betrayal to talk about him like this. To spill the dark secret she’d held so close to her heart. She pressed the pads of her fingers to her lips and closed her eyes a moment, taking in a deep breath. “Willis is not my son’s given name. Since I had his Primal frozen, I have not once uttered his real name. They didn’t know who Willis was. They were searching for ... Alexei. My son’s name is Alexei.”

Griffin whispered his thumb back and forth across his chin, lost in contemplation. She brushed his mind, and caught him digesting the information, trying to determine what information they could use to defeat the Falcons.

“Clever, Riana. Well done. But they still discovered who he was and took him.

What do you think they want?" Griffin asked, watching as Jason pulled the pipe from his shirt pocket, filled it and set the leaves aflame.

Did she dare tell them? Did it matter?

"I didn't intend for any of this to happen. Their magic is too powerful for me, and now...." She covered her mouth with her hand. "Gone. It's all gone." Nausea turned her stomach inside out, forced her to close her eyes.

Spicy-sweet-smelling smoke wafted around her. Desperate to feel better, she held out her hand. "May I have a bit of that?"

Jason put the small wooden pipe into her palm. Curling shaky fingers around the stem, Riana brought it to her lips and inhaled deeply. Livendium was widely used among her kind, for reasons typically much less desperate than hers. She didn't care.

Exhale. Another deep inhale. Hold.

Release.

She gave the pipe back to Jason, then leaned back to let the herb do its work.

Griffin cleared his throat. "Continue, Riana. Why did the Order take Willis?"

"I first saw them when I was back in Rome, though I didn't know who they were. As I've already said, I almost always found one or two Falcons near the bodies of dead humans, so I've had reasons to consider them threats. Nothing definite, since I've never seen them kill. I don't think they're immortal, but they do live a long time. I wish I really did know what they wanted with Willis, but I don't."

Riana felt hot. She rose from the bed, moving away from Jason out of pure fear, though her gaze remained on him. This conversation was about to change everything, and none of it for the good.

"Why do you think they took him?" Griffin repeated, watching Jason as he spoke.

"I can only guess, but I think they want him," she began, wiping her suddenly sweaty forehead with the back of her hand, "because he's part of someone important to them."

Jason straightened and dumped the Livendium embers into a nearby potted plant. Tucking the pipe into his back pocket, he faced her slowly, his eyes dark, muscles tense. She could feel anger radiate from every cell in his body.

He lifted his chin. "What are you saying?"

"I'm sorry, Jason," she said, stepping back until she bumped the wall. "You said you knew I was pregnant. You both did."

"The day they came for him, they told me he was special. At the time, I didn't care about them or what they thought was theirs or what they thought about him. I will never give him up. After they tried, I found the most powerful sorceress money could buy and had him bespelled to save his life. To save both our lives." Her gaze shifted between the two warriors. "Twenty-five years ago, I dropped out of Eskarian society because I knew you ... *you*, my two best friends, would condemn me for what I did."

Jason's jaw clenched.

"I just couldn't bear to hurt my family or my friends. I was embarrassed, confused, and upset. Facing you, Griffin, or my parents ... I couldn't stand the thought of so many people judging me when...." She closed her eyes and exhaled.

"Continue, Riana," Griffin interrupted. "You clearly have some huge secret. Out with it. We don't have all day here."

She set her hands on her hips and lowered her head. She was tired. So many times

she'd dreamed of and feared this very moment. Now that she was facing it, she didn't think she deserved desertion by her friends. All she'd done was live a dignified life.

“My son is only half Eskarian. The other half is Red Falcon.”

Chapter Six

Jason pushed past her and left the room.

Griffin rested both forearms against the doorframe, his glare icy. “He didn’t deserve that, Riana. What the hell were you thinking?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “What I thought or hoped or wanted didn’t matter, did it? You wanted to know and so you backed me into a corner. Now you know. Happy?”

“How the fuck did this happen?”

“Griffin, we’ve been friends for a long time. Since you guys were kids. The only thing I’ve ever asked of you is to allow me to train as a Defender, which you did. I’m grateful for that. But now I need you to back away from this. I can’t tell you how it happened. I really can’t.”

“You can’t?” he echoed, narrowing his gaze.

“No, I can’t. Please ... let it go.” She felt the feather-light touch of his mind. She pushed him away and blocked her thoughts as best she could. His mental powers were unparalleled, and she really didn’t know if she could keep him out if getting in was his goal.

He studied her a moment. “I see. Well, that’s one way of getting out of binding yourself to your benekeda.”

Riana stared at the floor. “That’s harsh, Griffin. I’d rather be with Jason. You have to know that much.”

“And how’s that? Because you have a half-breed son by someone else? Because Jason’s so much a part of your life?”

“I didn’t know he was my true mate until--what?--days ago.” She looked up.

“Days ago? Do I look stupid? You were inseparable before you left Malanaya. Do you really expect me to believe you were never attracted to him then? That you felt nothing for him? Not one little scrap of emotion?”

She shrugged. “I thought he just had a little crush on me. I didn’t think....”

“Obviously, you didn’t think. He knew you were his mate years before you left, and now you’re going to stand there and tell me you felt nothing? I refuse to believe it.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you, then.” She examined her fingernails, wishing like hell she hadn’t opened her mouth. “I didn’t know.”

He shook his head. “How can you not know? That isn’t even normal for our kind. That’s just not how it works.”

“*I don’t know!*” she shouted. “Jesus, Griffin, get off me about that, will you? I said I don’t know!”

He studied her a moment. “Then tell me this--do you feel anything for him now?”

Her scrutiny moved to the tissue in her hand. “Yes.”

“And you know he’s your mate now?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand that,” he said, shaking his head again. “We always know.”

Always.”

“I do hope we’re not going to rehash this. I know now, but I didn’t know then, and I don’t know why that is. It just is. Can we move on?”

“You know that’s not right, don’t you?”

“Sure, I do,” she admitted. “But maybe it’s all right now. Maybe I was just really distracted back then. You know, your training was a bit rough on me.”

Griffin tucked one hand into his pocket, lazy and casual. “It was supposed to be rough. You survived.”

So she had.

“Yeah, okay. Whatever.” She waved dismissively. “Look, my son is out there, Griffin. He’s probably terrified, and God knows what those bastard Falcons have done to him. I want him back. I want every single Falcon dead and gone, and then I want to get out of here. We had a good life. I want it back.”

Griffin’s eyebrows shot up. “Leave? You’re just going to bail on your mate?”

“I have my own life and a son. Jason is feline. You know that’s a disaster waiting to happen. Willis and I have had enough excitement to last a good long while, I think.”

“So, without giving him a chance, you’ve already decided his fate.”

“Happens all the time. I’m hardly the first.”

“It doesn’t happen all the time in our world. Not between mates.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done to him?”

Riana straightened. “Of course, I know, and I’m sorry. I didn’t come here to hurt anyone, nor did I come for a mate. I didn’t even know I had one. None of this is any of your business, by the way. I see no reason why I should justify myself to you.” Her patience was wearing thin. “Now, stand aside, Griffin. I have to go look for my son.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You’re not going anywhere until we find the Falcon base of operations. You don’t know this area. We do. When we have the information we need, we will search with you.”

“You expect me to just sit around and wait when they have my son? Are you nuts? Get out of my way, Griffin. I have to go find Willis.”

“I’m sure you do,” Griffin said, a crooked smile on his face. “Where do you plan to search for him? Hmm? Fauntleroy? Bainbridge? Whidbey? If I tell you the Falcons’ base is on Vancouver, which way would you go? Do you understand what I’m saying here? Whether you like it or not, you need us, Riana.

“I know you’re concerned and frightened for his life. For what it’s worth, if it were Pia, I’d be terrified, too. That doesn’t mean I’m going to charge out there without knowing where to look. You’re the one who came here and asked us to help. Now you have to trust us to do our jobs. Think you can do that?”

“I did trust you, and look what happened. I kept him safe for twenty years. After a day with you, the Falcons find and take him. Thanks for that. I’m sure you realize he could be dead by now, all because you and Jason couldn’t trust me to do my job. No, I don’t believe I need any more help. Get out of my way.”

In the blink of an eye, Griffin had her back against the wall.

Memories of harsh Defender training flooded her mind. Brutal memories she wanted to forget. He’d trained her just as he’d trained his men. Now that she’d been away from it for so many years, she couldn’t imagine how she’d survived.

He gripped her shoulders, his fingers digging painfully into her skin. “We will

look for and find him. You are not to do this alone. Do you understand? I'm putting you under Jason's watch, effective immediately. He will know where you are at all times. Is that clear?"

She looked up into those silver eyes. "I don't need--"

"Is. That. Clear?" His gaze narrowed. "I won't ask again."

"It's clear."

"Make sure it stays that way." Griffin stepped out of her space. "Now, you will talk to Jason while I find out more about the Order."

Riana blew out a breath. Her neck ached from the tension. "What am I supposed to say to him? What do you think will change? And why do you care?"

"First, I've no doubt you'll think of something. Second, whether it changes anything is not my concern. That's up to Jason. Third, as Jason's friend, I do care about what happens to him. As for you." He paused, shaking his head. "I don't even know what to think. Be assured, though, I am *not* doing this for you."

He reached into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a small device--a Blackberry--and started to type.

Talk to Jason. Great. She didn't want to talk to Jason. Why did she have to do this?

"Because I'm asking you to have a little respect for your benekeda's feelings," he answered, his fingers flying over the tiny keypad.

Her eyes widened. "I can't believe you just did that."

He looked up. "Did what?"

He didn't seem to notice she hadn't spoken those words aloud.

She shook her head. "Forget it."

"I just put a couple trackers on this. I'm sure they'll come up with something soon," he continued with a sigh. "Don't worry, Riana. From what you've told me, I think they have something in mind for him. I think they want him alive. Now go. Jason's waiting for you."

She hated being dismissed like that. "Fine."

Griffin caught her shoulder as she passed in front of him. Auburn hair caressed her cheek as he leaned closer. "From this point forward, make certain Jason knows where you are at all times. You don't want me to have to come looking for you," he said, menace in his soft voice. "Consider your Defender status permanently revoked."

Riana slipped from his grasp, spun and glared up at him. "Like I care. I don't need it anymore. I don't need your threats, either. I'm no child, for God's sake, and I don't need a *goddamn* babysitter."

Griffin's eyebrows shot up. He studied her with flashing silver eyes, tapping his fingers against the wood. She'd pissed him off. Good. Pompous jerk.

"You will remain under Jason's watch," he repeated, his voice so whisper soft her toes curled, "until we find your son. Take matters into your own hands, and we withdraw completely. Your choice. You will not challenge the Falcons before we have the information we need. You will not challenge them alone. Understood?"

"Yeah, fine." She charged out into the hallway, and then spun to face him. "But understand this, Mr. High and Mighty Commander. If you take so long to figure out what's going on you cost my son his life, I'll find a way to make you pay. I trusted you once and now Willis is gone. Never again."

With that, she stormed down the hallway toward the stairs. Part of her expected him to follow. Part of her hoped he would, because she had more to say.

As far as she was concerned, Willis's abduction was wholly their fault. The simple truth was they hadn't taken her seriously, and Willis had paid the price.

By the time she hit the first floor, she was shaking. She'd catch hell for threatening the second in command. She wasn't stupid. Griffin would report it to Blair, and it would just snowball from there.

She didn't care. Once she had Willis back, they would go home. She'd lived under the radar before. She could do it again.

Riana came to the living room. At the far end was a wood-and-glass display case. Inside was a single artifact. She hadn't noticed it before and now, approaching the case, was surprised to see the object was something she'd once owned.

How had it survived all these years? Why did he still have it?

A Roman cup. Made of thick dull glass, it resembled pottery more than glass. Not worth much, so why was it in this case, on display as if it were priceless?

A long-forgotten memory resurfaced.

Centuries ago, Jason had returned to Malanaya wounded. He didn't say much, but she'd seen the deep lacerations across his chest and back, and the pain in his eyes. He'd brushed her aside, unwilling to accept her offer of comfort. He'd never been one to show any kind of weakness, so she wasn't surprised, but she'd wanted to help. As if they were connected, she'd felt his pain as her own and didn't like it.

Taking her blades, she'd opened her wrist to fill a cup--this cup--for him. So he'd heal faster. So he wouldn't hurt.

He'd accepted the cup and sipped slowly, watching her over the rim. When he'd finished, his eyes closed. The lacerations across his broad chest laced together with a speed she'd never seen before. Seconds later, no evidence of the wound remained.

He was a natural healer. Long before he became sendagi, he could do these things. Everyone had the innate ability to excel at something. Healing was Jason's gift, like hers was a deadly accurate aim.

She'd thought him so young at the time. He'd achieved Defender status, but he seemed somehow out of reach. Too young, too different. She remembered that night now, the way his eyes had smoldered when he looked at her. You didn't soon forget that kind of fire.

But she had.

His lips had brushed her cheek. His hand had whispered across her bare shoulder and down her arm. And as those dark amber eyes captured her gaze and held it, she would've sworn that hand just grazed her breast, a light brush like wings that had made her shiver and her pulse race.

"Thank you, Nukita," he'd said, his lips close to her ear. "When I taste of you again, it will not be from a cup."

Riana sighed.

Griffin had said everyone knew she and Jason were mates, but she never did, and even though Jason had touched her often, somehow she'd missed the heat of her perfect mate's skin against hers. Griffin was right; it shouldn't have been possible.

She passed through a breezeway to a separate structure and went in without knocking. He would know she was there.

The room was dark, except for the far wall. The rear projection, suspended from the ceiling, sent a cone of bluish haze across the top of the room. The action, blood and violence beguiled her, though she didn't think it looked very realistic.

"I've always liked this movie," Jason said from the floor. His back rested against the leather couch and his legs were up against his chest. His arms lay folded across his knees.

She positioned herself between him and the screen. He clicked the remote without looking at her. The images froze, dowsing the room in ethereal blue light.

Clearly still furious, he studied the remote, his breath shallow and quick. "What do you want?"

She waited a moment, struggling to find the right words, struggling to deal with the sudden venom in his voice. "I'm sorry about what happened back there."

His gaze shot up to hers. "You've got some balls coming here after that. You have a son by someone who isn't even like us, for Christ's sake, and now you show up asking for help? Jesus, I should throw your butt out right now."

"So why don't you?"

He snorted. "Riana, don't do that. This is hard enough without you trying to mess with my head."

She set her hand on his leg. "You don't understand, Jason. You really don't. I ... it was..." She couldn't explain it to herself. How would she explain it to him?

He raised both hands. "No, don't bother. I guess it's really none of my business."

"I honestly didn't know you were my mate."

"You can't imagine the rage I felt," he said, ignoring her comment. He laid his head back against the couch. "The betrayal. You came here after so long, and I thought we would finally be together. Finally, after centuries of waiting."

She had no idea what to say.

"Instead, I find out you have a half-breed son. How fucking special is that? I nearly gave in to the rage," he confessed. "I wanted to..." His voice trailed off. He looked away, his jaw clenched.

"Jason," she whispered. "I'm..."

"No." He leaned forward and settled a fiery gaze on her. "I don't care that you're sorry. You're always sorry, and honestly, I'm tired of hearing it. Empty words, Riana. You might as well save them for someone who gives a damn."

"They're not empty, Jason." She took his hand and placed it against her heart. She opened her mind enough to give him a brief glimpse of her life and who she was.

Jason looked at his hand, centered between her breasts. His brow furrowed as he searched the little bit she gave him. "You hide so much."

She nodded. "I have to. My own people condemn me as an outcast. How fair is that?"

His long fingers splayed across her chest, across the swell of both breasts. She wanted to ignore the heat in his palm, but it just felt so good. So perfect. Her eyes closed.

She wanted to feel more.

"Do you have any idea how much it hurts to know what you've done?"

"Yes. I know exactly how it feels." Their connection was strong. She felt all his emotions.

He lowered his hand and threw up a wall in his mind. "So you just think you and

your son can show up here and I'd be so happy and grateful to see you I wouldn't care about the past? How long have you been avoiding me? A thousand years? Thank you for all that respect and consideration."

She looked at him. "I wasn't avoiding you. I admit, I did have Griffin transfer me to Singapore, but after that, I just didn't think about it. As I said, I didn't know."

Jason took his pipe out of his shirt pocket. "How could you not know we were meant to be together?"

"Look, I just went through this with Griffin. Really, I didn't know. Until yesterday, I didn't know." She spoke so softly she wasn't sure he even heard. "I thought we were just good friends."

He filled the pipe from his stash then lit it with his thoughts. The warm glow of the embers danced with the shadows across his face. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"The heat," she said, looking at her hands. "The suteka, the heat of true mates. I never felt it until yesterday. In the car."

He cast her a disbelieving glance.

"Griffin didn't believe me, either, but I swear it's true. I feel awful, like there's something wrong with me."

He scanned her body a long moment. "There isn't." He looked past her at the images on the wall. "I hate knowing you have a son by another man who isn't even Eskarian."

"I understand," she said.

"I don't think so. If you were looking to hurt me, Riana, you definitely found the best way to do it." He let his eyes drift closed. "I can't think of any way you could've done more damage."

He inhaled deeply from his pipe, and once again, the smoke surrounded her, filled her, and warmed her. "You could've told me you wanted a child. I would've given it to you. In a heartbeat, I would've done it for you. Do I repulse you that much?"

"No, you don't. It wasn't like that, Jason. I swear, I never meant to hurt you. I--"

"But you did." He opened his dark eyes to regard her.

"I know." There was still too much she couldn't tell him. "I'm sorry. I know you think it means nothing to me, but you're wrong. I never meant to cause you pain." She reached out to whisper her fingers along his cheek. Again she felt the mating heat, strong as ever. "I can't change what's happened now. I do have a son, and I love him with all my heart and soul. I wouldn't change that, even if I could. That doesn't mean I feel nothing for you. I do."

Jason nodded, taking some comfort in that. His gaze lowered to the small wooden pipe in his hands.

"As I said, it wasn't my intent to hurt you. I really didn't know. I should go." She pushed off the floor.

His hand shot out to shackle her wrist. He sat her down hard in front of him, shaking his head slowly. "Don't walk away." The tip of his tongue came out to moisten his lower lip. "I don't want to watch you leave again. You say you didn't know. Okay, I'll accept that. I'll forget what happened, and we can start over. I'll even help you free Willis from the bobcat and the Order. Just stay here for a while. Get to know me again. Be a part of my life. Do you remember how much fun we had back in Malanaya?"

"I do, but you were just a kid then. I thought you had a crush on me, puppy love. Guess I was wrong, wasn't I?" Riana pulled her wrist free.

"Yeah, you were. We enjoyed being together."

She agreed. "We did."

He caught her hand again and pressed a light kiss to the center of her palm. "It could be that way again, if you'd just give me a chance."

"Jason, a thousand years have passed. I'm not the same woman."

"And I'm not the same man." He reached up and traced the contours of her cheek with his thumb. "You feel that, don't you? The suteka? We're still right for each other, you and I."

"Yes," she said, leaning into his touch. It seeped into her skin and warmed her. She wanted more. Wanted his skin on hers. Wanted the total connection that came with the binding of two perfect mates.

"Then let me make you mine, Nukita," he said, so low and soft and seductive she felt the words brush against her spine. "Allow me to taste you again. I've hungered for you since you left. A thousand years, and I still need you."

He stretched out on the floor and pulled her down beside him. Securing her wrists above her head with one hand, he put his leg over hers and pinned her beneath his weight. "Will you allow it?"

Yes, she whispered to his mind. She couldn't think anymore. All she wanted was to feel Jason inside her mind, soul, and in the aching, empty void between her legs.

He brushed his lips over the rapid pulse in her neck. His hand feathered over the front of her robe, deftly untying the sash at her waist.

Riana slammed her eyes shut. He'd opened the lapels of her robe, exposing virtually every inch of her body. She knew the minute his breathing stopped he was looking at her. She felt his body become hard and insistent, felt his cock thicken against her leg.

"My God, you're incredible. I've known lots of women, but none as beautiful as you. Nukita, you are truly a goddess."

Riana could barely breathe. The hunger and need inside him swamped her, the cry of his body almost more than she could bear.

"Make love with me," he said. "Bind with me." He rested his free hand against her flat belly. "Take my life, my soul, my heart, and give me yours."

His scent, a blend of jasmine and thyme, captured her like nothing else ever had before. He was attempting to seduce her, and she wanted to surrender. Desperately. She wanted to complete the binding as much as he needed it.

"I am yours," she breathed.

He leaned forward to capture her bottom lip in his teeth. Tugging on it gently, he closed his eyes and fastened his lips to hers. His tongue swept inside her mouth, exploring with a need so fierce, she could only submit.

She savored the chills that erupted from his heated touch. Silky hair fell across her shoulder, teasing as his mouth and fangs caressed her body. He ran his tongue along her pulseline, sending flames spiraling from her shoulders down to her toes. He nuzzled her cheek, kissed it, and brushed her mouth with his.

"I've waited so long to feel your skin next to mine, Nukita. And now that you're here, I'm not going to let go. I'll never let go. I've loved you for so long. You belong to

me, Nukita.”

You belong to me.

The words tumbled around her mind.

At once, she couldn't breathe. As if the walls had collapsed, she felt smothered, crushed. Her throat was constricting. “No, get off me.”

“Please, Nukita.” He paused, raising his head to look at her. “I won't take more than you choose to give. Don't be afraid.”

A single thought possessed her. Desire for the man shattered as terror shrieked through her, and her hands clenched into fists.

You belong to me.

No, she belonged to no one, and she'd never allow anyone to possess her like that again. Never. She slammed her eyes shut. “You can't do this to me. You can't.”

“You don't believe I'd do something against your will, do you? Tell me you know me better than...”

She couldn't hear him anymore. He was still talking, but all she heard were her own whirling thoughts and the sledgehammer pounding of her heart.

“Riana, what's wrong?”

Her entire body shook, and all she could think about was what he'd do next. She knew just what it'd be, too. He'd dip his head and draw the blood from her body. Leave his mark on her. And then he would open her legs and take her body. And then it would be over.

In every conceivable way, it would be over. Her life would change irretrievably. It did change. In the span of a day, everything changed.

She whimpered. Waited for the prickle of sharp teeth against her skin. Oh, yes, the beginning of the end. He'd take something sacred. Not only her blood but that part of her that had remained innocent and protected for most of her life.

Jason wasn't talking anymore. His grasp on her had slipped away. Like a memory, or a dream, he simply vanished.

She was alone.

A moment later, she realized the room had become dark. A thousand candles surrounded her. She lay on a bare mattress, hands and feet bound to the wooden frame, unable to see much more than her own naked body. Tugging at the shackles around her wrists, she tested their strength and found them unbreakable.

Someone spoke from behind her.

“Stop struggling, Valeriana. You can't escape from these chains. They were made for your kind. Just relax now. It'll be over soon enough.”

A chill wind spiraled across her body, over the candles, plunging the room into darkness. A callused hand found her mouth and clamped over it.

No, her mind cried.

“Riana!”

She screamed.

She sucked in a deep breath. Huddled in the corner of the room, knees up against her chest, she awoke to find her outstretched arms ready to fend off ... what? It was just there, on the tip of her tongue.

She was panting.

Jason crouched in front of her, his handsome face tight with alarm and outright

fear.

“Nukita, are you all right? Talk to me, girl.”

She scanned her surroundings and saw she was in Jason’s home. Letting out a breath of relief, she tucked her clasped hands tight beneath her chin.

“Yes, I’m all right,” she whispered, afraid to make a sound.

He nodded. “I think you must’ve panicked.”

Her brow furrowed. She’d never panicked in her life. “No.”

“No, what?” He touched her shoulder.

She flinched, as if his touch had burned. “Don’t touch me.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he assured. “You’re shaking. Come lie on the couch. I’ll get you a blanket. Do you mind if I light some candles? Maybe get a pot going?”

She nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

Several candles came to life all across the room. She looked around. There were no windows here, only the large white screen, a black leather couch with throw pillows, and several wine-colored chairs, also leather. Bookshelves lined the far wall, most dotted with small statues.

Yes, she remembered those little things. Familiar. Ugly. She’d never liked them.

“You still collect those little pagan statues.”

“Yeah,” he said, rising to his feet. “I have over nine hundred of the little buggers. These are my favorites.”

She wrinkled her nose, deciding not to tell him how much she disliked them.

He crossed to the closet and began to rummage through boxes and such, moving from one shelf to another.

He glanced at her over his shoulder.

“I know you don’t like my pagans. I never liked your Egyptian medallions. Here, this is what I was looking for.” He pulled a blue quilt from a shelf toward the top of the closet.

“You didn’t like my medallions? I thought you did,” she said, dropping onto the couch.

She bunched up one of the pillows and tucked it under her head. Jason covered her with the blanket.

“Better?” he asked, sitting on the floor in front of her. He glanced at something to her left. The contents of a small black clay pot began to smolder. Livendium. The welcome aroma, a mixture of sage and mint, wafted around her and soothed her nerves.

She nodded. “Yes, better.”

Jason drew a small leather thong from his pocket and tied his waist-length hair with it. Leaning forward, he lightly caressed her cheek with his fingers.

She pulled back, still preferring some distance between them. Studying his face, she saw only love, concern, fear.

He smiled. “Something terrified you just now. Can you tell me what it was?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Has it ever happened before?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m not sure I’d know if it had.”

“Hmm.” He idly rubbed his chest as he thought, making the muscles in his arm ripple and bunch. His body amazed her. “Okay. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Mind-numbing fear. Choking. No, she didn’t want to tell him about that.

“I was afraid that once you took my blood, you’d own me. My life wouldn’t belong to me anymore.”

“Oh, no, Nukita. That would never happen,” he protested. “We share blood, but one does not dominate the other.”

She drew the blanket closer to her chin. “But it felt so real.”

“I know.”

Riana looked away.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, shrugging one shoulder. “Let’s talk about what happened. Did someone hurt you?”

She lowered her gaze. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Jason let out a slow exhale. “Why not? Is it that hard?”

“No. I don’t know. Yes. Can we just drop it?” she snapped. She suddenly wanted to scream. Instead, she rubbed her forehead with the pads of her fingers. “Please, can we just drop it?”

“Sure.” He smiled. “Just rest, then.”

“No, I think I should go.” She was feeling better. The terror of that memory was fading, and the Livendium was doing its job.

Throwing off the blanket, she sat up and checked to be sure her robe was securely fastened. “I’m kind of hungry.”

Starved, actually. She felt as if she’d used all her energy defending herself from Griffin and Jason.

“I suppose it’s too much to ask you to take from me.” Jason cocked his head and gave her a smile.

Was it too much to ask? She’d never allowed it in the past, but only a few minutes ago, she was on the floor with him. If events had progressed much further, she would already know the sweet taste of his blood.

“I know you’re going to leave once we get Willis back. I also know it’s likely I’ll never see you again.” He sighed, shifted on the floor. “Would you do this one favor for me now?”

Her brow furrowed. “Jason, I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“I want to do this. Please, Nukita, let me feed you, just this once. It would mean a lot to me. I want to feel your mouth on my skin. You’re still my mate, you know. Unbound, but still my mate.” He lifted a brow. “One favor. That’s all.”

One favor.

She wondered if Griffin had been right. Did she only take as much as she could get without ever giving back? She feared it was true. A long time ago, she’d given a cup of her blood to Jason. He’d drunk it slowly, watching her with golden eyes that burned. Had that been the only time she’d truly given of herself?

A thousand years had passed since that time. She’d erected a wall around her heart no one could breach.

One favor.

She squared her shoulders. “Okay.”

The tension in Jason’s face relaxed. He smiled and lowered himself to the couch.

She stood up and smoothed her robe. “Ready?”

“Anytime.” He parted his legs, inviting her closer. He clasped his hands behind his back, tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

Ah, now wasn't that a sight? He sat primed and ready for her, a symbolic captive. But Riana wasn't made of stone. She was hardly immune to the powerful sexual vibrations that poured from his body. His face was gorgeous, his skin nearly flawless. In her mind, no man alive was more beautiful than the one sitting before her. Strong, spiritual Jason--the mate she couldn't have.

She lightly traced the contours of his cheeks, the lines of his eyebrows and the fullness of his mouth. Her fingers trailed down the sides of his neck, over his shoulders and across the steel bands of his arms. She traced the small dragon tattoo on his left bicep.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered. Her exploration continued across his chest, over taut nipples, and up to his neck again. "So beautiful."

He swallowed.

She curled her fingers around his neck, feathering his jaw with her thumbs. Bending to him, she first washed his skin with her tongue then sucked it, tasting his saltiness, breathing in the unique scent that she loved and had missed.

He moaned softly. "Riana."

No, she wasn't made of stone. The sweet sorrow in his voice tugged at her.

One little favor.

He deserved that much.

Beneath her stroking tongue, his pulse thudded. Her canines extended.

She bit down.

His body tensed, and his back arched. He moaned again, a ragged sound steeped in need and pain. Her teeth retracted, and then the blood flowed easily. Closing her eyes, she tasted his essence, savoring the hot stickiness on her tongue. He felt so warm, so right. She couldn't remember anything feeling this good.

No, she wasn't the one doing the favor. He was.

Slowly, his hands came around to trace the length of her back. His fingers were gentle and slow. How exquisite they'd feel, like a whisper of wings, upon her bare, heated skin.

Finally, he rested his hands on her hips. She laid her hands on his arms. The muscles were taut.

He was shaking.

Riana raised her head to see the sheen of sweat covering his body.

She licked the punctures at his neck, watching them close.

"Are you all right? Did I take too much?"

"Yes. No." His lips parted as his eyes opened.

Riana gasped. Something deep and primitive had taken hold. The iridescent rings around the outside of his irises were glowing. His eyes reflected pain and barely restrained hunger. The mating lust, the edukitza, the possession, had taken hold of him. He was an inferno of desire. A thousand years of waiting and wanting, needing, and ultimately, denial. The edukitza had full control.

His gaze locked to hers.

Mesmerized by the raw sexual power dripping off him, by those eyes, the last vestige of her resolve dissolved. The protective wall she'd built around her heart crumbled and fell.

He'd been trained to control the edukitza, as all Eskarian males were. She also

knew his body was in more pain than she would ever know. Despite that, if she wished him to leave, he would go. She knew he would. She'd rather die now than send him away.

His gaze dropped to her mouth. "You don't know what you do to me, do you?"

"I know you're hurting," she said, wiping the sweat from his cheeks.

He let his eyes close. "Yes."

She'd never seen him like this before. His breath was shallow and quick. Great rivers of sweat rolled off him and still, he didn't move. Not a muscle.

Her skin was hot, her body aching and ready for his touch, his penetration. Like him, she was desperate for completion, ready to be bound and taken by this dark, dangerous warrior. The mating lust was powerful and potentially deadly. A warrior as strong as this could shred her without knowing it. Was she ready for all that power to be unleashed?

Jason was burning alive.

"Say it," he whispered. "Say. It."

A male in the midst of edukitza was not himself. Once he found his mate, he waged an internal battle for control that would last until he completed the mating process or his would-be mate flung herself as far away from him as she could get. Jason was waiting now for her to accept him as benekeda. She had only to whisper one little word.

She loosened the sash on her robe. "Yes."

Jason crushed her to him, rising on powerful legs to carry her to the plush rug between the projection screen and the couch. He took her in a bruising, punishing kiss as he lowered them both to the floor and dropped into the cradle of her thighs. His tongue plunged into her mouth, sampling feverishly every corner and hollow. Taking what was his, what she willingly gave.

Without pause, he pushed her robe aside. He grasped the neckline of his T-shirt and ripped it off, moaning softly when his bare skin connected with hers.

He drew back, panting softly, like her. He pressed his forehead against hers, mingling their breath and scents, mixing their sweat, tightening his already crushing grip around her waist. His eyes remained closed. "You take. Me now. Mine."

"Yes."

His head descended, the words spilling from him in a staccato rush. "You are ... my ... true ... mate. Your ... blood and ... your life are ... mine. And ... all that I am ... is ... yours."

His teeth drove into her neck. The sting of his long canines through her skin sent liquid fire streaking through her body, down to the apex between her legs. His erection ground against her bare folds, demanding entrance. He moaned softly, as if frustrated that he couldn't enter her.

She felt his need to possess her, to plunge deep inside her with his body, mind, and soul. His pain swirled around her, through her. She sensed his control was tenuous at best.

There would be time later for leisurely lovemaking. Now he needed to finish this.

She didn't know that much about the edukitza, other than that it was utterly consuming, and those who couldn't control it, the ones who killed or raped their mates, faced a quick death. Weakness among their kind was never tolerated, no matter the cause. And the reason for Jason's lapse into this wretched state bothered her enough she didn't

want to think about it, because that meant she'd have to acknowledge her own flaws and mistakes. A tough thing to do when so much time had passed and lives had already been irretrievably affected.

"Jason," she whispered. "Enough. Look at me."

He growled, the sound half-human, half-leopard. A warning. She ignored it and the dizziness that came from too much blood loss.

"Look at me. Jason, look at me."

He growled again and raised his head. His eyes were still closed, but at least he'd stopped draining her. That was enough, for now. She was strong enough to survive the blood loss. Indeed, she'd faced worse. Much worse.

"Open your eyes. I need to see you," she said, reaching up to thread her fingers into his hair. She knew the sound of her voice would be his link to reality. "Can you loosen your grip on my waist? I can't breathe very well."

"No. Mine." Hot breath spiraled across her cheek.

He opened his eyes. They still glowed with the edukitza. His body was tense and hot, which meant he was still very dangerous. The edukitza would pass only after he'd made love to her. Unless he lost control.

"Mine for..." he gasped, "ever."

"Yes, yours, my love," she assured. "Will you let me take off your jeans?"

He raised his hips.

She trailed her hand slowly down his wet body to his jeans. Popping the top button, she unzipped them and then slipped her foot between his legs to push them down enough to free his cock.

He lowered his hips again so the tip pressed against her folds. "I've ... waited ... so ... long."

"I know," she said softly. "It's over now. I..."

She felt the shift in the air current just as Jason did.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "Griffin, not now."

I'm sorry.

He tapped on the door and then pushed it open.

Jason roared, a vicious protest that was all feline. He rolled off Riana and shifted. She cinched her robe and scrambled away from the snarling black leopard.

Dear God, the beast was huge. Heavy muscles rippled beneath silky, glistening black fur. It--he--Jason paced, as if deciding what to do next. His long tail twitched at the end. Golden eyes looked through her, feral eyes that didn't seem to recognize her.

She was terrified he'd completely succumbed to the possession, but if he had, she would most likely be beneath all that glossy black fur and those long teeth would be poised at her throat.

Griffin kicked the door shut behind him and drew his dagger.

"No!" Riana sprang to her feet and thrust herself between him and the leopard. "This doesn't concern you, Griffin. Leave it to Jason and me. We can fix it. Leave. Just leave."

"Come now, Riana, you know the laws," Griffin said, eyeing the leopard. "He's out of control."

Riana shook her head in disbelief. "Have you learned nothing in a thousand years? If he were out of control, he would've attacked by now. My God, Griffin, he's

your friend. How could you?"

A wave of complete exhaustion washed over her. She recognized the embedded command to sleep but couldn't tell who it came from. Eskarian males were simply too strong to fight. She slumped to her knees and then tumbled forward to the floor.

Griffin knelt beside her. "Goodnight, sweetheart," he whispered against her ear. Bastard.

Her last thought was of vengeance. She knew Jason hadn't lost control. Knew it. If Griffin harmed Jason in any way, she'd...

Chapter Seven

Jason panted. He knew the shift into his primal would assuage some of the sexual energy that burned in his veins, but he needed more.

“We’ll wait for you.” Griffin opened the door leading to the breezeway. “You sure you’ll be all right? Your eyes are still glowing.”

Yeah, I know. I’ll be all right. I just need to be away from Riana for a while longer. Take care of her for me.

“Sure, but you know she’s going to be a spitting hellion when she wakes up. You’ll be back by then, right? I have enough on my plate, what with Lissa’s hormones and all. I don’t want to deal with your shit, too.”

No problem. I’ll be back. Probably.

He padded over the threshold.

Griffin drummed the doorframe with his fingers. “I mean it, Jason. She already lit into me once. That girl’s got a temper and a vocabulary to match.”

Jason laughed. *Don’t worry, I’ll be back before she wakes up.*

“You owe me for this one.”

Probably.

“And you’re welcome!” Griffin called after him.

Jason ignored him.

He had two things on his mind.

The first was getting laid. He wanted a clear head when he returned to mate with Riana, and feeding the edukitza was the only way to do it. He’d never really needed anyone before, not like he needed her. For the first time in his life, he’d come terrifyingly close to losing control. Another few seconds, and the mating lust would’ve overwhelmed him. After that, he could only guess what would’ve happened.

He’d had no choice but to call Griffin for help.

He had been susceptible to the edukitza for hundreds of years, since that first time he’d taken Riana’s blood, the catalyst that started the binding process. He shouldn’t have taken it, but he hadn’t been able to help himself. She’d offered so sweetly, draining her blood into the ugliest cup he’d ever seen. The gift had been needed and appreciated, the unwelcome side effect notwithstanding.

Shortly after that, Riana left Malanaya, abandoning most of her possessions, including that butt-ugly little cup. He’d taken it, keeping it as his own priceless artifact all these years.

