BOKS OF STONE

RUN

B.L. BRUNNEMER

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Sneak Peek At BOS 3

To stay up to date...

# "A

#### **Astrid**

ll right, everyone! Last call!" I announced over the din of werewolves. Groans and complaints filled the room.

"Tough shit! It's Christmas, and I have plans!" And a very special gift for Ranulf if he's been a good boy.

Advar leaned over the bar. With both height and width, the giant of a wolf could be scary as hell. Truth was he was a big, old teddy bear. "Do those plans have anything to do with the fact you were walking a little bowlegged this morning?"

"They do indeed." I smiled as I put away a glass and reached under the bar and into the dishwasher for another.

"I need three beers in the bottle." Tammy came out of the crowd and set down her tray. "And who the hell is this guy?"

Advar pointed at me. "If he gets out of line—"

"I'd take care of it myself. I don't need my big pack brother saving my ass." I raised my nose in the air. "I save my own quite well."

"I've never seen you this excited about a guy." Tammy leaned on the bar. "Who's the lucky wolf?"

My smile faded a bit. "He's not a wolf, just...just a good male."

Everyone's excitement dimmed as if someone hit a switch, making my heart sink.

"Oh." Tammy put on a forced smile as I set the beers on her tray. "Well, someday you'll find your mate and you'll be really happy." She picked up the tray and made her way back into the crowd.

Except, I already had my mate. And I couldn't tell anyone. My smile disappeared. I was never going to have a wolf for a mate. I had a gargoyle. And I couldn't even tell them. I'd never shift and run with Ranulf. Disappointment filled my heart, sinking my mood.

"When are you going to date a wolf again, Astrid?" Advar turned back to me. "Did David hurt you so much that you won't even try for a real shot?"

I plastered on a smile. "I would if it was you, lovey."

Advar's cheeks turned red. "That's not what I meant."

"What did you say now?" Jax, a wolf decked out in leather, moved out of the crowd to the bar.

"Just that I think she should give another wolf a shot." Advar turned to Jax.

"Let the female handle her own love life." He leaned over to Advar and kissed his mate on the lips. "You can step in if she gets a cat."

Advar and Jax chuckled while I shook my head. "There will be no cat. Ever."

"Sure, blondie," Jax teased. "Can I get your best tequila, please?"

I turned, picked up the bottle of Peligroso, and began pouring his drink.

"There's always my brother," Advar said.

"Dag?" Jax scowled. "She's not desperate."

The pair chuckled as I put the drink down in front of Jax. "It's about the guy, not the wolf." Wasn't it?

My phone rang. It was Ranulf.

"Hey, sexy." My smile was suddenly back.

"Evie was attacked." Ranulf's voice was rough.

"Is she okay?" I hurried out from behind the bar and through the crowd.

"She's fine, but the high demon possessed that dick Matt!" he shouted as something slammed on his end. "It knows who you are and where to bloody fucking find ya!"

My heart stopped. If it could find me...I hurried into the back. "I have to call Rina."

"Don't ya dare hang up until I get there!" he growled as wind started to hit the phone.

"She's human!" I snapped before hanging up on him. I took the stairs two at a time as I hit Rina's contact icon. I was on the second floor before she answered. "What?" Rina's voice was rushed.

"Where are you?" I demanded, my heart pounding.

"I'm in Albany, New York, with my family," Rina said. "Evie... What happened?"

I turned with the stairwell and kept climbing. "Evie was attacked by the high demon Abaddon, who's in Matt, by the way."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. How'd you know something happened?"

"Telepath." Something zipped closed through the phone. "I'm on my way back now."

"No!" I burst out onto the roof and searched the sky. Knowing Ranulf, he'd be here any second. "Stay there, it's safer." There. Ranulf was coming in fast.

Ranulf hit the gravel roof hard and didn't stop. He pulled his wings into his back and rolled. My body throbbed; my pulse picked up as his momentum brought him to his feet in front of me. The predatory look in his eye shoved Tammy's words out of my mind.

"The demon knows everything that Matt did, right?" Rina asked as something slammed shut, bringing me back to the here and now.

"Yeah." I tried to ignore Ranulf as he began inspecting me for damage.

"Then he knows where to find my family."

Shit. She was right. I pulled the phone from my lips. "Where's Evie?" I asked him as his fingers moved my hair so he could inspect my neck.

"St. Joseph's." His hands held my face as he looked for injuries. It was sweet. Irritating, but sweet.

"Fine, get here as fast as you can," I ordered Rina. "And go straight to St. Joseph's."

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" Ignoring Ranulf, I focused completely on Rina.

"Look, I've got to pick some things up for Evie. It might take me a couple days. I'll see you as soon as I can."

"Hold it!" I dug my fingers into my hair to keep it out of my face from the wind. "Where are you going?"

"The first stop is the Chrysler Building."

"Into the city? Are you insane?" My gut knotted at the very idea of her in Manhattan.

"I have to. If I don't...just trust me." She hung up the phone.

I cursed and looked up at Ranulf.

"I heard," he said before I could even ask.

"She can't go alone." I shook my head at the very idea. "A telepath in that city won't last long. Especially since she's been struggling with her barriers lately."

He pulled his phone out. "Zahur, we have a problem." It wasn't long before he hung up. "Falk will catch her in Manhattan."

I sighed in relief as I texted Rina that Falk was headed out to help her.

Ranulf's turquoise gaze was warm as he pulled me close and held me against him. I slid my arms around his neck as calm poured through me. His lips rested on my forehead as I took a deep breath. The scent of rain clung to him like a second skin. Clean, fresh. It settled my heart. It didn't matter that he was a gargoyle and I was a wolf. It didn't matter that we weren't supposed to be mates. It didn't matter that we had to hide it from everyone. It only mattered that he was here, with me.

His hand travel down my spine, pressing me harder against his naked chest. When he reached my ass, he pinched me hard. I jumped and shot a look up at him.

"That's for hanging up earlier." He smirked down at me. Heat spread as his hand soothed the pinch.

I shook my head as I began to shiver. "Rina seems to know more than I do. So, start talking. What the hell happened?"

"Abaddon attacked Evie. She's unconscious at the kirk right now." His body grew hotter against me.

I pressed myself even more against him, loving that he could turn himself into my personal heater. "I thought you said she was okay."

"She is." He started rubbing his hand up and down my back, creating warmth. "Zahur says she should be up in the next day or so."

I sighed; there wasn't much I could do about it. If she was unconscious, then she was unconscious. But this demon... I looked up at him. "I need to warn the alphas about this high demon. They'll put everyone on alert."

He nodded. "All right, let's go."

"Oh, hell no. You're not going." I pulled away and crossed my arms over my chest at the chill.

He shook his head. "Until this demon is back in Hell, I'm with ya."

"Ran." I tried to think of a way to convince him, but I knew there wasn't a point.

He smirked. He knew he had me. "Let's get this over with, goddess."

THE RIDE out to meet the alpha pair was tense. It didn't help that Ranulf knew David was my ex-fiancé. And it also didn't help that I was driving us towards his house where he lived with his new mate. Where I had lived until eight months ago.

Ranulf reached over the console, set his hand on my thigh and squeezed gently. Most of that anxious energy melted out of me.

"This is the ex?" Ranulf asked, his voice gruff.

I swallowed hard. "Yeah."

He squeezed my leg again, sending warmth through me. "I'm not going to get jealous, goddess."

My shoulders started to relax. "You're not?"

He turned toward me with a grin. "No."

The knowing look on his face had me squirming in my seat. I turned back to the road in time to watch the gate come into view. I slowed to a stop at the guardhouse and rolled down my window.

Trevor came out of the guardhouse and gave me a sad smile. As one of David's bodyguards and friends, he and I had spent a lot of time with each other over the years.

The dark-haired hottie leaned down to look in my window. "How's it going, Astrid?"

"Doing good, Trevor. How's the mate?" I smiled up at the big guy.

He smiled. "Doing great. Flo's parents are in town, so..."

"You're taking the night shift?" I asked, laughing.

He shrugged. "Guilty." His gaze moved to Ranulf as he took a deep breath. "Gargoyle."

"Wolf," Ranulf countered.

Trevor turned back to me. "He won't be able to go in."

"I know." I tightened my grip on the wheel.

"Go on in." Trevor straightened before heading back into the guardhouse and hitting the button for the gate.

When the gate opened, I pulled through.

"I'm going in," Ranulf announced.

"No, you're not," I scoffed. "The only gargoyle who is allowed without invitation is Evie."

He cursed under his breath.

In the few years I had lived here, the mansion had never felt like home. Majestic stonework, ivy, and manicured lawns. It just wasn't me. How had I gone so long and not realized it? I pushed the thought away as I pulled to a stop outside the front doors. "Stay in the car."

He sent me a look full of promise. The thought of his retaliation made my blood rush. I got out of the car on weak knees. Ignoring the looks from the wolves on guard duty, I walked to the door. It opened before I could touch the handle.

A tall, lithe platinum-blonde female opened the door. I expected the familiar pain that hit me whenever Alia was around. But this time, it didn't come. This time, I knew. David wasn't meant for me. I had someone better waiting.

"Hey, Alia. Sorry for the time." I stepped through the foyer.

She blinked in surprise. "Hi, Astrid. He's in the study."

"Aren't you coming?" I asked, making a point. She was an alpha; she needed to take care of business.

She sighed wearily and followed as I walked through the marble foyer towards the study. I didn't bother knocking before I opened the door.