Now his chance to mate with Riana had finally come, and nothing was going to stop him. All he needed to do was get the edukitza under control and he was home free. He knew just who he could trust to help him.

Once he felt like himself again, he would tackle his second goal.

Finding a wizard.

He shifted from leopard to eagle. The smaller body still sizzled with need, but his head was starting to clear. Taking flight, he soared above the treetops.

He roamed for hours, first over Vashon Island, then Bainbridge, across the Puget Sound. Finally, he came to the high-rise condominium building where Irena lived. Even now, he wasn't certain he could trust himself, but Irena was strong. He'd told her what to do if the worst happened. The dagger was always under her pillow.

Once on the roof, he shifted to human form and paced along the perimeter. His body, still hot and sweaty, shook, and his nerves were raw. Christ, what he'd give for a pot of Livendium. He hated feeling this way; struggling so hard for control made him downright irritable.

He peered over the edge of the roof, absently swiping at the sweat on his forehead. Irena had a nice stash of Livendium in her refrigerator; all he had to do was get it. And her.

He didn't move.

After a long moment, he dropped to the ledge of the roof, and sat, letting his feet dangle. He wanted to believe he was content, for now, to watch the ferry boats glide across the water. Sounded good, but it wasn't really true.

Hours passed. Dawn was not far away, and still he waited.

* * * *

An hour before sunrise, he stood on the balcony of the high-rise condo near the Seattle waterfront and stared at the French doors. He still couldn't bring himself to knock.

He felt as if he could fuck for hours--days, maybe--given a break or two for feeding. When he got like this, which wasn't often, he was an animal. Fortunately, Irena loved rough sex. The harder he drove into her, especially when he tied her hands behind her back, the more she wanted, and the faster she came. And came. And came. Irena couldn't get enough.

He liked it rough, too. He loved that she was game for most anything, loved that he could knock on her door anytime, day or night, and she'd be there for him. Praise the gods for lusty Irena.

She'd have the time of her life tonight. He was ready to toss her on the bed, bind her hands to the headboard, shove her ankles up to her neck and fuck her until one of them screamed. If he came first, which was likely given the way he felt, she'd still get the release she needed. No one ever left Jason's bed unhappy.

He huffed out a breath.

The last thing he wanted to do was take Riana that way. His body had reacted the moment he'd seen her at Blair's, and since then, his cock had been demanding the wet heat only a woman's body could provide. The worst part was that he really wanted to take her in the basest of ways. Throw her beneath him and thrust until he filled her with his seed. She deserved so much better.

"Never. So help me, I'll never treat her like that," he whispered, resolving to stay in control. He'd never take her so basely. If he had to, he'd stay here until he was too exhausted to move. When he returned to Riana, he'd be in full control of mind, body, and soul, and everything would be perfect. He would be slow and gentle so she'd know just how much he loved her. Until then....

Jason leaned forward and tapped.

Irena came to the door, her copper hair piled on top of her head and held in place by a long, thin paintbrush. A few strands hung loose about her face. She often wore sweats, like now, and a cropped T-shirt. On anyone else, it might've looked sloppy. On

her, it was utterly sexy. Jason doubted there was ever a time she didn't look sexy.

She opened the door wide.

"Jason, I was just thinking about you. Come in. Your eyes are glowing again."

He stepped across the threshold, brushing her bare stomach with his fingers as he passed. "So I've heard. What were you thinking about?" He stopped in the middle of the living room, faced her.

"I missed you," she said, approaching with a soft sway in her hips. The hem of her T-shirt stopped two inches above her sweats, exposing a muscular, tanned belly, complete with a small diamond stud in her navel. "It's been a few days."

He hadn't realized it until she said something, but she was right. For the longest time, he couldn't stay away from her for more than a few hours at a time, maybe a day at the most. Now, it had been three, and before that, another three.

"I was busy."

She ran a finger down his chest. "More alien invasions?"

He smiled. "They're not all aliens, you know."

Irena lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug. "Like there's a huge difference."

"There is," he said, reaching up to pull the brush from her tresses. The girl knew more than she should, especially for a human. Very few of them knew Eskarians existed. Those who did were trusted implicitly. Both Irena and her father were two such people. Irena's father, Vladinov, like his father before him, forged many of the weapons Defenders relied on to defeat whatever threat they happened to come across.

Irena's silence was never questioned, partly because she worked part time for the wizard, Severin, partly because her father was well loved and respected, and partly because she'd grown up knowing about his kind and understood the importance of secrecy. No one had to remind her of it.

He studied the brush. "Working on something new?"

"Trying to, but I'm not really into it tonight."

"It'll come. You're best when you've decided your work is complete crap and you have no business trying to make a living from it." He extended both hands and slowly circled the room, taking in the subtle colors and beauty of the decor. "Look at this place. It's incredible. Your work pays for it. People don't pay exorbitant amounts of money for crap. What you do is amazing." He handed her the brush.

A little smile came to her mouth. "Thanks. It helps when you have a gorgeous Spaniard for a salesman."

"I do what I can." In truth, he hadn't been as altruistic as she made him sound. Flirting with her customers was fun, made better when one of them took him home.

Now that Riana was back to stay, his days of casual sex were over. He'd miss that part of his life, but she was worth the sacrifice. The change was long overdue and very welcome.

Images of her lovely naked body came to mind. He inhaled sharply. Only Riana had ever made him feel this way, and only she could cool the fire. Only her.

He needed to go home.

Tiny beads of sweat dappled his forehead.

Irena frowned, resting a hand on her hip. "There's something different about you tonight. Something's happened, hasn't it?"

Jason thought about that a moment. He couldn't quite figure out how to answer

without shooting himself in the foot. Or head. “Not really. What makes you say that?”

She leaned forward just a little. “You haven’t kissed me yet. You haven’t touched me,” she complained. “And it’s been days since you made love to me. And the last time you did, your heart just wasn’t in it.”

“I touched you when I came in.” He straightened, giving an indignant sniff.

She wrinkled her nose. “Not like you used to. And you’re all possessed by that mating thing. I’ve seen your eyes glow, but not like they do tonight. I love it when you get like this, so why am I not enjoying some great sex?”

He knew where this was headed. Short of manipulating her thoughts, he wasn’t certain he could avoid the coming battle. “Irena, please....”

“What’s going on?” she demanded. “You look tired and completely whipped. Did the bad guys kick your tail?”

“No, of course not. I am tired, but that’s no big deal. I’ll be fine.”

She closed the gap between them, resting her hand on his upper arm. “Then kiss me and make love to me. Show me everything is all right.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. Irena was exquisitely beautiful, with dark brown eyes, warm, tanned skin and thick coppery hair that had tumbled to her waist when he’d removed the brush. With legs that went up to her arms and lush full breasts, she was every guy’s wet dream, including his ... at one time.

Damn, she was right. He didn’t want to touch her. Fresh memories of Riana’s hot body beneath him flooded his mind. He’d come here tonight thinking he’d release some energy on Irena, but now he knew he couldn’t. Just couldn’t. Riana was home, asleep, and that’s just where he should be.

Where he wanted to be.

Hoping to diffuse an argument, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. His tongue slipped into her mouth, danced with hers and explored every inch. But the passion he’d once had for her was waning even as he kissed her, even as her fingers curled into his hair.

When he drew back, her brows knitted.

“You’ve found someone else, haven’t you?” she asked, pulling away.

“Uh, sort of. My mate has returned,” he said and then instantly regretted it. Bad move. Jesus, he felt like a pup again, awkward and inexperienced. He leaned against the back of the couch, rubbed his face with both hands and sighed. “A few days ago.”

“Oh,” she said shortly. “I see. So, you’ve come to say goodbye?”

Had he? “Well, I hadn’t really planned on it.” Not intentionally.

“No?” Now she studied him with a narrowed gaze. “What did you plan? To have us both? I don’t think so.”

“No,” he said, catching her shoulder. “I didn’t plan anything. You know, I....” He stopped, sighed. “We’re not like humans.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “No kidding. I figured that out the first time Joshua flew onto the roof near my bedroom window, when I was--what?--eight years old. He was a....” She stopped to think about it. “A red-tailed hawk. Was there a point here?”

“Ah, I came to be with you.” This had sounded better in his head, only moments ago--not too long before he’d firmly shoved his foot into his mouth.

Irena thought a moment. “A final tryst before you go commit yourself to another woman? Or are you already committed?”

“Bound is the word we use.”

“Whatever. Are you?” She folded her arms over her ribs, which pushed her breasts up and closer together.

His gaze dropped from her fiery brown eyes to her bunched-up breasts. He exhaled and wished he could turn back time so Irena wasn't angry with him now. He'd rather suckle those extraordinarily large nipples than try to dance around an argument. Just the thought of his mouth on them made his stiff cock twitch in anticipation. The edukitza rushed in his veins. He inhaled sharply and held it. A pot of Livendum would do a world of good right about now. He would've torched one up but had a strong feeling he wasn't going to be here much longer.

He exhaled. “Not yet. I wouldn't be here if I was.”

She seemed to accept that. “Good to know.” The tension in her shoulders dissolved but the unhappy glint in her eyes remained. “So, this really *is* the last time.”

“I honestly couldn't say for certain,” he said, really wishing that wasn't true.

“Why not? You said she came back, right? Didn't she come back to bind with you?”

“Not exactly,” he admitted. “Look, you know, it might be best if I just left.”

Her hand shot out to catch his forearm. “No, don't go yet.” She looked up at him. “I'm not ready to lose you.”

“Irena,” he said, pulling her close. He kissed her forehead. “You won't lose me. I've known you since you were just a babe, almost thirty years now. I'll still be around.”

She sniffled. “But not like this. Not close.”

“That's true. Not like this.” He wrapped both arms around her shoulders. “I'm sorry. You knew I had a benekeda, that this day would come. How did I mislead you?”

She shook her head, sniffing again. “You didn't. It's my fault. I wanted more. You immortals are so great to be around. Christopher, Sean, Griffin--well, maybe not grumpy Griffin--you guys rock. But you,” she stepped out of his arms to study him, “you're special. You're truly a sendagi, not only of immortal bodies but human minds and hearts, too.” She crossed the room to pluck two tissues from a box on the shelf, dab at her eyes and nose then returned. “You healed me, Jason. After Stingray bailed, you know, I swore off men.”

Jason remembered Stingray very well. He'd given the lad a thing or two to think about after Irena came home with a bruised jaw and a broken heart. He didn't tell her that, of course. Nor did he tell her that after his visit Stingray had cut his hair, gone into therapy to discuss his need to abuse people and started calling himself by his given name. The ability to shape-shift had definite advantages.

“You changed all that,” she continued. “Gave me hope. Now I'm terrified I'll never find anyone like you.”

“You will. I'm sure of it.”

Irena dabbed at her eyes again and laughed. “Yeah, right.” Sniff. “You should go.”

“Okay. Will you be all right?”

She nodded, wiped her nose. “Oh, yeah. Always am. I'm not going to come around for a while, so say hi to the guys for me. You know, I don't want to see you with *her*.”

Jason nodded slowly. “I understand. Joshua is coming into town in a couple of

weeks. Want me to send him over to check on you?"

She brightened a little with that. "Sure," she said, nodding. "Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks."

"Anytime." He framed her face in both hands and bent to kiss her. Though he wanted to shove his tongue down her throat and plunder her thoroughly, he accepted that his time with her was done. Instead, grasping the fibers of his control with all his strength, he whispered his lips back and forth ever so lightly over hers then pressed gently in a kiss that was meant to say all that for which he could not find words. Beneath his mouth, hers trembled. She thought she was really losing him. In time, she'd see the friendship they'd shared all her life was still there.

He raised his head to look at her.

"Go, please," she said.

Her eyes misted, and he knew then she was ready to be alone.

He took her face in his hands and brushed her cheeks with both thumbs.

"Someone waits for you to find him, Irena. Take comfort in that. I know it to be true."

She nodded, pulled away.

"You'll never really be alone," Jason whispered as he turned about, suspecting she hadn't heard him.

With that, he phase-shifted and left without looking back. Standing for a moment at the balcony, he hesitated, thinking he should say or do something else. What? I love you? Of course, he loved her. They'd been lovers for almost two years. That didn't mean they would share a future, but each had known that from the beginning.

Jason loved women and loved to play. He'd done so for years while he'd waited for Riana to come home. First and foremost, though, he was a Defender and with that came the responsibility to never mislead anyone.

The women who came to his bed were willing to take him without expectations other than a night of uninhibited fantasy, and for many years, that had been enough. Until now, it had been enough.

His thoughts returned to Riana. She had accepted him as her mate. Finally. That thought overshadowed everything else and made him ache to return to her side.

The edukitza surged once again, and as he had so many times before, he tamped it down until, after several painful moments, it was tolerable.

He inhaled deeply, taking in the scents of the night. He truly loved the tang of the salt air, the soft breeze whispering across the sound, and the low hum of the foghorns on misty nights. This was home. Now Riana was here, and that was where he needed to be.

He hopped over the rail on Irena's balcony and shifted halfway down. Spreading his wings, he soared over the tops of skyscrapers, the Space Needle and the busy communities of Queen Anne and Magnolia.

His burning cock would have to wait a while.

Control. It was always about control.

* * * *

Now the time had come to find a wizard. Irena worked for one. The man was a real scoundrel, too. Jason didn't exactly despise Severin, but he didn't like him either. No two ways about it, wizards were just strange. Odd. Out of place and out of time. They were people who didn't belong anywhere.

Severin belonged on another planet. Jason wouldn't have bothered with the man,

but he had a solid reputation for breaking the spells of his peers. Riana and Willis needed someone like that.

Severin's home was on the south edge of the island, along the waterfront. The house was large, but like most wizards, he spent no time caring for it. Severin saw it as a place for his lab, potions and powders, and to eat and sleep. Most wizards didn't bother with anything of sentimental value. Magic, addictive as it was, ruled their lives.

The moment Jason stepped onto the wizard's property, the pungent scent of hali'coeur powder assaulted him and brought back memories he was of no mind to deal with. The Council of Wizards had banned hali'coeur in the early nineteenth century when it was discovered the powder contained hallucinogenics. Giving credence to drug-induced visions was just nuts, yet wizards were happy to call them revelations.

Jason came to the front door. Just like a wizard to leave it open.

"Severin, you 'round?"

No answer, not that he truly expected one. He stepped onto the dilapidated wooden porch and...

The wood beneath his boot snapped and broke.

"Shit," he grumbled, pulling his foot from the rubble.

"Griffin? That you?"

Jason peered inside the doorway. "No, it's Jason."

"Jason? Jason who?"

"Aw, come on, Severin, I don't have time for this," he snarled. "You know damn well who I am."

Severin, all six feet six of him, appeared in the doorway. His salt-and-pepper shoulder-length hair was tousled and dappled with white powder and--was that a barrette? Jason shook his head.

The wizard pushed round glasses up the bridge of his nose and then returned his attention to the small bowl in his hands.

"Tu-ura," he said to the bowl. The contents began to smoke. He looked up again. "Oh, yes, I remember you, now. You're the one with the nasty attitude, aren't you?"

"No, that would be Griffin. I'm the nice one."

Severin turned to study him a moment. "I thought you were Griffin."

"Christ, man, *inhale much*?" Jason snapped. "Look, I just need to find a reversal spell. I have a friend who's been bespelled into the body of a bobcat and I need to get him out. Can you help?"

Severin tugged at his collar while he thought.

"No." He turned and disappeared into the house, white smoke swirling behind him.

Jason let loose a string of curses as he thought about what to do. Wizards. Freaking crazy, the lot of them. He studied the hole in the porch where his foot had broken the wood. He'd bet good money that hole would still be there next year. Damn wizards.

"You need Azeal."

He looked up to see Severin peering at him over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. "What?"

"The Master wizard. Azeal. He can help you. He's very good with animals and small children," Severin said, pointing to his north. "Find him near the old tannery. And

tell Griffin he owes me fifty bucks.”

Jason grinned. “I’ll make sure he pays you right away.”

Severin nodded. “Good. ’Bout damn time. Cheatin’ bastard.” He disappeared inside the house again.

Jason was the one who owed Severin money, a bet he’d lost on a football game last summer. He hadn’t paid off yet because he was fairly certain Severin had used magic to ensure he won.

Magic always left a residual tart smell, like citrus. Humans couldn’t smell it, but Eskarians, with their finely honed sense of smell, always knew when a wizard was around, and when he’d used magic. Undoubtedly, Severin had forgotten that Jason was Eskarian.

Griffin wasn’t much better these days. Between Lissa and that nasty business with Joshua and the Black Diamond Witch, Griffin had his hands full. He’d most likely pay up and never realize what had happened. Jason laughed. Yeah, he’d settle with Griffin. Eventually.

He prepared to shift.

Sudden hot pain in his calf scattered his energies. He looked down to see that a black arrow had pierced it. The immediate dizziness told him he’d been drugged. Or worse. There were a few poisons around that, while they wouldn’t kill him, could easily make his life miserable for the foreseeable future.

He suspected this was one of them.

Chapter Eight

Riana gasped and bolted upright. Where the hell was she?

“Willis?”

She frantically searched her surroundings for anything familiar. The pastel blue walls, dark hardwood floors, and three huge beautiful windows shocked her at first. It took a full minute to realize she was in Jason’s home on Vashon Island, and both he and Willis were gone.

“Oh, my God,” she breathed.

Jason.

He’d spoken the binding words, and then she’d allowed him to take her blood. Without knowing if he and Willis would get along, she’d selfishly forged ahead to ease the ache in her own heart. A moment of weakness, and now she’d complicated her life in ways she and Willis did not need.

She remembered the gleam of Griffin’s dagger and the implied threat. As she drifted off to sleep, she’d felt the brush of soft fur and then ... nothing.

Her fingers brushed over her carotid pulse, where Jason’s teeth had pierced the skin. A single question raced through her mind--*What have I done?*

Willis would never forgive her for this.

A knock scattered her thoughts.

“Come in.” She secured her robe and pulled the quilt over her breasts.

Griffin opened the door. “Good morning.”

“Thanks for sending me to sleep,” she said coolly. “Where’s Jason?”

He huffed out a breath. Crossing to the window, he peered through the wood slats of the blind before opening them.

“I wish I knew. I expected him back long before now.”

“I can’t feel him. Why is that? Unless he’s dead, I should at least be able to feel his life-force. What did you do to him?”

“Nothing. He was fine when he left.” He glanced at her as he paced; the sun caught the iridescent rings along the edge of his irises, and his eyes took on a soft white glow until he turned his head.

She narrowed her eyes. “You had the blade ready and you believed he’d lost control. Do you really expect me to believe you just let him go, Mr. High-And-Mighty Commander?”

“Yes, I do. He chose to leave.” He stopped to lean against the windowsill and lifted one arched eyebrow. “High and mighty?”

Riana slid off the bed, wobbled, then grasped the headboard to steady herself. “That’s right. You stupidly follow those laws as if the world were black and white. It isn’t, you know. You betrayed your friend and me for those rules. Stupid rules.”

Griffin snorted. “You’re right, Riana. Jason didn’t lose control, but he was close. Too close to trust himself to stay sane. You don’t understand how hard it is for us when the edukitza hits. It gets so bad you don’t think. You can’t. Sometimes, it’s all you can do

to get away before it eats you alive. We're taught to control it, but in a way, we never really do. We just go somewhere until it gets better.

"In the beginning, there were few of our kind. Legend has it that, back when everyone lived in the primordial soup, the males were the first to crawl out and the women were slower to make that transition. Successful mating was really important, otherwise our kind wouldn't have survived. Obviously, we did. The edukitza is part of the reason for that.

"If Jason had stayed, most likely you'd be dead now and Willis would be an orphan. He chose to leave so that couldn't happen. He asked me to send you to sleep. I betrayed no one. How's that for black-and-white?"

Last night, Riana had felt the raw hunger surging in Jason's blood. She'd felt a living, breathing demon inside him, waiting for the chance to strike. Maybe Griffin was right.

"Maybe I owe you an apology."

"Maybe you don't. You just don't see the whole picture. Sometimes it is black-and-white. Sometimes not. I ask that you trust me to know the difference and know that I'd never take an Eskarian's life without exhausting any and all options. If nothing else, even if I wasn't Jason's friend, I would fight like hell to save him because he's our best sendagi. We all need him, just like you. I deserve more credit than you give me. Remember, he chose to leave. For you."

He resumed his pacing. His gaze swung to her, eyes glowing for a fraction of a second again when the sunlight caught them. "For you."

She considered what he'd said. That Jason had chosen to leave was a sad reminder that she didn't know him nearly as well as she thought. Integrity and honor were important to him. He was selfless, giving. Kind. His gift to her last night was priceless. Even if he weren't her benekeda, she could fall in love with a man like that.

"Then thank you for looking after the both of us," she said to Griffin's back. "You don't know where he is now?"

"No. I can't feel him, either. Something's happened. He doesn't close himself off unless something is really wrong. Unlike some people," he added.

"My life is my own, Griffin. I left the nation long ago. Don't start hassling me now."

"Hassle you? I wouldn't dream of it. However, you're Eskarian. You'll always be a part of our world, even when you think you're off doing your own thing. You're never really that far away."

Maybe he was right. Again. If she'd been of a mind to listen, that tiny voice in her mind would've been happy to remind her that the pain and isolation she'd suffered had been self-imposed. It wasn't the way of her people and shouldn't have been her way. Her kind shared the burden, so that no individual bore a load too heavy.

Not her. She'd chosen a solitary life and blamed the Falcons for it. Why not? That had been the easy part. The hard part had been living with the choice.

She pushed all that aside. "Could he have been hunting a threat?"

"No. He's been training an apprentice for several months now. It's been a long time since he's hunted threats."

Her heart clenched. Could something or someone be hunting him? She reached for him again with her mind. *Jason?*

Still nothing.

“Griffin,” she said, “if something has happened, we have to find him.”

He stopped and faced her. “Yes, I know that. I have trackers looking for him now.”

“But I’m the best qualified to hunt for him. Especially if he’s hurt, I’ll find him faster than any of you. I should be the one to go.”

“No,” he said flatly. “Your Defender status was revoked, and you’re unable to feel him. I don’t believe you are the best qualified. Take heart, though. We have trackers who can find him quickly. You have other matters awaiting your attention.”

Riana frowned. She knew him well enough to understand the dark glitter in his silver gaze meant something. She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I have information about the Order. Red Falcons have been seen in the woods near Crystal Lake, on the peninsula side of the sound. My sources say there’s a large group of people who keep to themselves. It’s thought to be some kind of religious cult, but people always say that about shape-shifting communities. If you’re going to save Willis, now’s the time. Still want to search for Jason? I think you need to make a choice.” He gave a wan smile. “Willis or Jason.”

Tears burned her eyes. If she left, and Jason was wounded, he might die. If someone was hunting him, they could find him and that would be the end of that. The mate she had finally accepted would be taken from her. Jesus. Some choice.

But her son. Dear God, her son. Her heart clenched at the decision that lay before her. How could she choose one over the other? Each had a place in her heart and in her life.

“I can’t choose.”

Griffin knelt beside her. “I can’t choose for you. I’ll abide by your decision, but I won’t make it.”

“How? How can I choose?” She swiped at the tears, realizing the reason her decision was hard. “I love them both.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do it for you. I wish I could, but you have to live with the consequences of the choice. Only you know what you’re willing to bear.”

She didn’t want to bear any of it. She wanted both her men, safe and happy, at home, at her side. Why the hell was that so much to ask?

The answer? Her thoughts spiraled back to the bane of her life--those damned Falcons. They wouldn’t give her her life back, not until the one thing--*the one thing*--that mattered most was gone. Forever.

Willis.

No. She wouldn’t do it. She’d fight to the death, until she had nothing more to give, no more blood to shed, until her son was back.

“Jesus, Griffin.” Her hands curled into fists. What a horrible decision to have to make. “Damn them,” she hissed.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll fight beside you.”

The harsh reality, the one that made her stomach roil, was that either Jason or Willis could die. Who would it be? The mate who had yet to claim her, or the son who depended on her?

“Willis. If my decision costs Jason his life, I ask for your lenience, Griffin. I can’t choose anyone over my son. Not even my mate.” She took in a shuddering breath. “If he

dies, a part of me will go with him.”

Griffin nodded. “Then it’s done. For what it’s worth, I think you made the right decision. We’ll find Jason. You go find your son. Christopher Bartholomew will drive you to Crystal Lake. He’s a good man. You can trust him. I do.”

“You won’t go with me?” she asked, not bothering to disguise the hurt in her voice.

“I can’t. Lissa needs me. Jason says the baby has uncanny power, even for an Eskarian. Pia speaks and moves, and it affects Lissa. She’s hurting. I really cannot go with you. Trust me enough to believe you’ll be safe with Christopher. He is newly mated and utterly devoted to Mackenzie. They have a son as well, so he is sympathetic to what you’re going through. I’m sorry for the choice you had to make.”

She understood the tension in his voice. Eskarian children were prized. Riana realized, at that moment, that Griffin had made the exact same choice she did. He truly did understand.

She nodded. “I trust you.”

A small grin came to his face, as if he hadn’t expected her trust. He cleared his throat. “You remember the Dragon prophecies, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Sure.”

“The seventh one came to pass a few years ago. There was a powerful sorcerer, Uleah, who died something like four thousand years ago. He had his power bespelled into a small vial, which was kept by his family, along with an ancient journal and spell book. In the journal, he vowed to come back to life. Christopher’s mate, Mackenzie, was the last female in Uleah’s lineage, so she was chosen to be the host for his great return.

“Three wizards were helping Uleah. They cast a spell on Mackenzie, which slowly pushed out her life-force. She became nothing more than a shell.” Griffin took in a deep breath then exhaled. “In the process of bringing her back and destroying the wizard’s ability to return, Christopher took Uleah’s power into himself. He became more powerful than any of us. Me included. You’d never know it by looking at him, but Christopher is an exceptionally powerful wizard. I thought you might want to know that.”

“Thanks, I think. So the moral of the story is, don’t piss off Christopher?”

“No, there is no moral. I just wanted you to know.” He stood up and headed for the door. “Get dressed. Christopher will be out front in five minutes.”

Riana chose clothes for function rather than aesthetics. After donning black jeans, boots, and a burgundy-colored long-sleeved T-shirt, she wove her hair into a loose braid and secured it with a small band. She tucked her cell phone into her pocket, then took in a deep breath.

“Go get your son,” she told her reflection. “And Jason, if he’s still alive.”

Griffin was waiting beside a large black Land Rover when she closed the door behind her. He opened the front passenger door and put his hand on her shoulder. “Bring your son home.”

“I won’t come back without him.” She slid into the seat and smiled thinly at him as he shut the door.

“I know. You’re in good hands,” he said with a nod and moved away.

“Thanks, Griffin.” Turning to the driver, she let her grin widen. “Hello.”

“Hi,” he said, sliding his dark sunglasses down the bridge of his nose. “I’m Christopher Bartholomew. I’ve heard so much about you. It’s good to finally meet you.”

“Valeriana Secundinus. Call me Riana, please. Thank you for the kind words.”

She liked Christopher right away. His dark-brown hair was offset by the most brilliant blue eyes.

“You’re young, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “For an immortal, yes. I was born in 1750, converted twenty-three years later. I...” His attention slid to Griffin. “Shit.”

Riana followed his line of sight. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck lifted in warning.

Jason.

A clunky old car sporting every color imaginable pulled into the driveway and wheezed to the roundabout, rolling to a stop beside Griffin.

Riana got out of the car. “What’s going on?”

Griffin shot her an impatient look. “Stay there.”

She looked back at Christopher. “Why the hell would I do that?”

“Maybe you should wait here a minute.” He got out and adjusted his sunglasses. “I’ll find out what’s going on.”

He crossed the driveway to Griffin. They hunkered down with their backs to her, speaking so softly she couldn’t hear a word. Christopher nodded twice and shook his head once. What had happened?

She reached out with her mind to grasp even a small morsel of information--*anything*--but got nothing, no matter how hard she pushed. Both Christopher and Griffin had closed her out.

The secrecy, more than anything, set her nerves on edge. She couldn’t feel Jason but knew he had to be in the car. All they had to do was tell her he was all right, and she’d be fine. That and significantly less angry. Less frustrated. Less ready to break something.

She huffed out a breath.

From the driver’s side, an older human rose to an impressive height. Riana knew right away he was a wizard. Even from a distance she could smell the residual tang of herbs and powders used for spells. His white coat was smudged with dark fingerprints and something that resembled blood. She didn’t want to think about where that blood might’ve come from.

Griffin listened to the wizard, who spoke too softly for her to understand. Then he opened the rear car door and bent inside. Christopher leaned over, too. If she’d had to guess, she’d say Griffin was tending Jason, assuming he was alive.

Damn it! If Jason was there, she still couldn’t feel him. Judging by way Christopher and Griffin were behaving, she was right. Even from this distance, she smelled the tart scent of stress on their skin.

“Come on, guys, fill me in.”

They ignored her. Of course.

Her skin tingled. Muscles tensed. She was getting more impatient by the second.

“Griffin, if you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to come over there and find out myself. Don’t keep me in the dark like this.”

He straightened and faced her.

“Just another minute or two. Be patient.” He stuck his head back in the car.

“I don’t want to be patient. I want to know what’s wrong with Jason. How come I

can't feel him? Griffin? Christopher?" She couldn't see much more than their backsides poking out.

What the hell. If they couldn't answer, she'd just see for herself what had happened.

She started for the car. Christopher straightened, turned to her, and shook his head. She felt his telekinetic power whisper around her. A warning. If she tried to come closer, he'd push her back. Unimpressed, she gave him a taste of her own power. She had years of training over him. He was just a kid, for Christ's sake. How strong could he be?

She took another step forward and was instantly enveloped in a whirling shield of raw power. She sucked in a last breath before the shield wrapped so tight she couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Something this strong could suffocate her.

Griffin had told her Christopher had residual power from an ancient wizard within him, but she really hadn't given it much thought.

Until now.

He was much, *much* stronger than she would ever have guessed.

"Please wait a minute or two. We won't be long," he said.

Sure, she said telepathically, unable to do anything else.

"Good." Then he smiled and ducked back into the car. She was left in the dark again.

He didn't say Jason was alive.

Seconds ticked by. The shield of power Christopher had wrapped around her slowly eased enough she could comfortably breathe and move. Both her pride and her ego were bruised, but her body was fine. She didn't understand why they protected her like this. After all, she was a grown woman and a Defender. She'd seen plenty of violence. What was this nonsense all about?

Riana tapped her fingertips against the roof of the car, furious with them for making her wait. Clearly, it would be easier to just let her know what had happened to her mate. The moment she had the chance, she'd let them know exactly how she felt about what they'd done.

Wait.

She gasped. There it was. Jason's life-force.

"Praise the gods," she whispered.

Both Christopher and Griffin stepped back at the same time. Several seconds later, Jason rose from the car, leaning heavily on Christopher. She craned her neck to try to see more of him. "Come on, come on. Don't be shy."

It wasn't until he'd cleared the door that she saw the dried blood on his leg. His jeans sported a frayed hole where it looked as if something had entered the front and exited the back.

His thoughts were open to her now. He was hurting and in a perfectly foul mood. Despite his wound, he wanted to jump into battle as soon as he could. In fact, he was looking for one, wherever he could find it. Someone was going to pay, and he didn't really care who it was.

He looked at Christopher and pointed toward the car. "Take me there."

Griffin caught his shoulder. "You need to rest. Take some time and submerge for an hour or two."

"No." He tossed his black mane of tangled hair. "Fuck, no. I'm not sitting at home

like some damn invalid while Riana hunts for Willis. Not happening.”

“Look at you,” Griffin said. “Jason, you can’t fight with that leg.”

He scowled. “Chris can fight. As soon as I figure out what happened, I’ll fix it. I appreciate your concern, but it’s not necessary. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Griffin countered, stepping into his path. He leaned forward and she could’ve sworn he said, “You were dead not two minutes ago.”

That couldn’t be right, could it?

He straightened. “You can’t do this. You’re too weak, and that makes you a risk to our people. I won’t allow it.”

Jason glanced at her then returned a steely gaze to Griffin. “I am going. Stand aside.”

The commander didn’t budge.

The two men glared at one another, each ready to fight. She didn’t know who was the better warrior, but as Griffin wasn’t wounded, her bet was on him. To her knowledge, he had never lowered himself to trading punches to make a point. He was capable of it, and would most likely win, but in all the years she’d known him, he’d always preferred the power of words over muscle and blade. She suspected it was the refined Englishman in him that enjoyed that kind of challenge.

“Maybe you should do as he says, Jason,” Christopher urged. “If we run into Falcons, you could be a liability for us. We don’t know much about them, you know. I think it would be best if you gave yourself time to heal. If you can’t do it for yourself, maybe you could do it for Riana and Willis.”

“I’m fine.” Jason pulled away from him and shoved Griffin aside. He limped toward the car, mouth set in grim determination.

Griffin whirled and started after him, but Christopher caught him first. He charged forward, dragging the younger Eskarian several paces. “Jason, this is not the time to go gallivanting off into battle. You need to take care of yourself.” He finally stopped and looked at Christopher. “Get off me.”

“No. Let him go.” Christopher held on tight. “I’ll make sure he’s healed before taking on any Falcons.”

Griffin glared at Jason’s back. “I don’t like it.”

“Like I care,” Jason said, boldly flipping him off.

Riana gasped. “Oh, my God. Jason, what are you thinking?”

Behind him, Griffin’s eyes darkened. The ground beneath him trembled as fury surged through his big body. His fists clenched. He stood with his legs apart, unmoving as the ground shook under his boots, his gaze fixed on Jason.

Christopher held on, one hand splayed across the titan’s chest, the other firmly locked around his bicep. “Easy, Griffin, easy ... let him go....”

Riana realized she’d instinctively backed up when she bumped the side of the car. To her knowledge, no one had ever blatantly disregarded Griffin’s orders. You just couldn’t do something like that and hope to come through it unscathed.

“Let Jason go, Griffin.” Christopher spoke softly, as one might address a child. “You and I both know he should take care of himself. He does, too, but Riana and Willis need him. He has to do this, for his family. Come on, big guy, you know about fighting for family. Let him go.”

The ground settled.

“Yes, I do know about family.” Griffin rolled his shoulders and relaxed. He glanced to one side. “Let go. I’m all right.”

Christopher, apparently, wasn’t quite ready to acquiesce. “I’m sure, Commander. Let’s give it another minute or two, shall we?”

Griffin glared at him. “I said I’m all right.”

“Jason was my mentor,” Christopher said, his voice a fraction above a whisper. “You were ready to destroy a good and decent man because your ego is bruised. I want to be sure you’re really all right.”

The comment seemed to surprise Griffin. “I had no intention of destroying Jason. I was just,” he looked from Jason to her, “enforcing the rules.”

“Your temper suggested otherwise.” Christopher released him and stepped back. “I think between Riana and I, we can manage to keep him out of trouble. Wouldn’t you agree, Riana?”

“Absolutely.”

The tension she had felt in the air lifted.

Jason neared the car, feathering long fingers over her cheek.

“Get in. Front seat.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Christopher, let’s go. Now.”

Griffin kept his icy gaze on Jason.

“I’ll work on the temper.” He spun on his heel and returned to the house.

Riana slid into the front seat. Jason opened the car door and dropped into the back. He swung one leg in, and lifted the other with his hands and eased it into the car. He leaned forward, rubbing the wound absently.

Christopher settled into the driver’s seat. “You’re nuts, Jason.”

“No, I’m not.” He looked at the blood on his jeans, then at Riana. “Griffin was just being an asshole--again.”

Christopher turned to face him. “Maybe, but I suspect we’re both going to be in Blair’s office when we get back. He was seriously pissed off.”

“Yeah, well...” Jason waved his hand. “Whatever. He gets his panties in a bunch when the weather changes.” He laughed. “I can’t believe he actually said he’d work on his temper. Maybe there’s hope for the old man yet.”

Christopher shrugged. “We’ll see. I’m not holding my breath.”

Riana’s gaze dropped to the damaged jeans. “So, what happened?”

Jason studied his calf a moment then sighed. “Early this morning, I went to visit Severin.” Jason turned to watch the wizard return to his car, start it, and drive past. “As I was leaving, someone shot me with an arrow. It went clean through my calf and left something inside me. I don’t have a clue what it is. I also don’t know who did it, but I’m certain it was a deliberate attack and I was the intended target.”

Christopher started the car and let it coast down the driveway to the street below. “Yeah, powerful stuff.”

“Very.” Jason shook his head.

“Okay, out with it, guys,” she said. “Christopher, tell me what happened. Did I hear Griffin right? Jason died?”

Christopher watched the road, pursing his lips. “Well, there might be some truth to that.”

“Oh, my God. And you guys weren’t going to tell me? Spill, damn it. Now.”

He glanced at her. “It was some kind of magic I’ve never seen before. I was able

to draw it from Jason's body, but it took a whole lot out of me." He raised his hand from the steering wheel and made a fist. "My hand is still numb. Anyway, once it was gone, his heart started and he woke up full of piss and vinegar."

"And I'd like to see you go through that and not feel like shit," Jason said. "I think I'm doing remarkably well, all things considered."

Riana turned around in the seat. "Are you okay now?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it's getting better."

"Good. I'm sure you don't want me fighting your battles, do you, Irakas?"

Instructor.