David kept working on the paperwork scattered around his desk. "You don't live here anymore, Astrid. So, stop acting like you own the place."

It was like a slap and it pissed me off. "Oh, fuck you, David."

His handsome, square face was hard as he leaned back in his chair and finally looked at me. When we met, his black hair had been shaggy, his chocolate eyes sparkling with humor. Instead of an Armani suit, he'd been wearing jeans and a shirt. I liked him better back then. But now...his face was too pristine, his nails perfectly manicured, a glint of disdain in his gaze. Something inside me finally was finished and I liked it.

"That's not how you talk to your alpha," he reminded me in such a condescending tone I couldn't help but push back.

"You're right; that's how I talk to my ex," I countered. "Look, I don't have time for this crap. There's a high demon in town. He attacked Evelyn and is loose in the city somewhere."

His gaze narrowed. "What name?"

"Abaddon."

He cursed, then noticed Alia standing in the doorway. His voice was softer when he called, "Come in, sweetheart."

Alia looked between David and myself before she moved to stand next to the desk while wringing her fingers.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked her. Was he serious? She was still too new to this!

"I don't know," Alia admitted in a quiet voice that surprised me. "I'd defer to more experienced wolves. Most likely, Astrid."

I bit back a smile of approval. She knew enough to admit she didn't know how to run the pack. That was something, at least.

He sighed, then turned to me. "Then, Astrid, what do we do?"

"Notify everyone via the phone tree. Keep the pack on alert and remind them to report anything suspicious," I answered without even having to think about it

He nodded with a small grin of approval. It rubbed my fur the wrong way. "Exactly." He turned to Alia. "You need to start thinking logically, like Astrid."

Alia nodded, her gaze on the desk. Was he fucking serious?

He turned to me. "Since we'll have the pack from Thunder Bay in town for the holiday run, I'll be sure to inform them as well."

"Good." I turned to leave. I was almost to the door when he stopped me.

"Since you're already here, there's something I need to tell you," he announced.

I turned at the door and waited.

"Thunder Bay is looking for a new alpha female." His gaze ran over me as if he were assessing a stranger. As if he'd never seen me naked or touched me at all. "And since we are trying to create an alliance, I've suggested you."

My heart dropped. Alliance... What the fuck? "What?"

"They have a new alpha." He leaned back in his chair. "And he's looking to create a stable foundation for his pack."

I eyed him. My wolf woke up and bared her teeth inside me. "Why?"

He gave me a sad smile. "Because you ran this pack with me for three years before I found Alia. I know you're a good alpha."

I scoffed. That wasn't the only reason and I knew it. He wanted me gone. I ruined his perfect, new life. But, how far would he go? "You know alphas are married unless negotiated otherwise."

He nodded.

A cold stone settled in my chest. "You didn't make those negotiations." He shook his head no.

Stunned, I looked at the man I almost married. The man who knew me for years; who loved me once, and now was trying to marry me off to some wolf I hadn't even met. "No."

He sighed. "Astrid—"

"No," I growled, unable to believe he'd try this.

His eyes flashed with his wolf. "Think about it."

There was nothing to think about. I wasn't going to marry someone who wasn't Ranulf. I turned and started for the door.

"Why is there a gargoyle on the property?" he demanded from his desk.

"He's not on the property, he's in my car." I didn't even look over my shoulder as I walked out of the study.

"This conversation isn't even close to being finished, Astrid." What an ass.



#### Rina

I HIT the end call button, grabbed only my backpack and started down the hallway. When I stepped down the stairs into the living room with my bag, I had to slow down. Two of my older brothers were asleep in the dimly lit room. And the two giants were in my way.

I moved slowly through the room, doing my best not to make any noise. As I was stepping over Danior, something firm snagged my ankle, making me stumble. I caught myself on the floor, flipped my hair out of the way and glared into the brown eyes of my oldest brother. I pulled my ankle trying to break free but he refused to let go.

Why? he signed with his free hand.

Sighing, I steadied myself and signed back, *Evelyn is in trouble*; *I have to go help her*.

His frown lessened as he let go. *Mom's going to kill you*.

He wasn't wrong about that. *I have to go*.

*Wait a minute.* Danior got out of his sleeping bag and went to the Christmas tree in the corner. He came back with the small box I had been dreading since I arrived.

I shook my head. I didn't want to touch it.

He shoved it into my hands and whispered, "You need them, Rina. I don't want you trying to cross the street and not be able to tell a car is coming."

Hating that he was right, I took them. "Tell her thanks."

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "I'll take the bullet."

I smiled up at him. I really was lucky to have such a wonderful pain in the butt for a brother. Reaching up, I hugged him tight, then hurried out the door before we woke someone else. The click of the lock was loud in the chilly night.

I rushed down the walkway as fast as possible. The box seemed to weigh a ton. I eyed it before stuffing it in my backpack. Later; I'd deal with it later. I pulled my coat closed as an odd chill ran down my neck, as if someone was watching me. I looked over my shoulder expecting to find my brother in the window, only the windows were dark. The rest of the houses were still dark. Nothing. There was no one on the street. Or in the windows. Weird. My shoulders were tense until I finally waved down a cab and got in. "The train station please."

On the way, I ran over what Evelyn had told me. Getting pulled into a link with an unconscious woman wasn't pleasant. I had been getting ready for bed when I felt Evie's mental touch, then everything was black. There had been nothing but Evelyn, standing there.

"Rina, I'm in trouble," Evie said. "Now, this is going to sound crazy. But you have to trust me."

My nails dug into the strap of my backpack. God, this was insane.



#### Astrid

The RIDE over to the church was quiet. Ran didn't ask, he simply let me fume. By the time we arrived at St. Joseph's church, I was calmer. Well, as calm as I was going to get. Ranulf led me through the chapel and rectory, then into a dormitory. It wasn't long before we met Zahur coming out of one of the rooms.

"How is she?" I asked before we even reached him.

Zahur closed the door behind him as he turned to us. "She's all right. She has several injuries, so she'll be unconscious for a bit, but she'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." Zahur shook his head. "Atticus, on the other hand—"

The door opened. A disheveled Atticus leaned out of the door and shouted: "We need wash cloths and a bowl!" It wasn't until Atticus leaned back that he noticed us. "What?"

Zahur turned to Atticus. "Don't you think that can wait until Evie is awake?"

"No!" Atticus bit out before slamming the door behind him. Wow, without Evie, he was an even bigger dick.

Zahur turned back to us. "Falk has already taken off for Manhattan. He should be able to catch her at the Chrysler Building."

"Do you have any idea what she's doing?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

"No." He rubbed the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "Ranulf, will you find Astrid a room? I think it's best if she stayed here until we take care of the high demon."

"Hold on, we're just going to wait around?" I asked, my wolf pacing inside me. "Let's go hunting."

"It took two of us to keep that thing busy while the others got Evie out." Ranulf looked down at me. "And one of them was a pissed-off Atticus."

"And that's supposed to mean something?" I asked slowly, making it clear I didn't get it.

"Atticus has a certain ability. But he can only seem to do it when he's furious," Zahur explained. "He becomes extremely fast. He's hard to see and impossible to hit."

"Normally it would take four of us to keep a high demon occupied as long as we did with Abaddon," Ranulf added.

Oh...well, that changes things. "But what about my pack? We could help in the hunt."

"We'd appreciate it," Zahur said.

Then a horrible thought occurred to me. "What happened to her store? Her building?"

Zahur turned to me. "Gone."

"Gone?" I couldn't believe it.

"Her apartment was destroyed in the fight, and the building went when some magic got away from her." Ranulf shifted on his feet.

"This is going to kill her." I shook my head. "She'll need some clothes. I'll go to my place and bring her back some."

"We all will," Ranulf stated.

"Well, I don't have anything that would fit you guys," I countered with a smile. "You'll have to go shopping."

Ranulf smirked.

"Not until sunrise," Zahur warned. "Even though the high demon has a human body, it'll still have to stay out of the sun, or the body will break down faster."

The body... "What about Matt?"

They both turned to me with somber faces.

"What happens to him in all this?" I didn't care, but Evelyn would.

Zahur rubbed his temple. "With a high demon, the original soul of the body dies within twenty-four hours. There's no way around it; or at least, no one has found one."

"Damn." I shook my head. "Hold off on telling Evie that as long as you can."

They both agreed as a Templar came down the hallway with a bowl full of wash rags.

"A bowl and towels were requested," the Templar announced, his voice tinged in annoyance.

The door jerked open. Atticus reached out, snatched the bowl out of the Templar's hands, and slammed the door closed again. Zahur sighed and headed down the hallway.

"There's also a...messenger for Ms. DeHaven. On the roof." The Templar spoke directly to Ranulf.

"From who?" I asked.

The Templar glowered at me before turning back to face Ranulf. What the hell?

"The lass asked ya a bloody fucking question," Ranulf growled.

"We don't answer to wolves." The Templar turned to scowl with disgust at me. "You're lucky you're not being detained."

I scoffed. I'd love to see this shit try.

Ranulf stepped forward, towering over the man. "Look at her like that again, and I'll rearrange ya spine." My pulse picked up at the anger in his voice.

The Templar's jaw clenched and unclenched. "I believe it's a goblin; it was almost killed when we discovered it. South bell tower."

"It's probably a Redcap; they work with Evie. We'll take care of it," Ranulf bit out. "Any ally of Evie's will be welcomed; wolf, goblin, it

doesn't matter."

The Templar smirked. "Right."