"No, I don't." Jason leaned forward and jabbed a thumb in Christopher's direction. "Did I ever tell you I trained this young pup? He was one of my best apprentices. Now he's arrogant as hell."

"I was your only apprentice," Christopher said, glancing over his shoulder. "And I am not arrogant. I'm confident."

Jason shrugged. "Arrogant and ugly."

Christopher's gaze shot to the rearview mirror again. "Ugly! Bite me, Spaniard. At least I don't..." He glanced at Riana. "Later," he said to Jason. "I'll finish with you later."

Riana laughed. "Don't hold back on my account."

"You probably don't want to be around when I make your mate cry," Christopher said.

She looked back at Jason. "Oh, I don't know. Might be fun. It's been a long time since I've seen him cry."

"Very funny, Riana. I never cry." Jason mock-punched the back of Christopher's seat. "We'll see who calls for his mama."

Riana liked listening to them. She would've felt good, but something pulled at her, made her shoulders tense. The further they got from Jason's estate, the worse it felt. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was.

The Order would never give up Willis, not when they'd searched for him all his life. Griffin thought Willis was probably still alive. She needed to believe that or she'd never make it. How long would it take to get to Crystal Lake, and after that, how long to find him? And would Griffin really know if she slipped out from under Jason's watch? If he did, how bad would his punishment be? What about her punishment? Might it be worth it?

Willis might be alive now, but for how long? How long? Time had never been such a vicious adversary. The tension was enough to drive her nuts.

Jason laid his hand on her shoulder. "We're here to help, Riana. It'll be all right." She hoped so. Didn't feel all right.

* * * *

Beautiful did not adequately describe Crystal Lake. Pristine water protected by a lush forest of evergreens and maples--it was a haven Riana could easily get used to.

She stood on the dock and took in the beauty of the land. Years ago, she and Willis had been drawn to a place similar to this. They'd both felt the call of an untamed land, where few people lived. Save for the wilds of Alaska, no place on Earth was as incredible as this. The maple leaves, nested amid the evergreens, were just beginning to bud. Spring flowers, all yellow and gold and red, dotted the ground between dark green

and light. Amazing. She never tired of the wonder of nature. Never tired of the beauty of the sun setting behind a verdant forest.

The only thing missing was Willis. The uneasiness she'd felt just after they'd left Jason's hadn't subsided one bit. Her stomach was in knots.

She missed her boy, the beautiful child with dark hair and amber eyes, missed his funny bobcat grin. She even missed the way he'd reach up with a paw and leave little scratches on her chin.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Christopher walked up beside her.

"Yes, quite," she said, quickly wiping a tear. "I've been all over the world, but I love this area the best."

He faced her. His smile was genuine, eyes sympathetic. He brushed a wayward strand of hair from his eyes, then laid his hand on her shoulder. "Try not to worry. I think we'll get him back soon."

Riana smiled. "I hope so. I really miss him."

"I know what you mean. I miss my son, too." Christopher's gaze returned to the lake.

"You have a son?"

He nodded. "Yeah. He's a year old. Want to see his picture?"

"Sure."

This felt better. This she could handle. Made it seem as if Willis weren't so far away. Her Defender brethren were strong, fierce, and dedicated warriors. If Willis was still alive they'd bring him home. She had faith in them and in herself. The niggling question she couldn't push from her mind was whether Willis was still alive. She hated that she couldn't feel him.

Christopher pulled a wallet from his back pocket. Flipping through plastic cards and old photos, he finally stopped on one of a beautiful blond-headed, green-eyed boy.

"Mackenzie has black hair. I don't know how Colin came to us blond, but Mackenzie assures me I don't need to worry about it."

He lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. Riana liked his easy demeanor, his comfort with himself and his life. Griffin and Jason were the same way--strong men satisfied with their place in the world.

He took out the picture and gave it to her.

"He's named after one of my brothers who died."

"He's a handsome boy. Certain to be trouble when he reaches puberty," she said, touching his forearm. "I'm sorry about your brother. How awful."

"It was." His blue eyes lost focus.

She studied the picture. Colin definitely had his father's eyes, even if they were green, and the same nose. She thought of Willis's brilliant amber eyes and fear shot through her again. If Willis wasn't alive....

She gave the picture back.

Christopher returned from wherever his memories had taken him. "When Colin--my brother Colin--was twelve, we were playing, and this guy came out of nowhere, held a sword to my throat and took my brother's life, or so I thought. I discovered a few years later he was alive and living among the Sin Kaliennen."

"Demon wolves? Was he one of them?"

"Yeah, he was. Unfortunately."

“What happened?”

“Not long after I found him, I discovered the Sin had a plan to become immortal. They wanted to start the Hundred Days of Darkness. Ever heard of it?”

“That’s the spell that releases the Han t’por, isn’t it? If I remember right, the Han would stop time, and make everyone immortal.”

“The very same. What they didn’t realize is that the Han t’por wasn’t what they thought. It doesn’t stop time forever. Rather, it stops for a while and then starts going backward. They would’ve destroyed the planet. Anyway....”

Riana shivered then folded her arms over her ribs. Waited for him to continue.

He took in a deep breath. “He was part of the pack that started the Hundred Days. We couldn’t let them finish it, so they all died. My brother really was gone, then.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“My parents never found out the truth, of course. As far as they were concerned, Colin died when he was twelve. Obviously, I couldn’t go back and tell them he’d become a wolf and I beheaded him myself when he was twenty-two.”

“No,” she agreed. “That must’ve been really hard for you.”

“Yeah, it really sucked. I don’t think my parents ever truly forgave me for what happened. It wasn’t my fault, but they never seemed to get past that.” He turned his brilliant blue gaze to her. “I don’t know why I told you all that, especially since it happened so long ago.”

“It helps to know you faced a horrible situation and survived. I sometimes think I won’t. If anything happens to Willis, I’ll just....” She shook her head.

“He’ll be fine,” he assured. “We’ll get him back.”

“God, I hope so. I’m really afraid.” She rubbed the backs of her arms with her fingers.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Believe in us, Riana. We want him back, too.”

“Thank you. I do. It’s the Falcons that worry me so much.” She returned her gaze to the pristine lake. Fear for her son again threaded through every bit of muscle and bone and sinew in her body. She prayed they weren’t too late.

“Well, I’m sure Jason is wondering where you are. Can I escort you to your cabin?” Christopher held out his arm.

She curled her fingers around the inside of his elbow. “Sure.”

“Do your best to get some sleep tonight,” he said. “You’ll need to be on your toes tomorrow.”

“I’ll try, thanks.” She doubted she’d sleep a wink.

Nestled beneath towering maples and firs, the cottage seemed as ancient as the surrounding land, with a shingle roof and single-pane windows. Smoke billowed from the chimney, and from within came the soft golden glow of oil lamps. It felt comforting and familiar.

“What a beautiful place. I think I like this better than that huge palace Jason lives in.” She looked at Christopher. “It’s warm and inviting.”

“This is one of my favorite places, too. Mackenzie and I come here often.” He scanned the area, rubbing his chin with the pad of his thumb. “I’m thinking we should buy something up here. Griffin has a place not too far away.” He nodded. “It’d be fun to pester him.”

She smiled. “You two don’t always get along, do you?”

“We do all right now,” he said, leading her up the porch steps. “There was a time when we didn’t.” He grinned. “He didn’t like that I could beat the snot out of him so easily.”

She laughed. “I can imagine. They tell me you’re the strongest and fastest of all the Defenders. I’m impressed. It usually takes centuries to achieve that.”

He stared at the ground. “Oh, I don’t know that I still deserve that honor. I don’t fight much anymore. But, thanks.” He shrugged. “I hear you’re the only woman to achieve Defender status. And most of your battles have been won alone. I expected someone different ... less ... ah ... beautiful. It’s easy to see why Jason is so proud of you.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “He’s proud of me?”

He nodded. “Yeah, he is. He’s never told you that?”

“Well, I didn’t give him much of a chance, I guess. My only priority has been keeping Willis alive and out of Falcon hands. ”

“Willis is your son, right?”

Here it comes. “Yeah, he is.” She slipped her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. “And obviously not Jason’s.”

Christopher laid his hand on her shoulder. “It’s not my place to judge, Riana. No one bothered to enlighten me today, so I thought I’d ask.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I made an assumption. Might’ve been wrong about that.” She gave him a sheepish smile.

“Not a problem. I know the Falcons have been a thorn in your side for a long time. Can I ask why didn’t you ask for help earlier? I know Jason would’ve been there for you.”

“I didn’t know he was here. Willis and I have lived in our own little world for years. I was afraid, though, that I would be judged harshly--or worse--for breaking the rules. You know, that whole out-of-bondlock thing. Only when the Falcons came after him could I get over my fear and finally ask. Desperation can be a great motivator.”

“That’s true,” he said. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think anyone has judged you. Even Griffin has lightened up considerably. ”

She agreed. “I know. Amazing.”

He smiled reassuringly. “You’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.”

Riana faced the cabin door and inhaled sharply. Jason was there. She could tell he was still awake. Amazing, after what he’d been through today.

Christopher opened the door and stepped back to let her pass. “I’ll be two doors down if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” she said.

He nodded and left.

She closed the door behind her. While she’d been surveying her new surroundings, Jason had put their clothes into the dresser drawers and set out candles and pots of Livendium, strategically placed so the breeze from the open windows would pull the fragrance through the entire cabin. She took in a deep breath, savoring the spicy-sweet aroma. Soothing.

She hung her coat on the nearby rack. This cabin looked more like the man Jason had become than his house. Rustic and earthy, it spoke of comfort and happiness. Wood

beams splayed across the ceiling, matching the color and direction of the plank flooring. Large plush rugs in soft brown and green lay scattered throughout the living room and kitchen.

What she liked the most was the stone fireplace. Real wood, real fire, not gas-and-fake-log nonsense. The hearth and mantle were both made from large river rocks that had been lightly buffed. They gleamed in the golden light.

The fire had nearly died out. She placed two logs over the dying embers, then just for fun used her telekinetics to ignite them. That sort of thing took enormous energy, but with the whole night ahead of her to recuperate, she could spare a little.

“Perfect,” she said. She watched the flames a moment while the warmth seeped into her bones.

After a quick tour of the rest of the cabin, she went to the bedroom. She found Jason in bed, reading a book.

“How do you feel?”

He peered over the pages. “Fine.”

She sat in a wooden rocking chair near the window to take off her boots. “Have you figured out what was on the arrow?”

“No, I still have no idea.” He fluffed the pillows behind him, then leaned back. “So, what do you think of the place?”

“I like it. This looks like you.”

“Does it?” He shrugged, glanced around. “I guess.” He fidgeted with the edge of the blanket.

She tested the link between them and found it closed. That he didn’t want her close hurt her feelings a little, but she supposed she deserved it. After all, she’d been doing the same thing.

Feeling awkward, she stood up and stuck her hands in her pockets. “Are you okay?”

“Yep,” he said with a yawn. “Tired.”

“You should sleep.” She hadn’t thought about where she’d sleep, and now it was probably too late to make other arrangements.

He closed his book, set it on the nightstand and looked at her. “Will you sleep here? With me?”

“Uh ... I don’t know.” Her cheeks got hot.

A little smile came to his face. “I want to make love to you. Then sleep. In that order.”

She blinked. “But your leg?”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Come here.” He held out his hand.

She padded to his side. Slipping her fingers into his, she watched his large hand close over hers. Felt the sutekan heat warm her body. Desire curled in her belly, pooled lower. His eyes began to glow again as he kissed her fingers.

He ran the tip of his tongue along his lower lip. His gaze lowered to her breasts, then dropped further, to the juncture at her thighs. “Take off your jeans.”

Despite her own need to mate, and the dampness between her legs, Riana hesitated. Without Willis knowing how his life would change, bringing Jason into her life seemed unfair and selfish. Again she chastised herself for letting him bite her in the first place.

“Um ... Willis....”

She'd always done her best to be honest and forthcoming with her son. He hadn't yet had much of an opportunity to be just a little boy. He deserved that, and a home, a father and so much more.

He cleared his throat. “We'll go out tomorrow morning and find the Falcons. Shouldn't take long to find their base. Christopher is a very good tracker. For now, we have the night to relax and prepare for new day. The whole night. Together. Please, come to bed.”

Riana nodded.

“Yes,” she said, in response to several things. Yes, they'd find him. Yes, they had the night to relax. And to his silent question, yes, she did want to make love with him tonight. He dripped power, hunger, and the scent of his arousal made her think of sweaty sheets and wet skin. Even now, he belonged to her and she to him. But her son....

She wiped her suddenly sweaty palms on her jeans.

Jason's brow furrowed. “Riana? What's going on?”

Stalling for time, she pulled the band from her braid, loosened her hair, and smoothed it back. She tried to sound brave and sure of herself, but the need to mate was so strong, she could hardly think.

Who was she kidding? She didn't want to think. She wanted to lie beneath Jason's hard, beautiful body and feel him stroking inside her, giving her what they both desperately needed.

Steeling herself, she prepared to say what had to be said. “I can't do this yet. I want to, but I can't. Willis and I are family. I need to have him back with me before I can bind myself to you. I have to know he's willing to accept you in his life, and you're willing to accept him.”

Jason's mouth opened, closed, and opened again. “You already know I'm willing to accept him.” He looked away.

She did? “When did you tell me that?”

“Well, I didn't actually say it, but obviously if I'm willing to mate with you, I'm willing to make your son a part of my life, too.”

She blew out a breath. “I'm relieved. I hope Willis feels the same way.”

Jason was quiet for a long moment. His mind was still closed, but she could guess. Didn't take a genius to figure out he was angry.

Riana bit her lower lip and waited.

“How fortunate for your son that you consider his feelings,” he said at last. Rising to his feet, he tied a leather thong around his long hair and dragged on black jeans.

“That's a luxury you've never afforded me. Do you have any idea how much it hurts to begin the binding process only to stop halfway? Everything inside me is screaming to shove you up against the wall and fuck you into next week. But I didn't want to do that. Why? Because I wanted everything to be perfect.” He began to pace the room. “When the mating lust got to me, I left and went to my girlfriend's condo. But even then, knowing you were here, stupidly believing you were waiting for me, I couldn't do it. Emptying myself inside her would've made me feel so much better, but I couldn't. In the end, I had no choice but to break it off with her. For you. Because I thought you were finally coming back to me.”

With an impatient wave of his hands, every pot of Livendium, every candle

simultaneously extinguished.

Riana's eyes widened. "You have a girlfriend?"

"Oh, no," he snapped, "don't even think about hassling me over that. You were gone for fucking centuries. I had no idea when or even if you'd come back. I do have needs, you know. You've never considered my feelings at all, have you?" He held his hand up. "Forget it. Don't answer that. I already know. Don't bother waiting up for me. I'm done. I am so fucking done with you."

She nodded, feeling both foolish and embarrassed. "I understand."

"No, you don't understand anything. You have no idea just how much and how long I've loved you. What an idiot I've been." He shook his head. Without so much as a glance her way, he stormed out the door.

She stared after him for several moments, shocked by his reaction. She'd just discovered he was her mate, and now he was walking out the door. All she needed was a little more time. Why was that so much to ask?

He was right. She really didn't understand.

With a heaviness in her heart and limbs, she took off her jeans, slid into his side of the bed, and buried her face in his pillow. She drew his beautiful fragrance into her lungs and savored the spicy-sweetness of it. Jason. Her mate.

"I love you, too," she said to his pillow.

Seconds later, the tears came, and this time, she saw no reason to hold back.

Chapter Nine

“For god’s sake, Julian, get off the floor.”

He opened his eyes. The left side of his head was cold, sticky, wet, and it hurt. He’d failed to take his own life and instead of trying again, had simply passed out.

The failure was disappointing, and now that Dane was here and knew what his intentions had been, he would likely not get another chance.

“I’m still alive.”

Dane smiled thinly. “Yes, you are.” The disappointment in his voice wasn’t lost on Julian.

He got to his feet and, after brushing himself off, looked at his hands. He touched the side of his head and felt raw, bare skin. The bullet had grazed the scalp and either burned or ripped the hair clean off. Judging by the trail on his scalp, hair and skin were missing.

He made the mistake of looking at the blood on his fingers. At once dizzy, he found the nearest chair, an old brown recliner, and sat. The sight of his own blood made him sick.

“So, either your hands were shaking so bad you completely missed the side of your own head, or you don’t want to kill yourself as much as you think,” Dane said. “Which is it?”

Julian looked up and blinked. How long had he been out? He wasn’t thinking clearly yet.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, until you figure it out, consider yourself still a part of the Plan. That means you have a job to do, whether you like it or not.” Dane picked up the gun and studied it a moment. “I don’t have the luxury of finding someone more competent to replace you, so it looks like we’re stuck with each other. However, I need some assurance you’re going to stay alive long enough to finish this, so from now on, Cody’s your right-hand man. If Sepheus asks, you promoted him. Wherever you go, he follows. Understand?”

“Yes.” Julian nodded.

Dane’s brow knitted. “You made the choice to join us, Julian. You believed in our goal. Frankly, I’m disappointed. I thought you were stronger than this.”

He would be foolish to admit he didn’t believe in the plan anymore.

“I’ll be all right. It was a stupid thing to do, I know.”

Dane studied him for several seconds.

“Maybe you should go back to the ritual room and see if Nala has something to help you feel better. I need you in top form, both mentally and physically. I am relying on you, you know.”

“I know.”

“How’s the magic?” Dane asked, tucking the revolver into the side pocket of his coat. “Did Nala treat you well?”

“Fine. Yes, she was very efficient.” He thought about the small vial in his pocket

and wondered if he should mention it.

Kodiak and her apprentices had reasons for the things they did. And since they controlled the magic in Sadaar, no one ever questioned their motives. Until now, Julian hadn't thought them aware of the Plan, but Nala had proved him wrong.

The trouble was, he didn't know which side they were on. Hell, for all he knew, they had a Plan of their own.

"Good, then you're all set." Dane glanced at the bruise on the side of Julian's face. "Perhaps you should have the Nitooki priestesses look at that wound." He made a sour face. "Looks painful."

"It's fine." He pushed a lock of hair off his forehead. "Did you come here for a reason?"

"Yes." Dane strode back to the table and picked up a glittering purple collar. He dropped it into Julian's open hand. "When you find the son, put this on him."

"A Sadaarin collar? Why? I thought we wanted the man alive."

"We do, but we want to ensure his compliance. He must believe he has no choice other than to present himself to Sepheus. This will help convince him." Dane pointed. "Let him think his time is limited."

Julian looked at the collar. "Is it set to detonate?"

"Not yet. I have the activator, so I can set it anytime. If he does not perform to our satisfaction, I will destroy him myself."

"Very good. It will be done."

"Excellent. I'll leave you to your work. Report back to me when you've collared the son and brought him here. We'll keep him hidden until Sepheus is only minutes away from death." Dane nodded, evidently satisfied his Plan was on schedule.

Julian watched him leave.

The Nitooki tribesmen used the collars for the execution of Sadaarin hard cores. How Dane had managed to obtain one, he couldn't imagine. The Sadaarans didn't make them readily available to just anyone.

He held it up for a closer inspection.

Just what had Dane traded for it?

* * * *

Thanks to Nic, Julian and Cody knew just where to go. Parked at the entrance to the estate, they waited in one of the compound's Hummers.

They both figured they'd have to wait days before the mother ventured out alone. If she knew they were waiting for her, she'd elude them indefinitely, as she had for the last twenty years.

Fortunately, she didn't have a clue. She came out for a walk that very day, much to their surprise and utter delight.

"Send up the scouts," Julian said. He pressed a button on the armrest and the window slid down.

Cody nodded and punched the numbers into the keypad of his cell phone.

"Go," he ordered after someone answered.

Minutes later, Falcons surrounded the area. The mother didn't stand a chance. Everyone there buzzed with Sadaarin magic. Even if she became invisible, they'd be able to spot her.

But that wasn't their goal. She was not the target.

She was simply an inconvenience.

When she realized she'd been discovered, the scouts reported, she'd started an erratic dance, flitting from one hiding place to another. He was certain she thought herself quite clever, ducking beneath thick leafy canopies and darting here and there.

His Falcons reported every move, every attempt to deceive. She was trying to lead them away from her son. Admirable, but futile.

"There are still three people in the house," Cody said.

Make that one person. Two men, both large and well-muscled, took off at a dead run in the same direction as the mother.

"Perfect. They're rushing to save her. This is going to be easier than I thought."

"We don't have the son. This isn't over yet." Cody's cell phone rang. He flipped it open. "Garrick."

Julian's attention went back to the house. If only one human remained, they could easily approach and overpower him.

"Got it," Cody said. He snapped the phone shut. "Eris confirms both males are headed toward the mother. Time for us to move in."

Julian took in a deep breath. "At last. Lead on."

Cody got out of the car, straightened his jacket, and started up the long driveway to the house.

Julian followed.

They had every intention of killing whoever remained, so rather than knocking first, they opened the door and stepped inside.

The place was huge. They took their time, knowing it was on their side, going from room to room, studying the home as if the owner were a true enemy. Whatever information they could glean from his personal possessions was something they could potentially use against him.

Hello.

Julian's head nearly exploded. He winced and covered his ears, though the voice had very clearly been inside his head.

Cody did the same.

Julian spun to face the bobcat. "Hello?"

Hello.

"Ow!" he said. "Can you turn that down?"

Turn what down?

"Ah, Jesus," Cody hissed. "Strong telepath."

"A telepath. I would never have guessed. Use the magic to filter the power." He knelt. "Hello, little fella. How are you today?"

Okay.

Good. The magic filter made it a bit easier to listen. "Excellent. Say, I'm a friend of Valeriana's and was just wondering if she was here. I'd like to talk to her for a few minutes."

Mama went for a walk.

"Mama?" Julian looked at Cody. So it was true.

Valeriana is my mama's name.

The bobcat was young. What, maybe five to seven years old? The mother had disappeared around twenty years ago. The lad would've been five then. Had she really

hidden her son inside a bobcat for that many years? Spells like this weren't easy to find. In fact, outside of Sadaar, he'd never heard of a spell as strong as this one.

Sadaarin magic was the most powerful he'd ever encountered, by far. Again, he wondered about the motives of the Nitooki priestess and her apprentices. The implication of their involvement in the Plan made him shiver. If Kodiak knew what they were doing, it was only a matter of time before they failed.

Cody jumped in. "And a lovely name it is. Tell me, son, what's your name?"

Willis. The bobcat sat and showed his teeth in a display that made Julian think he was smiling.

"Willis, I'd like to tell you a little secret. Do you like secrets?"

Sure!

Julian leaned closer. "Do you know who your father is?"

Willis's eyes grew wide. No. Do you?

Julian nodded. He felt bad. Willis was clearly very young and had been told nothing about his family, or what the mother would believe was family.

He'd expected to deal with a full-grown man. He didn't like this at all, but continued, knowing he had no choice.

"Yes, I do know your father. He's a great man. A leader of many people."

Really?

"Absolutely. He isn't like you, I'm afraid. He's called a Verlinean. He leads the Order of the Red Falcon."

I'm 'Skarian.

"Half Eskarian," he lied. "Your father is very ill and needs your help. Would you like to help your father?"

Okay.

"If you come with us, we'll take you to your father and tell you all about the Red Falcons."

Mama says Red Falcons are bad. They came to my house. One smelled really bad and he hurt me. The little bobcat trembled, prompting Julian to reach out and scratch his ear.

"It's all right now. That man is gone."

"Had to be Carlos," Cody said. "Drinking again."

"Your mama doesn't know that your father is dying. She doesn't understand about our world, but I think you do. Would you like to see your father now?"

Okay.

A female voice intruded. "What's going on? Who are you people?"

The housekeeper stood only a few feet away. She was the last human in this house and the only one who knew what they looked like.

"Come, Willis, let's go see your father." He turned to Cody. "Take care of the housekeeper."

Cody grinned at the lovely, tall woman. "I'd be happy to."

Chapter Ten

Jason slammed the door behind him and stood on the porch. He let out a long, exasperated breath.

Damn her.

He couldn't figure out why he continued to wait for her. Seriously, why did he bother? He knew lots of human women, and they had no problems expressing their desire for him. In fact, some all but threw themselves at him.

Which was kind of nice.

It was better than feeling like this. Anything was better than feeling like a useless piece of shit. Unwanted. Unloved. You name it, he probably felt it.

He sat on the bench by the door and lowered his head into his hands. For so long he'd waited, hoping she'd come to him on her own. When she did show up, he was thrilled. Finally! The hope he'd thought long dead was once again vibrant and alive. He'd even begun to think about their life together, where they'd live, children. God, how he loved her.

Resentment could eat a man alive. Given time to grow, it could destroy the best things in life. Love, friendship, family. No sendagi worth his salt would allow something like that to happen, especially not because his mate loved her son.

But the boy's resentment was another matter altogether. Jason didn't know how to reach him, or if he *could* reach him.

He was beginning to wonder if his future even included a family. If he lost Riana and Willis, he could imagine turning sour, as Griffin had. Jason had empathized with the commander when he'd lost his mate and daughter, but now the possibility of their lives paralleling so closely frightened him. He really didn't want to explore that path.

He rubbed his chin with the back of his hand and thought back to those fateful last moments with Irena. He'd denied himself the lush curves of her body, the soft whispers in his ear as he loved her and, most of all, the love she gave back, even knowing there was no chance of a future for them. She loved him anyway. In his mind, that was the greatest, truest love of all. Pure and bittersweet. Finite.

He couldn't help but respect her strength because of it.

Now she was gone, because he'd stupidly thought he had some kind of a future with Riana. A quick tumble with Irena would soothe his wounded pride and ease the emptiness he felt in his heart. It would definitely cool the fire in his jeans and distract him from the woman in his bed.

Since he'd already said goodbye, running back to her after mere hours had passed bordered on cruel. He was aroused and frustrated, but not enough to hurt Irena more than he already had. Anyway, he doubted she'd take him back. She just wasn't that kind of girl.

He rose from the bench, stepped off the porch and was preparing to shift when he noticed Chris sitting on the dock. He could use a bit of friendly conversation. Changing direction, he started for the shore.

Chris had rolled up his jeans and was soaking his bare feet in the frigid lake water.

“What are you doing? Have you gone completely nuts?” Jason sat beside him. The wood was cold and damp, and he was fairly certain he’d end up with a wet spot on his butt. It was worth it for the camaraderie he’d find in his young, slightly nutty friend.

“I like the water.” Chris replied. “And I haven’t been out on the boat for awhile. I’m suffering from withdrawal.”

“So that makes it okay to give yourself frostbite? What is it, thirty degrees? You’ll freeze your toes off.”

“No, I won’t.” Chris grinned and pulled his feet out of the water. “It is a bit chilly, though.”

“No kidding.” Jason scowled. “What’s keeping you off the boat these days?”

“Been busy as hell. Colin is walking and talking, I’m arguing with the city about some improvements I want to make to one of my properties. Between that and helping out at Mackenzie’s veterinary office, I just haven’t had time. But I will when I get back. Mackenzie’s been talking about wanting to go down to San Diego again, and her birthday’s coming up. Think I’ll surprise her and load up Colin, the dogs and just go.” He shrugged as his grin broadened. “They love the water as much as I do.”

Jason nodded. “Sounds nice.”

“It is,” Chris agreed. “I’m a lucky man.”

“Yeah.”

Lucky, indeed. Chris had a benekeda who actually wanted him. Jason envied the life his friend had with his mate and son. Even the dogs were loved and wanted.

Several minutes passed in silence. He watched the moon rise over the water and listened to the flutter of night birds, crickets, and the occasional demon wolf he should be hunting, but wasn’t. The hell with duty. He was trying to push Riana from his thoughts, but it seemed everything was conspiring against him.

Truth was, while he understood Riana’s reasons for brushing him off, he still didn’t like it and didn’t appreciate that he had no say in the matter. Didn’t like putting his life on hold.

“You know, it’s not an unfair request. Human parents do the same thing when they remarry,” Chris said. “Why shouldn’t we?”

Jason’s thoughts scattered. “What? What do humans do when they remarry?”

“They ask the children for permission to bring the new spouse into the family.”

“Riana did that,” Jason said. “Willis threw a fit. He was so upset, he cried. He doesn’t want their lives to change.” He looked at his friend. “It bothered me. The little squirt didn’t even give me a chance.”

“Kids are like that,” Chris said. “You’ll be better off when you make peace with him. He probably thinks you’re trying to steal his mom away. You need to show him how good it can be with the three of you.”

“I’m not sure how.” He shrugged and pushed a few errant strands of hair from his face.

“You’ll do just fine as long as you don’t let that feline part of you do all the thinking.”

What else was he supposed to do? He was feline. “Well, now, that’s kind of a funny thing. I went through a really weird time, about...,” he looked up as he thought

about how long it had been, “five hundred years ago. I got totally fed up with everything and took a sabbatical from my duties. Spent four years continuously as a black leopard. I wandered the jungles of Central America and lived as leopards do. After that, the feline attributes just stayed with me. Like, they became a huge part of me, Chris. You might as well ask me to stop taking blood.”

“Maybe the bobcat senses that.”

He looked out at the water. “I told Riana I wouldn’t hurt her son.”

“Good. Did you tell him?”

He studied the horizon for several seconds. He did actually care for the bobcat. Assuming the little guy would allow it, he’d be happy to sit down and talk about their lives together.

“Well, no,” he admitted. “I didn’t get the chance. The Falcons nabbed him.”

“I know her son means everything to her. If anyone tried to mess with mine, I’d be all over them, like, right now.” He snapped his fingers. “I’m sure Riana’s the same. More so, because it’s been just her and Willis for so long. When you get him back, and I know you will, be his buddy. Show him how important he is to you.”

“I’ll do that.” He leaned back, scanning the night sky. “I envy what you have.”

“But you’d prefer the bobcat wasn’t part of the deal, don’t you?”

“It does make everything more complicated. If I’d known she wanted a child, I would have given it to her. I’d give her anything, Chris, but she’s never bothered with me. Not once. She left Malanaya almost a thousand years ago, and I didn’t see her again until the day before yesterday.”

Chris pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and popped it in his mouth. “Why didn’t you go after her?”

Jason rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. “It never occurred to me she’d leave for good. I was so in love with her ... still am.”

Chris rolled the toothpick to the side of his mouth. “But you let her get away.”

“I did,” he admitted, maybe for the first time. “Probably the biggest thing that kept me from chasing her was what she said.” He paused, thinking about the hurtful words.

“What was that?”

He blew out a breath. “She said she wasn’t the one for me, but when I grew up, someday the right one would find me. The problem was, I was grown and knew she was the one. How come she didn’t know? That messed me up for a long time.” He reached up to rub the base of his neck.

“I can imagine. So when she finally returns, she’s toting the son that should’ve been yours. You must’ve been pissed.”

“Oh, man.” He shook his head. “It was a knife in the heart. I mean, how could she do something that cold?”

Chris shrugged. “Don’t know. Did you ask her?”

“Yeah. She didn’t really answer. Then later, she tells me Willis is half Falcon. Can you believe that?”

Chris shook his head. “Man.”

“I know. But there’s more to it, something I haven’t been able to figure out yet. She keeps so many secrets. She keeps finding ways to push me away.”

“When I talked to her, she said she was terrified we’d judge her harshly for what

she did. I'm sure she had her reasons, and God knows what she's had to deal with since her son was born. Then the Falcons come and steal him, and on top of all that, she finds you, her mate. Now things are really complicated. Add to that the fire of the edukitza, and it's a nightmare."

"I guess I really hadn't looked at it like that." He removed his wooden pipe from his shirt pocket. Taking out his Livendium stash, he filled the bowl and lit the silver-tipped leaves with his telekinetics. He inhaled slowly, letting the spicy-sweet herb fill his lungs and impart its soothing benefits to his tired body.

While he held his breath, he thought about the package deal--Riana and Willis. After watching them together over the past couple of days, he realized he was jealous of Willis. Jealous he got to touch and love the woman Jason could only dream about. He wanted to be a part of the little world they shared.

He turned the picture around in his mind. From Riana's perspective, she'd left the Eskarian nation and built her own world with a son she guarded at all times. Now the boy was in enemy hands, and she was trying get him back.

And trying to keep Jason out of her pants.

He blew out two smoke rings.

"Yeah, okay," he said, passing the pipe. "Maybe I can see her point."

"I thought you might." Chris took in a long drag and let the smoke out in a thin stream. "So, what do you know about the Order?"

"I've had run-ins with them in the past. Riana thinks they aren't shifters, but I do. I've often found them near the dead as well, but not always. I don't really consider them threats because I haven't actually seen them kill anyone, and more importantly, neither Blair nor Griffin have ever said anything about them."

Chris nodded, handing the pipe back. "No sense looking for trouble."

Jason smiled. "They're small birds. How dangerous can they be?"

Chris looked over at him and smirked. "Have you ever met a Mendoloran?"

"What, those tiny dragons?" He drew on the pipe and exhaled. The herb had done its job, and now he felt much better.

"Tiny and vicious. In this case, size doesn't matter. I had one put me in submergence for five hours. Five hours. One little dragon. That damn thing almost tore my left arm off. I bled so much I nearly went over."

To the dream state, Jason finished. As in a coma, he wouldn't have been awake or asleep. Unlike a coma, he would've dreamed all the time, uncertain about where the dream began and reality ended. Only submergence in hot salty water, time, and lots of blood would pull him out. Bad place to be.

"Where was I when this happened?"

"Europe. That's when Mathias passed."

Jason grunted. Mathias had been his mentor. He'd dropped everything when he'd received word Mathias had been killed in an accident while tending a wounded Defender.

"That's right. Who took care of you, then?"

Chris snorted. "Griffin. His bedside manner really sucks, by the way. It was my first time in submergence, and he just shoves me under. No reassurance I'm not going to drown. Nothing. He didn't bother to tell me we can breathe through our skin."

Jason chuckled. Yeah, that was Griffin.

"So you panicked?"

“Hell, yes, I panicked,” Chris snapped. “Who wouldn’t? Christ almighty, that man can be an idiot.”

Jason couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, he’s just not wired the same as us.”

“I’m sure the mother ship is still looking for him.” Chris shook his head. “Some days he really pisses me off.”

“Yeah, I think he pisses everyone off.” Jason looked back at the cabin, realizing the time had come. He’d gotten angry with Riana because she was putting her family first. Now he realized he owed her not only an apology but his assurance he’d do everything he could to win Willis’s trust.

He was putting his family first.

Chris followed his gaze. “You going back?”

“Yeah. I have some apologizing to do.”

“Well, enjoy.” He moved his legs to sit tailor-fashion.

Jason looked back at him. “Huh?”

Chris grinned. “The best part about fighting is you get to do lots of making up afterward.”

“Somehow, I don’t think it’s going to be like that, Chris.” He stood up and swiped the back of his jeans. Yep, wet spot. Damn. “But I look forward to lots of making up in the future.”

“I’ve no doubt,” Chris said, sticking his feet back in the frigid lake water.

Jason frowned. “Don’t come crying to me when your toes freeze. See you later.”

Chris waved him off.

The short walk back to the cabin gave him time to collect his thoughts. Pushing the door open, he took in a deep breath and stepped inside. Time to make things right.

He closed and locked the door. Striding on silent feet to the bedroom, he sat on the opposite side of the bed. He quickly shed his boots and shirt, then laid down behind her.

She was asleep on the side of the bed he’d originally chosen, with blankets and pillows surrounding her. The furrow between her brows told him she wasn’t having happy dreams. Her fingers twitched, curled, and then relaxed, only to start the dance over again.

He threaded his fingers through her long, black hair.

“I’m sorry for the way I behaved. I was wrong.”

“Mmmm.”

He leaned against her, resting his chin on her upper arm so he could see her face.

“Do you mind if I sleep next to you?”

“No.”

“Riana?” Was she awake? He waited a few seconds, then decided she’d drifted back to sleep.

It felt good to have her close enough he could reach out anytime and connect with her warm skin. Years had passed since the last time she’d allowed him this close. Now, here she was, sleeping beside him. Beautiful, sensual Riana. Strong Riana, defender of her only son.

Accomplished Riana. No other Eskarian woman had done what she had.

His woman.

Propping his head on his hand, he traced the curve of her forearm with his middle

finger.

“Rest, Nukita. It’ll be my pleasure to watch over you.” Leaning over, he kissed the soft skin on her shoulder. She smelled so good, like woman and musk and sleep. He could lie there forever, breathe her in forever. This moment could last for centuries, and it wouldn’t be near long enough. Eternity might not be long enough.

She sighed softly. Chills erupted over her skin where he’d touched her. “Do you know how much I love you?”

Chapter Eleven

Jason awoke the second the first rays of light threaded between the blinds. Riana's words sifted through his mind, lifting him from the thick black mire he'd dwelt in for so long. It had taken hours to fall asleep, and now, seemingly five minutes later, he was awake and the new day had begun.

Riana was gone. The twisted sheets tumbling down the side of the bed were evidence she'd fought them all night. At one point, he'd gotten up, gently disentangled them from her legs and drawn a new, smaller blanket over her.

That, too, was on the floor.

Any other day and he would've felt nineteen again, reliving the memory of her stealthy departure from Malanaya so long ago. At the time, he knew only that she was leaving and hadn't bothered to say goodbye. He hadn't known about her need to make a difference or her desire to taste all that life had to offer.

Years would pass before he got over it.