As I watched him walk away, something about that smirk bothered me. I moved to Ranulf's side. "What was with that look?"

"You caught that too?" he muttered.

"Yeah." I watched the Templar's back. "We may have to watch the Templars."

Ranulf nodded. "Have you dealt with the Redcaps?"

I shook my head. "They stay clear of us and we stay clear of them. Our species just don't mix well."

We started back through the dormitory towards the back of the church, making our way to the bell tower.

"Just don't kill anyone," he warned.

"I would never!" I said with mock shock as we came out on the roof. The wind immediately had me closing my coat. Ranulf climbed out of the arch in the bell tower and walked out to the enormous Redcap crouching on the roof in the shadows. He didn't look half-bad for a goblin. Six feet tall, only two eyes. And a nice smile. His grey, bumpy rough skin was mostly what gave him away as a goblin.

"Helix, what's going on?" Ranulf greeted the goblin. When had they met?

"Evelyn wasn't answering her phone," Helix said. "What happened?"

"She's hurt, but we're patching her up." Ranulf put his hands on his hips. "What can we do for you?"

Helix grumbled, "My patrols have reported several humans murdered by demons. It looks like another crack in the barrier was found."

I sighed. So much for a night in bed with Ranulf.



#### Rina

The wind was howling, pulling at my clothes, almost knocking me off balance. This is crazy, I'm crazy. Heart pounding, I clung to the metal gargoyle as I looked over the edge of the Chrysler Building to look down sixty-one floors to the busy street below.

"Oh shit." I took deep breaths, trying to slow my heart. This was fucking insane. I carefully crawled back off the metal gargoyle's head and backed up until I could grab the railing. I got to my feet, closed my eyes, and struggled to breathe as the world spun. What was it she had said?

"Tears of a Reaper. Normally, they're impossible to get. Thankfully, I know one that owes me a favor. But you'll have to get his attention first..."

Crap! I looked out over the city again. Jump and scream some grim reaper's name and hope he gets here in time? Oh hell. Was I really going to do this? What if I was nuts? Crazy? I could have imagined it and Evie really hadn't connected with me. Oh hell, I knew she connected with me. Astrid's call had confirmed it. Add in the same grogginess I had whenever I linked with someone by accident. Shit! Evie was in trouble. That was a fact.

Feeling steadier, I moved back out to the neck of the gargoyle and looked over again. My heart pounded against my ribs; my hands began to sweat. My breathing sped up as I watched the dots that were cars move on the street below. Why did it have to be heights?

"Evie, if I live through this, I'm going to kill you," I promised between clenched teeth. "Shit, shit, shit, shit."

Did Evie really need reaper's tears? Couldn't she... Shit. She would never have asked if there was another way. Did I trust her? The world grew still. That's what it came down to, right? Did I trust Evie enough to jump off a building?

"Oh crap." I took one more step, then leaped off the gargoyle into a swan dive. Adrenaline surged through me, making me fight not to flail. I screamed, "Viktor Bronnikov!" I didn't want to die; I didn't want to die! I kept screaming that name. The wind flowed over me in a rush as I careened toward the sidewalk. Something hit me, grabbed me. Every part of me was squeezed tightly. The pressure released just as quickly as it began. I hit tile and rolled with someone wrapped around me. We came to a jarring stop and the air whooshed out of his lungs. I was still reeling when he let go of me and sat up.

"Who the hell are you?" he snapped, his voice thick with a Russian accent. A square jaw and chocolate hair glared down at me.

Shaking, and just happy to be alive, I tried to push myself up but my arms collapsed under me.

He sighed, got to his feet, and helped me lean against the wall of the building. "Deep breaths, milaya." He squatted down in front of me. "I forget, not everyone is used to popping around."

When the shaking finally slowed and I could breathe again, I looked up at him. "Viktor Bronnikov?"

"Da, I know who I am. But I am at a loss as to who you are and how you knew to get my attention," he said in a clipped tone.

"Evelyn Dalca."

He got to his feet and took several steps back. "You know Evelyn?"

I scrambled to my feet, only for my shaky legs to drop back to my butt. "She sent me. She's in trouble."

He crossed his arms over his chest and waited. "What kind?"

"I don't know, exactly; all I got was her instructions." I met his hard gaze. "She needs reaper's tears."

He raised an eyebrow. "She is calling in her favor, da?"

"I think so." I shrugged. I had no clue what kind of favor he owed her.

He spoke in Russian; I didn't know the language, but if I had to guess, I'd say he was cursing, long and hard. "You have a vial?"

I pulled the plastic vial out of my pocket and held it up. He took it before walking across the terrace of the Chrysler Building, keeping his back to me. As my heart rate slowed, my mind began to race. How the hell did he get me back here? What would a reaper ever need from Evelyn? There was a reaper at the other end of the terrace. A grim reaper! Holy crap. There was no cloak, no sickle, he wasn't skeletal. He looked like a normal, living man.

I had just enough time to rein my thoughts back in before he turned around. He looked exactly the same as before. But the proof was in his hand; the vial was partially filled with clear liquid.

He held it out to me. "Tell Evelyn we are even."

I took the vial. "Thanks, I will."

He eyed me, then in a blink, he was gone. I was left staring at the terrace. Checking my phone for the time, I saw I only had a couple hours to get to the airport, get my ticket, and get through security before my red-eye flight took off. Thankfully, I managed to make my way to the door on wobbly legs. It was official; now I really hated heights....

I finally stopped shaking when I reached the lobby. More than a little aware of my timeline, I hurried outside and tried to get a cab. When one didn't stop, I started walking down the sidewalk. The hair on the back of my neck rose again. I looked around, trying to find the source. I met my watcher's gaze on the empty street. Black hair, blue eyes, handsome; he began to walk down the sidewalk on the other side of the street. I swallowed hard, turned, and hurried. He kept pace with me. I tried again to get a cab but none would stop. Cursing under my breath, I followed the

corner and decided to hurry to Grand Central. There would be cabs there. There always were.

A shadow separated from the building ahead of me. My heart leapt in my chest. It was another man; pitch-black hair and a disturbing grin. Where was everyone? Normally this part of town was bustling. Every instinct screamed at me to run. Without thinking, I crossed the empty street and headed for a café. Heart in my throat, I hurried through the dim courtyard and went to the doors. They didn't budge. What? I pulled again. The sign read: Closed for Christmas. Shit!

I turned and started back through the courtyard only to pull up short. Black hair one and two were at the entrance, slowly stalking towards me. Shit! Shit! What did I have on me? I pulled out my keys and held the tube of metal. Taking deep breaths, I started walking towards the other end of the courtyard.

Black hair one moved, making it clear they weren't going to let me go.

"I don't have much cash," I said, hoping that's what they were after.

They both grinned, their canines flashing. Vampires. Well. That changes things. I stepped back and flicked my wrist. The telescopic baton extended in my hand. Blue eyes raised an eyebrow. I smirked. Number one tilted his head as number two started towards me, laughing.

His image blurred, but I was already moving. Pressing the button, I stepped to the side and swung for the body. It was like hitting a wall with a metal bat; the vibration radiated up my arm until I couldn't feel my fingers. The streak was knocked back, his feet kicking out from under him. I didn't stop the swing as I brought it around and clocked him across the throat. He convulsed from the shock as he gasped and wheezed.

Black hair one's eyebrows were in his hairline. Normally I wouldn't have gone that far—that would kill a human—but they were vampires. They'd live.

"Collapsible baton," Black hair one said. "Well done."

I brought the baton up again, turning to face him. "Stun baton, actually."

The approval disappeared from his face, and with good reason. Vampire bodies were so amped up that any powerful electrical shock could kill them, or at the very least, screw their hearts up for a while. He seemed to be rethinking his decision when something dropped from the sky to land in a crouch in the shadows. A man with wings. His head lifted; glowing, goldenamber eyes met mine. My heart pounded; the back of my neck tingled. That

feeling. I knew that feeling... I'd only felt it once before. The man rose to his height. Falk. Shirtless. He was shirtless Falk. With wings. Holy... My mouth went dry as his wings folded back and in, disappearing as if they never were.

The last vampire turned to find him there. Falk stepped back, squaring his shoulders and shifting his weight.

"Gargoyle," Thing one hissed.

Falk didn't move a muscle as the vampire faced him. Shivers ran down my spine. The vampire moved. Falk simply stepped to the side, dodging him, then reached out and casually drove his hand into the vampire's chest. My jaw dropped as the vampire screamed and fought. Falk's face didn't change as he jerked his hand from the vampire's chest. The scream cut off; the dead body fell to the courtyard stone. My stomach rolled as the heart clutched in his talons beat one more time, spurting blood onto the stones. I grew cold as he tossed it away as if it were nothing more than a candy wrapper. He bent down and used the vampire's own shirt to clean the blood from his hand.

Falk turned to me. He eyed me as he pulled a black shirt from his belt loop and walked into the light shining from the windows higher up on the building. His eyes darkened to almost black in the light. I couldn't seem to take my gaze off the dead vamp's sightless eyes staring up at the sky. My heart jumped. I stumbled back into the glass doors as Falk came towards me.

He towered over me. His narrowed gaze ran over my face and down my neck. Astrid sent him...and if she sent him, he was a good guy. My gaze flicked back to the dead vampire. Right?

The scent of ozone tickled my nose and made the hair on my arms stand as he continued looking me over. Dark, sharp eyes met mine. Wild, brown, thick hair curled around his jaw.

"You didn't have to kill him." My throat grew dry as I closed the baton.