Today was different. He sat up in bed, smiled, and felt, for the first time in centuries, a shard of hope.

"Meus," he said in her language. *Mine*.

Rising from the bed, he donned a dark-blue T-shirt and shoved his feet into black boots. Whipping his waist-length hair into a loose braid, he secured it with a small strip of leather.

His hope was that they would find the Falcons' lair, snatch Willis from under their collective noses, and leave them none the wiser. They had precious little information about the Order. If the reverse was true for the Falcons, it could work to their advantage. Just as easily, the Falcons could know something about them, which would make getting in and out much more difficult.

His little crossbow, with its six-inch arrows, seemed ineffective, but with the auto-loader he'd had fitted years ago, he could easily pin a quarry to something in less than a heart beat. When he used arrows dipped in his tranquilizing solution, the crossbow became a formidable weapon.

After sliding his leather bomber jacket over his shoulders, he folded the bow tines flat against the stock and stuffed it and the arrows into the inside pockets of his jacket. He tied his satchel of medicinals to his belt.

He did a last-minute check to make sure he had everything--weapons, medicinals and the ever-present baggie of Livendium and his favorite wooden pipe.

Stepping outside, he saw the Land Rover still parked in the driveway, which meant Riana was nearby. He didn't like that her thoughts were always closed. Just knowing where she was, like now, would go a long way toward improving his peace of mind.

Chris was on the dock again. Had the man even slept last night?

He strolled down to the shoreline, savoring the warmth of the sun on his face.

"Morning," he said, tilting his head to watch Chris work.

The younger Eskarian was barefoot again. One leg hung over the edge of the dock and his foot was in the water.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Jason peered over the edge of the dock. “Still trying to get hypothermia?”

“No. The water’s warmer now,” Chris said, dipping white arrows into a small vial of murky liquid. The poison was one of Jason’s many concoctions, fast and deadly for some, painful for others. Always effective. He knew his herbs.

“Not that much warmer.”

Chris squinted over his dark glasses. The sunlight caught the iridescent rings around his blue eyes and lit them up like rings of ice-blue fire. He flashed a quick grin.

“You get laid last night?”

“Nope. Thanks for sticking your nose where it isn’t wanted.”

Chris chuckled. “No problem. I like sticking it where it doesn’t belong.”

Jason ignored him. “What’re you doing?”

“I want to be prepared in case you or Riana need a little help.” He went back to dipping arrows in the poison. “So, why the perma-grin? I saw it the minute you walked out the door. Looks like you got laid.” He peered over his sunglasses again and laughed.

Jason scowled. “Damn, Chris, let it go, would you? None of your damn business.” He scanned the area surrounding the cabin. “Have you seen Riana yet?”

“No. I thought she was with you. I’ve been here since about six. Haven’t seen a thing.”

“Since six this morning? She’s been gone almost two hours?” He threw up his hands. “Damn it!”

Chris looked startled, his brow furrowed. “I’m sorry. She’s always closed off, you know, so I just didn’t give it much thought. I didn’t realize she’d bailed.”

“Apparently, she has.” He sighed. “She must’ve taken off on foot. Well, I’m sure we can find her. I’ll go to feed while you finish up.”

Chris pointed to his left. “There’s a campground just down the way with at least a dozen campers hanging out. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” Jason collected his energies and prepared to shift.

Nothing happened. He tried again. “What the hell?”

He narrowed his focus to the inner workings of his body. Something must’ve remained from his wound, even though Chris said he’d removed the magic. Searching carefully for something that didn’t belong, he found nothing. He felt fine, his body was functioning perfectly. He just couldn’t...

Chris looked concerned. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t shift.” Jason looked at his hands, as if they might have the answer.

“Why not?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

“Hmm...” Chris thought a moment. “Try phase-shifting.”

Jason tried and, again, nothing happened. “I am so screwed. I have no idea what’s wrong.”

“Maybe Ian or Blair can help.” Chris dropped his arrows into a leather quiver, then straightened, swinging the quiver and large wooden bow over his shoulder.

“We don’t have time. I’ll just have to live without it. You ready to go?” He turned, heading back toward the house at a rapid clip without waiting for an answer.

Chris trotted up beside him. “You’ll have to be extra careful, Jason. I’ll protect you as best I can, but if you can’t shift, you’re definitely at a disadvantage.”

“No shit.” He stopped. “Don’t put your neck on the line for me. You have a mate and a son who love you. I haven’t fully bonded with Riana and don’t honestly know if it’s going to happen anytime soon.” He gripped Chris’s shoulder. “I mean it, Chris. If something happens, take care of Riana and Willis. Make sure they’re safe, always. Swear to me you’ll do this.”

Chris lowered his sunglasses. “You’re my mentor. You helped me build a new life after I converted and, more importantly, saved me from Griffin’s wrath more times than I care to remember. I’m not leaving you behind.” He pushed them back up. “End of subject.”

Jason appreciated the loyalty, misplaced as it was. “Will you at least make sure Riana and Willis are safe first?”

“That I’ll do.”

He swung around. “Good. Then let’s go find them, shall we?”

“Sure. After you.” Chris extended his hand toward the path ahead.

As they headed west, his thoughts came back to Riana. She’d been put under his care, and her Defender status had been revoked. So why had she chosen to look for Willis alone? Why risk Griffin’s anger? If he found out about this...

Chris laid a hand on his shoulder. “You need to relax.”

He looked away. “I *am* relaxed.”

“Jason.” Chris tugged him to a halt. “You know better than this. What if Riana needs you? You’re going to be all knotted up, and you won’t be able to help. You’re already at a disadvantage. Don’t add anger to the mix.”

“I’m not angry. I just don’t understand why she couldn’t wait for us.” He resumed his course away from the lake, toward the section of deep forest known as Devil’s Path, where the shape-shifters had taken up residence.

“Probably because she’s looking for her son.” Chris followed a step behind.

“Shut up,” he growled. “And quit taking her side. *We* are looking for her son, too.”

“Guess she’s just used to working alone.”

“Yeah, she is. Keep this between you and me, Chris. Griffin does not need to know.”

He shrugged. “She was with you the whole time, as far as I could tell.”

Jason smiled. “Good. Thanks.”

Chris grinned and gave him a casual slap on the shoulder. “I’m happy to help.”

Several moments passed in comfortable silence. Their footfalls were nearly soundless, aided by their telekinetics. Jason was grateful he still had that much. The loss of his ability to shift and phase-shift made him feel like a liability, a feeling he hated more than anything.

Someone knew what they were doing when they shot him. Though he had no proof, he suspected a member of the Order had done it. The substance on that arrow had been a powerful, mind-altering hallucinogenic. Seconds before his heart had stopped he’d gone on one whopper of a trip.

“I think someone from the Order shot me yesterday. They know about us.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I spent some time at Irena’s. After that, I just cruised around the area, trying to clear my head. Shortly after dawn, I went to Severin’s. If anyone had been tailing me, they would’ve had to have the ability to shift.”

Chris thought a moment. “Unless they were waiting for you at Severin’s.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t tell anyone I was going there.”

“Hmm. How do you think they found out so quickly?”

He could only guess. “Maybe they were watching us before they took Willis. I don’t really know.”

“Griffin’s going to have kittens over this one.” Chris whistled. “Yeah, we’ll be in Blair’s office after this. Good thing I already left Service. My ass-chewing won’t be so bad.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Jason said. “Appreciate the support.”

Chris grinned and shrugged. “You could be wrong. Maybe someone else is after you. Someone’s jealous husband, maybe?”

He snorted. “I don’t sleep with married women.”

“Ah. Okay. I didn’t know that. I thought you did.” Chris looked at the dirt road ahead.

He glared. “I don’t.”

Chris looked unconvinced. “If you say so.”

“I don’t!” he growled. “Look, don’t start with me.”

Chris shook his head, smirking at Jason. “I’d never do that.”

“Mmm-hmm ... I still think a Falcon shot me.”

“Give it up, Jason. You have no evidence. Anyone could’ve shot you.”

They rounded a thick patch of trees. Riana’s scent led them down a dirt road, where they passed the occasional house set back into the thick forest. Twice it clouded over and lightly rained.

Hours passed without their finding anything other than her sweet floral scent.

At one point, Chris had to feed. Jason kept going. Though he was hungry, he pressed forward, driven by the need to find her and her son.

In the span of mere days, his mind and body had become attuned to Riana. He felt as if he’d been sleeping all this time and had just now awakened. He felt alive. In love. Ready to begin a new life. He just had to find her.

Chris returned several moments later. Shifting mid-air, he landed on his feet fully clothed. Jason gave back the bow, quiver, and his favorite pair of sunglasses. Donning them, he peered over the top with his head cocked.

“You need to feed. You’re looking a little pale.”

As if on cue, Jason’s stomach rumbled. “Guess I am a little hungry. You offering, since I can’t shift?”

“Sure.” Chris pushed back the sleeve of his leather jacket and extended his hand. “Just be quick about it. I don’t really need to be seen with you stuck to my wrist.”

Jason snorted, looking up at down the dirt road. “We’re in the middle of nowhere and can see cars coming for a mile each way. I think you’re safe.”

He held out his hand, palm up. “All the same, I’d appreciate it if you’d just hurry up and take care of business.”

“Yes, sir.” Jason took the proffered wrist and quickly bit into the flesh. He drank until his secondary system activated and he started to feel better. Licking the residual

blood from the double punctures, he gave a quick nod. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Chris wiped his wrist on his jeans. He looked up. “What have we here? Look behind you.”

Jason glanced back to see what he was looking at. “What?”

“Falcons,” Chris said, using the tip of his bow to point upward.

Three Falcons circled around something deep in the forest. Jason scanned the area and soon found what he was looking for. “There’s our trail. Let’s go.”

Chris nodded.

Jason led the way. “I can tell something happened here. Her scent has changed. I think she knew something was up.”

He felt a change in the air. Seconds later, a low current of fear, anger, and shame threaded across their path, raising the fine hairs across the back of his neck. “Do you feel that?”

“Yeah, *that* I feel strongly. She’s around here somewhere.” Chris shrugged the old wooden bow off his shoulder. “And in bad shape,” he added.

Jason drew out his crossbow.

He could tell Riana was in bad shape, too, and that didn’t do much for his sense of balance. Part of him wanted to charge in, shoot first, and maybe ask some questions, if there happened to be any survivors. Logic told him to wait and see what had happened.

As they drew closer, Chris moved behind him. Each moved silently, listening to the sounds of the forest, waiting for the signal of danger. Jason scanned to the front and on each side, knowing Chris would do the same behind them.

The forest was thick. Tall maples and firs reached for the sky, while lush Boston ferns basked in the filtered light beneath the canopy. Wild grasses flanked the trail, which was narrow and dense with weeds and rocks. This path was seldom used.

A Falcon glided over them, suddenly shrieking out a warning to the others.

Jason stopped. “Okay, that’s for us. Split up.”

“Yep.” Chris darted into the trees just to his right.

Jason looked up as he sifted into the forest to his left. As he continued forward, he stretched his tight shoulders. He itched to shift into something less conspicuous, and then cursed the Falcons because he couldn’t. Damn them. Shifting might take precious energy needed for battle, but Christ, he hated not having the ability.

The trail veered to his right and he followed, remaining beneath the cover of thick canopies. Chris moved in parallel, his posture low and ready to strike.

Jason was the first to see them.

Two men stood in the center of the trail. Willis sat at their feet. In fact, he sat on the taller man’s feet, just as he had Riana’s. If a bobcat ever had the ability to look angry, it was Willis.

Riana was on the ground, one knee up against her chest, the other beneath her. She was panting. Her hair was a mess, her long braid littered with twigs, dust, and leaves. Blood was drying on the side of her face.

Riana, he called telepathically.

Slowly, she turned her head toward him. A large gash split her cheek from temple to chin. She held up her hand. “Stay there.”

He felt her anguish, her sense of utter defeat. Whatever had happened, it had broken her.

The two other men looked past Riana to the trees where Jason and Chris crouched. The tall blond spoke first. "No, I wish them to come forward. They will help you fulfill our requirements."

Chris looked back. *What do you think?*

Jason shook his head. *Not yet.*

"I won't repeat myself, gentlemen. You will accomplish nothing by cowering in the trees," the blond said. He looked down at Willis. "Bring them to me."

Willis stood up, padding by Riana without looking at her. Her gaze followed him, tears streaming down her face, reaching out for him when he was close enough.

He skittered past without allowing contact.

Riana lowered her head again and closed her eyes. Sniffed.

Jason was almost relieved her Defender status had already been revoked. Griffin would've had her hide the second she returned to the island.

He doubted she'd care. She'd probably seek retribution against these people the moment she was able to fight--if that ever happened--and status wouldn't matter at all.

He'd never seen her like this.

Willis stopped on the trail between Chris and him. He sat, looking first at Chris and then him.

We were waiting for you, Sen-doggy. Mama did a very bad thing. I want her to fix it right now, but she won't.

Jason frowned. What could Riana have possibly done? He straightened, threading through the trees and brush until he stood on the trail near Willis. Chris followed, taking a position between Willis and Riana.

Jason lowered his weapon. "Okay, I'm listening."

I am not a bobcat, Willis announced. I am both Eskarian and Verlinean. My father is the leader of the Red Falcons. He's going to die soon, and I'm supposed to take his place. Mama won't help me. Will you?

Stunned by the request, Jason looked first at Riana, who sniffled, then Chris, whose focus was on the men. "If I can. Why won't she help you?"

I don't know, Willis said. She just shakes her head and cries.

Chris turned to regard him, his eyes sympathetic, though he said nothing. Jason didn't either. They both knew what had to be done.

He looked down at Willis. "What do you need?"

I need to look like you.

Chapter Twelve

Jason shook his head. "I don't know how to do that."

That's what Mama said. But, you're sen-doggy. You know magic, right? Willis looked up, hopeful and trusting.

Jason realized this was his chance to heal the chasm between them. "I know some, but for this, you'd need a very powerful wizard." And then he remembered Severin's words--*You need Azeal.*

"Gentlemen, come forward," the blond said.

Jason stepped around Willis and strode toward the two men, brushing the top of Riana's head with one hand as he passed. Chris followed, and Willis took up the rear.

The blond smiled. "I'm Julian Richards. My colleague here is Cody Garrick. As you may have surmised, we are Verlinean." He dipped his chin in a formal bow.

Jason inclined his head in response.

"Jason Velazquez." He pointed toward Chris with an open hand. "Christopher Bartholomew." He wasn't about to offer that they weren't human, either. Let the Verlineans figure it out themselves.

"Gentlemen, Cody and I are senior members of the Order of the Red Falcon. As Willis told you, our great shiema, Sepheus, is ill, and his passing is imminent. His lineage is very special, what you would call royalty. The crown, so to speak, is passed from parent to firstborn, the heir. This has been our tradition for many thousands of years.

"Willis is the shiema's heir, which makes the reason for our presence here quite obvious, I'm sure."

Jason now understood. "So, Riana and the shiema produced an heir."

Cody, who'd been looking strangely disinterested, snapped to attention. "That's right. We knew the heir was alive. Sepheus was counseled to sire more offspring, but he steadfastly refused. He wanted his heir to be immortal, which was why he chose this one. To his mind, no other would do. We are here to claim what is rightfully ours."

"That is correct. It was an arrangement, of sorts." Julian tossed a disdainful glance at Riana.

"So, let me see if I have this straight," Jason said. "You chased Riana all over the planet just so Willis could replace Sepheus?"

Julian nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"Why didn't Sepheus just sire a new heir? Seems irresponsible, doesn't it, if only one family can govern your people," Chris said. "Wouldn't you want some kind of backup? What if Willis had died at some point?"

"He's not yours."

Jason turned to see Riana stand up and brush the dirt and leaves from her clothes.

"I'll never give him up," she told Julian. "Never."

Chris shrugged. "As you can see, Willis isn't available. Choose someone else and teach your people to adjust."

"It is not that simple," Julian said. "And *you*," he pointed at Riana, "know

perfectly well he does belong to us.”

“No, he doesn’t. You can’t have him,” she snapped. “Not now. Not ever.”

Chris glanced at Jason. *They reek of deceit.*

Jason agreed. He walked back to Riana. She looked better now. That quick temper had brought a flush to her cheeks and fire to her eyes. Once again, she looked like the woman he loved. “How are you?”

She tore her gaze from Julian. “Okay.”

“It’ll be all right, Nukita. He’s coming home with us.”

Pulling the leather satchel from his belt, he extracted a small jar and opened it. He dipped his index finger into the paste, a combination of herbs and salt that always remained very warm. Catching her chin in his fingers, he tipped it upward. “This will help heal you.”

He spread a thin layer over the gash in her cheek.

“Ooh.” She squeezed her eyes closed.

“I’m sorry. It’ll pass in a second.” He should’ve warned her the paste had a tendency to sting.

“It’s fine.”

He dropped the jar back into his satchel. “Can you walk? We need to get out of here.”

She snapped her attention back to Julian. “I’m not leaving without Willis.”

Jason offered his hand, and she took it. Rising to his feet, he faced the two Verlineans. “Nice fairy tale, gentlemen, but we have more important things to do.”

“I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood, Mr. Velazquez,” Julian said. “This is no fairy tale, and as Willis has accepted his destiny as our next shiema, we must insist you return him to human form.”

“And if we refuse?”

Cody answered. “You would deny your son the right to choose his own path?”

“He’s only a child,” Riana said. “He doesn’t understand what you’re asking of him.”

Willis stood up. His little stump of a tail twitched. *Yes, I do, Mama. I’d protect people from bad things. They’ll show me how to do it.*

“He’s far too young for that kind of responsibility. You can’t have him.” Riana’s strength rang in her voice. Despite her earlier lapse, Jason would make sure Griffin knew she’d faced her worst enemy with dignity and honor.

“He can choose his own path when he has a better understanding of his choices,” he added, giving Riana’s hand a gentle squeeze.

Cody’s dark eyes focused on Willis. “We will teach him our ways. He’ll play with other children and learn to lead. It will be as if he had always been one of us.”

Riana huffed out her annoyance. “And never one of us? I don’t think so.”

Julian continued. “Yes, as one of *us*. Revered. Celebrated. We will cherish him for all time. And yes, he will be ours.

“In case you hope to dissuade him once we release you, we’ve fitted him with a special collar--one you cannot remove--that will allow us to track him. You have two days to accomplish your task. After that, we come for you.”

Jason tugged Riana behind him. “Come for her? What do you mean by that?”

“We are the sole guardians of the gates to an underworld, gentlemen. Sadaar, to

be exact,” Julian said. “We alone can open them. We control who goes in and who comes out. I presume you know of Sadaar.”

Jason looked at Christopher. Sadaar, the worst of the five underworlds. Everyone had heard stories at one time or another. Ian had suspected some human had seen beyond the gates and that was where the Judeo-Christian version of hell had come from.

“We know of it,” he admitted. “So, you throw her in. So what?” His stomach turned at the thought. “You still wouldn’t have Willis.”

Beside him, Riana stiffened.

Julian offered a patient smile. “I don’t think you truly understand, Mr. Velazquez.”

He shrugged. “I know it’s an underworld. Not exactly a paradise from what we’ve been told.”

Julian’s expression hardened. “It is the worst kind of hell. Those who dwell in Sadaar are among the most bloodthirsty in the universe. If you fail, in she goes, and her death will be merely an appetizer. If you fail, we open the gates, and they come for you first. I see there is a great deal of strength in you. Your demise might be a terrible thing for the rest of humanity, don’t you think?”

Jason knew enough about the underworld to know they could never allow the gates to open. “You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” Julian asked. “I know that none of you are human. I know you serve mankind. I know unleashing even a handful of Sadaarans without you and your kind to provide protection would be genocide.”

So much for their advantage.

Chris was closest to Willis. He reached down and brushed the fur aside to reveal an iridescent purple collar. He glanced up at Jason.

“Two days, gentlemen.” Julian looked from Jason to Christopher. “This is the back entry to the Falcon compound, Calizimar.” He pointed to the small trail to his right and to the small falcon statue on the left. “Just look for the falcon. Be back here, in two days.”

Julian and Cody disappeared inside a plume of swirling dark-gray smoke. From the center, two red falcons emerged, their broad wingspans dispersing the smoke as they rose into the morning sky. Nothing remained. No discarded clothing, no footprints, as if they’d never been there.

“Definitely not shifters,” Chris said, watching them disappear over the trees.

Riana instantly dropped to her knees. “Willis.”

The bobcat trotted to her. She brushed his cheeks.

“Are you all right?”

I’m okay. Mama, will you make me like you?

“Yes. We’ll find a way.” She hugged him, burying her face in his neck, her shoulders trembling.

Willis pulled out of her arms. He nuzzled her, licked the tears from her cheek, then gave her his toothy bobcat smile.

Jason knelt beside her, placing one hand on Willis’s back, the other on her shoulder. “Riana, what’s going on?”

She took a moment to compose herself. “The spell was cast long ago by a Nitooki apprentice, one of the most powerful in North and Central America. She was well

respected and very, very strong. The problem is, the Nitooki tribes tend to be nomadic. They're almost impossible to find, even when you know where to look. I know of no other wizard or witch who can do as they've demanded."

He pulled her close. She clutched him with the same ferocity she had given her son.

"We'll find someone, Nukita. We know people who practice magic."

"Okay, thanks. Thanks," she whispered.

He kissed her dusty forehead. "Anytime. You know that. Come, let me take you home now."

* * * *

They returned to Vashon Island, having no further reason to stay at Crystal Lake. Chris left immediately, saying he had some apologizing to do at home. Jason laughed, but Riana only smiled and looked confused. He'd enlighten her later.

Now Willis was snoring soundly in front of the fireplace, and Lissa, sweet girl that she was, had offered to watch him and was curled up on the couch with a book. Riana loved her long soaks in the bath and had chosen that while Jason went out to feed.

He was tired and needed a little extra blood. Since he still couldn't shift and didn't have a housekeeper anymore, he'd had to ask his yardman for a little help.

It really chapped his ass to have to ask. He didn't like how it made him feel. Weak. Needy. Feelings to which he was wholly unaccustomed. Thankfully, Gordon was a good sport and offered his wrist without any hassle.

Jason was on the way to his bedroom for his own much-needed shower when he passed by Riana's. Her door was open. He heard the tinkle of bathwater and her soft voice humming quietly, which he liked. She sounded better now, after hours of brooding during the trip home. He couldn't blame her, what with the timetable and ultimatum the Falcons had issued.

What he really wanted was just to see her beautiful green eyes and warm, golden skin. Talk to her a little. Deciding how he might get away with it and not seem too needy--the thing with Gordon still bugged him--he went in and knocked on the bathroom door. "It's me."

A moment passed before she answered. "Yes?"

Not quite the response he was hoping for, but he pressed forward anyway.

"I wanted to see how you're doing. Feeling any better?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Ah ... okay." Damn. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against the door. By Teros, some days his behavior astounded him. All this experience with women, and he had no idea what to say to Riana.

Well, he hadn't loved those women. Talking to them had been easy. No risk. No fear. No loss. No rejection.

"Uh ... I just wanted to know." Didn't take a genius to figure out he wasn't wanted. He started for his own room.

"Jason?"

He stopped, but didn't turn around. "Yeah?"

"Would you come in here for a minute?"

"Sure." He spun and opened the door.

Her hands were already covering her small breasts. She even blushed, which he

thought was funny and sweet. He'd seen her naked and knew she was beautiful and perfect, but if it made her feel more comfortable, he had no problem with it.

Such a vision. Her skin, wet and slick in the lilac-scented water, glistened in the warm glow of the nearby wall sconces. His body tensed and shivered as he drank in every gorgeous inch of her golden skin.

"What's up?" he asked, surprised to hear tremors in his voice.

"I was wondering...." She looked up at him with those gorgeous eyes.

"Uh-huh ... about what?" Had he been with anyone else, he would've shed his clothes and joined his guest.

Riana wasn't just a guest, and he was nervous.

She raised her brows. "Would you wash my hair?"

He grinned. "Sure, I'd love to."

Riana returned such a brilliant smile, he nearly melted right there. "Thanks."

"My pleasure." He knelt beside the tub. "Turn your back to me."

She kept her palms firmly centered over her breasts and turned, sloshing water over the edge of the tub and onto his T-shirt.

"Oops," he said, looking down at the large wet spot across his shirt. Well, it needed to be washed anyway. He reached behind his head, grasped the neckband and pulled the shirt off.

"Sorry." Riana's gaze dropped to his chest and abs. Her eyes widened.

He was proud of his body. Hours upon hours of weightlifting, sparring with Griffin or Josh, and extensive sword work had honed it to perfection. He watched her slow perusal start with his pectoral muscles, moving down to the washboard abdominals and finally stopping at the thin trail of fur that disappeared under his jeans.

His hope that she would like what she saw fizzled when she gave him a thin smile and turned her back.

With a little sigh, he squeezed a bit of shampoo into his hand. Rubbing both palms together, he worked up a lather. He started at her temples, spreading it through the strands along the sides of her head then continuing across the top. He drew firm, large circles along the back of her neck and head with his thumbs, which made her sigh and close her eyes.

"This feels wonderful."

He grinned. "Then I must be doing it right."

She moaned softly. "Oh, yeah."

He continued across her tight shoulders. She leaned forward, so he continued down the center of her back, massaging until the knots and tension were gone.

"Time to rinse," he said, turning on the spray.

As he rinsed the shampoo from her hair, his thoughts started to run away with him. He wanted to ask if he could join her. His canines ached to extend and plunge into her soft neck, and his body ached to finish what he'd started.

A moment later, he shut off the spray. Riana rubbed her eyes. Her slender fingers threaded through the thick strands of wet hair. "I feel much better now."

"Glad to hear it," he said absently, reaching for the conditioner. "This is next."

"I love this. You pamper me so, Jason."

He smiled, looking at anything but her. "What else could I do for my queen? You need to be pampered."

And loved, many times over.

“Nice thought. I’d love to get used to massages, especially if you’re doing them.”

He pressed a quick kiss to the back of her shoulder. “You will.”

He poured the conditioner into his hand and massaged it through, starting at the scalp, threading down to the ends and back up again.

She finally let her arms fall to her sides and laid her head back against the edge of the tub. The move caught Jason by surprise, but he doubted she noticed his slight hesitation.

Her eyes were closed, a little smile on her lips. She looked content, either unaware or uncaring that her entire body was exposed to him.

His fangs descended on their own, which meant his eyes were probably glowing again. If he were smart, he would leave immediately and go for a good soak at the bottom of the frigid Sound. Too bad one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the edukitza was the inability to think clearly.

No, he wasn’t going anywhere. Riana belonged to him, and it was high time he finished what he’d started. Surely she didn’t think she could just lie there, wet and beautiful, and expect him to keep his hands to himself.

He wasn’t built like that.

He moved his hands from her head down to her neck. He rubbed the sides, the base, then forward across the long column of her throat. Her eyes remained closed. She’d given him her trust, and it bothered him that he was probably not worthy of such a gift. Not now and most likely not for the next several minutes.

His concern dissolved when she moaned and brushed her cheek against his forearm. He splayed his fingers wide, moving across each collarbone, down her upper arms, below the water level, returning to the base of her neck.

She was too beautiful. He was in more pain than he could ever have imagined. They were alone, and the night was young.

“Riana,” he whispered against her ear, “do you know how beautiful you are?” He reached forward to cup her left breast in his palm. Instantly, he saw her pulse quicken.

She didn’t even hesitate. “No, tell me.”

Her parted lips were an invitation he wanted to accept, but first things first.

“Too beautiful to resist. I am yours, Nukita. Always have been.”

“Jason.” Her whisper-soft voice was nearly inaudible.

He rose up enough to slide his right hand down her glistening, flat belly to the apex of her legs. He parted her folds, quickly found her clit and began a slow, gentle massage.

She gasped, arching her back, fully exposing her throat. Her pulse spiked as he closed his fingers around her nipple.

“Relax, Nukita, I’ll take care of you.”

“I can’t,” she said. “Willis....”

Chapter Thirteen

“Lissa’s with him, and he’s fine. This is for you.” He teased her ear with his tongue, taking the soft lobe into his mouth and scraping it with his teeth. Then he moved to her throat, to the rapid pulse that beckoned for his attention. His own thundered in his ears, so loud he couldn’t think. Couldn’t stop. All he could do was feel her body, her essence, and her life-force mingling with his, demanding completion.

Reaching lower, he slipped his fingers inside her silky folds. She was ready for him. Hot, sweet, perfect. His thumb pressed against her clit while his index finger stroked her inner walls.

She moaned softly, turning her head so her pulse was a mere breath away from his mouth. She lay before him, open, an offering of blood and flesh.

His fangs wouldn’t retract and had cut into his bottom lip. Though the blood was his own, the taste was still sweet. Addictive. Necessary. He needed more.

He lowered his head and plunged his fangs into her neck.

She hissed, but didn’t pull away.

He pushed his finger deep inside, sliding his thumb back and forth across her clit. Her body responded, muscles clamping around his finger. She arched her back again. Both her hands grasped his forearm and hung on. Her nails dug into his skin.

The whisper-soft moan was absolute music.

After licking the small punctures on her neck, he kissed them, then sat back so she could catch her breath. Her wet body, flushed from his attentions, was all he could see. The rise and fall of her breasts, her dark gold skin, and the corded muscles in her arms and legs. So beautiful.

So desirable.

And, as he knew it would, the animal within him raised its head. Control. It always demanded control. The beast whispered seductively, promising release from the pain if only he would do this one simple thing. She would understand. This was how it had always been done, since the beginning of time.

No.

He willed himself to his feet, shuffling backward. His own breath came shallow and fast, and his heart ... erratic. Wrong. All wrong.

Now he was on his knees. Eyes closed. Didn’t want her to see what he truly was.

“Jason? What’s going on?” She got out of the tub, wrapped a towel around her body, and took his face in her warm, soft hands. Her voice was so soft and gentle. “Let me see your eyes.”

No.

“Leave, Riana. Now,” he whispered. His fists clenched, his body shook. The edukitza had him, and she was close, so close. He couldn’t hold on. Couldn’t. “Go.”

“I won’t leave you like this.” Her hands left his face, traveling down his body to his jeans. Quickly unbuttoning them, she tugged them down enough to free his cock. “You’re burning up.”

Sweet Jesus, she was kneeling.

Her lips closed over his erection. Pain and pleasure collided, ripping a cry from the back of his throat. He shoved his fingers into her wet hair, held her tight, savored the magic of her tongue and lips. She sucked, pulled.

Once.

“Ah, God....” He squeezed his eyes shut, groaned and emptied himself into her mouth.

She took what he gave, sitting back only after she knew he was done.

The moment he caught his breath, he whispered, “I’m sorry. I couldn’t....”

“It’s okay. That was for you,” she said.

Mildly satisfied, the beast grew quiet, retreating to the far corners of his mind. A long moment passed before he let her go, longer still before he finally opened his eyes.

Still clad in the towel, Riana sat with her back against the cabinets. She looked gorgeous with her wild hair spilling about her shoulders and spiky wet eyelashes. Remnants of the healing paste was still smudged on her cheek.

She was smiling. “Do you feel better now?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I do.”

He reached for the washcloth on the edge of the tub. He wet it then sat in front of her. Unable to think of anything else to say, he simply touched her cheek, grateful for what she’d done.

He should’ve been angry. She had taken a horrible risk. What if he had lost control? Her courage amazed him. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “Your eyes are still glowing.”

“It’ll go away in a few minutes.” He put two fingers under her chin and tipped it up. Raising the washcloth to her cheek, he gently wiped off the rest of the paste. Then he leaned forward, brushing the edge of his jaw along her face and neck. It was a very feline gesture, his leopard speaking to her cheetah. He did it again.

“I love you,” he said.

She drew back and studied his face, as if committing every plane and hollow to memory. “I love you, too.”

He couldn’t help but grin. Scooping her up into his arms, he carried her to the bed, set her down and settled behind her. It was too early to sleep, but this moment was so perfect and special, he just wanted it to last a little longer.

* * * *

“Of course there’s still a Council of Wizards, but I doubt they’ll help us. If we get lucky, we’ll actually find a Nitooki priestess. If not, we’ll have to find someone who’s adept at the ancient arts.” Griffin curled his arm around Lissa, who sat on the arm of his chair, arms crossed over her large belly.

“Most of them just dabble in potions and such. The real sorcerers live out in the deep forests, away from all civilization. They can’t be found on the Internet, or in the Yellow Pages, unfortunately. We’ll have to search for them the old-fashioned way.”

Riana sat on the floor in front of the couch, her long legs, clad in embroidered jeans, stretched out before her. Through the skylight, a sliver of moonlight caught her hair and made it shimmer. Candles and a warm fire provided soft light. Colorful pots of Livendium burned on tables and on the fireplace mantel.

Jason sat on the couch to her left. He toyed with her hair while Willis lay beside

her with his head on her lap. He felt good, better than he had in days.

“But we have less than two days,” Riana pointed out. “Is that enough time?”

Griffin gave a little shrug. “Obviously, it’ll have to be, since that’s all they’ve seen fit to give us. I suggest you start out before the sun rises tomorrow. What you need to remember is that wizards aren’t exactly a sociable lot. The fewer who show up on their doorstep, the better.”

Jason felt Riana’s fear spike. The time limit bothered her. She looked down at Willis, who was sound asleep. Her shoulders tensed, and even though she didn’t say a word, he knew she was afraid for him.

Lissa sat down on the floor beside Willis. She tunneled her fingers through his thick fur, a little smile on her mouth. “I admire your strength, Riana. I don’t think I could’ve done what you did.”

Riana’s brow furrowed. “What, take on a few Falcons? It was nothing. You’ll learn there’s nothing you won’t do to protect your child. I don’t know where the strength comes from. It just does.”

Lissa’s gaze lifted to hers. The women shared a moment of unspoken understanding while Jason watched them and Griffin studied the rock fireplace. Jason was beginning to understand the fierce love Riana had for Willis. He would always share her heart with her son, and that was okay. That’s what families did.

Finally, Lissa nodded. “I’ll watch your son for you, if you’d like to spend some time with Jason.”

He jumped on that. “Good idea.” He offered his hand to Riana. “Come, Nukita.”

Riana bent closer to Willis, gently nudging him awake. “Stay with Annalissa, okay? Call me if you need anything.”

Willis looked up at his mother. He rolled onto his back, reached up with his left paw, and touched the underside of her chin. *Okay.*

“I won’t be long.” Riana eased from beneath his head, laying it gently on the carpeting. She accepted Jason’s outstretched hand and allowed him to lead her up to the solarium.

He was grateful for the respite she’d given him. The edukitza was quiet, and he felt almost civilized. He still wanted to take her back to his bed, lay her against the soft quilts, and remove every stitch of clothing. Make love to her. The need to make her his still burned, but now he felt in control again. He just might survive this.

In the solarium, he waited for her to choose where to sit. She loved the water, so he wasn’t surprised when she chose a wooden glider near the healing pool.

Riana still hadn’t said a word. Her unfocused gaze was on the water, but he could tell her thoughts were a million miles away.

“You all right, Nukita?”

She glanced up at him and nodded. “It won’t be long until morning.”

“No, not long at all. Don’t worry. Finding a wizard is easy. They’re always out in the middle of nowhere, and there’s this gawd-awful stench surrounding their homes.” He knelt before her, resting his palms on the tops of her thighs. “From all the potions and crap they mess with.”

“I know, but we need either a Nitooki priestess or a very strong wizard,” she added. “One who can undo a powerful spell.”

Jason sighed. “True. I have the name of a wizard who’s supposed to be very good.

We'll see him in the morning."

"Oh, good," she breathed. "I feel better knowing we have a lead. I'm sorry for dragging you into this. I never meant to be such a burden."

He reached up to brush her dark hair from her forehead. "You could never be a burden to me, Nukita. I'm glad you're here, and glad you're letting me be a part of your life, if only for a few days."

Her brow furrowed. "I'm afraid I'm going to lose Willis. How could they possibly ask such a young child to lead a nation of people? He's not ready for that yet. He--"

He caught her chin with the pads of his fingers. Whispering his thumb along her bottom lip, he smiled and let his gaze roam her beautiful face. Her eyes were incredible. When she smiled, they lit up, perfect small spheres of green ice.

"Nukita, relax. Let's get this spell removed and then worry about his role in the Falcon nation. Will you agree to trust me on all this?"

Letting her hands drop into her lap, she searched his face a moment. Her mouth, drawn into a tight line, turned down as she spoke. "Please don't let anything happen to him. And if something should happen to me..."

Jason pressed a finger to her lips. "Hush, girl. I won't hear it. Nothing will happen to you, I promise. You have my word I'll protect Willis as if he were my own son."

Riana pushed his hand from her lips. She traced the line of his cheek down to his jaw. Tilting her head, she drew near until her mouth was scant millimeters from his. "Thank you. I can't possibly tell you what that means to me."

Then she welded her mouth to his in a searing kiss that brought his body back to a fevered pitch. Dipping her tongue inside, she explored leisurely while her hands crept around his neck.

It was a good start, a very good start.

Chapter Fourteen

Dane Maxim had followed Julian and Cody to find out what the mother knew. He didn't think she knew anything. His spells were strong, and he had no reason to think their potency had faded, but it was always best to be sure about these things.