His brows drew together as he looked at me as if I was insane. The stillalive vampire groaned, his fingers starting to flex, drawing both of our attention. Falk's face grew cold as he stepped toward the vampire.

I darted between him and the still prone vamp. "No. You're not just going to kill him."

He scowled at me as the vamp groaned wordlessly. His sharp gaze shot back to the vamp before coming back to meet mine. His lips pressed into a hard line before he wrapped his hand around my upper arm. My heart jumped as a wave of heat washed through me. He pulled me away from the vampire. His fingers tightened on my arm as he got me walking out of the courtyard.

My face was warm as he dropped my arm. What the heck was that? I made a point to take deep and even breaths as we stepped out onto the sidewalk and down the street. I tried to sneak a glance at him as we walked. Falk was scary. His silence even more so. His face was a stony mask. A chill ran over my skin; I pulled my jacket closed even more. Astrid wouldn't have sent him if he wasn't on our side. Evie would never have dealt with him if he wasn't... Right?

#### Falk

MATES. With a human! Was that even possible? My body ached with every step out of the courtyard. I curled my fingers into a fist as I tried to force myself under control. It didn't help that the movement of her hips caught my eye as she started down the street. I tore my gaze away as I moved to walk beside her, keeping her on the inside, near the buildings.

Yeah, I had noticed her back in Chicago; any straight male would. But mates? The muscles in my shoulders grew tense. I couldn't even begin to wrap my head around it. I focused on our surroundings. We were headed north... The street grew busier. She flagged down a taxi and turned to look up at me. Those hazel eyes hit me like a punch.

"I have to get to the airport." She swallowed hard. "I'm guessing you're supposed to go with me?"

I nodded.

She wrung her fingers as she turned to get in. Before I knew I even moved, I was holding her arm, pulling her back from the cab. Cursing myself, I bent down and checked the ID number before letting her arm go. My fingers tingled as she slid in.

"JFK please." She cleared her throat before shifting over further to make room for me. I followed closely behind and was immediately surrounded by the scent of lavender.

This nodding or shaking my head thing was only going to work so long, I was going to have to talk to her at some point. Decision made, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket, brought up contacts, and held it out to her.

Her fingers trembled as she took it, careful not to touch my skin. When I had checked her over for injuries, her eyes had been as wide as saucers; her olive skin had gone pale. I'd scared the shit out of her. Any normal person would be scared of someone who did that. The twinge in my chest irritated me. It shouldn't matter. Scaring people wasn't anything new. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as she typed in her information. A human. As my mate. Memories surged, making what was left of my heart drop into a pit.

Rina finished with my phone and handed it back to me. I quickly texted her.

Falk: I can't talk. So, I'll have to text you. Next time you run into vampires, run away.

Her phone chimed. She read it and answered without looking at me. "I did." She hesitated before typing something into her phone.

Rina: Why did you kill him? You could have just knocked him out.

Was she that fucking naive? I scowled as I texted back.

Falk: They were going to drain you dry then toss your corpse. And that's if you were lucky. Next time, go for the kill.

She swallowed hard before looking out the window. It got under my skin. It was the truth; she would have been killed or converted. That's what the nest in Manhattan did. I looked out the window as we got on the freeway. There was no reason to feel guilty about scaring her...

Falk: Where are we flying?

She hesitated before looking at her phone. "Jacksonville, Florida. Evie's in trouble. Your doctor friend won't be able to figure it out. At least that's what she said when she linked with me."

Gears turning, I texted.

Falk: She told you how to save her?

"Yeah." She gave me a mischievous grin as the fear faded from her face. "It's going to be interesting." ... Something about that grin told me she was going to be trouble.



#### Rina

I STEPPED into the line for security with Falk. He had been quiet the rest of the drive to the airport. The longer he went without killing someone, the less jumpy I got. The large man had even bought my ticket before I could.

We were halfway through the line to checkpoint, standing in awkward silence, when I looked at the ticket.

"Uh, Falk." I looked up at him and held up my ticket. "I think they made a mistake; this is a first-class ticket."

His face didn't change a centimeter as he pulled out his phone. My phone dinged.

Falk: Zahur warned me that I wouldn't fit into economy.

Oh. Without raising my head, I eyed his legs. Yeah...Zahur was right. He'd have a hell of a time. I got squished sometimes, and he had a good eight inches on me. My phone dinged again.

Falk: And I'm not leaving you to sit alone.

I looked up at him. Was he serious? I was a grown woman. His face was blank as a wall. There was no give there, nothing soft. Just hard, icy lines.

"Thank you for the ticket," I said as I turned and moved up in the line. My phone dinged.

Falk: Where are we going after?

"Jacksonville, obviously." I turned and looked up at him again. "Then St. Louis, then Chicago."

He raised an eyebrow.

"That's it."

He frowned, then texted again.

Falk: Why does it seem like that's too easy?

I gave him a half-grin. "Because it probably is. Knowing Evie, it's going to be harder than we think."

His eyes moved over my head, then back to me. He gestured behind me. Not understanding, I turned and found an annoyed TSA agent. "Miss? Step forward."

My face warmed as I hurried forward and gave him my boarding pass and identification while muttering, "Sorry, I didn't hear you."

He checked my pass and ID, then waved me through with a nod. I went over to the conveyer belt, tossed my bag in a low plastic bin, toed off my shoes, and added them to the bin. Falk was sent to the other side and did the same. The line didn't move slowly, but I was checking my phone for the time every couple of minutes. Then it was finally my turn. I put my phone in my bin and walked into the screening area.

A guy around my age smiled at me. "Go ahead and face to the right there, honey. And lift your arms."

Honey? It wasn't anything new, but it still irritated me. "Um, I have hearing aids in; they might pop up on the scan."

He nodded as he gestured for me to face to the right. Uneasy, I did what I was told.

"Please step out."

I followed instructions.

"Oh." Creepy smile guy turned to me. "I've got to pat you down. So, if you'd step this way."

For crying out loud... Irritated, I moved to the spot he asked me to as Falk began to go through the screening. "Can I get a woman agent, please?"

"Arms up, please," Creepy smile guy said. "None of our women are on tonight, which is why I'm not offering a private screening. It protects both of us."

Protects? What the heck? No women on tonight? That didn't sound right...

He stepped behind me and ran his palms over my arms. My stomach rolled as his hands moved down my sides to my waist. As he patted down my hips, my skin crawled. When his hands went to my butt, I'd had enough. "Are you sure there aren't any women on shift?"

He said something I couldn't quite catch.

I turned my head, trying to hear. "What?"

His hands moved between my legs, his fingers brushing places on my body he had no business being near. His wrist rolled, bringing his fingers and palm against me.

"Whoa, whoa. Hey!" It took everything I had not to turn around and slap him. I'm not well traveled but I've flown enough to know they were *never* supposed to do that!

The hand disappeared. There was some noise behind me. I kept my arms up and turned. Falk had the creepy smile guy against the scanner and now stood like a large bear between me and him. Creepy smile guy's face was turning purple, his eyes bulging as Falk held him pinned to the machine by the throat. The other agents started to move towards him.

Without thinking, I darted in front of them and grabbed Falk's arm with both arms. "Don't kill him," I hissed under my breath. The tension in his body seemed to drain from his shoulders. Falk loosened his grip. Creepy smile guy gulped in air.

"Sir, take your hands off the agent and step away," one of the agents ordered Falk as another called for security. Falk didn't move.

"Falk..." I tugged again, my heart pounding in my throat. With a deep growl, he let him go. Creepy smile guy slid down the scanner to the floor. Falk's arm dropped to his side. I looked over my shoulder at the other agents as I pulled on his arm to get him to step back even more. "That jerk just groped me!"

Falk didn't take his eyes off the handsy TSA agent as he moved with me away from the scanner. He turned to the other agents and signed in Sign Assisted English: *She asked for a female to do the pat down. He refused. And when she protested, he ignored her.* 

Stunned, I repeated what he signed to the other agents. Then added, "And the jerk used his palm and fingers while doing a groin check."

Several of the older men shared an angry look.

One of the older TSA agents began saying something but it was under his breath, so I couldn't catch it. He stepped forward. "I'm sorry. We have women on shift. If you can calm down your friend, you might be able to still make your flight while I find one." Tell me we were going to get out of this...

A large, warm hand slipped around one of mine. My skin stopped crawling as my pulse began to slow. Looking down, I realized I was still holding onto Falk. He seemed to realize he was holding me at the same time. We both jerked away from the other. My face burning, I shoved my hands in my pockets quickly.

"If you two could come this way?" the polite TSA agent asked.

Falk waited for me to follow before moving an inch. My face warmed as people watched the entire scene. They called for a female agent and their supervisor to come to the screening area.

Screening continued; several people shot me dirty looks. Falk shifted slightly and blocked me from sight.

I looked up at him and signed: *I'm sorry*. *I didn't mean for that to happen*. *We might miss our flight*.

If he wasn't an asshole, then it wouldn't have happened.

I snorted. *I didn't know you knew how to sign*.

He glanced at my ear. No one I know really uses it. I tried to teach Ranulf once, but I may have taught him a few signs that got him in trouble in London.

"Shot yourself in the foot there a bit, huh?" I grinned a little.

Falk nodded. He turned to the right. I turned and found a female TSA agent.

"—to interrupt, I need to finish your pat down," she said in a sweet voice. I followed her instructions and it was over quickly.

She apologized again for what happened and assured us that the man wouldn't get off lightly. Falk stayed between me and the crowd as we started walking toward our gate.

It was close, but we made it just in time. Heck, I was just happy Falk wasn't going to get charged with assault.

When we got on the plane, he hesitated at our seats. He gestured for me to get on the inside.

My stomach rolled. "Um, actually, I hate heights, so sitting next to the window would not be a good idea."

He only hesitated a moment before he ducked into the row and took the window seat, frowning.

It wasn't long before we were both strapped in and the plane door was shut. We were taxiing to the runway when I started rubbing my palm against my jeans. My heart pounded; my lungs grew tight as we turned onto the tarmac. I started taking deep, slow breaths as we came to a stop. The feeling of someone watching me washed through me; I looked up at Falk. His eyes narrowed as they ran over me, his brows drawn down as he watched my knee bounce. I took another deep breath through a tight chest and let it out as my hands began to shake. I pushed up the sleeves of my sweater and clutched the armrests. The engines grew loud enough that even I could hear them. My breathing sped up. The plane shot forward, shoving me back into my seat. I closed my eyes and focused on staying calm.

Falk shifted in his seat, his forearm pressing against my hand on the armrest. Calm slipped through me, taking most of my fear with it. What the heck... The plane continued to climb. When the seatbelt light finally went off, I was actually doing all right.

Falk shifted; his arm pulled away from mine as he got comfortable. That nervous energy shot through me again, but at least this time we weren't taking off.

I reclined my seat. It was almost morning, and all the adrenaline rushes of the night left me feeling exhausted. I decided to try to get some sleep.

RINA'S BREATHING was deep and even beside me. It had been impressive; she was half-awake and muttering one second, dead to the world the next. I examined her ear from where I was. You couldn't even see the hearing aid there. She had told the TSA agent about them quietly, almost as if she were ashamed of it. Before that, I hadn't been around her enough to notice her hearing problem. I shook my head; I couldn't talk, and my mate couldn't hear. Nice job, universe.

Not that it mattered. She was human. It was a dagger to the gut. It seemed I was destined to always outlive any woman that may...

Memories swam through my head as I watched the clouds go by below. But this time...this time I knew not to try. It wouldn't matter if we would be happy for decades. In the end she'd hate me, and regret everything. I swallowed hard as it hit me. If she were with me... No. I couldn't do that to her. I learned my lesson the last time.

"The moose..." Rina muttered in her sleep, drawing my attention. "Make sure the baby moose brushes her teeth... It's important..."

My lips twitched as a calm peace settled into my chest while I watched her sleep. I couldn't help it. She was beautiful. Those deep-hazel eyes were going to haunt me for centuries.

She was going to have a normal life. A happy, human life. Even if I had to watch as she married some... I leaned back in my seat and watched the sky grow lighter, my forearm still tingling from her skin.

## $\sim$

#### Rina

I GASPED as the seat dropped from under me. My eyes snapped open as a searing palm forced me back into the seat. The plane stopped dropping. Chuckles ran through the cabin as the plane climbed back to cruising altitude. My heart pounded in my throat as I tried to breathe.

Falk. His hand was spread out over my stomach he had kept me in the seat. And I was still clinging to him. I swallowed hard and forced myself to let go. He pulled back immediately.

An announcement came over the speaker above us, but it was too fast and garbled for me to make out. The people around us groaned and cursed. I turned to Falk with an eyebrow raised.

There's a huge storm moving in. We're going to hit turbulence. We're being diverted and grounded at Richmond Virginia, he signed for me.

I sighed. Great. "I hate turbulence."

I stretched before turning back to look out the window as the sun was starting to rise. Pink, orange, and purple began to streak across the sky. With the clouds below, it wasn't so bad. I couldn't see the ground. The purple and blue clouds rolled under the clear sky. It helped me pretend it was fog.

At least the sunrise is beautiful.

He looked out the window and shrugged. *It's a sunrise, just like every morning.* 

I raised an eyebrow. *Really? You don't think that's beautiful?* 

It's the same as yesterday, it'll be the same tomorrow, he signed.

I tried to smile as my heart sank. He couldn't see it. But this is the only sunrise that will happen today. This sunrise will never be seen again; it's only for one day. It might be only a little while, but that doesn't mean it's not worth watching.

He stared at me silently for several heartbeats before he looked out the window again. I kept my gaze on his face as he watched the sunrise. His jawline softened a little around the edges. He saw it. I smiled, my heart warming.

#### CHRISTMAS DAY

Astrid
omething annoying dragged me to the surface. I pulled the blankets over my head, but it didn't stop. Fucking phone... I reached over to the nightstand and picked it up as it stopped vibrating. Turning on the screen, I checked the number. Shit... It was David. I muttered under my breath and I texted.

Astrid: What the hell do you want?

Alpha Dick: We have a missing wolf. There's a crime scene.

I pushed the covers off my face and read it again. Fuck.

Astrid: Send me the address.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to wake up. We hadn't gotten back until late morning. One of the stinking demons had been a chameleon. It had taken hours to find him. We still had no idea how many were out there.

A large foot nudged mine. Ranulf rolled over, still deep asleep. I slid out from under the blankets and started pulling on my clothes. I got dressed quickly, then slipped out into the hall.

I stopped for coffee before I drove out to the address that David texted me.

It was out of town but not far, and close to the Matthiessen State park. The house was an old cabin. It was nice, and far enough back from the road to need its own gravel driveway.

I pulled in and spotted other wolves waiting. I turned off my car and climbed out. Several wolves eyed me. One of the females hurried over.

"Astrid, thank God." Candice's face was pale. "I came out to see Ben for Christmas and he's just...gone."

I shut my car door and crossed the lawn through the others. The scent of copper reached my nose. Shit. The front door was smashed open and hanging by one hinge. Memories surged to the front. Blood. Silver buckshot. Fire. I pushed them back the best I could.

A heavy stone sat in my stomach as I stepped into the house. Furniture was busted, and blood splattered the floor and walls. I stopped and took a deep breath. Ben's scent and...something else. Something human. Hunters?

A cold shiver ran down my spine as I backed out of the room and stood on the porch. As long as there had been shapeshifters, there have been hunters. They stalked and killed us for our pelts. Well, they used too. Memories crawled out of the dark hole in my mind they called home. The burn of silver, the coppery scent of blood thick on my tongue... I closed my eyes and focused. That was then, this is now. Get your shit together, Astrid.

I took a deep breath. When I opened my eyes, I was steadier. I was about to step back inside when Candice came onto the small porch.

I turned to her. "Did anyone shift and try to find a scent?"

"Jovie did, but he lost them at the back road," she explained.

"Well, get more wolves out there and try again. They may have dumped him if he bled out," I ordered as I walked away from the door and back towards my car. The others got moving around the back of the house to get started. Jerking open my trunk, I dug through my forensics supplies, pulled out swabs, labeled plastic vials, a pen, then closed the trunk. I headed back to the porch and slipped on my gloves.

Stepping inside again, I looked around with hunters in mind. I looked closer at the door. It was riddled with holes around where the dead bolt should have been. Shotgun, close range. It was most likely Ben who broke the furniture, possibly with a human even.

I stepped around the blood splatters. Most of them looked like human, but I'd have to have it tested to be sure. It wasn't well known, but werewolf blood was darker than every species but vampires. And most of this blood was dark. The projection spatter told me that they must have had knives. I eyed the wall and the length of the elongation tails. Maybe machetes. I squatted down, took out a swab, and soaked up a spot that was lighter than the rest. After sliding the sample in the long vial, I screwed the top down, pulled out a pen, and noted the location.

"So, you do get to use your forensic science degree." Ranulf's voice had me jumping and almost dropping the clean swabs. I turned and shot him a look. "How'd you know where I was?"

The veins in his neck bulged. "Ya remember those handy find my phone apps? Well, lass, I remembered the password for yers."

I eyed him. He called me lass... "You're pissed."

"Aye, I fucking am." He moved into the room. "The high demon is out here and ya took off alone."

I gestured at the destroyed room. "There's a wolf missing."

His bootsteps had me getting to my feet and turning to him.

He stopped as he towered over me. "Never again," he bit out between clenched teeth. "Do ya understand?"

His voice sent heat pooling at the junction between my legs; my breathing deepened. My wolf woke up to his order and began to pace inside me. I eyed him and wondered what would happen if I pushed him.

A car door closed. He quickly moved away from me to the hallway and out of the blood splatter. I went back to collecting samples.

"Hey, Astrid, I thought you'd be here," Jeffery Hobbs called from the door. "Has anyone found him yet?"

"Not yet." I started labeling another blood sample. "They're all heading back towards the road if you want to give them a nose."

"I'm sure they have enough noses; I figured I'd give you a hand." Jeffery's voice was slightly strained; it was probably the blood.

"Do you have a degree or training in forensics?" I got to my feet and moved to the wall with blood spray and began to take another sample.

"No, but I'm great with instructions." The way he said it had me looking over my shoulder at him. Jeffery was a good-looking male, light-brown hair with a good-guy smile. The works. And he was looking at me as if I was already naked. I ignored it and went back to what I was doing.

"Are you working at the bar tonight?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Yep, and tomorrow, and the night after that, and the next, and the next," I sighed. "When you run your own business, you don't have time for anything else, really."

"Sounds kind of lonely."

I rolled my eyes.

Ranulf stepped out of the hall and into the living room. "Nothing in the back. All the damage seems to be in here."

"And the sliding glass door." I gestured towards the broken plate glass. "Looks like Ben took it outside. Probably so he could shift."