Today's meeting confirmed it. Almost everyone who knew about the Plan was either dead or had pledged allegiance, with their blood, to him. Even so, he couldn't shake his concern that something had changed. He had to be sure the Plan was still viable.

God help anyone who tried to stand in his way. He wasn't overly worried about Cody, but Julian was an idiot and often utterly clueless.

Dane had been a member of the Order for the better part of twenty-eight hundred years, most of his life. He wasn't part of the royal family, though he served it. All that was about to change, though. It had been years in the making, years of his life, with the worry and stress of coordinating the Plan. Making sure no one screwed up, punishing those who did.

It would be worth it. To see the look on the shiema's face when the power shifted. To see the sense of betrayal he and his cronies would experience because not one of them had seen the treachery coming.

He chuckled.

Then he laughed out loud.

He could see it now. Soon, his own people, those unconditionally loyal to his new Order, would control the gates and the future of humankind. He took in a deep, cleansing breath. Good to be king.

He went to a special part of the underground system, far below the stronghold, Calizimar, where extraordinary plans were made.

Moments later, he keyed in the special code that opened the door to the vault.

Only his men knew of this place, this sanctuary where they could strategize and argue and conspire without fear. Had their duplicity been discovered, they would've paid with their lives. All were trusted, exemplary men in the Order, but they were all of the same mind as Dane. They had a common need and had worked a long time toward fulfilling it.

Their most precious commodity, their *raison d'être*, was here. The one who promised one simple reward if only the gates would open.

"Vox, my lord, it won't be long now. The shiema's condition grows worse by the day." Dane stood at the base of the large stone statue and spoke reverently. "Soon, the gates of Sadaar will open, and what was lost will be regained."

The statue shifted. Heavy stone eyelids lifted to reveal ruby-colored irises.

"I am pleased." The soft voice, incongruent with the heavy stone carving, was that of the man who'd been exiled from Sadaar long ago.

Vox had purposely taken refuge inside the statue, a protection spell cast by a friend who owed him a favor. The oversized square head sat atop too-small shoulders and

a body half that size. Vox had pilfered it from the Easter Islands many years ago, using magic to animate the stone figure so he could survive within it. The move had saved his life, and thus, the balance of debt shifted, long ago. One day, he would be required to set it right.

As if exile weren't bad enough for his kind, a bounty had also been set. Kodiak, the Nitooki priestess, wanted him dead. She'd set the bounty unusually high to ensure no hunter could resist such a lucrative prize.

But Vox had outsmarted her and every bounty hunter tempted by what they thought was easy money. His refuge inside the statue had been impregnable. For centuries, he remained solidly sequestered away from friend and hunter alike. Now, no one bothered with Vox. Not the hunters. Not the priestess. He was considered clever, and dangerous.

Kodiak was not one to trifle with. Vox had done it anyway and won. Dane was convinced that, of all those who dwelled within the gates of Sadaar, Vox was the most defiant, the most dangerous. That he remained alive was a testament to his strength and cunning.

Dane bowed.

"My lord." He backed away as the statue closed its eyelids.

All was about to change. Their Plan was perfect. No one suspected the bobcat was not the shiema's heir. Only those of Sepheus's lineage had the power to control the gates. Power the bobcat did not possess.

Within hours of the elder's passing, the gates would crumble. High court members would be shocked to learn that what they'd believed for hundreds of years was, in fact, a bald-faced lie perpetrated by Dane's father, Vitus Maxim. Of course, by then it would be too late.

Dane curled his fingers into a tight fist and shivered at the thought of what would soon transpire. He could taste success. They were only days away from claiming what was rightfully theirs.

But things were never as easy as one hoped they would be. He needed a little more assurance they were ready. The timing was critical. If someone screwed up, they would all pay the price.

Turning on his heel, he headed for the office. Another wizard, the one who called himself Azeal, waited there. A crafty sorcerer, Azeal had been Dane's right-hand man since he had ripped control of the Plan from his father. Vitus, like Julian, had been too stupid to get it right.

He pushed the door open and smiled at the tawny-haired wizard.

"Azeal, I trust everything is in place?"

The wizard rose and bowed slightly. His neck and arms were scarred from what looked like an attack by an animal. Though it had happened only a short time ago, he refused to speak of the ordeal. Dane thought he must still be in pain. His movements were always measured and careful.

"It is. When the shiema dies, we will be ready. Vox will be at the gates, and once they open, it's over."

"Excellent," Dane said. "Tell me, Wizard, what do you see?"

Azeal held out his hand, palm up. He closed his eyes and whispered so softly Dane couldn't hear the words. No matter. He knew what would happen.

A moment later, a small, clear orb appeared, spinning just millimeters above Azeal's hand. The inside of the orb became clouded, first white and then dark red.

"Something has changed, my lord." Azeal frowned as he studied the orb.

Apprehension coiled in Dane's stomach. "What is it?"

"I see death." His brow furrowed with worry.

"A battle is coming. Death is to be expected," Dane said, irritated. How was this useful information?

"Yes, I know." Azeal nodded. "I see Vox's death, my lord. The Plan fails before the gates are opened."

Dane's hand was a blur as he snatched the spinning orb. He crushed it, not caring that tiny shards of glass pierced his skin. "If Vox dies, so do you," he hissed. "The only thing that's changed is that the mother knows of her son's destiny. Surely that can't be enough to matter. But, just in case, find the mother and her companions. Kill them all. I won't lose Vox to them. Not after all we've worked for. Don't show your face here again until they're all dead. Do you understand?"

Azeal bowed his head. "I do." He backed away.

A thought came to Dane. "One more thing...."

"Yes?"

"The mother is not Verlinean. She's something else. Immortal."

Azeal's golden eyes lit up. "Really? Immortal? Won't it be a shock when she's faced with her own death? I can hardly wait."

Dane nodded. "Yes. Good. Now, go."

Azeal closed the door behind him, leaving Dane to his troubled thoughts. Azeal's orb was always right. They had to trust it. Still, the probability of Vox's death was a shock and wholly unacceptable.

He was curious to know how such a thing might come about. Vox was Sadaaran. Few, if any, could best him. What kind of warrior could bring about his death? He was once the Shockti Haan, the most powerful sorcerer of Sadaar, and still had *some* power.

Of course. The answer was right there. The trespassers. Undoubtedly, they were friends of the mother. Were they immortal as well? Did it matter? Azeal was a seasoned wizard and had a vast array of potions and spells to assist him. Dane was confident they wouldn't stand a chance, no matter who or what they were.

He dropped into the plush chair behind his heavy wooden desk and brooded. The timing stunk. They were mere days away from the great shift in power, and that foolish woman had the audacity to interfere. Damn her.

He was tempted to go after her himself, just to be sure she suffered for her actions. No one would stop him from opening the gates. God help anyone who tried.

Chapter Fifteen

Riana took Jason's bottom lip into her mouth and sucked on it, releasing it just enough to kiss him again. His mouth was hot, wet, and she couldn't get enough. Not enough of his body, his heat or his spicy-sweet scent. The musk of his arousal filled her lungs and firmly shoved all coherent thought from her mind.

Which was fine with her.

He slid his hands over her hips, across her backside, and then pulled her onto his lap. He reached under her T-shirt, sliding his hands up her waist, under her bra, and cupped both breasts. He rubbed her nipples with his thumbs in delicious, slow circles, then held them tight between his fingers.

Her pulse spiked. She arched into his hands, letting her head fall back, moaning. Wanting and needing more. She loved the heat of his skin on hers.

"Please," she whispered.

"Tell me what you need, Nukita. Anything you want, and I'll give to you."

She met his gaze. He'd told her he felt better, in control. She believed him, but with his skin so hot, so close to hers, it wouldn't last. The rings around his irises would soon start glowing again. His body would become an inferno of need and desire. The mating lust would possess him, and he'd struggle against it.

She was tired of waiting, tired of trying to do the right thing when everything inside her shrieked to finish it.

Just finish it.

She wanted him wild, wanted him teetering on the edge, and maybe even beyond it.

She didn't have Willis's approval, and it was wrong and selfish to disregard his wishes, but her body was on fire. She could smell sex all over Jason. She was tired of fighting, tired of resisting.

God help her, she wanted him, wanted his body, and she wanted it all now.

The call of his life-force had been powerful, and after what they'd done earlier, the need to mate couldn't be ignored. She wouldn't even try. Tomorrow she'd deal with Willis and his anger.

"Just you. On me. In me. Now."

Wrapping one arm around her waist and one beneath her butt, Jason lifted her from the chair and pressed her up against the wall. His breathing was as labored as hers. His heart raced, hers matched. He knelt before her, deftly bringing her jeans to her ankles in one fluid motion. Her panties quickly followed.

He straightened, resting both palms against the wall on either side of her head.

"Do you want to know just how I'm going to take you?" he asked, his mouth only millimeters from hers.

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"Hard, Nukita, and fast. It'll be the first of many times I show you how much I want you. After that, slow and easy, so I can show you how much I love you."

His mouth brushed over hers, lightly at first. Then he slanted it in a bruising kiss that curled her toes.

He unzipped his jeans.

Wham!

Her eyes snapped open. “What is that?”

Mama! Willis’s anguished voice screamed in her head. *Let me in!*

“Willis? No, baby, stop.” She hadn’t thought to close her mind off, nor had it occurred to her that he would understand their intent to join together.

Wham! He threw himself against it again.

“Jesus Christ,” Jason snapped. “Get dressed.” He went to open it as she hastily pulled up her panties and jeans.

Panic had shattered her desire to mate, her son’s needs once again first and foremost. The moment her lust-filled mind cleared, the first thought that came to her was that she’d screwed up, royally.

She’d known her decision to mate with Jason would upset Willis, but she’d had no idea it would escalate to this level. Not like this.

Willis shot into the room, skidded sideways, spun to face Jason and hissed. The fur on the back of his neck and all along his spine stood straight up. He spat. *Leave Mama alone!*

“Willis, no. You don’t understand,” Riana said. “He isn’t hurting me. We’re just spending some time together.” Ignoring the look Jason threw her, she crouched and opened her arms. “Please, come.”

Willis didn’t budge. *You said it was just us! No sen-doggy! Just us! That’s what you said!*

Jason stepped around knelt in front of him. “Listen, I know you and I didn’t start off too good, but I promise you, I’m not trying to hurt your mother. I’m not trying to take her away from you, either.” He held out his hand. “Can we be friends?”

Willis raked his forearm and hand.

Jason gasped.

Willis hissed.

Blood seeped from angry furrows of torn skin.

“Willis!” Riana rushed to her son. “Honey, you cannot do things like that. You hurt Jason. He wants to be friends with you, and you deliberately attacked him. Tell him you’re sorry.”

No. Willis sat, utterly defiant.

Riana glared at him. “Tell him you’re sorry.”

No. I’m not sorry. You told me not to lie, so I won’t.

Looking behind her, she saw Jason had dropped to all fours. His head was lowered, and he was panting. The torn skin had already laced itself together, and the blood was beginning to dry, but he wasn’t moving.

“Jason?”

Slowly, he raised his head. The golden glow in his eyes was unmistakable, despite the hair hanging in his face. Anger and the need to mate had collided, and now the edukitza had him.

“You’re mine, Riana. Mine,” he said, his voice whisper-soft. His fangs had extended, and his muscles were tense, trembling.

“We’re a family, Jason. All of us.” She reached for his shoulder.

NO! No Sen-doggy! Willis lunged for her wrist, catching it in his mouth.

Jason howled in rage, scaring Riana so badly she tore her wrist from Willis’s mouth, grabbed him, and scrambled backward until she hit the wall. Willis flattened himself against her body.

Jason pushed off the floor and paced the room, glaring at her son. His T-shirt was soaked in the center, front and back, with sweat. He panted, each breath accompanied by a low growl. A warning, she knew, but for whom? Willis? Or her?

Both feline males wanted to claim her, though for different reasons. She also recognized each was perilous.

Willis had never bitten her before.

The stories she’d heard of the edukitza were terrifying, and now here she was, face-to-face with it. His anger and frustration fed the possession and made Jason very, very dangerous.

“Mine,” he snarled. His voice was still hushed, full of menace and promise at the same time.

Riana clutched Willis, too terrified to move. She hadn’t been trained to deal with this. Running might only provoke him. Staying here would surely get either Willis or her--and maybe both--killed.

Griffin burst into the room and quickly assessed what was happening.

“Go,” he said to Riana. “Take the little one with you.”

She scrambled to her feet. “Willis, come. Time for bed.”

Willis followed, ears flat against his head. *No bed.*

She ignored him. Her mind was on Jason and what had just happened. She tilted her head and listened to the conversation behind her.

“Calm down, Jason,” Griffin was saying. “What do you mean you can’t shift? Why the fuck not?”

She stopped. Jason couldn’t shift? Why not? A Defender who couldn’t shift when he needed the stealth of the Primal could easily end up a dead man.

Riana hurried down the hallway, Willis in tow. She didn’t want to hear any more.

Moments later, safe in their bedroom, she cleaned up her wrist and tried to relax.

Willis lay sprawled out on the foot of her bed, partially covered by one of the many blankets the new housekeepers had left. Despite his defiance, he’d settled down and drifted off to sleep quickly, for which she was grateful.

His temper tantrum had been alarmingly effective. Normally, she didn’t give in to them, but then, normally he didn’t throw himself against doors.

Her selfishness was to blame. She reached across the bed and patted his left thigh.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so weak.”

He didn’t even stir.

“Just you and me.” For as long as you need, she amended silently.

They had much to do tomorrow, and Riana was feeling the effects of the stressful day. She exchanged her jeans, T-shirt, and boots for soft silk pajamas. After running a comb through her hair, splashing water on her face, and rinsing her mouth, she was ready to sleep.

The celadon-colored sheets were of the finest Egyptian cotton. The white quilt looked handmade, complete with uneven stitches, and she thought it was wonderful. She

slipped between the sheets, bunching the pillow under her head. The morning would bring good things, like wizards and freedom and home. If she was really lucky, it might also bring forever-love in the form of a tall, sexy Spaniard with eyes the color of whiskey.

Pulling the covers over her head, she steadfastly refused to acknowledge the sinking feeling that said none of those things would come to pass.

* * * *

Riana awoke to a little paw resting on her cheek. She opened her eyes to see Willis's furry face only inches away.

He smiled, the tip of his pink tongue visible between two rows of very sharp teeth.

Can we go find a wizard now?

"Soon, when everyone else is ready to go."

She wondered who would be going with them, and almost hoped it would be that Christopher fellow. He seemed the best choice for everyone concerned, as he had no emotional investment in either Willis or her, which meant less stress in her mind. Doubtful she'd be that lucky, though, since Griffin had put her under Jason's *watch*.

"Time to get up, baby," she said, patting his rump.

Willis jumped off the bed and did a fully body shake to wake up. *Ready!*

"You need breakfast first, and I need a shower. Give me ten minutes."

Fifteen minutes later, she'd washed and dried her hair, applied a bit of makeup, and was dressed in khakis and a white tank top, with a leather bomber jacket over her arm. She took one last look around their bedroom and decided she was ready.

"Okay," she said, more to herself than Willis.

Yay! He did his excited little hop. He spun around and smiled. *I'm ready!*

Riana laughed. "I know you are, sweetie. Let's go see what everyone else is doing."

They went along the hallway and down the stairs to the kitchen. She was grateful Jason was nowhere in sight.

In fact, no one was there.

Great.

"What do you say, Willis? Eggs and bacon today?" she asked, opening the refrigerator.

Sure!

She loved his enthusiasm.

"Eggs and bacon it is, then."

Rummaging through the cabinets, she found a pan, some butter, eggs, and bacon, and set to fixing her son his breakfast. She was glad no one was around. It felt almost as if they were home again, and it was just the two of them, like it used to be. No Falcons, no purple collars, and no would-be mates with a serious case of blue balls.

She looked at Willis, who had jumped up onto a stool and was licking his lips. The crackle of sizzling bacon and the sight of her son waiting made her heart ache. She missed home so much, missed their life together. Missed the warm, happy love they had shared. "How do you feel today?"

Okay. I'm hungry. He nodded to emphasize his point.

"Almost done," she told him. She cracked three eggs into the bacon drippings and

mixed it all up. When they were done, she spooned his breakfast onto a plate. Looking around, she tried to sense Jason's life-force and couldn't, but that didn't mean he wasn't around. Maybe Griffin had locked him up somewhere. "We're still on vacation, baby, but we're not at home. I'll just put this on the floor."

She set the plate down. Willis jumped off the stool and trotted to it.

As he inhaled his food, she strode to the glass doors that separated the dining room from the patio. She slid the door open and stepped outside.

The new day was beautiful, belying the danger she knew awaited them. So many unknowns were a recipe for disaster. Soon, they would head out to find a wizard named Azeal. Would he know how to free Willis?

Assuming they accomplished that much, it only presented a whole new set of issues.

What would happen to Willis?

The screen door closed with a soft *click*.

Riana whirled around, drawing her dagger.

"Good morning," Jason said, glancing at the blade. "Sorry I startled you."

"Um..." Sheathing her weapon, she gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I guess I was lost in my own thoughts. I couldn't feel you."

"I was giving you some privacy." He stepped closer and brushed her cheek. "You look sad."

"I wonder what we'll find today. Do you think Azeal can heal my son?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. We'll just have to go there and find out."

Willis trotted past, having finished his breakfast. He required food, water, and a little privacy every now and again to tend to other business. She opened the screen door for him, then watched him disappear behind a thick hedge of greenery.

"Have you fed?"

"Not yet."

He dropped into one of the metal chairs, leaned back, and locked his hands behind his head. His faded blue jeans sported a silk-screened dragon that ran the length of his leg. He looked good. The long-sleeved black T-shirt suited him and was tight enough to outline every ridge and hollow of his chest and abdomen, including the tiny peaks of his erect nipples. Tempting and utterly decadent, he teased her by running his palm over his cock.

Great. Just what she needed.

He grinned. "Want to feed from me again?"

"No, thanks." She turned away. The man was relentless. "I'll take care of it later."

Willis scampered past. *Now can we go find the wizard?*

"In a few minutes," she told him. "Wait for me inside." She faced Jason again.

"Who's going with us?" Please let it be Christopher. Please.

"Me," he said. "We'll leave when you're ready."

"Oh, good." She didn't mean that at all.

She was anxious to be on the road, ready to have this wizard business behind them. She tried to tell herself it was all because of the Falcons, but the truth was she wanted to see her son in his human form again. Wanted to hold him and feel his little arms around her neck. After all these years, she wanted that first. Then she wanted to feel his thick, wavy dark hair.

She followed Jason to the Land Rover.

Willis trailed after her, equally unhappy about the travel arrangements. They had no choice, though, as both Griffin and Christopher were busy with their mates.

Riana put Willis in the back and then slid into the front seat.

Clouds were coming in, but she put on her sunglasses anyway. No one had mentioned if the wizard knew about their kind, so she wasn't going to chance it. Better to hide the iridescent rings around her irises, which had a tendency to catch light at the most inopportune times.

Jason's long hair and little round glasses made him look like one of those flower children from the sixties.

She smiled and held up two fingers. "Peace, man."

He glanced at her over the top of the frames.

"Make love, not war. I was there, too, you know. That was my favorite motto."

"I'll bet." Scowling, she huffed out a breath. Too much information, that.

"We're going to be on the road for a bit. I got the name of a wizard who's apparently powerful enough to do the job, but he lives pretty far from here." He turned the Land Rover onto the highway. "Might as well get comfy."

The car was luxurious and spacious, but Riana couldn't get comfortable. The suteka heat that sizzled between them felt stronger, more alive today. Stealing a glance at Jason, she saw he felt it, too, judging by the long bulge in his jeans.

Under earlier circumstances, she might've ignored it. Her work with the horses, the ranch, and Willis took most of her time, so erections weren't typically a part of her day. Now, she couldn't think of anything else.

She'd wondered what it would be like to make love to him. She loved having his mouth on hers, and the feel of his strong hands skimming over her skin. Loved his long, muscled body stretched over hers.

But what would he feel like inside her? What kind of a lover was he? Wild? Passionate?

A small sound scattered her thoughts. She glanced over at Jason. He was biting his bottom lip.

"When I get you alone, woman, you'll know exactly what I feel like." He looked at her then, and though his sunglasses were dark, they couldn't hide the glow of his eyes.

She'd given Willis her word. No sendagi. How the hell was she going to fix this?

Turning to her son, she found him lying on the seat with his head on his outstretched forelegs. As if he'd known what she was thinking, he scowled at her, his ears flat against his head, snorted in disgust and turned away.

Riana sighed.

* * * *

Hours later, they arrived at the gate to a huge estate. Jason pressed a button as he pulled up to the entry console and waited. The video monitor lit up, and a dark-haired man in sunglasses asked them what they wanted.

"We're here to see Azeal," he replied.

The man appeared to study them. "So?"

"We have need of a very powerful spell, one Azeal is capable of casting."

"Azeal does not do charity work. He must be paid for his services."

Jason shrugged. "Fine, we'll pay. How much?"

The guard let out an irritated sigh. "We don't need money."

"Okay." Jason sounded equally irritated. "We'll barter. What do you want?"

"Something unique. Of value."

"Well, that's completely vague. Antique or modern?" He looked over at Riana and shook his head. "I hate playing 'Twenty Questions.'"

"Antique."

Jason's gaze swung back to the screen. "Great. I have a friend who deals in antiquities. The finest the fourteenth century has to offer. I'm sure we can come to an agreement."

The monitor went blank.

Jason held up both hands. "What the..."

The heavy iron gate shuddered and began a slow retreat.

"Christ," he grumbled. "Wizards. Always something totally weird about them." He brought the car to the front of the building and climbed out.

Riana followed him to the front door. Willis stayed in the car.

"Come on," she said, crooking her finger at him. "We sort of need you, too."

No. He shook his head. *Bad feeling.*

"You go ahead. I'll get him." She started back toward the car.

"Okay." Jason rang the ornate brass bell.

Halfway back to the car, Riana heard two sounds. Terrible sounds.

Thwip.

Thwip.

She spun around, drawing her dagger, and gasped. "Jason!"

One arrow had lodged in his upper arm, and another was solidly embedded in his side.

"Get out of here, Riana." He dropped onto one knee, teetered, then fell forward onto his good arm. "It's a trap."

She started to turn when the front door opened. Out stepped a man with long tawny hair and eyes the color of chardonnay. His face and neck were scarred, as if an animal had mauled him. Dressed impeccably in black wool slacks, black blazer, and a gray polo shirt, the last thing he looked like was a wizard.

He regarded her. "Oh, don't even bother trying to run. You'll never make it. As you can see...."

He spread his arms wide. Two archers dressed in black stood on either side of the porch. Each had already placed new arrows in their bows and had them trained on her.

"We intend to keep you and the little one here." He looked down at Jason and smiled. "Yes, it was a trap. Didn't see this one coming, did you?"

Jason looked up.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "You're supposed to be dead."

Chapter Sixteen

“Well, as you can see, I’m not. No thanks to you, of course. I remember the blade you held to my throat. You, that Scot, and that damn Griffin destroyed my vision for the future.”

Riana wondered if this was about the Dragon prophecy. The ancient wizard Uleah had sought to return to the human world to conquer and enslave humans. He’d enlisted three lesser wizards as his servants. Was this man one of them?

“You may call me Azeal.” His gaze went back to her. “Yes, lovely. Finally, I get to meet the mother, the one who made this all possible.”

She scowled. The mother? Made all what possible?

Jason looked dazed. “Whatha ... fu ... you talkin’ ’bout....”

Had he been drugged? Poisoned?

She worried for him. Only hours had passed since his last wound from the same type of weapon. The Defender in her wondered if it was coincidence, or was Azeal working with the Falcons?

He’d said it was a trap.

Just what had they walked into?

“Come inside, people. No sense standing out here when we could all be comfortable.” Azeal nodded to one of the archers. “Kana, take care of the companion.” To the second man, he said, “Bring the mother.”

Kana extracted the arrows from Jason as one might pluck pins from a cushion. Quickly, careless of pain caused. Jason remained silent as the man jerked him to his feet. Blood drizzled down his upper arm, and the dark stain across his shirt seeped into his jeans.

The last time she’d seen him in this much pain was in Malanaya, after he’d battled a Winged Demon. Deep lacerations had marred his perfect body, and though he hadn’t said a word, she’d known how much he hurt. He never expressed pain, never wanted his brethren to see their sendagi in need of his own healing. But she’d seen it in the set of his jaw, and in his eyes.

Riana knew how powerful that kind of pain could be. You’d do most anything to make it stop. For Jason, it would mean submergence in a healing tank, where he’d sleep and dream while his body healed.

The other man came toward her. Riana had hoped they wouldn’t realize Willis was with them, but when the guy walked past her, smelling of grapefruit and sulfur, and opened the car door, her hope fizzled.

Falcons.

Her questions were answered. They’d been ambushed.

“Keep the bobcat with you,” he told her.

Riana wanted to kill Kana and his cohort. She had two knives on her person and the strength and speed to take out both of them without trying very hard. Had Jason not been wounded she would’ve considered it, but with him hurt and Willis here, she

couldn't risk failing.

"Willis, come."

He hopped out of the car and followed her into the house.

Inside, the two archers took Jason to the kitchen while Azeal led them to his living room. The carpet was a rich brown, and the walls off-white. She didn't like it. Despite the warmth of the colors, the place seemed cold and desolate.

"Please, sit. Make yourselves comfortable." Azeal pointed to the maroon-colored couch.

Riana sat. Willis immediately took his favorite place atop her feet. She could see the others working quickly and efficiently to strip off Jason's shirt and tend to the wounds. After the punctures were bandaged, they dragged him in and dumped him into a chair near her.

Azeal waved them away. His attention now on Willis, he sat in a chair opposite Jason and Riana and smiled.

"Come to me, young one."

Riana nudged Willis, whose wide eyes suggested he might run the opposite direction.

"Go. Maybe he can help."

Willis approached the wizard. His little tail twitched, as it often did when he was afraid and uncomfortable. Azeal was their best hope.

He dropped into a maroon-colored Queen Anne chair.

"Yes, young man, I see your spell," he said, cupping her son's chin in his hand. "You've been this way for a long time, haven't you?"

Willis nodded.

"You're tired of it, I know. Here, let me remove that collar." Azeal reached into his fur to grasp the collar. With a snap, the thing was off, tossed aside and immediately forgotten.

Willis trotted back to sit beside her.

Jason tried to speak. "Sadaara ... Saaaa...."

Riana left her chair and sat on the arm of his. "What are you saying?"

"Maaagi...."

She didn't understand. *What?*

Jason closed his eyes. *They said the collar could only be removed by Sadaarin magic.*

Yes, we were ambushed, she told him. He's with the Falcons.

"Yes, my dear. The venom was developed for immortals. You see, I've known about your kind for many years, ever since...." He ran his fingers along his scarred jaw line. "Well, it's not important now. What is important is that your Jason will soon be of no concern to us, which leaves you at my mercy." He smiled. "And I have very little, I assure you."

"What do you want from us?"

Azeal pushed out of the chair and accepted a glass of red wine from his servant, a small man with eyes too big for his head.

"I want your companion here dead and gone. He almost killed me. Now it's his turn to suffer. The venom I created will do just that. As for you, my lovely, I want nothing more than to take as much of your blood as I need to be made immortal myself. I

want to be as you are. Is that so much to ask after what you people did to me?"

Riana shrugged. "From what I was told, you deserved it. Didn't you get fed to demon wolves?"

"Oh, yes, your friends set the wolves on me, but I was the one who gave immortality to my wonderful creations. I enhanced them, you might say, and then they tried to take my life. I fought back, and in the end, I walked away, bleeding, my body torn. Your people did this to me. *He* did this to me, and now I demand restitution. I demand it."

Riana wasn't impressed with his demand. "You should know that not everyone is suited for immortality. The years can get very long and tedious...."

"Yes, yes," he snapped. "I know all that. I should like to find out for myself."

"So, maybe you will." Riana leaned closer to Jason to brush the hair from his forehead. His skin was cool, clammy, and very pale. "Did you know we were coming today?"

"Of course not. How would I?" His casual shrug was convincing, but the change in the scent of his skin belied his words. So, how was he connected to the Falcons?

"Hard to say. Maybe you know people," she said absently.

Azeal waved. "Your speculation is pointless. I want to be made immortal. You will do this. Now."

Jason lifted his tired gaze to her. *Don't, Riana.*

"And if I don't?"

"You'll never see your son again."

Azeal took a slow drink of his wine, a smug expression on his face. She studied him, suspecting he'd once been a handsome man. His long, thick hair trailed down to the middle of his back in soft waves. His eyes were much lighter than Jason's--almost yellow. He carried himself well and seemed appealing on the surface, but underneath that stylish exterior lay a cold heart.

Riana smiled. Despite his fine clothes and appearance, she smelled the chemicals, an odd combination of new-mown grass and chlorine.

"We will see about that. You know, I'd be more inclined to make a trade with you. Immortality for the life of my son. I need that spell broken. Can you do it?"

"No, I cannot. I can see the spell working. It's very old, isn't it?" He turned to her as she nodded. "It's Nitooki magic, so I'm afraid I can do nothing to help. You're in luck, though, as I happen to know where you can find a Nitooki priestess."

"And where might that be?"

As she'd feared, finding someone to break the spell would be harder than they'd thought. All she could do now was pray they didn't run out of time.

"The underworld of Sadaar."

"Sadaar." She huffed out a breath, realizing only now that the Nitooki priestess who'd cast the original spell must have come from the underworld. She shuddered. "Is that our only choice?"

"Of course not. You can always go your merry way and wait for a priestess to find you."

"Great. Thanks for that. Most helpful," she said, her voice purposely dripping with sarcasm. "Sadaar. The underworld." She didn't believe him, but since he probably knew more about the underworld than she ever would, she'd go along, for now. And now

she understood how he was connected to the Falcons.

Jason stirred. *Take me home, please. I need my medicinals. Don't make him immortal, Riana. He's far too dangerous to be like us.*

"The worst of the underworlds, but that's where the Nitookis live. You'd need the priestess or one of her apprentices. They can help you."

Riana looked at him as she got to her feet. "Then I need to take a trip to the underworld. We're leaving, Azeal. Jason is ill, and I need to save my son."

He set his glass down and straightened.

"Miz Secundinus, I'm afraid there is one small matter remaining." He smiled, and it neither put her mind at ease, nor was it particularly pleasing.

She wasn't impressed. "And that would be?"

His grin widened. "My immortality."

"Azeal..."

"We're about to get intimate, Miz Secundinus. Please call me by my given name--Alistair." He lifted a brow, suggesting, to her mind, intimacy of a different sort.

"I don't think so, *Azeal*," she said pointedly. "We're leaving. Your immortality will have to wait."

The smile faded. "I've waited long enough. You will give this to me now."

Riana glared at him. "I don't believe I care for the implied threat."

Azeal casually picked up the wine glass and brought it to his lips. "There's no threat implied, Miz Secundinus. It is a command. I suggest you obey it."

"Obey it? Why the hell would I do that?" She wanted to smack that look off his face. Obey it. Not a chance.

"To save your son's life."

To her horror, Willis simply disappeared.

"Willis?" She reached for him, hoping this might be some kind of Sadaarin illusion.

"I assure you, the lad is not there."

She ignored him. "Willis?"

She searched the living room, and then went to the kitchen. Nothing. She couldn't even feel him. Her stomach jumped into her throat, terror surged through her veins.

She wanted to rip the wizard's throat out. What kind of egg-sucking bastard did this to a child?

Charging back into the living room, she grabbed his lapels and thrust him against the back wall, pinning him with her forearm across his neck. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing, really," he choked. "I sent him elsewhere. You will release me if you want any more information."

"Fine." She pushed away from him. "Where, then? Damn you, tell me where he is." She drew her dagger.

Azeal raised a hand.

"Now, now, we wouldn't want to be too hasty, would we?" He went to the table, took a sip of wine, coughed, then gulped the rest and returned the glass to the table. "I can't very well bring him back if I'm dead, you know. Take my life, and you eradicate any hope, any dream, of seeing your son again."

Reluctantly, she sheathed her blade. "Well, I'm not sure I can motivate myself to do you if my son isn't with me."

“Let me make this very simple for you. Either make me immortal now, this very minute, or you won’t ever see your son again. I know where he is, and I can keep him there forever. Do you still want to play games with me, woman?”

“Fuck you, Azeal.”

“Later, perhaps,” he purred. “Immortality now.”

Some people could bluff better than others. She knew she could take him, but if he was dead she’d never know how to get her son back.

She needed help.

Riana placed her hand on Jason’s shoulder. *Wake up. I need you.*

He stirred, stretched. He was still slouched in the chair, his hands clasped over his stomach, legs splayed out in front of him. She knelt between his legs, resting her hands on his thighs. She wanted to scream at him for help. She wanted to pummel Azeal for doing this to her and Willis. And while she lived her life by her Defender training and the Code of their people, she still wanted to shout at the sky or cry or do something--anything--but sit here and pretend to be calm. She wasn’t, damn it. She wasn’t.

He looked at her.

She inhaled sharply. “What’s going on with your eyes?”

They’d become like dark copper.

“I don’t know. Are they glowing again?”

“No, they’re dark. How do you feel?”

“Better,” he said, scrubbing his face. He sat up. “A lot better.”

“Thank the gods. Azeal here wants to be made immortal. He sent Willis somewhere, and the only way for me to find out where he is, is to comply with his request. I don’t really think I have a choice. I’m going to do it.”

Jason’s gaze slid to the wizard. “Bad idea.”

“I know, but since he’s taken Willis, he’s really left me with no options.” If she’d been a gambler, she’d lay odds the wizard wouldn’t tell them where Willis was anyway.

“I suppose not.” He tilted his head to the side, then looked back at her and gave a little shrug. “How long has it been since you’ve done it?”

Riana thought a moment. “Long time. Eric was the last one.”

He nodded. “Eric. I remember him.”

“Yeah,” she said thoughtfully, scratching her chin. “He didn’t work out so well.”

Jason let his eyes close. “Sometimes, it’s hard to tell. They can sound convincing, especially when their lives are at stake. You can’t listen to their pleas, you know. A desperate man is not always rational.”

She agreed. “I know. Desperate and often cunning.”

“I *am* waiting,” Azeal said irritably. “I don’t bloody have all day, damn it.”

“I’m finding it really hard to care, Azeal. You take my son, then demand I do this when I know it isn’t right, and I’m supposed to care? *As if*. So what if you’re impatient?”

“Well, you may not be inclined to facilitate this little change, but you forget just how precious time is. I have him. You don’t. I may kill him tomorrow morning. Or tonight.”

Riana growled, got to her feet, and closed the gap between her and the wizard. “Fine.” Yeah, she’d give him immortality. “Sit.”

He obeyed without another word.

Brushing the long blond hair from his neck, she nudged his head to the side to

fully expose his jugular. "This might hurt a little."

"Yes, fine. I don't really care, as long as I get what I want," he said, leaning back in the chair. He had no compunction about giving himself to her, a thought that almost made her smile. Once Griffin got wind of this, Azeal would be hunted down and killed, not that Riana had any intention of sharing that small detail. Azeal sealed his fate the moment he sent Willis away.

Now that made her smile. "You will. You'll get everything you deserve."

The relationship between humans and Eskarians was symbiotic. Any other time, Riana would've phase-shifted--become nearly invisible by separating her molecules--and essentially hypnotized her donor so they had no idea what was happening. She wouldn't do that now. No, Azeal would feel everything.

She looked back at Jason. He was quiet, his eyes dark and hot with what looked like jealousy, silently tapping his fingers on the padded chair arm. The small vixen inside her had to admit she liked the idea he might really be jealous.

Returning to Azeal, she leaned forward and pushed her teeth into his skin. He hissed in a breath. It hurt. She knew and didn't care.

"Yes, lovely immortal. Share your secret with me."

Sure thing. Here's another little secret--life as you know it is over.

Hot liquid flooded Riana's mouth, ebbing to a trickle only moments later. To facilitate the change, Azeal would die a mortal's death, to be reborn after her Eskarian blood did its work.

His body relaxed as he slipped closer to death. "I feel two spells on you. Not very strong, are they?"

Jason sat up behind her. "What spells?"

"Ah, yes, lovely ... finally...." Azeal's body went slack.

"Wizard, what spell are you talking about?" Jason rose from the chair, crossing the short distance to where Azeal lay dying.

Riana straightened and looked down at the man. "I should let you die, you son of a bitch."

Azeal's mouth twitched.

After Willis was safe, Azeal was a dead man. If necessary, she'd see to it herself.

"God, this pisses me off." Riana drew the dagger and sliced into her wrist. As the blood flowed, she held it over Azeal's mouth. "Swallow."

He obeyed, taking long gulps until she felt dizzy.

She waited a few seconds longer. "Enough."

Again he complied, licking his lips when she pulled her wrist from his greedy mouth. She didn't like this man, hadn't from the moment she met him. Jason had said the wizard was supposed to be dead. She suspected she wasn't the only one disappointed the man continued to live.

Jason still hovered over the sleeping wizard, a scowl on his handsome face.

"Why are you looking at him like that?"

He looked up, and the scowl melted away.

"What he said a minute ago is really bugging me."

"What? About the spell?" She dropped to the couch. "He was probably talking in his sleep. Or delusional. Who knows? I'm sure it's nothing." Patting the couch, she gave him a grin. "Come sit with me for a few minutes while he sleeps. I need to rest a bit."