"Who the hell are you?" Jeff asked. There was an edge to his voice that hadn't been there a minute ago. The change in Jeff ruffled my fur. If Ranulf were a wolf, Jeff would have backed down right away. All of my friends and packmates should be overjoyed that I had finally found a mate, but Ranulf wasn't a wolf. And looking back between the two, I finally realized just how hard it was going to be to keep things between us a secret.

"That's Ranulf; he's giving me a hand," I explained before Ranulf could rip his head off.

"He's a gargoyle," Jeff bit out. "Where's Evelyn?"

I sighed and looked over my shoulder at him. "She's unavailable at the moment."

"We don't have a treaty with the gargoyles, only Evelyn," Jeff reminded me, his wolf slipping into his voice, making it deeper.

"Fuck off," Ranulf snapped.

"Get lost, Jeff." I turned back to what I was doing. "I'm too busy to cater to your bullshit."

"You're backing a gargoyle over a packmate?" Jeff bit out, making my wolf growl deep inside our chest. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Shut it, Jeff," I snapped over my shoulder. "Right now, it's about finding Ben. And you're most useful out there trying to track the possible killers."

Jeff stalked out the door as my phone rang. Cursing under my breath, I answered. "What?"

"This is Dahlia, head of the Witch's Council," a polite voice sounded in my ear. "I'm looking for Evelyn; she's not answering her phone."

"She's unavailable at the moment," I sighed. "This is Astrid. What do you need?"

"One of my witches is missing," she stated.

I cursed and looked around the scene. I didn't have time for this. "One second." I turned to Ranulf. "Can Zahur do a job for Evie?"

Ranulf nodded. "What do you need?"

"His number."

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s Falk rented a car, I watched the dark-gray storm shelf clouds roll across the sky, moving like tidal wave. Lightning flashed in the mass as it moved closer. It was strange. I'd never seen clouds like that before. Whatever kind of storm it was, it was strong enough to ground every flight out of Richmond, Virginia, leaving us to drive to Jacksonville.

Voices murmured in the background of my head, making it start to pound. I rubbed my temple. My barriers were thinning, and I couldn't figure out why. We needed to get out of town fast. Falk's image reflected off the window. I turned and waited for him to make his way through the crowd to me.

They're out, he signed.

"I didn't know that was possible." I adjusted my backpack. "We're going to have to take the bus or a train."

There's a bus and train station in town.

"We'll have to figure out which is faster." We left the rental terminal and made our way outside of the airport. As Falk opened the door to the outside, a clap of thunder cracked overhead.

His gaze ran over my face. Are you feeling all right?

"I've got a headache." I took one last look at the sky and started out. The wind blew my hair all around as the sky lit up. He reached down and took my arm as the first drops of rain hit the walkway. Everyone hurried towards the taxi line as the clouds broke open. Sheets of rain poured out, soaking us instantly. I cursed and prayed my laptop would be all right in my backpack. The cold wind howled as it swirled around us, taking my body heat with it. By the time we reached an available taxi, we were soaked.

I slid inside, cursing as I pulled out my hearing aids and shut them off. The world became muffled, everything a mild jumble. Great. Falk didn't even pretend not to watch as I tucked them into my pocket. Please work when you dry out. Stupid freaking rain!

*Tell the driver to take us to a store*, Falk signed.

"A store?" I shook my head. "We need to go to the transport station."

*Do it,* he signed.

Irritated, I sighed and leaned forward. "Could you take us to a store, please?"

The driver turned and said something. I turned to Falk.

He said there are several stores near the transport station.

"That's perfect, thank you." I leaned back against the seat and shivered. The heat radiating from him had me wanting to curl up against him. Yeah, curl up with someone you don't know and had already watched kill someone today. Good idea. I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to stop my teeth from chattering.

Falk turned to me. I need to pick up some gear and supplies. But we don't have long.

I nodded. "Let's split up. I'll pick up some food and drinks. Anything you don't like?"

I'm not a big fan of fish.

I snorted as the taxi pulled up to the curb. "I'm not bringing fish into a cramped space with a bunch of people. That'd just be rude."

His lips twitched as he paid the driver, then climbed out of his side. When I stepped out, the wind hit me, chilling me to the bone.

I headed for a grocery store while he started for the chain store

I got a small basket and started for the deli. Thankfully, there wasn't a crowd. I hurried through the store, picking up sandwiches, drinks, and snacks.

When I was done, I headed outside just as Falk was coming out of the other store. He made a beeline for me. Without a word, he took the grocery bag and handed me a bag from the other store, along with a pack.

"Did you find everything you wanted?" I asked.

There are some dry clothes in that bag for you. I've also picked up some weapons. Nothing great, but they'll work in an emergency. He focused entirely too hard on looking in the grocery bag. I had to guess your size.

Oh. I hadn't expected that. It was sweet. "I didn't even think of that. Thanks." I quickly opened the bag and found soft fabric and jeans. "Dry clothes!" I did a little dance.

Falk's brows drew down as he watched me as if I was some puzzle he was trying to figure out.

"Let's check the schedules and get tickets, then I'll change." I started for the bus and train stations.

Turns out the fastest way to Jacksonville was the train and we had some time to kill. Falk had us sit down on a bench. *Your bag is soaked. You should switch it out.* 

I sat down and started going through my still wet bag. I transferred my laptop and found all of my clothes drenched. I sighed, got up, and threw them away, along with the bag. There was no point in keeping them; they'd just get everything else wet in the new bag. I sat back down and looked to see what else he'd picked up. I found a collapsible baton; it wasn't as great as what I had used in New York, but it would work. Grinning, I pulled it out of the package and slipped it into my pocket. Falk did the same with several knives.

"Didn't you get clothes for yourself?" I asked as I found pepper spray and a stun gun. Wow, he had gotten everything...

A couple shirts.

"Aren't you going to change?"

*I'm fine*. He began putting first aid supplies into his bag. I grabbed a few snacks I'd bought myself and put those in mine.

"There's a couple German beers in there that I thought you'd like," I said as I handed him the bag. "We'll have to sneak them on, but it's not like we're driving."

He went still and watched me with a raised eyebrow.

"You're German, right?"

He nodded. *Thank you*.

"No problem." I smiled. I turned back to my bag and hesitated. Screw it. I pulled out the small, colorful gift from my mom. Hoping the rain didn't get to it, I took the paper off and opened it. Two brand-new, behind-the-ear hearing aids sat in the box. Along with batteries. Sighing, I opened each aid and put a battery in before closing them back up. Very aware that Falk was watching me, I slipped the hearing aid in my ear and settled the rest of it behind my ear. I did the same with the other. It was odd. They felt heavy,

and blaringly obvious. I ran my finger over the top and heard the swipe of my finger in my right ear. I did the same to my left, to be sure they were on. It was surprisingly loud.

"I'm going to go change." Not looking at Falk, I picked up the bag of clothes and headed back into the bathroom. Thankfully, there wasn't a line, but the door was locked.

A brunette man came out and smiled. "Enjoy," he said on his way by.

Okay... I headed in and locked the door behind me. I pulled out the clothes and smiled. How did he know my size? I didn't really care; I was just grateful. I stripped down to my skin and pulled out a pair of underwear and a bra. When I pulled them on, I paused. They fit perfectly. How the hell had he known my bra size? Was this a superpower he had? Picking out the perfect size?

I pulled out a pair of dark-blue jeggings and slipped them on. I went through the bag and pulled on a white, long-sleeve, scoop-neck cotton shirt and a thick, olive knitted cardigan that reached mid-thigh. I started pulling on my boots, surprised they matched the outfit. Was Falk into fashion? Could he be gay? My heart sank; I really hoped not.

I was throwing out my soaked clothes when the lights flickered. What the...? My pulse picked up as the temp seemed to drop. Okay, that's unnerving. Shoulders tense, I picked up my clothes bag and went to open the door. Only the door didn't budge. I checked the lock and tried again. The knob wouldn't even turn.

The lights began flickering again, only this time, they didn't stop. My skin broke out into goosebumps as my heart pounded. What the hell was going on? The mirror on my left began to glow slightly. My pulse pounded in my ears as I slowly turned, not really wanting to look. The bathroom was reflected back. My image just as I was, with my hair in a messy braid over my shoulder. Same clothes. Same everything. I let out a deep breath. Something caught my eye. In the mirror, it was slow and hard to notice. But my reflection changed. Her smile started off a quirk of the lips, then grew and stretched across her face until it was a terrifying smile I never even knew I was capable of. She turned to fully face the mirror. Cold terror tore through me as I watched her. Those cold eyes met mine; that smile grew bigger than physically possible. My breathing grew faster, my hands shaking.

Not knowing what else to do, I lowered my barrier a little and I reached out. I found him and skimmed over the surface of his mind. "Falk?"

Surprise and caution colored his thought as he reached back. "*Rina*?" My reflection's hand moved out of the mirror to grab the faucet.

"Something is crawling through the mirror in here." I swallowed hard as my reflection began to climb through.

"I'm coming," he sent, fear lacing his thought. "Don't let it come in!"

Don't let it come in? The temperature dropped again. My heart threatened to leap out of my chest as her head moved through the glass. Think, Rina! Her hands braced on the sink. The lights continued to flicker.

Stop it from coming in... I was moving before I knew it and slamming my fist into the surface. It cracked. Something large hit the outside of the door as I pulled back and hit it again with my hand as hard as I could. It splintered. She grabbed my arm, her grip freezing-cold. She pulled back into the glass, her grip taking my hand with her. I slammed my hand against the glass, bracing myself as my arm dipped into something burning cold on the other side. I cried out as I braced myself against the sink edge and pulled hard. My muscles burned as I struggled to pull my arm back. "Falk!"

Something slammed against the door again. I braced my foot against the sink. Grunting, I pulled with everything I had. My hand finally cleared the glass. I lifted my other foot off the floor and stomped onto the surface of the mirror. The glass shattered, cutting the hand off. I dropped to the tile as black oil splashed into the sink and onto the floor. The door finally broke open.

Falk's eyes were blazing as he found me on the floor. His gaze took in the oil and shattered mirror before he came to me. As he reached down and pulled me to my feet, his grip was oddly careful. He immediately began examining me. My heartbeat started slowing back to normal. His touch stayed careful and as far from groping as possible as his hands moved down my body looking for injuries. He took my arms and pulled them into the no longer flickering light.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, my voice shaking. "It looked exactly like me!"

His eyes were dark and hard when they met mine. He picked up my pack and began pulling me back through the train station.

The train was almost done loading. I was shaking when Falk pulled me back into a row and made me get in on the inside. Falk shifted so no one

could see me as he pulled my hand to him. The train began to move.

"What was that?" I whispered.

He clenched and unclenched his jaw as he glanced at me before reaching for my other hand. He pushed back my sleeve from my still shaking hand. A handprint wrapped around my wrist, most of it was red, as if lightly burned; but it was obvious already that it was bruising. Falk gently cleaned my wrist as I tried to keep from demanding answers. He pulled my cardigan sleeve back down over my wrist and started to put everything back in his bag. When he turned to me, his face was hard. *That was a barghest; it was trying to take you, or tag you.* 

My fingers grew cold. "What?"

It's hard to explain; but it trying to take you is the problem. It looks like a hellhound is after you. He clenched and unclenched his jaw.

Hellhound? I signed. My heart sank. My lungs grew tight.

Demonic bounty hunters. They usually have a pack of barghest working for them.

"Falk. Muggle words," I snapped, starting to get irritated that I couldn't understand.

He met my gaze. A barghest is a demonic, shapeshifting dog. Hellhounds are bounty hunters for hire. They usually have a pack of them to acquire their target.

"Tell me you're joking." It was starting to get hard to breathe through my tight chest.

He shook his head. *I wish I could. Someone is trying to get their hands on you.* 

The shaking got worse. "Why?"

*Maybe it's your connection to Evelyn?* 

I nodded as I fought to take a deep breath. "What do I do?"

Don't get caught, he signed.

Things started to spin.

I'll fix this, Corrina. Until then, I'll keep you safe.

I would have answered but things started to tilt. He noticed, reached out, and held my neck. He met my eyes and took a deep breath. I copied him, breathing in that ozone scent. He helped the world stop spinning, but there was nothing to do for being scared.

"How did they know where I was?" I whispered.

His face grew hard as his thumb stroked my jawline before dropping. *I* don't know, but I'll figure it out.

I nodded and sat back in my seat, pulling my cardigan closed against the chill that hadn't left me since the bathroom. Bounty hunters...hellhounds... after me. Okay, don't panic. I can handle this. I have my self-defense gear again; I can scream loudly, and I'm not afraid to defend myself.

Falk dug into his bag and pulled out a teal lap blanket. He handed it to me. Surprised, I took it with limp fingers. He picked up a blanket? My heart warmed a little. I tried to smile my thanks as I opened it and covered myself. Leaning back in my seat, I watched the countryside go by. And reassured myself that I could handle it.

An hour later, I had relaxed and calmed down.

Falk got to his feet and stepped into the aisle. *Restroom*.

I nodded that I saw him before he headed down the car. He scowled as he saw how small it was. I bit back a smile as he stuffed himself inside.

A man got out of his seat further down and came up the aisle. He actually sat down in Falk's seat. "Are you traveling with your boyfriend?" He smiled a charming smile.

Stunned, I didn't know how to answer. "Um, no," I said, trying to be friendly What the hell was he doing here?

"Personally, I'd rather take a train instead of fly any day," he chuckled. "I'm Evan."

"It's nice to meet you." Can you leave now?

"I've got a business meeting in Savannah tonight," he said confidently. "And of course, I need to be back tomorrow for another one, so I can't drive."

I smiled and nodded. Then, hoping he'd get the hint, I pulled a magazine out of the back of the seat in front of me.

He reached over and touched my hand. "I'll be getting off the train and having breakfast when we get"—his thoughts poured into my head—"She'd probably open those long legs if she knew how much money I make. All these beautiful bitches are really looking for a rich man to take care of them. Would you like to join me?" His eyes ran over me, lingering over my breasts.

"No, thank you." My skin crawled as I pulled away from his hand and went back to my magazine, my stomach rolling.

"Are you sure?" He tried again. "We could have breakfast at the Hilton. Bend you over the table and screw your brains out."

I mentally cursed, put the magazine back, and scooted as far away from him as I could. I crossed my legs, and my arms over my chest, then pretended to be looking out the window.

Telepathy sucked. Whenever I touched someone or they touched me, I got a glimpse into their heads. Sometimes even after they stopped touching me, I could still hear their thoughts. The only way to make it stop was distance, and we were stuck on a train. Try dating when you know exactly what the other person thinks of you; it was rarely flattering.

He frowned, straightened his shoulders, and took the hint. He got to his feet and headed back to his seat.

A heartbeat later, the bathroom door opened. Falk pried himself out and headed back down the aisle. He stopped at our row and sat down. Feeling his gaze almost like a touch, I looked up at him. He raised an eyebrow. I glanced at Evan's back, then back to Falk.

His jaw clenched as he looked down the aisle toward the businessman. He turned back to me. *What happened?* 

His thoughts were disgusting, I signed.

Falk turned and sent a murderous glare down the aisle that I swear would have made Evan piss his pants if he'd seen it. Hell, it wasn't even directed at me and I had to exercise a little control. He turned back to me. *Get some sleep, we have a long way to go.* 



### Falk

"How clean was that Bathroom?" She tucked a stray hair behind her ear and looked up at me.

*Clean, but cramped. You'll fit better though,* I signed, not liking how wide her eyes had been when I turned back to her.

Her lips lifted a little to a half-grin; it wasn't much, but I'd take it. I got to my feet so she could get out and head down the aisle. I sat back down, watching as she moved to the far side of the aisle when she passed that man. Rage boiled inside me as she went into the bathroom.

How disgusting were his thoughts to make her react that way? Make her feel that way? I was sure I didn't want to know. In fact... I surveyed the car; it was just us and the human. Good. I got to my feet and moved down the aisle. When I reached him, I grabbed him by the throat. His eyes bulged.

Instead of speaking, he gargled. Barely keeping myself from breaking his neck, I lifted him and carried him to the front of the car. He struggled, kicking and punching at me. His foot hit the bathroom door as I carried him into the front of the car, still gurgling. That cold place I usually went to when I killed disappeared, leaving white-hot rage coursing through my veins. He shouldn't have even been thinking those things about her! I reached the door to the outside of the train. I reached down and broke the handle.

A small, feminine gasp sounded behind me as I pulled the door open. The man's eyes were wide as he clung to my hand. I threw him outside and watched as he tumbled down into the lake we were crossing over. My rage cooled down. He'd live. I slammed the door shut again before turning around.

Rina's face was pale, her mouth open, her breathing shallow. Her wide eyes were on me, fear shining through clearly. I scared her. A deep ache filled my chest. It shouldn't matter; this was about her being comfortable... but it did. It mattered to me. Fuck! Her fingers trembled as they wrung together. I could see it all on her face, just as I had seen on hundreds of others. I was a killer. A murderer. I was all that and much worse than she knew. Or ever would know. I took a step towards the cabin. She backed up into the metal wall, her hands going behind her as if to hold onto something. As if I'd ever throw her off. Not able to take that look anymore, I signed: I timed it so he'll live without injuries.

Her gaze went to the door then back to me, as if deciding whether to trust me or not. Some of the color warmed her face again. Her eyes were full of shadows as she looked at me. "Why?"

Why? Did she really need to ask? Someone had fucking tried to take her! Then that jerk had disgusting thoughts about her that she heard...why else? *Let's go back to our seats*.

She eyed me. Then swallowed hard before walking back into the train car. She took her seat and covered herself with the blanket while not looking at me. I shouldn't care. There was no reason to, other than she was my match. She shifted until she was leaning back, curled up and watching the world go by out the window.

I raised my body temperature, hoping to help her to sleep while she rubbed her temples. Eventually, her eyelids began to droop and she fell asleep.

Good, she needed it. There was a bounty on her. Murderous rage pumped through me in time with my pulse. When I found them, they'd be begging for mercy long before I was done. But right now, I needed to focus.

I pulled out my phone and tried to text Zahur to warn him that bounty hunters were in the field. Only I couldn't get a signal. What the fuck? I tried the Wi-Fi on the train but there wasn't even a server registering. I put my phone away and looked out the window.

A lightning storm raged overhead. Oddly silent. No thunder. Just lightning. It must be making electronics glitch or something. Perfect. I needed to find a landline and hope that worked. I looked down at her.

Rina's face was soft, her lashes dark crescents against her cheeks. Why would someone put a bounty on Rina? She was a strong telepath, but how strong? I didn't know. But it was most likely her connection to Evie. Evie...