He grinned. "So, I finally get to sleep with you?"

"Ha. Ha. Funny," she said. "I'm not going to sleep. I just want to rest my eyes."

Jason settled beside her, draping his arm around her shoulder. She leaned against him, taking in the fragrances of clothes and man.

His scent spoke to her and made her think of tangled sheets and wet skin. Everything about him made her think of sex. Someday, she hoped to know exactly how every inch of his body tasted. Until then, she'd have to settle for dark, lusty fantasies.

He leaned closer, pressing a slow kiss to the top of her head. "You will know what I taste like. I promise."

She pushed at him. "Stop listening to my thoughts."

"No. I like your thoughts," he said.

The last thing she heard was a soft chuckle and another whispered promise, something about slick skin and kisses that went on forever.

* * * *

Riana woke, shocked to find she'd been sleeping with her head in Jason's lap. Firmly ignoring the musky scent, she pushed herself upright and scanned her surroundings. Jason was awake, his icy purple gaze on the wizard.

Purple.

Azeal stood several feet away.

"You bitch," he said. "How dare you do this to me."

And then he was gone. Disappeared into nothingness.

She looked at him. "Oh, my God, Jason. Your eyes."

"Yeah, I know. Azeal saw them and got completely pissed off. What's wrong with them?"

"They're purple. How did they get like that, and why?"

"I don't know, but I feel pretty good, so it can't be all that bad."

"So who was he calling a bitch?" she asked. "He wasn't even looking at me."

"Don't know that either."

"Okay, well, maybe we can find out. I wonder if the bitch has something to do with your eyes changing." She got to her feet, turning to face Jason. "I have no idea where to look for Willis. Can you walk?"

His brow furrowed. "I'm fine." He grunted softly, lifting himself from the couch, ripping bandages from his arm and side.

The wounds were healed and gone.

"See? Perfect," he said.

"Okay, let's go." Leading the way to the front door, Riana threw it open and stepped forward. "I hope...."

Bam.

She walked into something very solid and very invisible.

"What the hell?" She reached out and found a wall of something that felt like ice. Cold, wet--and utterly invisible.

Jason reached out. "I'd say somebody wants to keep us here."

"Yeah, but why?" Riana felt along the perimeter of the door, hoping to find a way to push beyond the barrier. Nothing. "I'm going to check the other doors and windows. Stay here and rest, okay?" She touched his upper arm.

"Sure," he said, still examining the cold water dripping down his hand.

Her knowledge of spells and magic was limited, but intuition told her she wasn't going to find any way to escape. She checked every door and every window and even the three fireplace flues. The house was solidly surrounded by what felt like a barrier of thick ice. A quick escape would be impossible.

She went back to Jason. "We really need to get out of here, and I need to find Willis. There has to be a way." An idea popped into her mind. "I wonder...."

"What?"

Riana drew her forked dagger and approached the barrier. "There's no way in hell I'm going to sit around and wait for something to happen. If this is like ice, maybe I can carve a hole big enough for us to crawl through." She shrugged. "Worth a shot, don't you think?"

He nodded. "Can't hurt. Go for it."

Riana placed her open palm against the wall so she knew where the dagger should hit. Drawing back, she thrust the blade as hard as she could into the ice.

Sparks flew as the blade made contact and ricocheted off. She tumbled forward, bumping her forehead against the wall.

"Ow. Damn." She rubbed her brow. Maybe along the wall she'd find some kind of chip or crack, anything to help facilitate their escape.

In the end, she found nothing. They were trapped. The wizard's spell was strong. "Okay, this isn't looking good at all."

Jason reached for her. "Come here, babe. Sit beside me."

Giving him her fiercest glare, she pushed his hand away. "I can't just sit here and wait, Jason. We have to do something."

"We are doing something." He patted the floor. "Now, come sit with me. I want to feel your gorgeous body next to mine."

"How can you think of sex right now?"

"It's easy," he said. "I just picture you and, voilà--sex."

"Hmph." Confused, angry, and impatient, she sat and drew her knees up against her chest. "What are we going to do now?"

Jason curled his arm around her shoulder. "We're waiting for Chris. Do you remember what I told you about him?"

She remembered the power she'd felt after that other wizard had brought Jason home. He could easily have suffocated her. "He's powerful."

"Not powerful enough to help Willis, but I'd bet he could take down this wall."

"Let's hope," she said, snuggling closer. "We don't have much time left."

Jason bent to kiss the top of her head. "They have to find you before they can send you to Sadaar. If we run out of time, we'll just make you disappear."

She looked up at him and was about to tell him she didn't like the way that sounded.

Lowering his head, Jason took her mouth in a hungry, wet kiss that heated her body and scattered her thoughts. His tongue slipped in, unabashedly plundering every inch. He cupped her cheek and finished with more kisses along her chin, mouth, and nose. "The only way they'll take you is over my dead body. You're mine."

"But...."

"No buts," he interrupted. "You're mine. We'll find your son and somehow keep the gates from opening. I don't know how yet, but as soon as we're out of here, we'll

figure it out.”

She would've argued, but the moment he shoved his tongue down her throat, she forgot everything.

Chapter Seventeen

Dane relaxed in the chair with his feet up on the old oak desk. Reaching for his glass, he finished the rest of the Scotch in two gulps.

The little bobcat huddled in the corner of the room. He could see it tremble and presumed the creature was afraid. Out of nowhere, it had appeared, reeking of the sulfuric residue of magic. Later, a phone call from Azeal confirmed he'd sent the animal.

Azeal had also said the mother and her consort had shown up at the door, asking for help returning the bobcat to human form.

He had been astounded. "Why do you suppose they came to you?"

"A former student of mine recommended me."

"How convenient," Dane said. He didn't like the way this was sounding. Convenience could easily mean someone had knowledge of the Plan.

Azeal continued his story. "I'd created a solution specifically for immortals. When the consort showed up, I took advantage of the situation and had the solution ... ah ... injected. It should've sent the man into a deep coma, and for several moments it appeared that would happen. But then he healed, Dane. Before my very eyes, the man healed.

"I put a containment spell on the house, so it is unlikely they'll trouble us further, but Dane, there's something you must know."

"And what's that?"

"The consort's eyes are purple."

Dane sat up. "Purple."

"Do you think Kodiak knows?"

Dane rubbed his forehead. "If she does, we'll find out soon enough. Until then, we have no choice but to continue with the Plan."

"And so we shall. I'll let you know if I hear anything else," Azeal said. He then hung up.

Dane realized the second he set the phone down that Azeal hadn't mentioned when he would arrive at the Great Hall. The wizard's role in the Plan was to make it look as if the transfer of power from Sepheus to the bobcat went as it should. So little time remained now. Everyone had to do their job or they would fail. Centuries of work wasted. He couldn't even stand to think about it.

Why the consort was not in a deep sleep had Dane quite puzzled. Even if Azeal's potion hadn't been a hundred percent effective, the consort should not have healed.

His left eye twitched. He rubbed it, annoyed that the stress of the Plan was wearing on his body so much. Odd tics, aches, and dizziness had plagued him for weeks.

And now this.

He made a mental note to visit Kodiak. She might have information that would explain the consort's miraculous recovery and the Sadaarin eyes. The crusty old woman had her nose firmly planted into everyone's business and had dirt on many. He refused to believe she knew anything about the Plan, but if she did, he'd have to find a way to take

care of it.

He glanced at the bobcat. The idea to hide the little boy inside an animal had been clever, especially since the magic used had been Sadaarin. Dane had laughed when Azeal told him a spell that powerful could only have been done by a Nitooki priestess or apprentice.

But now he was concerned. To change eye color, a man living outside Sadaar would have to have taken a concentrated amount--maybe even an undiluted amount--of the serum into his body. If the consort had taken in that much, he would be powerful enough to potentially affect the Plan. Azeal's containment spell had come at the right time.

Now that the mother and her consort were out of the picture, the little boy would remain a bobcat for the rest of eternity, and he was expendable once the transfer of power was completed. Dane wasn't sure what would happen after they turned the animal loose in the dense forests. Probably some hunter would shoot it. Maybe a hungry bear or mountain lion would get it.

He snorted. No one would care what happened to that little thing, least of all him. Still, the timing was critical. Sepheus couldn't know the bobcat was not of his loins until the last possible moment, when it was too late to save his life.

"They tell me you can talk," he said to it. "Say something."

The bobcat blinked stupidly.

Dane rose from the chair and poured another bit of Glenlivet. He sipped, eyeing the little cat as it huddled closer to the wall.

"What's your name?"

Willis.

The animal had strong telepathic powers. Dane used magic to lower the internal sound.

"Willis." Dane nodded, returning to the chair. "Do you know why you're here?"

No.

"I believe Julian told you Sepheus was your father. Unfortunately for Sepheus, that's not true. We have a Plan, you see, and that plan included you being sired by someone other than Sepheus. Your father is a friend of mine."

Willis cocked his head. *Okay.*

Dane smiled. The little bobcat had a certain charm, in a simple, child-like way. "You don't know what that means, do you?"

No.

Dane thought about how he might clarify. "Your mother is immortal, isn't she?"

She's 'Skarian. He sat up, giving Dane his full attention. His ears twitched from front to back, as if he were listening to two things at once.

In a way, he didn't even look like a bobcat. Something about him seemed very human, much like a small child.

"You are not like us. You're like your mother."

The bobcat's ears pricked forward.

A knock on the door startled him from his musing. He looked at the bobcat, who'd settled back into the corner of the room.

"Yes?"

The door opened, and Julian entered.

Wonderful. The idiot returns. Why the man didn't just die and get out of everyone's way was beyond him. Everyone thought so, and everyone who was anyone didn't hesitate to say so, though not to his face, the cowards.

Things would change soon, starting with this blond punk.

Julian nodded his ridiculous, undersized head.

"Sepheus says he's ready."

Dane rose from behind the desk. "Great. We're ready, too."

"I'll escort you," Julian offered.

"No, we can manage to find our way down that long, treacherous hallway without the Royal Idiot." Dane smiled. He loved harassing the man.

As he often did, Julian flushed. "All the same...."

"No. Get lost."

Julian's Royal Mouth snapped shut as Dane swept past.

"Willis, follow me," Dane ordered. He stopped and faced the lad. "We're going to see Sepheus, and we'll be playing a little game. You are not to tell him you're not his son. Do you understand?"

The bobcat nodded.

Julian's gaze lowered to the animal. "He's still not human."

Dane glanced over his shoulder. "No kidding. Sepheus will begin the Power Ritual anyway. We have no choice, since the immortals were unable to find a wizard who could undo it. As long as the boy survives, it doesn't really matter what form he takes, does it?"

"No, it doesn't, I suppose. In this form, though, I suspect the people will have difficulty following his lead. He cannot talk to them, can he? We will have to act as intercessors," Julian said, sharing yet another brilliant observation of the obvious.

At the door, Dane shook his head. "We'll worry about that when the time comes."

"Of course."

"Of course." Dane was growing more annoyed by the second. "Now ... if there's nothing else, we'll be happy to meet you in the Great Hall."

"Certainly." Julian grimaced, clearly annoyed by the dismissal.

Nevertheless, he bowed deeply, showing the proper respect and deference to his elder, and left as ordered.

Damn good thing he knew to be respectful.

Julian's father, Orlo, had been a part of the Plan almost from the beginning. He'd wanted his son to be a part of the new Order, so he'd asked if a position might be available. Dane had never liked Julian and refused to offer one. Orlo then blackmailed him into it by claiming a high court member already knew, and was preparing to tell Kodiak about, the Plan. Dane didn't know how the priestess would react to the news, so he wasn't willing to take a chance.

That was the only reason Julian was still alive.

Orlo had met an untimely demise, a series of misfortunes that drove the poor man to madness. He slashed his own throat.

Dane still didn't know who the high court member was, or even if he or she had ever existed, but years had passed now, and no one had come forth to cause any more trouble.

He sheathed his black-bladed dagger, attaching it to the back of his belt. He pulled

his sport jacket from the coat rack and shrugged it on, ensuring it fully concealed his weapon.

“Very well, Willis, I think we’re ready to go. Remember what I said about not admitting anything to Sepheus. You’re meeting a man who’s led our people for thousands of years, and now his time has come. So has mine, actually,” he amended, “at long last.”

Willis only blinked at him.

“He brought our people back from extinction, made us great again.”

Dane led the boy down the long hallway and turned to his left. The Great Hall was on another, lower floor, partially underground so it stayed cool. The Falcons liked it that way. Cool and damp.

“But things change, you know. Always they change. Now that Vox is prepared to reclaim his crown, the entire world is going to change.”

The whole world? The little bobcat’s eyes went wide.

Dane smiled. “Yes, the whole world. Vox can do that. Once he returns to Sadaar, his power will be restored, and I shall serve as his high priest forever. I will keep the magic.”

How?

Dane glanced down at the cat. So many questions.

“Sadaar is an underworld, which is sort of a world within a world. As such, there’s great magic in everything--plants, trees, the air, water. If you live there for even a little while, the magic becomes a part of you. Vox has been gone a long time, so his magic is no more. We’ll fix that, though. In just a few hours, everything will be as we’ve planned for so very long.”

Okay, Willis replied.

Dane chuckled. The simplicity of children. How refreshing. They took in what they heard and saw and accepted it all, much like little sponges. No debates, no controversy, just simple acceptance.

Life should always be that easy.

Exhaling softly, he stopped and turned to the boy. “We’re going to take a small detour before we visit the Great Hall. I must check on an old friend.”

Chapter Eighteen

Jason took Riana down to the floor. He lay beside her, tracing the contours of her face with a strand of his hair.

“We’ve got an hour before Chris comes. I intend to spend that hour doing several very delectable things to you, one of which will make you rake those deliciously long nails down my back. And though I have an hour, I’m going to promise you this--it won’t take me nearly that long to make you whisper my name. Or scream it.”

She shivered in anticipation. He could’ve said nothing, for all it mattered. She wanted him now, and the consequences be damned. The need to mate was so strong she could think only of the sweat and heat and total passion unique to their kind. “Are you sure you’re up for it?”

“What do you think?” He rolled onto her body and slid his erection into the cradle of her thighs.

She giggled. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. Yeah, I’m fine.” His eyes closed as he rubbed his cock against her. “Christ, even this is a relief. Do you have any idea what you do to me? The minute you walk into a room, I can feel you. From that moment on, all I can think of is how warm and soft your skin is, and how great you’d feel beneath me.” He bent to kiss her throat. “I love the way you smell. I want to be inside you when I make you come.”

Riana moaned. “Then you should be inside me now. Why aren’t you?”

Despite the layers of denim, she felt every inch, and it only fed the hunger. She tilted her hips in silent invitation. Need and desire collided, eroding her patience. Why was he taking so damn long?

Jason lowered his head, breathed softly against her ear. “I will be, in just a few minutes. You know, those little sounds you make drive me crazy.”

“I want you crazy, just like me,” she whispered.

He shoved her shirt up to her neck, unhooked her bra, and suckled one nipple while caressing the other breast.

She whimpered.

“Mine, Nukita. Just as I am yours, you belong to....”

Whatever he said after that, she didn’t know. The ground dropped out from under her and she was falling.

Falling.

Into darkness.

Whump!

Riana hit something soft and--*oof!*--lost her breath. Gasping, she opened her eyes and searched the room to get her bearings. She lay on a bare, powder-blue mattress that sat atop a four-poster frame. Her legs were spread, each ankle bound to the nearest post. Her hands had been tied together and secured to the center of the headboard.

Oh, my God.

The drab beige walls sported motel-style framed pictures and one window. The

midnight-blue drapes were drawn shut. A few lit candles on the table next to her bathed the room in a warm, surrealistic glow.

The sparse, ugly furnishings made her think of an institution, an asylum, a place where people were forgotten.

To her complete horror, she was nude. How had this happened?

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, but the pulse was deadly slow, and the blood in her veins thick as sludge. Her stomach was upset, and her head pounded. She wanted to throw up.

Hell, she wanted out of there.

Voices in the next room drew her attention. Summoning Defender discipline, she banished her fear, but the sluggishness wouldn't go away. The moment the door opened, she raised her head and her vision blurred.

She knew then she'd been drugged.

Two men entered. Both had dark hair, but she couldn't make out anything else.

"Well, the old man won't live forever," someone was saying.

The other chuckled. "And by the time he figures out what happened, it'll be too late."

"Exactly," the first man said. "Ah, Valeriana. You're awake. Good. This won't take long, I promise you." He strode back toward the door. "She's all yours, Nic."

The door closed.

Nic? Riana couldn't believe her ears. *Nic de Santo?*

"Nic, is that you? Where am I? Why am I tied up like this? What's going on?"

"You're mumbling, girl. I didn't understand a thing you said." He unzipped his trousers. "I'm guessing you're confused about what's happening. You're not going to remember this, so there's no point in me saying anything." His pants dropped to his ankles. "So, I won't."

She slammed her eyes shut. Only seconds later, she felt the mattress dip. He crawled onto the bed and settled atop her body.

Hating the feel of his cool skin against hers, she shuddered. "Get off me, you skanky little goth."

He tried to kiss her. She squirmed enough to avoid a direct hit on the mouth.

"Hold still, damn it."

"Rot in hell, Nic." She pulled on her ropes. If she could escape, this little dweeb was a dead man.

"Not a chance. You need me to do this. You have no idea what they had planned for you."

She tightened her grip on the ropes, which appeared to be nothing more than ordinary strands of hemp. No magic, and that meant she could break them, given enough time. "Nor do I care."

"You would've, Riana. You really would've."

"I think I'd rather have taken my chances, if you want to know the truth."

"Don't say that." Nic caught her jaw and forced her to face him.

Defiant to the end, she kept her eyes closed. She didn't want to see anything resembling passion in those black eyes.

"I know you hate this and me. I've always known that. You probably even want me dead, but I swear to you, this could've been so much worse."

“Dane thought you’d be too much trouble. He wanted you dissected and your egg....”

“Stop.” She didn’t need to hear anymore. The sudden imagery had her stomach in knots.

“I’m sorry.” Nic bent to kiss her neck, rubbing his jaw against hers. His Primal was Grizzly, though she hadn’t seen him shift since she’d left Malanaya.

“Sweet Riana, how I’ve loved you. You’re going to have a son. My son. That means I’ll be a part of your life forever.”

She nearly gagged. “Not if I kill you first.”

“You belong to me, Riana. You can’t mean that ... I know you don’t.”

The ropes snapped free of the posts. She wanted to take his life, just as he’d taken hers. Eskarian law forbade having children out of bondlock, and their societal norms enforced it. Not all that long ago, unbonded couples were shamed into leaving the Eskarian nation if they produced children. It was presumed a benekeda would show up eventually, and if the intended mate already had children, the binding process became infinitely more complex.

Nic was screwing her in every conceivable way.

“Oh, I surely do.” Snagging the rope, she had it around his throat before he could react and....

The blackness enveloped her again, with that sense of being out of time, out of place. And then she was falling, twisting and kicking frantically as she hurtled down to the....

“Riana, please ... look at me.”

“Jason.” She sucked in a breath, held it, and opened her eyes. Her arms were stretched above her head as if still tied. “It wasn’t a dream.”

She realized what she was doing and lowered her arms.

He sat beside her.

“No.” He brushed the tears from her cheeks. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

She sat up. “I wasn’t supposed to remember. A spell, they said. They put a strong spell on me, so I’d never know what happened. I wasn’t supposed to remember who did this to me.”

Jason’s eyes glowed faintly with the edukitza. His forehead was dappled with sweat.

“I’m going to find Nic and kill him for this. I promise you that. What he did is unforgivable, not to mention against Eskarian law.”

“No, I’ll do it. I tried to kill him once. I need to finish the job myself. I want to.” She shook her head, trying to push Nic’s image from her mind. “But I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“I think you need to talk about it. As your sendagi, I insist. You have feelings about what happened, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I suppose I do, but I’m not sure what they are yet. Even as a bobcat, Willis has given me so much joy. What happened was horrible and terrifying, and I don’t understand why they chose me, unless Nic told them I was immortal. But even so, I don’t regret having Willis. He’s the best part of my life.”

Jason’s brow furrowed. “Willis belongs to Nic.”

“No, Willis belongs to me. *Only* me. Nic just happened to be the donor. Since I

didn't know what had happened, I believed the Falcons after the first time they came to take Willis away. They said he was the son of the Falcon leader. Who was I to argue?

"It does explain why Nic has been in and out of my life all these last few years, and why Willis knows about the old ways."

"Maybe that'll make him easier to find and kill."

"Next time I see him, I plan to feed him one of my blades." She crossed her arms over her chest. "All these years, when I thought about it, the memory was so fuzzy. That alone horrified me. What would I tell my family? Or Griffin? Or you? You were my best friend when we lived in Malanaya. I didn't know how I'd ever face you again. I thought I'd disgraced everyone who meant something to me. That's why I disappeared." She sniffed as new tears loomed. "I love my son, Jason, more than I can ever say, but I thought I'd done something really awful. I was so ashamed."

Jason took her into his arms. "You didn't, Nukita. Nic is the one who should be ashamed."

He led her to the couch, then strode into the bathroom and returned with a box of tissues. She took one and dabbed at her eyes.

He dropped to the couch beside her. Sitting tailor fashion facing her, he took her hands in his, kissed them, and then smiled. "We'll get through this, together."

"I know." She nodded. "You look really different with purple eyes. Do you still feel okay?"

He studied her hands, dwarfed by his. "Yes, I'm okay. Lie beside me, Nukita, and rest. I know you're tired."

* * * *

Jason was shaking her shoulder. "Wake up. Chris is here."

She sat up, pushing both hands through her hair to smooth it, and then stood.

"Okay, I'm awake ... I think..." She followed him to the window, where they saw the fuzzy outline of Christopher's black SUV.

Awesome, Christopher said. *I can't really see it, but I sure as hell feel it. Massive power.*

"Great. So get us out of here."

What kind of magic is this? Christopher paced across the lawn to study the dome.

"How the hell should I know?" Jason snapped. "You're the one with all the magic, not me. Your old buddy Alistair did this. Seems the wolves didn't kill him after all."

Are you serious? Christopher stopped and turned in their direction. *You can't be serious.*

"Totally serious. And, by the way, the bastard is now like us."

No way.

Jason snorted. "Yeah, way."

Damn. He's mine, Jason. I'll make sure he's dead this time.

"No problem. So, can you get us out?"

Give me a few minutes. If this thing goes, you should be somewhere safe.

Immediately, Jason scooped up Riana's hand and led her back through the kitchen to a huge windowless pantry. He closed the door behind them, then set her against it and caged her with his hands on either side of her head.

"Riana."

She saw the desperation in his eyes. He kept such tight control over every aspect of his life, including his emotions. The edukitza was powerful enough to topple the strongest warrior, and yet he seemed to have it all neatly contained. She might've even believed that, but she could see and feel what he was able to hide from the rest of the world. Those amethyst-colored eyes smoldered with passion, a need so tangible she felt it in the pit of her stomach.

He rested his forehead against her shoulder. "I need to make love to you more than I need to breathe. After what just happened, I know you most likely need some time. I understand, but I'm going to explode if I don't taste you soon. Please...." He looked at her. "Soon, Riana ... please."

She saw no reason to wait. What Nic did twenty-five years before was horrible, but she wouldn't let it stop her from taking what was hers. "Now."

Lowering his head, he took her mouth, his tongue plunging deep and insistent, as if feeding from her. When he drew back, the rings in his eyes shimmered like captured sunlight. "My love ... I could never take from you as he did. I can only give. Of myself, my love, and my soul. Take from me."

The quiet desperation in his voice, the pain, the tight control he kept on himself, she felt it all. His mental shields had dropped, allowing her into his mind, and now she was privy to what he'd kept from her.

"Oh, my God."

He smiled. "It's okay. This is what we are."

He was talking about the Eskarian male's need to give himself, completely, to his mate.

"I understand. Tell Christopher to wait fifteen minutes. Just fifteen minutes."

Jason closed his eyes. "Chris, I need some time. I can't do this without...." He paused. "Yeah ... thanks, man. I owe you."

He dropped to his knees and, looking up at her, unfastened her jeans and slid them to her ankles. Her panties quickly followed.

She stepped out of them and leaned back against the wall. Her heart beat so fast she feared it would explode before he even began. Christ, she needed something to hang on to. Her legs were shaking.

Jason's warm breath against her skin bordered on torture. He kissed the inside of her thighs, teasing her with little licks and the dip of his finger here and there. Closing his mouth over her sex, he sucked and licked until....

Riana's legs gave out. Her world spun upside down. Chill-bumps rippled across her body as her feminine muscles contracted. She whimpered, happily lost in her orgasm, yet desperate to feel warm, hard flesh deep inside her.

Laying her on the floor, Jason quickly shoved his jeans down to his knees and settled over her body. How she loved the fire the suteka produced, the melding of heart, soul, and body as they came together in a perfect union.

He was panting. "Do you know how long I've waited for this moment? A thousand years. I'm sorry it's not going to be perfect, but I promise to make it up to you."

"It will be perfect, because it's you and me." She raised her knees. "It'll be just fine."

"It will be. I love you so much." He drove deep inside her.

Stretched and filled, both pain and exquisite pleasure scorching her insides, the

sutekan heat swirled around and through them, blending their life-forces. The moment they became one--bound--she felt it. Felt the perfect connection.

“My God, Riana. My God.” His fingers dug into her shoulders. The soft glow in his eyes dimmed.

Her fangs descended. She found his pulse and pushed her teeth into his skin. He moaned, a low whisper of need and desire fulfilled. The edukitza had flavored his blood, the sweet taste a powerful aphrodisiac.

They exploded together, she milking the warm fluid from his body, he shuddering, thrusting deep within her.

“Mine,” he said. “I’m sorry ... thank you ... *holy shit...*”

Riana giggled.

The floor began to shake.

“Get dressed.” He rolled to her side. Gone was the desperate lover, just that quick. The Defender had returned and taken control.

The second they were dressed, the house exploded around them. Jason had her back on the floor with his big body over hers before she thought to react. Cans of food and boxes of dry goods toppled from the shelves. Bits of drywall and paint chips drifted to the floor. The rafters creaked and moaned loud enough to make her wonder if they’d hold. The entire house heaved and shuddered.

And then, as quickly as it started, all was quiet.

Jason waited a full minute before lifting off her.

“Let’s go.” He caught her wrist on his way out.

The ice dome remained, save for the two-foot-wide hole where the front door once stood. Jason and Riana navigated from one room to the next, tiptoeing over the remains. The house had been demolished. Crumbled drywall from the walls and ceiling littered the floor. Most of the furniture lay in shambles, either sideways or upside down. All the windows had shattered. Anything that hadn’t been secured lay in pieces on the floor.

She glanced around the living room. A wide-screen television had somehow escaped demolition. Using her telekinetics, she shattered it, then smiled, pleased with her work.

Jason looked at the smoldering remains. “Tell me you didn’t just do that.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t just do that.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Riana.”

“Shouldn’t we be leaving?”

“Yeah, sure.” He turned and squeezed through the opening.

Riana followed.

Christopher lay unconscious on the lawn.

Jason rushed to his friend’s side. He knelt and, running his hands quickly over Christopher’s body, assessed the extent of the damage. Swearing softly, he thought a moment. “Okay, you’ll have to drive. Chris brought my medicinals, so I’ll take care of him in the back. Let’s go.”

She opened the back door for him and then slid into the driver’s seat while Jason put Christopher in the back.

“Go. Get on the highway and drive north until you get to Crystal Lake.”

“We’re taking him with us?”

“I’d rather not, but we don’t have any time left.”

She heard him removing things from his satchel. A moment later, a foul stench wafted through the car. Glancing back, she saw Jason hovering over Christopher, holding a smoldering pot under the unconscious man’s nose.

“Christ, what is that stuff? It’s strong enough to wake the dead.”

Jason looked up, concern in his purple eyes. “I hope so.”

* * * *

The Falcon compound spanned acres and looked more like a small town than a shape-shifter commune. At the gated entrance, she stopped. This was the home of her greatest enemy. She could only hope and pray Willis was here and they could get him back without much of a confrontation. If she could keep him away from the Falcons until their leader died, she figured they’d have to choose someone else and move on.

Christopher was still unconscious, which had Riana worried. The young man was so powerful she couldn’t imagine what had happened to keep him out so long. If it was the magic, Azeal was a formidable enemy, perhaps more than the Falcons. She didn’t like not knowing for certain. Too many things could go wrong.

She turned around to look at Jason, who’d fallen asleep sometime during the trip. He’d crammed himself into the corner to give Christopher the bulk of the available space. His arms were folded over his chest. His head was tilted at an odd angle. He looked uncomfortable.

She gave his knee a little shake. “We’re here, Falcon Central.”

He opened his eyes and took in a deep, slow breath, stretched, and looked around. “Christ, this place is huge.”

“That Julian said he was in charge. We should start by looking for him.”

“Agreed.” He checked Christopher. After he’d finished, he sat back, his brow furrowed. “Chris isn’t doing so good. I don’t know what happened. It’s almost as if he’s in the dream state, like he’s sleeping and can’t wake up. I wish I knew more about Azeal’s magic.”

“I wish I knew what we were getting into. We need a better plan.” She thought about what she’d just said. “I’m starting to sound like Griffin. God, that’s just wrong on so many levels.”

Jason grinned. “I’m going to disown you if you start barking orders.”

“Scary thought.” She looked at the gate. “Guess it’s time to do this.”

She got out of the car and opened the gate.

The scout Falcons were out so their presence would be reported, likely to Julian. If Willis was here, they’d have plenty of time to hide him and plan a defense.

She huffed out a breath. They were going to need all the help they could get.

Returning to the car, she drove forward to a building that looked like an administrative office. “I really don’t like this.”

“I agree,” Jason said. “I don’t like leaving Chris here, either, but we don’t have any choice now. Azeal was powerful when we battled him years ago. If Willis is here, then Azeal is definitely working with the Falcons. Since he was able to take Willis’s collar off, I suspect he is. Now that he’s like us ... Christ, the thought just makes me sick. The sooner Griffin marks him as a threat, the faster he’ll get dead. I’ll do it myself.”

“After what he did to Willis, I plan to beat you to it.” She got out of the car and studied the surroundings. “This place gives me the creeps. I’ve got a bad feeling about all

this.”

As soon as they started toward the office, a Falcon appeared a few feet above them. Dropping suddenly, the bird exploded into gray smoke and feathers. The combined scent of sulfur and grapefruit filled the air.

Magic.

From the smoke, a man appeared, one she recognized right away. At their last meeting, Julian had ordered Cody to “finish it.” He’d done that by kicking in her ribs. The man was well trained and fast.

He didn’t so much as glance her way. His focus was on Jason.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Jason answered, “We’re here to see Julian.”

Cody studied him for several seconds then sniffed. “This way.”

He headed for a huge log cabin with two levels and a porch that spanned the width. Riana was surprised he had agreed so quickly to take them to Julian. She’d expected a battle, and though she was relieved it wasn’t coming, she still had to wonder why the Falcon was so cooperative. Maybe they didn’t see a need to feel threatened.

Maybe Willis wasn’t here at all.

Or maybe they were walking into something they weren’t expected to walk away from.

The little hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She was afraid they’d just made a colossal mistake.

Jason grasped her hand.

She looked up. He met her gaze and flashed a smile, then resumed his study of the Falcon compound.

His confidence gave her comfort. She was glad he was with her.

Some buildings looked very old, while others were much newer. There were barracks, small houses, apartments, a chapel. Several barns dotted the premises. A general store sat next to the chapel. All the roads were dirt or gravel.

It seemed quite self-contained and, on the surface, looked like any other small town. She suspected there was more, however, and none of it was good.

Cody led them to a small office with dark hardwood floors and a large, antique-looking oak desk.

“Julian isn’t here. I’ll send someone else in to speak with you.”

After he was gone, Jason went to the window.

“I don’t think we’re going to find Willis today, at least, not here. If they have him, he’s well hidden by now.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Maybe we should come back later.”

She was just about to take a seat when the door opened. A tall man with vivid green eyes and black hair came in.

“Good morning. My name is Dane Maxim. I’m the manager here. How are you this fine morning?”

Jason nodded. “We’re fine, thank you. This is Riana Secundinus and I’m Jason Velazquez. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Welcome to Calizimar. What can I do for you?”

Do for us? Riana blinked. “I’m the mother.”

Maxim looked first at Jason, then her. “Of whom?”

“A little bobcat named Willis.” Ooh, that sounded bad.

Maxim sat down at the desk. Jason sat as well, but Riana remained standing. She wasn't comfortable, and if she needed to react quickly, she wanted to be ready.

Steeppling his fingers, Maxim pressed them to his lips and studied her a moment. “I see. You gave birth to a bobcat?”

“Well, no.” This wasn't working. She quickly changed her tactic. “I'm looking for a bobcat. Sorry. English isn't my native tongue.” Though she doubted her accent was noticeable after hundreds of years away from Rome, she went with it anyway.

Maxim's face relaxed. “I understand, but I'm afraid I can't help you. I haven't seen any bobcats of late.”

“Are you certain? He's gold-and-white with black spots, little tail, amber eyes.” She was trying to keep the fear out of her voice. She'd been so sure Willis was here. It seemed the only logical place. If he wasn't here, where was he? Where would the wizard have sent him?

“I'm quite aware of what a bobcat looks like. It's my job to know everything that happens on this property. No one has seen any kind of wild animal, other than a raccoon or two.” He paused, giving her a thin smile. “Will there be anything else?”

She nodded. “Yes. We wish to speak with Julian.”

“Julian? I'm afraid I don't know any Julian.”

“Thank you for your time. We've clearly made a mistake.” Jason rose to his feet, taking Riana's arm. “We'll show ourselves out.”

He turned on his heel and whisked her out of the house, down the driveway, and had her in the car before he said anything else. “What were you thinking?”

“What? What did I do that was so wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong. Maxim's mind was curiously blank when he was talking to you, and if he had nothing to hide, you know he wouldn't have bothered. If you'd been scanning him, as you should've been, you'd know that,” Jason added.

She realized her mistake.

“Shit, you're right. My anxiety got in the way again. I'm sorry.”

“Well, we did learn one thing--he knows where Willis is. The question is, why didn't he want to tell us? They said they need Willis to be human.” He leaned back and drummed his fingers along the top of his thigh. “So maybe he knows where that priestess is, or maybe he knows who wants the gates to open. Either way, we need to find out what he knows.” He faced her and smiled. “So, have you ever been inside an underworld before?”

“No,” Riana admitted. “Until recently, I didn't even know they existed. But if we go to Sadaar, what do we do with....” Her gaze shot to the backseat. “Where's Christopher?”

Chapter Nineteen

The empty back seat taunted him.

“No. Oh, hell, no.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. Shit. Yet another obstacle.

Chris? Jason sent his telepathic voice out with as much mental strength as he could muster.

No answer. Big surprise. He let out an exasperated breath. “Christ, what’s next?”

Riana watched him with sympathetic eyes. “What is it about this place that people can just disappear, and we can’t feel them or talk to them? It’s like they totally disappear.”

“Magic, I’m guessing. I don’t believe either of them has gone into Sadaar. That would make them seem to disappear completely.” He watched the Falcons scattered throughout the compound coalesce and move in the same direction. “And that makes sense, but I don’t think that’s what has happened. Look around. Something’s going on.”

The Falcons were migrating toward the chapel. Odd, to have a worship service at this time of day. He was willing to concede they had a religion all their own, and Tuesday was their Sabbath. All fine and well. He knew so many different species and was accustomed to traditions many humans would find appalling.

But something about this didn’t feel right. His intuition, limited as it was, said today was like no other.

Riana followed the direction of his gaze.

“Isn’t that Julian?” She pointed to a tall blond who had just left one of the barracks. “Sure looks like him.”

“Yeah, it does. Let’s go. We can park the car down the road and hike back. I want them to think we’ve left.”

“What about Christopher?” she asked, starting the car.

Chris’s disappearance bothered him, and as there weren’t any clues, he didn’t know if Chris had awakened and left on his own or if he’d been taken.

“We have to trust that he’s okay, or will be okay.”

“I’d feel better if we at least knew he was alive.” She maneuvered down the driveway and out to the main road.

“So would I.” He felt as if he were abandoning his friend. Chris had been his best buddy for so long and now....

Every Defender knew the day might come when he got left behind to fend for himself, or to die. Jason knew Riana understood this. He also knew her compassionate side didn’t want to let go of an extended family member. Chris, who was once a wild Highlander, would’ve called them clan.

“Clan,” Jason whispered. “Yeah, Chris, we are your clan.”

Riana kept her eyes on the road. The little furrow in her brow was the only evidence she’d heard him.

He stretched his arm across the back of the seat, catching strands of her silky hair

between his fingers, soft, long, and glossy. She had the kind of hair in which a man loved to bury his hands and face.

“Turn here.” He pointed to a small dirt road. “This looks like a good place. They won’t see the car from the main road.”

After she turned, he told her to park beneath a heavy canopy of trees. The scout Falcons would undoubtedly search for them.

He wished he could phase-shift. They just couldn’t risk getting captured now. Dane had lied about Willis and Julian. He knew something important was happening, and he was determined to find out what it was.

As he left the car, he rubbed his forehead. He hadn’t felt right for hours. Not since Azeal’s venom had made him so sick he’d wanted to crawl into a healing tank and stay there for a week. How and why he’d recovered so rapidly troubled him. Azeal had indeed created a powerful venom. Everything inside him said he should still be sick as hell.

So why wasn’t he?

His body felt ... different. He couldn’t figure out why or exactly what different might represent. His shifting abilities were gone, yet he felt strong.

The purple eyes had upset Azeal, which meant the venom hadn’t caused it. He could only conclude that the arrow from the first attack contained a potion strong enough to change his eye color.

All he had to do now was figure out what it was, where it had come from, and what it was really doing to him.

His thoughts swung to Riana. He’d waited for her a thousand years. Now that she belonged to him, he didn’t want to give her up without a fight. He was looking forward to having a family, maybe a little brother or sister for Willis to play with. Thinking about evenings spent doing normal things together made his heart do funny things. He wanted to build that life with her.

He really did feel okay, better than okay.

So why did it seem like his life was about to turn upside down, and this difference was the catalyst?

He tugged her to a halt.

“If something happens to me, and I can’t wake up....”

Riana flung herself from his grasp and growled. She actually growled.

“Shut up, Jason,” she snapped. “Whatever’s going on with you--and, yes, I *can* feel it--we’ll work through it. If you have something useful to say, I’m all ears. Otherwise, keep your damn mouth shut.”

He blinked. “Pardon?”

“You didn’t hear me? I said shut up.” She glared at him as if he’d sprouted multiple heads. “You are not going to die, Jason, and I am not going to lose you, okay? *I just won’t have it!* Do you hear me, Sendagi?”

No one had ever screamed at him like that before.

“Uh ... look, sometimes things happen that are beyond your control. They’re beyond anyone’s control. That’s just how it is for us sometimes.”

“Ugh,” she said, rubbing her brows. She raised her hand, palm toward him. “I’m not going to listen to this. Please, if you can’t contribute something useful, don’t say anything. I really don’t want to hear this crap. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yeah, sure. You’re absolutely right. I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” she breathed. “Let’s get on with it.”

Amazing how the mind could deny reality.

“It certainly is.” Riana leveled a withering glare at him. She was angry, resentful of what he’d said. She didn’t understand that, while he didn’t plan to get himself killed, knowing she was prepared and ready gave him enormous comfort. It meant he could focus on the task at hand and not worry about her.

Riana could be strong one minute, soft and needy the next. He suspected she didn’t know that about herself. He loved everything about her, but to get through this battle, he needed her to be strong.

She didn’t see that.

He didn’t bother to say anything else. She clearly either didn’t understand, or didn’t want to understand. He had a thousand other things he wanted to tell her, most of which, he suspected, would fall on deaf ears. He’d have to find another way to reach her.

Through the trees, they could see the compound. Three Falcons shifted and took to the air. Jason watched them circle the perimeter. As they neared the area where the car was parked, he swore.

“What’s up?” she asked from behind.

“I don’t think the car is hidden well enough. The Falcons are circling.”

“I saw that. I don’t think we have any choice but to keep going and hope they either don’t notice or don’t care.”

“We should be so lucky.”

He swiped at the leaves on a nearby tree. They did care, and they would notice. That’s what they did--scout the area and look for anomalies.

He and Riana were the anomalies.

Two Falcons soared toward them. He darted under the thick canopy of the trees.

“Phase-shift. Now.”

She did. Her molecules split, and she became nearly invisible as the Falcons soared overhead. Pressed against the tree, he held his breath and waited.

If the Falcons found them, he wasn’t entirely certain they’d escape. Riana was strong and fast, but against so many? He had his doubts. They had strong magic in their favor, which made them dangerous adversaries. He had believed the three of them could do some serious damage, but Chris was missing, and he ... wasn’t himself.

The Falcons circled lower.

Riana stayed perfectly still. Jason shrank back farther into the darkness of the canopy and wished like hell he could shift. Hiding like this sorely tested his patience, chafed his pride, and just plain pissed him off.

One of the Falcons lit on a nearby branch, not fifty yards from where Riana stood. Humans wouldn’t be able to see her, but he wasn’t certain about the Falcons. Their vision was considerably sharper. Still, unless they knew what to look for, he doubted that would help.

Rigid as a statue, Riana waited for the Falcon to make the next move. She’d be tired now. Phase-shifting took an enormous amount of energy to sustain, energy she’d need to rescue her son.

The Falcon scanned the area, clearly looking for them. He held his breath and counted. Seven ... eight ... nine....

The Falcon flew off. Riana followed its flight, materializing a moment later.

“Jesus, that was close.” She teetered from fatigue.

Jason breathed in relief and stepped out from the shadows, catching her shoulders to steady her. “Are you okay?”

She pushed a hand through her hair. “Yeah, I’m just tired. I’ll need to feed in a little while.” Giving his arm a little squeeze, she met his gaze and smiled. “I’m fine. Let’s finish this. I want my son back.”

He took her hand and led her through the trees and brush toward the Falcon compound.

Time had never been a consideration for him, but now that it was finite--unless he managed to figure out what was happening to him--he felt greedy and selfish and completely outraged that something precious had been stolen from him.

“Do you think Christopher woke up and just wandered off somewhere?”

“No, I don’t. I think someone found him while we were wasting time with Maxim.” He glanced over his shoulder. “He wanted us off the property, so I’m guessing this thing with the shiema’s about to go down. Willis is probably there, in the chapel. I’ll bet Chris is locked up somewhere in the stables.”

“Maybe we could move a little faster, then,” Riana suggested, nudging his back. “Let’s get in and out as quickly as we can.”

He wished they had that luxury. “We’re not rushing, Riana. These people are strong and intelligent. Be patient.”

As they neared the perimeter of the property, Jason could see a big problem.

“There’s no way to get to the chapel without being seen. You’ll have to phase-shift and go in alone. I can’t shift.” He stopped to face her. “I wish like hell I could be there with you.”

Riana studied his face and then scanned his body. Her gaze narrowed. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing. Really, I’m fine.” He smiled. “A little tired.”

Nodding, one eyebrow raised, she took a step back. “You’re a liar, that’s what you are, Jason Velazquez, a liar. I can see and smell the sickness all over you. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“It isn’t sickness, exactly, it’s more like a…”

Her gaze shot to something behind him. Suddenly, her eyes grew wide. “No!” She grabbed the dagger from the back of her jeans and shoved him out of the way.

Pain exploded in the back of his head. He dropped to his knees.

He heard the scuffle behind him and realized the scouting Falcon must’ve spotted them.

As he fell forward, he hoped Riana had fared better than he.

It was his last thought for a long time.

* * * *

The tip of his nose itched. Thick rope around his wrists prevented him from scratching it.

Captured and bound.

It had been so long since the last time this had happened Jason hadn’t even considered it a possibility. Arrogance had led him to believe he was immune to so many things.

Though he couldn’t break his chains, he still felt invincible. The substance in his

body was making him stronger. He didn't understand it, so he'd tried to expel it, to extinguish it. Nothing had an effect. Some time later, he came to understand that it was changing him. Making him more than what he'd been before.

Suspecting his eyes were still purple, he shifted so his long hair fell over his eyes. He didn't want to give up a potential advantage.

The air was cool and damp. Opening his eyes, he scanned the interior of the dark cave. Riana sat on the other side with her arm around Willis. Both looked terrified. A huge stone statue that resembled one of those Easter Island figures sat in the center.

"You're awake. Good. Welcome to Calizimar," Maxim said, leaning against the statue.

Jason snorted. "Calizimar? What the hell is that?"

"It's the name of our community. This is one of several Falcon communities located throughout the world. Our headquarters is outside London. I lived there for years, though I prefer it here. Nicer climate." He straightened, slipping his hands into the pockets of his dark-gray blazer. "And Americans are more tolerant of foreigners, even those of us who aren't quite human."

Jason nodded. "I see. You're a Falcon, a Verlinean, like Julian and Cody."

"Cody is Sadaaran, from the underworld. Did you notice the eyes?"

Jason had had other things on his mind. "No."

"They're purple. It comes from having so much magic running through the veins. All Sadaarans have purple eyes, though it'll happen to anyone exposed long enough."

Magic. He'd been given a potent dose of magic.

That meant they had an ally.

"We mostly keep to ourselves. We have Verlineans, some Sadaarans, and even some humans work here. They know what we are, but we don't worry too much about anyone finding out about us. Who would believe us to be what you call shape-shifters? We look human, and our blood tests human. We cause no problems."

Jason chuckled. "Yeah, right. You had a woman impregnated for your own selfish purposes and then stole her child. No problem at all. That was my mate, by the way."

"All necessary, I assure you," Maxim said. "Does it not comfort you to know the child is at least one of your kind and not some half-breed bastard?"

"No, it doesn't. What comforts me is knowing you'll be dead by the time this is over."

He smiled. "Strong words from a dying man."

"My death won't prevent yours," Jason said. "I guarantee it."

"Your words mean nothing. You're bound, and your body has been infected with a powerful serum, created by a master wizard. There is no cure for what you have." Maxim turned away.

Jason realized then that events had not played out as Maxim had expected. He wasn't aware of what had actually happened. This, and the promise of Sadaarin magic at his disposal, was the advantage he'd been looking for.

He continued, "And your dying shiema? What about opening the gates of the underworld?"

"Ah. You know all about that, don't you? Lovely of Julian to tell you. Well, in a few hours' time, it won't matter. I'll make sure he doesn't survive after the gates open."

He smiled, stepping away from the statue. Facing Riana, he crossed the dirt floor

and knelt. He brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

Jason saw red. Unable to do anything about it, he struggled for calm, to wait until Maxim made a mistake. He would, eventually.

“And you, my ageless beauty,” the man said, his voice low and soft. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Riana’s brow furrowed. She pushed his hand away. “Should I?”

He lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Technically, no, but I presume you’ve figured out a few things. Tell me what you remember.”

She huddled closer to Willis. “Nothing.”

“No?” He lifted his brows. “Allow me to refresh your memory.” He stood and began to stroll around the perimeter of the cave. “I have been alive longer than you--and yes, I do know all about you people. We are not immortal, but since we’ve been here, we have discovered ways to live a very long time.

“Just before the birth of Christ, I came to know a man now known as Dominic de Santo. The young man had recently been made immortal and I’m told he took some time to adapt to your ways of life. Some might say he never did. He was an impressionable young thing, and I needed a scapegoat, of sorts. I needed a player, so I enlisted his help. It took centuries to gain his trust, but time was the one thing I did have. And yes, to answer your unasked question, I did take full advantage of his naïveté. Why not? He was young and stupid and so in love with you.” He shrugged again.

“He told me about a young immortal woman of incredible beauty who lived in a remote part of the Basque mountains. A hidden city, he said, filled with immortals who protected mankind from all sorts of nasty things. Things like me, I’m sure, as we do not have any inherent interest in ensuring mankind’s survival.” Dane took in a deep breath. “The woman craved adventure, and had taken to traveling the world. It took some time for us to find her--the world was not as small as it is now, you know. But once we did...”

Jason was appalled, disgusted, and ready to kill. How he wished he could break these ropes. Maxim would be dead inside of a minute.

Maxim leveled a brooding gaze on him and took to his pacing again.

“You look like shit, Defender. Azeal’s potions are second to none, I must say. Enjoy eternity in the hell he created just for you. My God, you people are a disgrace to the concept of heroes and protectors of humanity. You can’t even protect yourselves. How easy,” he purred. “How easy it was to take you down, which brings me back to you, my little immortal.”

He swung his gaze back to Riana. “When you were still in Malanaya, you spent all your time with this Defender. Dominic--Nic--hated the fact that you preferred Jason’s company to his. So, he sought out my sorcerer and bought a very powerful spell, one that would keep you from seeing your true love. It worked, didn’t it? Rather well, I’d say.” He chuckled. “Jealousy is a wicked old girl, isn’t she?” He inhaled deeply. “Well, enough of that. Ancient history.

“But just so you know, I was the one who had you drugged. Sepheus wanted an heir, someone who could keep the gates closed forever. I told him about you after we’d finally found you, twenty five years ago, and from that moment on, that was it. He would have you and no one else would do. We made it happen. My people took you to a dark place, stripped you of your clothes, and bound you to the bed.”

From the shadows, Nic stepped forward. He’d been there all along, waiting for his

moment. “She’s been through enough, Dane. We don’t need to rehash this crap.”

Jason’s anger spiked. The rogue shouldn’t be allowed to live after what he’d done. He pulled at the ropes binding his wrists and felt a surge of power in his veins. “Nic, you’ll die for this. I wish like hell I could be the one to do it.”

Nic sauntered over to him. Standing six-foot-two, with collar-length hair that always seemed to hang over his black eyes, Nic was the consummate gothic punk of the 1980s, especially with his usual attire of black jeans and sleeveless black T-shirt.

He’d gone rogue years ago. No one wanted to hunt him down. No one wanted to get close enough to cut his throat. The man was insane, dangerous and insane.

“Who’s going to do it, Velazquez? You?” Nic spat on the ground, only millimeters from Jason’s face. “You can’t even save your own woman.” He delivered a swift kick to the center of Jason’s stomach.

Whoosh! All the air left his lungs.

“After I put you in the ground, guess who’s getting the girl?” Nic kicked him again.

Jason cursed, muscles tightly coiled in defense. Pain seared his insides, made his eyes water, made him sweat.

Maxim sidled up and rested his hand on Nic’s shoulder. “Enough, Dominic. Let us continue with the Plan. Come.”

He strode to the dark statue. He faced it, and the harsh lines on his face smoothed. He looked up into the stony face in utter reverence. “It is time, my lord, your time.”

Nic joined him in the center of the cave; his attention slid to Riana, who watched with fury in her green gaze.

A crack appeared in the stone figure, then another ... and another. A moment later, the entire statue became an intricate web of cracks and crevices. Piece by piece, it crumbled. From the dust and rubble appeared a man standing at least seven feet tall. He stepped clear of the debris.

Maxim dropped to his knees, bowing his head. “My lord.”

Nic looked up, stepping back several paces. His face pale and his mouth open, he looked as if he were facing a Corillian raider. “Jee-zus H. Christ.”

If Jason had known exactly where he was, he would’ve sent out a call for help.

“Rise,” said Lord Vox.

Chapter Twenty

Dane got to his feet but kept his head lowered.

Nic retreated to the shadows. He belonged there, amid the demons and shadow serpents.

Vox stretched then ran long fingers down the length of his arm. His black pants and jacket looked like silk, as did the cream-colored sweater.

“Lord Vox, the shiema’s passing is imminent. He has called for the boy.”

“Excellent. Sadaar will be great again, I foresee it. Upon my return to power, the entire Nitooki tribe will be executed for treason. I should like to see their bodies displayed when it is done, to serve as a reminder. My authority will not be questioned again.”

His voice was powerful, hypnotic. It had an odd resonance, as if it were actually the combination of two voices, one low, one an octave higher.

Riana sat with her arm around Willis. He shivered in terror, and nothing she could do made it any better. Yet.

She was waiting for her chance to strike. When the time came, Dominic de Santo was a dead man, for what he just did to Jason, for what he did to her twenty-five years ago, and for what he was--a waste of immortal flesh.

Lord Vox brushed past Maxim and glided toward her. “So this is the mother. What will you do with her, Dane, after we have reclaimed Sadaar?”

“We no longer have any use for her. I’d planned to kill both her and the companion, my Lord.”

Vox smiled. “She is mine. I do have a use for such a lovely creature.”

“Yes, of course.” Maxim nodded his head once.

Jason tried to sit up. “Leave her alone.”

Dane faced him and raised his palm. “You’re more trouble than you’re worth, Defender. Sleep now, forever.”

Jason’s eyes closed. His breathing became shallow and slow, and his skin grew pale. Riana felt him slip into the place where reality and dreams converged, the place where no Defender ever wanted to be.

He’d entered the dream state. He would never awaken again on his own. Because Dane’s magic had induced the state, she didn’t know what, if anything, could be used to heal him.

Only a few hours ago, he’d told her that sometimes things happened, that events could be uncontrollable. Sometimes people died. She’d screamed at him in frustration, in anger. She’d told him she would not lose him and he would not die.

But he’d known, somehow, this was going to happen and had tried to prepare her. She hadn’t listened. Her last words to him were harsh, accusatory. She’d called him a liar.

“You, Mother. You will come with me.”

She met Vox’s icy gaze, irises that were nearly white. He stood before her with

his hand extended. She was supposed to take it, but the thought of touching such a foul creature made her ill. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

He bent and claimed her hand. She tried to pull away from the frigid grasp, but his hand was huge, and his fingers like steel.

He pulled her to her feet.

"You will come with me." He cupped her chin in his free hand. "You will not resist nor defy me, nor will you deny me your company. You live only because I wish it. If I should find you to be more trouble than you're worth, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Riana felt a curious tingling run over her skin, from her head to her toes. A spell? In her head, she heard a low chant, a repetition of three words, or so it sounded, that drew her attention. It was hypnotic, captivating, and she listened and wondered what it was, then why it wouldn't stop when she decided she'd listened long enough.

Vox looked back at Jason.

"There is another here like them," he said to Dane. "An immortal. He has greater power than these two but can still be destroyed. Send the Codexus to kill him. Tell him to make it appear an accident. I do not want Julian or the shiema to feel a shift in the power sphere."

Dane bowed. "It will be done, my Lord."

He seemed more submissive now. Riana thought he looked smaller and weak, the polar opposite of what he'd been an hour ago.

Vox leaned so close she felt his cold breath along her cheek. "Walk with me, my beauty. Bring the child."

Her limbs felt thick; her movement was sluggish as she turned to Willis. "Come with us."

Mama?

"It's all right, Willis. Vox will take care of us. Come."

She looked at Vox. His smile was genuine and made him look so handsome. She returned it. The phrase *power sphere* tumbled about her mind.

"Who is the Codexus? Is he a Falcon, too?"

"He is my personal executioner," Vox said, reaching to grasp her hand. He tucked it into the crook of his arm.

Riana fought the haziness in her mind, trying to understand exactly what he'd said, seemed important. "So, he could be anything, human, falcon."

"He is Sadaaran. Did you not notice his purple eyes? All Sadaarans have them." His smile turned sardonic. "As I will, again. Soon."

"And what is this power sphere?"

"You may think of it as a force shield above Calizimar. The human world cannot know of Sadaarin magic. You understand about things that must remain hidden, don't you?"

"Very well," she said.

He led them through a long, dark tunnel that seemed to wind this way and that, up a little and then back down. Like a world beneath the world, the tunnel system was intricate, with capillaries leading to places she could only imagine. Torches that hung on the walls smelled of sulfur and grapefruit. If it weren't for the chanting in her head, she might've been able to remember what that meant. Her intuition said it was important, like

power sphere.

At the end of the tunnel was a dark-gray door. Vox faced her, laying his hands on her shoulders.

“Beyond this door is the future, our future, Riana. I am the exiled ruler of the underworld of Sadaar and the Shocki Haan. When the gates open, as they must after the shiema tries to give his power to your boy, a new world will be born. And yours will shatter.

“Sadaar was like your definition of hell when I ruled, a paradise for Sadaarans then. But we grew fat and lazy and complacent, and when the Nitooki tribesmen attacked, our arrogance led to our demise. All but one of my followers was killed. The Codexus and I were sent here. Others were sent to kill me, for the sport of it, because I was a danger to the priestess, until I took refuge inside the statue. There I remained for thousands of years, waiting. Just waiting--sleeping and planning what I would do once I was able to return to my world.

“Mostly I waited. I will not be denied this moment.”

His tongue came out to slide seductively over his bottom lip, riveting her gaze to the gleaming skin of his full mouth. He gave her a smile that was equally tempting, and so charming.

“The future awaits us.” He held out his hand and the door slowly opened.

Impressed with his telekinetic ability, Riana passed over the threshold. Willis followed.

Once again above ground, she scanned her surroundings. The building was large, with windows all around. She went to one and looked out.

“This is the Falcon Great Hall. I detest this place, as I detest these people. They guard the gates to make sure no one can ever pass through them again. Once, we would give the newly deceased a chance to be a part of our world, but only those who met our requirements.” He chuckled. “It was fun. I love chaos.

“But that changed when Kodiak sent her tribesmen to defeat us. Now the Falcons guard the dead and prevent the Sadaarans from increasing their numbers. My people do not live forever, Riana. We are a dying race because of the Falcons and that witch, Kodiak. That will all change when Sadaar is once again mine.”

Riana thought she should protest what he was doing, that it was wrong. The soft chanting in her mind caught her attention again. Such a lovely sound, though she couldn't understand the words.

Three of them, she thought, but what they were, she didn't know. She smiled anyway.

“Come, beauty.” Vox reached for her. “Let us bring about the change together.”

“Change,” she echoed. “Yes.”

He led her through huge double doors.

The chapel doubled as a Great Hall. Stained glass windows hung just below the ceiling. The open windows allowed fresh air into the Hall. The carpet was an unremarkable shade of brown, but with the hanging plants and stained glass windows, it seemed inviting, pleasant enough.

People gathered, either standing in groups or alone. At least a hundred, she suspected, all waiting for something. At the far end, a lone man waited.

“This is where Sepheus will conduct the ritual transference of power. I've

experienced this only once before in my very long life. Tell your son to approach the dais.”

Riana faced her son and knelt. “This is what you wanted, baby, to be a part of their world. Go stand up there, and that man, Sepheus, will tell you what to do next.”

She brushed his cheek and smiled reassuringly. The chanting made it impossible for her to hear his thoughts.

“Go,” she said.

Standing, she took her place at Vox’s side.

Vox continued, “When the shiema completes the ritual, nothing will happen. He will die, and there will be no one to keep the gates closed. Then your son will be free to leave.” He placed her hand on the crook of his arm, patting it gently. “And then I will reclaim my throne.”

“We can leave?” She smiled again, watching her son stride proudly down the center aisle. All eyes were on him.

“Your son may leave. We will wait now for the shiema to initiate the process. I do not believe it will be much longer.”

Willis stood at the base of the steps. The shiema lay on his side, clad in black robes, on a pallet of thick blankets, atop a slab of black marble. Vox was right. Sepheus looked horrible. His long gray hair was wet, matted against his head, and his bluish skin was dappled with dark splotches.

Willis faced him. Riana felt proud of her son. He’d handled this challenge so well. Perfectly, as if made for this moment.

She settled into a comfortable silence, content to stand at Vox’s side. Scanning the gathering of Falcons, she marveled at their patience, how they quietly waited for the ceremony to begin.

Near the back of the room stood a man with golden hair and eyes to match. She was certain she’d seen him before, but the memory escaped her. Perhaps she could introduce herself after the ceremony.

Soft chanting in her head made her thoughts slippery. Certain it was something important, she tried harder to call the thoughts back from the murky darkness.

The name popped into her head. *Azeal*.

Vox smiled down at her. “Have I told you yet what beautiful eyes you have?”

The chanting continued and whatever she’d been thinking of was now gone.

Beaming, Riana shook her head. “No, but I think I’d like you to tell me that more often.”

His grin broadened. Warm fingers caressed her jaw. “I do believe I will.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Far below the Falcon compound, in one of many tunnels that comprised their subterranean sanctuary, Dane was trying to figure out what to do with the Defender's body. He wasn't dead yet, but Azeal's potion was strong.

The Defender wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

"Take the body to the lake, weight it, and dump it in the water."

Nic nodded, more dark hair falling across his black eyes. "What's going to happen to Riana?"

Dane shrugged. "What difference does it make? I gave her to Lord Vox. He'll do whatever he wants with her. I suspect he'll take her to the underworld with him. Why do you ask? Don't tell me you still have a crush on her."

"It's not a crush." Nic shifted his weight onto his other leg and tilted his chin up. "I want her."

Dane toed the Defender's ribs. "I don't want this thing in my sight any longer. Please get rid of it."

Nic didn't move. "Did you hear what I said? I want her."

Dane straightened, brushing hair out of his face. "And I told you I gave her to Vox. If you want her, you'll have to take her from him. It's utterly out of my hands."

Crack!

The sudden blow to his face splattered blood across his sleeve and onto the cave wall. He reeled and fell to his knees. Wiping his nose, he looked at his fingers, then turned to the rogue.

"What the hell?"

Nic hauled him to his feet by the lapels of his coat and shoved him back against the wall. "Take me to him, or I'll kill you right here, right now." He smiled, a testament to the fact he wasn't right in the head. "Want to find out if I'm bluffing? Bring it on, you sick...."

Dane raised both hands. "Okay, okay." He glanced at the unconscious companion. "I guess he's not going anywhere."

Nic's black gaze followed Dane's, his brow furrowed. "I never liked him. He didn't even claim her as his mate until today. I feel the bond between them now. What kind of idiot ignores a woman like her for so long? If she was mine, I would've pursued her as long as I had to. Loser. He deserves what he got."

"I should tell you she'll never accept you," Dane warned. "The spell is fading. She took Sadaarin blood into her body recently. That's the only way the spell could be broken. Now her memories are returning. She knows you're the one who gave her the child. So does the companion."

Nic released him. "Then I'll have to make it up to her somehow. As for Jason, who cares? He's about to become fish food."

Dane grinned. Nic was in for a rude surprise. "I don't think she's too inclined to forgive you."

Nic punched him in the sternum, slamming him into the wall. Air whooshed out of his lungs. "I don't care what you think. That's between us and only us." He tilted his head toward the tunnel. "Let's go. Get moving."

Dane coughed, and a moment later, caught his breath. He'd been a fool to think the rogue could be controlled. He took some comfort knowing that, now that the mother and son were safely within the Falcon walls, Nic's counsel was not needed. Assuming Nic survived his confrontation with Vox, Dane would simply turn him out on the street. Let his own people deal with him.

He'd started for the Great Hall when he heard a shuffle behind him.

Spinning about, he studied the small subterranean cavern.

"What?" Nic asked.

The slumbering Defender didn't look like he'd moved. Azeal's venom seemed to be working perfectly. Nothing was out of place.

Dane shook his head. "Nothing. I thought I heard something." He glanced at the rogue. "I must be imagining things."

"Jason is still asleep," Nic said. "Trust me, I'd know if something was up."

"I'm sure." Dane continued forward.

Today, the gates would open for the first time in more than ten thousand years. No one had even seen them for that long. Were they still the color of blackened gold?

He had only heard stories. Now, he wanted to see what he'd protected for centuries. That is, until he'd discovered Vox.

Until he'd discovered the Plan.

He pointed to the doors. "Through those doors is your future. Go make peace with the mother so you can rest easy when death comes for you."

Nic looked at him through his veil of black hair. "We'll see who dies first, Falcon." He stepped forward and opened the door.

Dane heard a noise again, back in the small cavern. Like a groan, and then maybe something just above a whisper. If he didn't know better, he'd have sworn Jason had whispered the mother's name.

* * * *

The shiema bolted upright. "This is not my heir! Guards! Kill this abomination! Where is Julian?"

Two guards pushed past Riana and Vox on their way to the dais, where Willis trembled alone.

Riana was dimly aware of their presence, and the way they'd thundered down the aisle with their tense expressions and swords already drawn.

She looked at Vox, marveling at the sculpted features of his handsome face.

"You shall rule at my side, Riana. Your name and your great beauty shall be immortalized in our history. You will be known as the...."

Mama! Help me! I'm scared.

She gasped. "Willis!"

The chanting in her head became a roar in her head.

No wo mati no wo mati no wo mati....

She heard nothing else now, and yet she still had the sense that something was very, very wrong. Turning away from Vox, she saw her son, surrounded by the shiema's guards.

Vox slid his warm fingers along the contours of her cheek. “My lovely Riana, let nothing trouble you now. This time ... is our time.” His voice was so soft and hypnotic. He commanded her attention.

His arm curled around her shoulders.

Help me, Mama.

“My queen, let me tell you about the world you shall rule....”

Vox’s voice faded and for a moment she had a reprieve from him and from the voices in her head.

This was not right.

And then the chanting started again.

No wo mati no wo mati no wo mati....

Willis stood surrounded by the shiema’s guards, who were now raising their swords.

Sepheus’s voice bellowed above the din of the chant. “Where is my heir? Julian? Dane? Where is the heir?”

No wo mati no wo mati no wo mati....

Mama, please.

“Willis?” Her own voice sounded foreign, as if someone else were speaking.

Sepheus continued, “Kill the abomination!”

“No,” she whispered.

She tried to pull out of Vox’s grasp.

He pulled her tight against his body. “Rule Sadaar with me, my Queen, we shall....”

Thip!

Thip!

Thip!

Riana looked up.

Three tiny arrows protruded from Vox’s neck. He teetered, finally dropping to one knee. He started to reach up, as if to pluck them from his body. He stopped midway and let his arms fall to his sides. The arrows quivered with Vox’s rapid heartbeat.

Tiny arrows, from a little crossbow.

Jason.

She spun about.

Jason stood with his crossbow in one hand and with Dane, struggling to free himself, firmly in the other. He was talking, but she couldn’t hear a word.

Battle came to her mind. And then, just that fast, it was gone and the soft chanting made her smile.

She faced the dais again.

The guards had surrounded Willis. He lay flat against the floor, his little body quivering in fear. She wished she could hear him.

Several Falcons apparently weren’t happy with the ceremony. They shifted their form and, amid a cloud of gray smoke and feathers, took to the air and soared through the open windows.

A phrase came to her mind.

“Power sphere,” she said. She looked at Jason. “*Power sphere*. Important.”

Jason’s eyes closed. A moment later, he raised his crossbow over his head. His

hand began to glow. The soft purplish light passed through the crossbow and streamed upward through the ceiling.

Whump.

A sonic thud shook the floor. Was that the power sphere?

“Vox. How did you get here?”

Sepheus was sitting up. “You cannot be here, nor can you be allowed to return to Sadaar.” Reaching into his robes, he drew out a small wand, pointed it at Vox, and began a chant.

“By the order of the ninth decree, you are hereby sentenced to death by decapitation,” he said, “for trespassing, for theft, and for murder.”

“No, you cannot,” Vox said. “I won’t allow it.”

Sepheus whispered more chants.

Complete lucidity came to her, and she held onto it for all she was worth.

Gone, finally. The voices were gone.

She drew her dagger and plunged it into the side of Vox’s neck, with more strength than she thought she possessed. The blade severed the carotid artery. She wrenched the dagger sideways, neatly severing the head.

Both fell away.

“Go, Riana,” Jason said. “I’ll take care of the body. Go get your boy.”

Sprinting down the aisle, she skidded to a halt just inches away from Willis, her dagger at the ready. Flanked by the guards, he stood shivering and terrified. “Get away from him.”

Neither guard moved.

“Touch him, and I swear you’re next, both of you.”

Both guards looked to the shiema.

“Sir,” Riana said to Sepheus. “My son is like me. He’s just a boy, an innocent pawn in a scheme to open the gates of the underworld. Please, tell your guards to stand down.”

Several Falcons gasped. Some whispered to others. She could see they were shocked and appalled. Others eyed her with suspicion.

Still others took to their Falcon forms and fled.

Sepheus eyed her much the same way. He waggled a weathered finger at the guards. “Give them some room.”

The guards both took two steps back.

Sepheus squinted at her. “You were supposed to give me an heir.”

“I believed I had, sir. We were lied to.”

“By whom? Who wanted to open the gates? Tell me, woman, who would do such a thing?”

Facing the shiema, she slipped her blade into its sheath. “Julian Richards and Dane Maxim, sir. They planned to return Vox to Sadaar.”

Few Falcons were left. She heard more gasps, more murmurs among them.

Sepheus sputtered then coughed so hard his face turned red. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. He quickly wiped it away and crooked his fingers at Jason.

“Bring the traitor here.”

He dragged the reluctant Dane to the shiema.

Jason spoke, before anyone else could interfere. “Highness, you might want to

consider that many of your guards follow Dane. His people are everywhere.”

“I suggest you take care of this problem quickly,” Jason said.

Sepheus nodded. “Quite right.”

He waved that little wand.

Dane grasped his throat, falling to his knees as he disappeared.

“You have no heir, sir,” Jason said to the shiema.

Sepheus shook his head. “No heir. The power required to keep the gates closed has been a part of my family for generations. As decreed by the Nitooki priestess, it cannot be passed to a man not of my ancestry. I trusted Dane to help me find a woman who would provide me with a new leader.” He looked at her. “Dane told me about you, that you were immortal. It seemed a perfect solution. My legacy would have been my son, an immortal who would keep our people safe and the gates closed forever. I am distressed to learn that I was deceived ... by my own people ... by a man I’ve trusted for years.”

Riana could empathize. “I was deceived as well, sir.”

“Yes, I know. You were supposed to live with me, as my companion. You both were to be well cared for, your every need met, every desire fulfilled. They didn’t tell you that, did they?”

“No, sir, they didn’t.”

“I thought not. I did this with the most honorable of intentions. I am truly grieved by these events.” Sepheus continued, “And now it is too late. I am an old man, and my time here is at an end. There is nothing I can do.”

The doors to the great hall burst open. Christopher stepped over the threshold, leading a tied and gagged Julian. They approached the dais.

Christopher grinned. “Look who I found trying to escape.”

Sepheus looked at Julian. For the first time, real emotion showed on the old shiema’s face. He felt betrayed. “My most trusted advisor. Julian, how could you do this to me? Your family has served mine for thousands of years.”

Christopher removed the gag.

Julian lowered his head. “I’ve nothing to say.”

Sepheus’s eyebrows shot up. “Nothing? This is treason, Julian. You know the punishment for this.”

“I do.”

Julian at least had the decency to look ashamed.

“Then you accept it?”

“Yes.”

The shiema let out a tired breath. “So be it. You will spend the rest of your days in Sadaar, with no possibility of release. My rule is absolute and unchangeable.”

Julian didn’t look up as he, too, slowly disappeared.

Jason grasped Christopher’s shoulder. “And where the hell were you?”

He shrugged. “When I woke up, I was starving. I went to feed on a Falcon.”

Riana gasped.

He looked at her. “What? They were nearby. I didn’t hurt him.”

Jason glanced at her before turning to the shiema. “We cannot create an heir from nothing. To keep the gates from opening, there’s only one thing we can do.”

Riana’s eyes widened. Leave it to a master healer to find a way.

“We must change you,” he said. “How do you feel about living forever?”

Sepheus’s brow furrowed. “Change me? Is this possible?”

“I assure you, it is. And it is our best hope to keep the gates closed, now and forever.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, immortal.”

“You must understand, you won’t be Verlinean anymore. You’ll be like us. Riana and I are Eskarians, immortals dedicated to the protection of life, all life. Because you’ll be one of us as well as leader of the Order, I am asking for an alliance between our people.”

Riana sighed in relief. His strength made her proud.

Jason, the master of healing, had found a solution that benefited everyone.

The Falcons responded by clicking their tongues.

Riana didn’t know what it meant until she scanned the audience with her mind and found a nearly unanimous agreement with Jason’s proposal.

“You will require nothing more than blood from now until the end of time. Do you agree to this?”

Sepheus nodded. “Yes. For my people, I agree.”

Riana looked back at the Falcons. “May we have a chalice?”

Jason bent to the ailing shiema and began to take his blood. As he drank, a nervous little Falcon trotted down the aisle with a beautiful golden chalice. With an elegant bow, he presented it to Riana.

“We thank you,” the child said. His purple eyes glowed in the morning light.

“You’re welcome. We’re pleased to help.” She inclined her head.

The boy bounded back up the aisle.

When Jason was finished, he stood up.

The shiema was unconscious. His heartbeat was erratic, and his breath was shallow. He was dying.

Riana gave Jason her dagger.

He cut a deep hole in his wrist, and held it over the chalice.

The name came to her the moment she met his gaze. *Azeal*. He was trying to escape in the midst of a small group of departing Falcons. Azeal was the kind of man you couldn’t help but notice. His golden features were striking. He was handsome--deadly, but handsome.

She gasped. “Azeal. He’s here--and he’s trying to get away.”

Reclaiming her dagger, she rushed past the remaining throng to cut off Azeal’s escape route.

“Going somewhere?” she asked.

Azeal was no fool. He raised both hands in acquiescence.

“I do not wish to die today, lady.”

“He’s mine,” Christopher said, drawing his own blade.

“No,” Riana snapped. “He’s mine, for what he did to Jason, Willis, and me.”

Christopher sheathed his blade and nodded. “Enjoy.”

She didn’t miss the disappointment in his eyes and was grateful for the gift. She needed this.

A low rumble came from behind. The gates glowed and began to open.

Azeal darted away, grinning. “It appears you are too late. The gates are opening.

Today, a new world begins.

Riana's blade was already out. "Okay, Azeal, the way I see it is that you have about two minutes left of your life. Anything you care to confess?"

The wizard bolted for the exit. Though his speed and agility had increased significantly, he was still no match for a Defender. Riana caught him by the throat and threw him to the floor.

He gasped for breath. "Damn you. I'm immortal. You can't kill me now."

She tightened her grasp. "Are you sure about that? You're a threat to humanity. For attempting to open the gates of the underworld, trying to kill my mate and child, and for unleashing Uleah the Great Wizard, you will die."

"No!" Azeal swung his fist, catching Riana in the jaw. She fell, and Azeal sprang up.

He ran toward the doors. She caught up and blocked his path.

"Stand aside, woman! I can go around you or through you, but make no mistake, I'm leaving this place, alive and well. Get out of my way."

She crooked her fingers at him. "Bring it on, baby."

Realizing he was trapped, he did the only thing he could--he ran toward the gates.

She was already on her feet, cutting Azeal off at the base. Wind, like a great exhalation from the underworld, blew through the Great Hall.

Azeal punched her in the stomach and raced up the steps. He grasped one of the spindles of the gate to try to pry it open faster. He was going inside Sadaar.

Riana followed, snagging him by the shoulders and hauling him off the gates. They tumbled, a rolling mass of flailing arms and legs, fists and teeth.

Azeal escaped yet again. He shot to his feet and...

Riana hurled her dagger as hard as she could. Her blades sank all the way into the base of his neck.

She rushed to this wizard, and caught him by the hair, shoved him to the floor, and ended the man's life. "Finally."

It was over. They'd won.

Relieved, Riana blew out a breath and leaned against the wall. She watched the gates, expecting them to close any minute.

Any minute now.

Any minute.

The gates weren't closing.

She looked at her mate. "Jason, the gates...."

Jason finished feeding the shiema and set the chalice on the altar.

"Sleep, Sepheus, and heal. A new life awaits you."

He stepped off the dais, walking toward the blackened portal. To Riana's complete horror, Sadaarans began to appear on the other side. Men without morals, demons, thieves--they all waited for the gates to open. They would be through in minutes. And then what? Who would send them back? How would they get the gates to close again?

Their worlds were really going to collide.

Riana's attention went back to Jason, who stood at the base of the gates. He raised his arms to shoulder level. As if in a trance, he stared at nothing, saw nothing. He began to speak, to chant.

Wind from the underworld continued to blow. Riana's hair whipped around her face. She caught it and held it back. Jason was doing something he'd never done before.

Using powerful magic.

His eyes glowed brightly, like amethysts. On and on he chanted, until the gates finally closed with a soft thud.

Jason lifted his arms over his head and closed his eyes. His body trembled, and sweat broke out on his face and chest. Christopher watched, his mouth open in awe.

Minutes later, the Sadaarans within lost their chance to escape. The disappointed faces shrank back into darkness.

The gates were closing.

Christopher strode to the dais and bounded up the steps. He bent to brush Willis's head.

"How you doing, buddy?"

Willis smiled. *Fine.*

"Glad to hear it." He studied the sleeping shiema then looked back as the gates and the black clouds around it dissolved. "He did it."

Jason teetered. "Yeah, we..."

He slumped to the floor.

Riana rushed to his side. She dropped to her knees. "Jason?"

He looked at her. "I'm sorry. I can't hang on..."

Grasping his shoulders, she tried to shake him awake. "Jason, what are you talking about?" She cradled his face in her hands. "Don't leave me now. We won. The gates are closed. Vox is dead, and so is Dane. Our lives belong to us again. You can't leave." Tears burned her eyes. "Don't leave me now. We need you, Willis and I."

She looked to her son. "We're family, right?"

Willis's gaze was steady. He thought a moment and then nodded. *Family.*

Riana's attention went back to Jason. "See? All of us, we're family. Please ... don't go."

His body disappeared.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I don’t know what happened,” Riana snapped, trying like hell to rein in her temper. “He just disappeared. No, he didn’t phase-shift. He just flat out disappeared. How the f...” She caught herself. “How should I know what happened to him? Are you accusing me of something here?”

She sat in Blair’s office, along with Christopher. Her bruises were finally healed. She’d taken some wild punches from Azeal. She would’ve healed faster if she’d gone into submersion, but refused to do it. If Jason came home, she wanted to be there to welcome him.

They all did.

Riana hated the looks her Eskarian sisters were giving her, as if she were already a widow. She wasn’t. Damn it, she wasn’t.

When she’d returned to Jason’s house, gifts of every size and shape greeted her, Eskarian binding gifts, like wedding presents. The moment Riana saw them, she’d burst into tears.

Lissa had been the first to say it. *I’m so sorry, Riana. We all loved Jason....*

Seemed like an eternity since he’d left, and yet it had been only a week.

Blair set his black gaze, the one that made her peers cringe in fear, on her. She was hard-pressed not to do the same.

“Riana, you will maintain control before your superior officers.”

She nodded. “Sir.”

Griffin rose from one of the nearby chairs and stood before both her and Christopher.

“So, you don’t know where he is, and you had nothing to do with his disappearance.”

She glared at him. “Jesus, Griffin. You don’t actually think something like that, do you?”

He shrugged. “I have to ask, Riana. You and Christopher were the last ones to see him alive.”

Last ones to see him alive. The words stung. Her mate was gone, and she wasn’t really sure how she was going to live without him.

“I have no idea what happened, and I sure as hell didn’t have anything to do with it, and damn you for even asking.”

“Riana!” Blair slammed his fist down on the desk. “*Desist. Now.*”

“Sir,” she said again. She knew she was behaving badly in Blair’s eyes. “He was my mate. I love him with all my heart and miss him terribly. I would never have harmed him.”

Blair’s black gaze swung to Christopher. “Any other observations?”

Christopher shook his head thoughtfully. “No. Like Riana said, Jason was there one minute, gone the next. He had Sadaarin magic in him. His eyes had turned purple, like the indigents of the underworld. He used the magic to close the gates and then

disappeared.”

“You think he’s passed?” Griffin asked.

“Yeah, I do.” Christopher’s brow furrowed. His gaze dropped to the satchel on his lap, Jason’s medicinals. “It’s been a week. Jason had the power to heal anything. If he could heal himself, wouldn’t he come back to us?”

The tears came again. Riana tried to blink them back.

They all seemed so willing to forget about him, to let go and move forward. She couldn’t, wouldn’t. “Damn you, too, Christopher. You’re supposed to be his friend.”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye but said nothing.

Griffin turned to Riana. “Do you think he’s passed?”

She shook her head. “No, he hasn’t passed.” She wiped the tears from her face and rose to her feet. “Now, if there’s nothing further, my son and I are going home.” To what, she didn’t know.

“Riana,” Griffin said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, “for what it’s worth, I don’t think he’s passed either.”

“Then what can we do about that?” She didn’t dare let her heart fill with anything resembling hope, something that could shatter with a single word.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, let me know if you come up with something.” She looked down at Willis. “We’re going home. What do you have to say to these gentlemen?”

Willis looked at her first and then Griffin.

Thank you, he said. He looked at Blair and lowered his head in a respectful bow. *Thank you*.

Riana regarded them both then she inclined her head, just as Willis had. “Thank you for your time, your patience and your compassion. My mate is missing, potentially dead. I have to be alone.”

She sighed. Coming home to him had been a revelation. Though she hadn’t recognized the emptiness inside her, once she’d mated with him, everything seemed to fall into place. Even Willis had had a change of heart. Now he was gone. How was that fair? She wanted to scream at the injustice. Scream until someone changed it, somehow, someway.

“Thank you for reinstating my Defender status.”

“You earned it,” Blair said.

Griffin nodded. “Agreed.”

“Gentlemen.” She left the office, Willis in tow.

We’re not going to see Sendagi again? Willis asked.

“I don’t know, baby, maybe not.”

He thought about it for a moment. *Too bad*.

She reached out to brush the silky insides of his ear. “You miss him, too, don’t you?”

No, not really. I like the Griffin best. He smiled. He tickles me. Maybe he could be my dad. Sendagi is always so serious. No fun. But I know you like him. You get all funny when you see him. The Griffin could be my dad.

Got all funny? No, she didn’t. She softly snorted.

“No, he couldn’t. You already have a dad.” And Griffin has his own child on the way. Willis didn’t yet understand the concept of forever-mates.

His little forehead furrowed as he thought about that. *Dominic, right?*
“Yes, that’s right, but I don’t know if we’ll see Nic again, might be just the two of us.”

Can we stay here with the Griffin and Christopher? He gave her such a plaintive look, she didn’t know if she could deny him.

“What about our home?”

I don’t know.

“Okay, well, let’s talk about it later. Is that all right with you?” She brushed the little furrows in his head.

Okay. He smiled again. She loved his bobcat smile.

She walked out of Blair’s house and, in her mind, out of their lives forever. With each step, her heart ached a little more, and life seemed a little more empty and bleak. She rubbed her chest.

“I think we need to head home. We have some new foals on the way, and I should be there for that.”

Okay, Mama. If it makes you happy.

“It does.” Sort of.

* * * *

Riana watched Willis from the glider-chair on the porch as he hopped around in the snow. One foot was propped against the stair railing. She slouched, rocking back and forth, arms crossed over her chest.

Her black cowboy boots had gotten wet in the snow, and now her feet were cold, which meant she’d be freezing soon. Lacking the energy to get up and take care of herself, she just let the cold seep into her bones. This kind of freeze would make her sleepy in no time, and that’s just what she wanted. Dale, her ranch manager, had already said he’d watch Willis, if necessary.

She wasn’t doing so good. She didn’t care. Much as she wanted to pretend Jason hadn’t been in her life long enough to affect it, the truth was, he had. Now that he was gone, she couldn’t manage to get on with things.

Two months he’d been gone, and each day she slipped farther into the dark abyss inside her mind. She just couldn’t shake the feelings of loss, emptiness, and loneliness. The icy claws of despair had a firm grasp on her.

They’d moved in to their new house only a week ago, and even that hadn’t done a thing to lift her spirits.

“You look like shit.”

She didn’t bother to look up. “What do you want?”

Nic came around and blocked her view of Willis. He leaning a scrawny hip against one of the porch pillars.

“Do you still think he’s alive?”

Her brows furrowed. “I’m beginning to think he isn’t.”

He knelt and touched her leg to bring her attention fully to him. Long, stringy bangs hung in his eyes, and if she didn’t know better, she’d think he wore a bit of dark eye shadow, hard to tell with all that hair in his face. He was thinner than most Defenders and more vicious than even Griffin.

“I know you loved him.” He looked away, sniffed dryly, and returned his black gaze to hers. “Maybe you’d consider me a tolerable replacement.”

“I wouldn’t. Get off my property before I sick the dogs on you.”

“In time, I will. Meantime, listen to me for a minute. I never meant to hurt you. I knew about Vox but had no idea where he was. That was the last piece of information I was waiting for. Dane didn’t trust me with that kind of information either.” He sighed.

She scooted her chair around him so she could watch Willis. She loved watching her son.

Nic still deserved to die. If she’d had the energy, she would’ve done it. “Can’t imagine why.”

He threw her a hurt look. “Do you even know what happened? Griffin condemned me without knowing all the facts. Did you know that?”

She gave him a lopsided smirk. “Is there some reason I should care?”

“You’re a Defender,” he said hotly. “You’re supposed to be dedicated to fairness and life and the protection of those who cannot protect themselves. If I tell you I was wrongly accused of killing that woman, does it mean anything to you?”

Riana had seen the woman in question, who looked like she’d been mauled by a bear. Randy had come down from Canada, and after the attack, had informed Griffin that Nic had been the one to do it. Riana knew Randy and Nic couldn’t stand one another. Everyone did. She also knew Randy was very capable of telling that kind of bald-faced lie.

She didn’t think Nic was so far gone he’d killed a human, but you never knew with Nic. He lived by his own code.

Had he really saved her life that night? Maybe. She’d never know what plans Dane had had for her, and Nic might never tell the truth.

Would she forgive him? Probably not.

She glared at him. “If you have an issue with unfairness, I suggest you take it to Griffin, not me. I pass judgment on no one.”

“How sanctimonious of you,” he hissed. “But you *have* passed judgment on me. I resent that.”

She waved him off. “Whatever. Take it to Griffin.”

A tense moment passed.

He rested his hand on her knee. “Did you know I found my benekeda?”

“No. Quit touching me, asshole. Why aren’t you with her?”

He winced before turning away. “She left.”

The thought came unbidden that he’d caused her to leave.

“I didn’t,” he said flatly. “I loved her.”

“I’m sorry.” She understood his feeling of loss yet still felt uncomfortable. “I am. But really, why the hell are you here, Nic? I don’t care about you or your benekeda or anything you did or didn’t do.”

His head lowered. “I know you don’t.” A long pause. “I know where Jason is.”

Now he had her attention. She sat up. “Where? You’d better not be messing with me.”

He looked up at the sky, a little smile on his mouth. “See how quickly they decide my life is of value.”

“Get over yourself.” Riana grabbed his throat and squeezed. “You tell me where he is this very minute.”

“Or what? You’ll rip my throat out? I wish you would,” he breathed. “Really, just

end it for me. Please.”

She scowled, pushing him away. “Jeez, Nic. What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.” He coughed, settled back on his haunches. “I kind of got tired of running a while ago, after you left Vashon. Met up with Griffin and asked him to hear me out before he killed me. I didn’t think he would, but I figured, what the hell.”

“So, he listened to you?”

“Yeah, he did. And then he thought about it for a while. He decided the best punishment for me was to find Jason and return him to you. Seems Griffin didn’t think he was dead, either.”

“And you did find him.” She nodded, leaning back in the chair again.

“Yeah, I did. Now all I have to do is bring him to you and the price on my head is lifted.”

“Okay, so why are you asking me to end your life? I don’t get it. You have a chance to start over.” She raised her hands, palms up.

“If you’d said you wanted me, just a little, I wouldn’t have told you about Jason. I’d do most anything so I could be with you.”

Riana could scarcely believe her ears. “He’s my mate. You’d deliberately keep us apart? Knowing how you felt about your own mate, you’d still do that to us?”

Hanging his head, he nodded.

“You have no honor, de Santo. Frankly, I’m surprised Griffin made this agreement.”

“For whatever reason, he saw fit to spare my life. I wish he had taken me out.” His gaze lifted, and she could feel seething anger. “I hate the thought of bringing you and Jason back together. Hate it.”

That kind of anger was dangerous. She didn’t want to coddle him, but at the same time she didn’t want to show any fear. Knowing they could cause that made some people feel powerful. Now would be a bad time for her to find out he was one of them.

“I can’t change how you feel, and even if Jason were dead, I’d rather be alone. Your kind of love scares the hell out of me. Now, tell me where he is.”

“He’s in the underworld, Sadaar.”

She stood up. “Take me there.”

* * * *

“Let you in?” Matthew, the new manager of the Falcon compound, gave her a look of utter incredulity. “Have you lost it? Why would I do that?”

Riana stopped pacing. From the moment she and Nic stepped into Matthew’s office, the fine hairs on the back of her neck had stood up. “Because one of our own is there. We want him back.”

Matthew had annoyed her the moment his mouth opened.

“Jason called for an alliance, and your shiema agreed.” Her eyes narrowed. “You people do honor your agreements, don’t you?”

Matthew stiffened. “Of course. How dare…”

“Save it,” she snapped, resuming her pacing. “I don’t give a fig about your righteous indignation. Tell me, how do you get inside an underworld?”

With a haughty sniff, Matthew lifted his chin, studied her for a long moment, then cleared his throat.

“Cody?”

The smaller Falcon appeared in the open doorway. “Yes?”

Riana’s internal alarms went off. Cody sounded so much like Codexus she couldn’t help but wonder if there was a connection. She swung her attention to Nic, hoping to have someone with whom she could confer, like she had with Jason and Christopher. She only just that moment realized how much she loved unraveling mysteries like this, and missed working with her fellow Defenders to solve it. Scowling at Nic, she still missed it. He was no peer.

His black gaze was fixed on Cody and he looked almost ... enraptured.

Ugh. Useless twit. Clearly, she could rely only on herself.

She was grateful Lissa had volunteered to watch Willis while she was gone. Knowing he was safe and protected gave her enormous comfort, let her relax enough to focus on the task at hand.

Julian waved a dismissive hand toward Nic and her. “Take these people to the gates.”

Cody leveled scorn on her, which made her wonder why. What reason did he have to hate them like that? If you considered that Cody and Codexus were the same man, though, it made perfect sense.

He jerked his head toward the door. “Let’s go.”

Nic followed first. He reminded Riana of a mindless groupie, happily traipsing after whatever band would pay him the most attention.

She brought up the rear, scowling at his back.

The unfairness of this whole situation stuck in her mind. Why was she here with the ultra-pathetic Nic when clearly anyone--*anyone*--would be more suitable? She brooded. After dealing with Nic, Griffin was Mr. Happy.

Cody took them to the Great Hall. It was empty, as she’d expected. She looked toward the corner of the room where the gates had appeared.

“The direction of the gates changes with the earth’s rotation.” Cody cast his purple gaze her way. “So if you’re looking for them over there,” he pointed to that corner, “you won’t find them. They’ll be here.” He jabbed a thumb behind him.

Riana nodded. “Understood. So, do it.” Patience wasn’t her forte at the moment. Why bother pretending?

Nic was still stupidly gazing at Cody, which made her even angrier. What could be going through his mind?

Cody spread his arms wide and closed his eyes. He began to chant, like Jason had, soft, oddly seductive, entrancing.

Shaking her head, Riana forced herself to focus on the present. She tapped into her Defender training and recalled Griffin’s words. A particularly painful moment came to mind--another rainy day back in Malanaya.

“Pay attention,” Griffin had snapped. He caught her ankles with one booted foot and sent her face first into the mud.

She landed with a grunt, dripping with the rich, dark soil of her homeland. She wiped her face on her sleeve. Tempted to fight back, she lay still instead, seething, ready, waiting. She’d get her chance, eventually.

“You have only this one moment in time, Riana. You can daydream, wish it to be something it isn’t, or choose to take responsibility for every action, every thought, and every emotion. The gods will never pull you out of the mess you’ve made, girl. Only you

can do that. Wallowing in the injustice of whatever wrong you think has been done to you is a waste of time. This moment is the result of your actions and thoughts. Deal with it.”

Now was the time. Taking a deep breath, Riana centered herself and prepared for battle. More than ten years had passed since she'd last taken on threats. Was she ready?

Oh, hell, yeah. Her skin tingled in anticipation of a good fight.

Keeping her gaze on Cody, she sidled up to Nic.

“What’s going on with you? I’m beginning to wonder whose side you’re on.”

“Nothing,” he said irritably. “Waiting for the gates to open.”

Big duh there. “Yeah. And then?”

He scowled at her. “And then we go get your forever-mate, as you like to call him.”

“And after that?”

What would happen to this angry young man? She really wanted to know. After what he'd done, part of her wondered why she should care, yet a dark, secret part of her understood his misguided reasoning. She'd been drugged and hadn't been able to make sense of anything. Maybe he really had saved her from something even worse.

Maybe she didn't want to think something that heinous had actually been preferable to the grisly death Dane Maxim had planned for her.

“Don't worry about me,” he said, casting a black glare her way. “I can take care of myself, been doing it for a long time. All you have to do is get in, get your lover, and then leave. That's it. Think you can handle that?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. What wasn't he saying? She sensed a double meaning in his words. If Nic hadn't made a deal with Griffin, she would've thought he planned to escape inside Sadaar. “I don't see why not.”

“Good.” He nodded. “Then there's no problem.”

A low rumble made the floor shake, catching her attention. As before, a circular black cloud formed behind Cody. It swirled counter-clockwise, eventually burning off to reveal the gleaming blackened-gold gates.

A small black staircase descended. The gates opened enough to allow two black gryphons to descend to take positions on either side at the base of the staircase. Their purple eyes glowed like amethysts in sunlight. Glossy, bat-like wings fluttered in the breeze coming from the underworld.

Cody nodded at the gryphons.

“These are sentinels of Sadaar. Their job is to make sure no one else tries to enter while we're there. They can't stay in our world for long, which is why the Falcons normally guard the gates. Come, we haven't much time.” He extended his hand, inviting her to precede him.

Riana drew her forked dagger, passing the purple-eyed gryphons without incident. She didn't like the way they watched her. Those beaks looked very sharp.

The little hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

Steeling her resolve, she took the stairs two at a time and entered the underworld.

Right before pain exploded at the base of her neck, and the world went black.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“You wake up now, boy. Time for you to go.”

Something jabbed him in the ribs, twice.

“Quit poking me. I’m not a goddamn pincushion.”

“I tink you are. You got plenty o’ holes in you.”

Jason sucked in a huge breath and opened his eyes.

“Where am I, and who are you?”

“You in Sadaar. Da underworld. Don’ look like no underworld, hey?” She cackled. “My name Kodiak. I be da master healer o’ Sadaar. Like you. Master. All da magic is my magic. Good an’ bad.”

“Where’s Riana?” He shivered, feeling frozen to the bone. “God, I’m so cold.” He rubbed his arms. “What is this?”

“Dat da magic. It make you cold when it go. You be fine soon. You woman here. In Sadaar,” the old black woman continued. “She all bloody now.”

Alarms went off in his head. “What? What happened?”

“You woman, she come for you, but dey hurt her instead. Dey want you here forever. Dat what happen when da dead people come to Sadaar. Dey stay forever.”

Another cackle. “You not dead.”

“I’m not staying, either.” Jason sat up, rubbing his temples with the pads of his fingers. His head felt like it would explode.

“You be fine soon.” The old woman settled her ample self on a nearby stool. “You had da magic in you. I give you good magic. Ya, Kodiak know about da Plan. I give you magic to close da gates, but I see you have da bad magic when da gates opened. I call da magic home an’ take it out.”

Jason looked at her, squinting in the hazy blue light of the room.

“You took what out?” He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

“I take out da magic.” She tapped his calf with her wooden cane where the arrow had penetrated. “I give da magic to Nala. She give it to Julian. Big secret, hey? Da Codexus, he shoot you wit’ it. You lucky he not know you immortal den. He tink he kill you. He make mistake. Now he here. ’Nother mistake--I call da magic home an’ he pay.”

He frowned. “What the hell is a Codexus?”

Kodiak looked away. “He da assassin for Vox. He spy, too. Julian not know. Call him Cody. He Sadaaran. Bad man. He pay soon.” She looked back at him. “Da one like you, he pay, too, hey?”

“Nic,” Jason guessed, sliding off the bed. “That bastard traitor. Yeah, he’ll pay. With his life, if I have any say in it.”

“Nic,” she said thoughtfully. “Ya, he here, too. He stay.”

Jason snorted. “What, he’s already dead?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He not dead. He hide. He tink he safe. He not safe from me.”

Gathering his clothes and boots, Jason quickly dressed. “Hide? From what?”

Her face crinkled, showing a pearly white smile and black eyes that were sharp and alert. Nothing got by her, he suspected.

“From you people. You go now. Codexus an’ Nic, dey bot’ wait for you. Dey want to kill you.”

Warm now, Jason was ready to get on with it. Aching to find Riana. Needing to find Nic and Cody to make them pay for what they’d done. Tossing on his jacket, he checked to ensure his dagger was still in his pocket.

He bent to the old woman and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you for healing me, Kodiak. I thought that magic was going to kill me.”

“Magic did kill you. You dead for hours.” She grinned up at him. “I took dat, too, from da strong one. You friend. I took somet’ing else. You no black cat now. Mine. I heal you. No cat, no bird. No shape now. You only immortal man.” She grinned. “But you still alive. You blood good now.”

So, he’d really died. The shock made his skin tingle and his mouth taste like citrus. He swallowed. Sadaarin magic was powerful, indeed, if it could raise the dead.

“You alive,” she reminded him. “You still immortal.”

Then it registered what else she’d said.

“Damn.” She’d taken his Primal. No wonder he felt as if he’d slept for centuries. The animal was so much a part of him, and now it was gone. “Forever?”

“Ya, forever. My price to heal. You no like?”

“No, I just wanted to know.” He stopped at the door. “Thank you.”

“Go find you woman. She sleep now. All bloody.” Kodiak limped to the kettle hanging in the fireplace. She stirred the concoction boiling over the fire. “Ya, you find da woman. Give her what she need to heal.”

“What, blood?”

“Blood, ya, from da heart.”

Jason frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“When you give her da blood, it must be from da heart. Magic.”

He didn’t really understand what that meant. “Okay, but--”

“Go now. Oh, I take da magic from da bobcat, too. Good magic.” She chuckled softly to herself. “I t’ink you happy to pay dat price. You go now. Live good life.”

What did all that mean?

He pushed the question from his mind as he left her modest home. He had other things to do. A Sadaarin spy and a rogue Defender to kill.

Find Riana. The thought burned through him and made his blood boil. Kodiak had said she was bloodied and needed to be healed.

The moment he was out on the street, he sensed her. He closed his eyes as he psychically examined her body for wounds. Finding a large cut on the back of her head, he saw as well the oily black Sadaarin magic keeping it open. She was in the dream state.

He had no idea how to purge the black magic from her body. Whirling around, he rushed back to Kodiak’s house and rapped on the door.

“Kodiak, it’s me. I need help. Open up.” No answer. He rapped again. “Please, I need to know how to get rid of the magic. It’s Riana ... I can’t help her if I don’t know what to do.”

Again, nothing. Obviously, she was done with him.

Heaving a tired sigh, he turned and headed for Riana, hoping like hell he’d

manage to think of some way to bring her out of that dark place.

Attuning himself to her, he took off at a run, sensing his way through the quiet city. In fact, he saw absolutely no one as he wound along narrow streets, made of something that resembled cobblestone.

The pinkish, sunless sky told him he was far from home. The odd smell of the air burned his lungs and made it difficult to keep up the pace. He needed to feed, but in this strange land, even if he'd seen any people, he would've passed them by. Nothing felt right about Sadaar.

The path narrowed after the last neighborhood faded into the distance. Now in sparse woodlands, he stopped.

He wasn't alone. Worse, he knew who pursued him.

"Bring it on, Cody." He reached for his dagger. "Let's do this."

Wham!

He flew backward from the impact. Blinding pain shot through his body. His ribs were cracked.

Cody stepped into view, holding an aluminum baseball bat.

"Nic tells me you guys are tough. I thought I'd even the odds."

Pressing his forearm against his ribs, Jason rose to his feet. The pain made him dizzy.

"You'll need more than a bat to make us even." He held his ribs in place while they fused. Now that the Sadaaran magic was gone, his body was healing as it should.

Cody smiled. "Are you sure about that? Do you know what I am?"

"Yeah, I know. Ask me if I care." The pain now gone, Jason gave a casual shrug.

Cody lunged, preparing to swing the bat as a fist to his kidney sent Jason stumbling forward.

"Jerk."

Nic.

Jason reached up to catch the bat. His knees buckled under the impact, and the sting of metal against his palm made him gasp. He snatched it from Cody's grasp, spun and cracked Nic on the shoulder.

"Fuck!" Nic dropped to his knees, hissing in pain.

Completing the move, Jason faced a shocked Cody. "Where's Riana?"

"What difference does it make? The magic is killing her."

He shoved the tip of the bat into Cody's chest, driving him to the ground.

"You better hope that's not true."

"It is true." Cody sat up and spat blood. "She deserved it for killing Vox. It was a pleasure to destroy her."

Blue metal flashed before Jason's eyes. Nic's dagger was poised at his throat.

Jason thrust the butt of the bat backward, meeting hard flesh, then swung as he faced the rogue, brought the bat down and shattered his collarbone.

Nic grunted softly, grimacing with the pain. He dropped hard onto his backside, arm limp at his side. Blood from his crushed shoulder stained his black shirt.

He'd heal in a few minutes. Jason prayed he had enough time to find Riana and get the hell out of this place before then.

Whipping his forked dagger from his coat pocket, he drove it into Cody's throat. "For Riana."

Cody disappeared.

Jason glanced at Nic, who had yet to move or say a word. "It'll be a pleasure to finish you off, asshole."

Nic glared up at him, hate in his soulless eyes. "Just remember who had her first."

Bristling, he slammed his foot against Nic's face in a roundhouse kick. Nic's head thudded into the dirt.

He phase-shifted, his strength a shock. Now nearly invisible, Jason wouldn't be able to kill him.

"Don't think you can run forever, Nic. I will find you." He dropped his blade back into his pocket.

Or I'll find you, came the reply.

Furious, Jason turned away and attuned his senses to Riana. He followed the faint call of her life-force and found her several minutes later, nestled under a large bush with blood-colored leaves. No, not colored. Real blood, he realized, from her. The grisly sight made him wish he could kill Cody over and over again.

He dropped to his knees. He spoke, knowing she might hear him and even recognize who he was. Maybe.

"Riana? Can you hear me?"

In the dream state, the lines between reality and dreams didn't exist. She wouldn't know if he was real or not. He turned her gently so he could examine the wound. Still open and bleeding, the gash was dangerously close to the top of her spine. Jason was grateful Cody's aim had been off. The danger in moving her with a severed spine was more than he could bear to think about.

As he studied the extent of the damage, he wondered how the hell he was supposed to stop the bleeding? The edges of the cut were black, evidence of the magic that kept it from healing.

He sat back on his haunches and rubbed his eyes. "Riana, I can't lose you."

He'd lost his medicinals, so he had nothing to treat her with. Absolutely nothing to try. Scanning the surroundings, he searched desperately for some kind of plant that looked familiar. Anything to help. Anything at all.

He found nothing. "Damn it."

Nothing but blood.

Just blood.

He drew his dagger from his pocket and held his wrist over her mouth. Dragging the blade across his skin, he gave her the only thing he had to offer.

Himself.

The blood flowed into her mouth. She swallowed, taking enough that she should've awakened, even from the dream state. Why wasn't she?

Her lips were turning blue.

"No, please." He couldn't lose her. Just couldn't.

But his blood wasn't working. He scanned the area again, for anything that might help.

Blood from the heart, the priestess had said.

He'd thought it was metaphorical. What if it wasn't?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blessed warmth.

Riana exhaled a watery breath. She woke up feeling as if her bones had turned to ice, though the water in which she was submerged was hot. Aware that Jason was close, she gave herself a moment to recall how she'd gotten here.

Her memory was hazy.

She dimly recalled Jason carrying her through the gates of Sadaar. Something dark and foreboding had brushed her mind, compelling her to open her eyes and look.

Dominic de Santo had stood on the Sadaar side. His black hair hung in his eyes, as it usually did, and his left shoulder dipped oddly. Hatred and despair resonated from his body so strongly it made her cringe.

Bitch, he'd said in her mind.

Then he was gone. The gates closed, and he was trapped there.

Later, without knowing how much time had passed or where she was or how she'd gotten here, she woke up in submersion.

She lifted her head above the surface. Purging the water from her lungs, she took in the first fresh breath of air in what seemed like a very long time. Jason's soft whiskey-colored eyes gazed down at her.

"They wanted to kill me," she said, remembering what Nic and Cody had done. "How is it I'm still here?"

"The priestess shared a little magic with me while I was there." Jason rubbed the back of his neck as he thought about it. "I had little to give. I was in bad shape myself." He unbuttoned his shirt to show her the new scar. "I fed you from here." He pointed to the X, poised over his heart. "Sadaarin magic was there. It took out the magic in you and allowed my blood to sustain you. I would've lost you without it."

"My God."

"Feeding you like that was amazing. I felt the life-force pass through my blood into you. It was incredible to see you come alive by feeding from my," his fingers brushed over the scar, "body, from my heart. And now, here you are."

She blinked more water from her eyes. "And I'm starving."

He looked relieved. "That's a good sign. How do you feel?"

She glanced down at her nude body, blurred by the swirling water. "Ready to be dry and clothed."

He swept an appreciative gaze over her. "Oh, I don't know. I think you look damn good naked and wet."

She chuckled. "Is that right? Well, if I'm going to be naked and wet, I think I should get something out of it. Don't you?"

"Name your price, girl."

His pupils dilated, just that quick. Her blood heated to match, and fire coiled between her legs.

"I don't know. What do you have that I might want?"

“I’ll show you what I’ve got.” He rose to his feet and scooped her out of the healing tank. Carrying her to a large flokati rug near the fireplace, he set her on it, then pulled off his white T-shirt. The thick muscles of his arms bunched and rippled as he dug into the pocket of his jeans, pulled out a leather thong, and tied his hair back. Kicking off his boots, he unzipped his pants and smiled.

“You look incredible.” His teeth grazed his lower lip, his tongue slipping out to wash it.

She laughed. “Quite the tease, aren’t you?”

“Hardly.” He stepped out of his jeans. “I intend to show you exactly what I’ve got, several times for several hours. That’s a promise.”

She didn’t doubt it. Her gaze dropped to his thick, deliciously hard cock and heavy balls. The mere thought of him deep inside her sent liquid flames through her, made her shiver, made warm cream rush to the fringes of her sex.

Dropping beside her, he traced the lines of her leg with his fingers. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

She raised up on her elbows. “If it’s anything like what you do to me, yeah, I do.”

“I wanted to take this nice and slow, but you’re just too hot and sexy.” He trailed two fingers along her arms. “I can’t wait to get inside you. Spread your legs for me, so I can see all of you.”

She lay back down, locking her fingers behind her head. Teasing him, she first moved one leg then, several seconds later, the other. She laughed, knowing she was driving him crazy with need.

Closing her eyes, she finally lowered her knees to the side so she was fully open to his gaze. Tonight was her turn to be the symbolic captive.

He put two fingers inside her, sampling the moist fire he’d ignited. Her patience was thin. She wanted him inside her as much as he wanted to be there.

She trembled. Each breath was fast, hard. If he didn’t hurry, she was going to finish without him.

“Do you like that?”

“Yeah, I do, but you’re killing me. I thought you said you couldn’t wait.” She lifted her hips to match his torturous rhythm.

“I changed my mind.” He chuckled. Nudging her thighs farther apart, he lowered his head and teased her by blowing his warm breath against her skin.

“Lord,” she whispered, “you really might be the death of me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. I think I’ll just make you come several times tonight.” He lightly ran his tongue along the wet fringes, driving her up and up. She burned as she never had before.

“I’ve got something for you,” he said. “Keep your eyes closed.”

She did. Seconds later, he leaned over her and took one nipple into his mouth. He pulled and suckled until she gritted her teeth and wished like hell she had something to hang on to.

Cold metal surrounded her nipple, pinching ever so lightly. He did the same to the other nipple. The pain and pleasure of it made her shiver.

“Jason, please.”

He licked his way up her body, stopping to suck on the skin along the underside of her breasts. The head of his cock slipped between her folds. He moaned softly.

“Maybe I can’t wait. You’re hot, woman.”

“Quit talking and make love to me. I may fall asleep before you ever get around to doing something.”

“Doubt that.” His thick erection drove into her.

Riana gasped. White-hot flames streaked through her body. His pace quickened, and he rode her hard, grunting with nearly every thrust of his powerful hips.

She arched her back, clenched her fists. She thought she might explode right there.

His fangs descended.

“Mine.” His head lowered, and he pushed his teeth into the top of her shoulder. She turned her head to his throat and let the scent of his blood draw forth her own fangs. Plunging them into his warm skin, she drank.

She felt the spiraling maelstrom consume her, felt her body climb higher and higher.

He was sweating.

So was she.

Her breath came in gasps. Each thrust tore a heated whimper from the back of both their throats.

She detonated, her body bathing him in wet fire.

He raised his head, locked his mouth to hers and moaned, releasing his own fire into her.

* * * *

The sun was shining when Riana finally woke. Stretching, feeling deliciously sore and loved, she reached for a robe. Jason was still asleep, on his stomach, snoring softly. His long hair covered his face and tangled in his fingers. Leaning to him, she brushed a kiss across his cheek ... or close to his cheek. He deserved a few more hours of sleep. He’d worked hard last night, giving her more climaxes than she’d ever had at one time-- or seven times.

She crossed the floor to the bathroom, where she dressed in dark-blue denim jeans and a yellow knit shirt. Quickly washing her face, she finished by dragging a comb through her hair. Jason’s loving had done her a world of good. Her skin glowed, and her eyes were clear, bright. She felt better than she had in so long, forever maybe. His love was perfect in every way.

She came back to the bedroom and put on her boots.

“Good morning.” He grinned. “I *am* perfect, in every way.” He rolled out of bed and threw on his white T-shirt and jeans, carefully tucking his erection into place.

She watched him and wondered how soon she could get him between the sheets again.

“That’s not what I meant. And stay out of my thoughts.”

“Anytime,” he answered, obviously still listening.

She lifted her brow in mock admonishment.

He laughed. “No, really, I mean it, anytime, Nukita.”

“Later,” she said, heading for the door.

He followed her out of the bedroom, resting his palm against the small of her back.

In the living room, Griffin and Christopher were sharpening their daggers. Willis

watched, his gaze riveted to the way they carefully dragged the blades across thick black whetstones.

Riana stopped, unable to take her eyes off her son. "Oh, my God."

The little boy with curly back hair and exquisite amber eyes lifted his head.

"Hi, Mama," he said, smiling. "Hi, Jason."

Her eyes flooded with tears of joy. Her knees gave out, and Jason caught her, held her and lowered his mouth to her ear.

"Now I understand what Kodiak meant. She took the magic from him." He waited a moment. "Say something."

She wiggled free of his grasp and rushed to her son, crushing him to her. "I was afraid this day would never come."

Willis squirmed. "Mama, I can't breathe."

She quickly released him. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so happy." She hugged him again. "I'm so happy to see you again. You're such a handsome little man. I love you so much."

Willis put his little hand under her chin, just like he did when he'd been a bobcat. "Can we stay here with Jason and the Griffin and Christopher?"

Riana looked back at Jason, who nodded.

He grinned at her son. "We can do anything you want."

His eyes lit up. "Can we have pizza?"

"We'll see about the pizza. You may change your mind about that."

Willis looked at Jason.

"Okay," he said thoughtfully. "Can we be a family?"

Fresh tears came to Riana's eyes. "We already are, baby, all three of us."

The End