She shifted in her sleep, the blanket dropping off her shoulder. Absently, I reached over and covered her again as I followed the thought. Evie had a treaty with the Witch's Council in Chicago. Why wouldn't she have sent Rina to them instead of teaching her herself? The question ate at me. Didn't Evie say that she sent anyone with abilities their way? Had I heard wrong? It's possible, but I doubted it.

Rina shifted in her sleep, muttering. "Stupid dogs...stop barking..."

As she settled down again, I shifted my gaze to look out the window. I needed to get my thoughts in order. How did they find her? Tracking signal? No, everything she had was soaked, it would have stopped working. Tracking spell? Maybe, but that would leave traces of magic on her and I'd feel it. The barghest had tagged her with a magical LoJack; that I knew. That handprint was only going to get worse. At least until we could get it removed or the hellhound died. But that was for later.

That left only one way. Someone was following her. I clenched my fist as the need to find and rip them apart battered at me. I settled in for the day and started coming up with a plan.



## Zahur

Cursing, I hung up. Why the hell was Helix finding so many problems? Luckily, a Templar was walking by.

"You!" I barked. The young man turned a little pale. "It looks like there's a possessed human nest in an empty building on Fifty-First. Meet the Redcaps at Washington Park and they'll tell you where to find them." "Yes, sir." He took off down the hallway.

I was about to go back to Evie's room when the phone rang. Again. I cursed in Egyptian and answered, "Yeah?"

"This is the head of the Witch's Council, Dahlia. Is this Zahur?" a professional, friendly voice asked.

For crying out loud. "Yes, that's me. What do you need?" And make it fast.

"I've got a witch missing," she announced. "Astrid gave me your number and said one of your gargoyles would fill in. Was she wrong?"

I ran my hand down my face. Son of a... "No, she was correct." With Astrid and Ranulf gone with the wolves, I was the only one left. "What's happened?"

"One of my witches hasn't been to work, isn't answering her phone, or is even at home. She's missing. It was probably the vampires," she stated as if it was a fact.

"Listen, I'll be happy to look into it, but at the moment, I'm taking care of Evelyn. I have your number. I'll call you when I have a chance." I hung up the phone and went back inside to check on them both.

Sweat was rolling off Evie's flushed face. My shoulders tightened as I checked her temperature. Hot; too hot. This shouldn't be happening; she shouldn't be getting ill.

"What is going on?" Atticus growled from the end of the bed.

"I'm not sure." I opened her shirt enough to check the burn on her chest. No, it was healing with no signs of infection.

"How could you not know?"

I sat on the side of the bed and carefully pulled up the shirt Atticus had put her in until I could see the bandage on her side. Atticus paced as I began to remove it. I cursed. The wound was red and swollen. The stitches bulging. Her veins were black and starting to turn red as they moved away from the wound. Infection.

"What's wrong?"

"She has an infection." I got up, went into the bathroom and got more towels. "Go to the medical wing and tell them you need a sterile debridement kit. And enough saline to flush a large wound."

Atticus took off at a run. God help anyone who got in his way. I laid the towels around her and pulled on my gloves. Carefully, I placed my hands around the wound. The heat coming off it warmed my hands. I cursed in my

native language again. How had I missed this? I felt the area around the stitches and felt the fluid under her skin. Shit. I'd need to open her stitches. While I waited for the kit, I drew up a dose of antibiotics and gave it to her quickly. I was putting away the vial when Atticus slammed the door open and ran in. I took the kit and set up what I needed.

"I'll need to cut open her stitches and irrigate the wound," I warned Atticus. It wasn't going to be pretty.

He growled in his chest but I ignored it. Carefully, I used the scissors and forceps to cut and remove the thread. The wound opened as if grinning at me. I cursed under my breath and I began flushing it with sterile saline. Thick, pink, foul-smelling liquid began to flush out of the wound. I made sure to catch it with the towels.

"I thought you cleaned that out already!" Atticus bit out as he paced on the other side of the bed.

"I did," I said in a calm voice. "But she got an infection anyway."

Her hands clenched and unclenched as her face grew pinched.

"Atticus, hold her hands." I filled another syringe with saline. The last thing we needed was for her to wake up and take a swing at me now.

Atticus sat at the head of the bed and took his wife's hands in his. He leaned down and whispered in her ear as I kept cleaning out her wound. The original wasn't that deep, but the more I irrigated, the deeper it showed me, the more worried I became. She shouldn't be bleeding this much or have this much discharge. It shouldn't be eating at tissue...

While Atticus was distracted, I examined the black veins and decomposing tissue. It had to be more than an infection; whatever this was, was necrotic. And fast-acting. I focused on flushing her side until the saline ran clear. Then I took out a swab and got a good sample. I closed the cover before packing the wound with gauze instead of stitching it this time. She'd need a drain but thankfully, the area around it looked better already. I finished up with her, took off my gloves and turned to Atticus. "We're moving her to the medical wing."

His head snapped up, eyes harsh. "Why?" He moved off the bed, grabbed my shirt, and lifted me off my feet.

I hung passively as I tried to get through to him. "She needs a drain and I want monitors on her."

His bloodshot eyes were tortured as he set me down; bags under them hung like bruises. The white stubble on his face was thicker than I'd ever seen, his hair in disarray from running his fingers through it. With his wrinkled dress shirt and blood-stained slacks...he didn't look like Atticus anymore.

"Atticus!" I snapped, making him focus on me again. "I know you're struggling just to get through the next minute. I've been there. But you have to keep a level head for her."

He swallowed hard and nodded. Atticus was barely holding it together. And with the paleness of his skin, it was looking like I'd need to put him on a drip soon. He went to her bedside and pulled back the blankets.

"Come on, luv." He slipped his arms under her and lifted her to cradle her against his chest. She made a small, pain-filled whimper as she settled against his shoulder. He pressed his lips against her forehead. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I picked up my bag and held the door for him. When we reached the ward, I held the door again. "Put her in bed three." The ward was dimly lit and practically abandoned. A thick layer of dust coated the nurses' station.

I set my bag down, then turned on the light and monitors on the wall. Atticus gently laid his mate on the thankfully dust-free bed, then carefully pulled the blankets out from under her. He covered her while I found the disposable pads for the heart monitor. I did a double take. These were old. At least five years old. No one made this design anymore. I hooked them up to the monitor and placed the pads on her. They barely stuck to her skin. Her heartbeat began to beep on the monitor. Atticus brushed the sweaty hair from her face as he sat on the side of her bed.

It didn't take me long to find the supply closet and get what I needed. I went back to Evie's bedside, took off the bandage, fitted her with a drain, then mostly stitched her wound closed. I placed icepacks around her to try and bring her fever down.

"Watch her closely." Dread filled my chest as I rushed across the ward to the medical lab. The wing was empty but the lab wasn't. I found a young Templar reading a medical journal as I walked in.

He set it down as I scanned the lab for what I needed. "You must be Dr. Zahur."

"Where's your incubator?" I demanded, skipping the pleasantries.

He shrugged. "I don't know. We haven't had one since I've been here."

I eyed him. That was ridiculous. Even though we'd been out of touch for years, our funding still came through for the Templars like clockwork.

He had to be wrong. I set my bag on the counter and started walking through the lab. As I walked, I noticed other things. Most of the equipment was ten years out of date. Some was missing altogether, like the incubator. The more I searched, the angrier I became. I strode back to the Templar. "Where the hell is all the equipment?"

The Templar shrugged. "I don't know. I've been trying to get an updated lab for months now, and all I'm told is it's not in the budget."

Not in the budget? We'll see about that. I walked back into the hospital wing. Cyrus would have already put the word out that our squad was rogue, but that wouldn't matter to several gargoyles, and I knew exactly which ones. Only my phone wouldn't connect. What the...? I tried again, only to get nothing. Cursing, I moved around the nurses' desk and found the landline.

"So, it's Cyrus's most -wanted number two," Charles chuckled in my ear as he answered on the second ring. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"I need you to check into the payment records of St. Joseph's church in Chicago." I sat down in the desk chair. Dust shot up, filling the air around me.

"If I do that, Cyrus will know exactly where you are," he pointed out. "But I know the financials backwards and forwards. What do you need to know?"

"Have we been funding them for the last ten years or so?" I watched the lab door.

"Yeah, we've never stopped funding any of the churches." Charles made a point to keep his voice down. "Each gets almost three million a year. They're well-funded."

"Then why am I at a church that has an incomplete, ten-year-old lab?" I muttered.

The silence was thick.

"All I can tell you is the problem isn't on this end." His voice lowered. "Look, Cyrus is claiming that you guys have gone against orders. What the hell is going on?"

"His orders were illegal." I explained about Evelyn and how she was Atticus's mate. That Cyrus wanted to separate them.

Charles cursed long and hard. "Are they mated?"

I looked across the ward to Atticus, who was bathing her forehead with a wet cloth. "Yes."

"Son of a bitch," he muttered. "Look, you guys are going to have to come back at some point and set the record straight. He's already building a squad to send after your group."

I cursed. "Do you know who?"

"No, but Wallace is the lead."

I grinned. "Good. Tell Wallace what's going on. He'll be able to explain the situation to the others once they leave town."

"And Wallace will keep them out long enough to give you guys enough time to run," he surmised. "I got you."

"We can't run," I stated. "There's an angel and high demon running around Chicago at the moment."

"What?" he asked, stunned. "Tell me this is one of your dry jokes."

"I wish I could."

"Do you need backup?" he asked, lowering his voice further. "I can pull some strings and get a team out to you."

"No, not yet." I looked around at the dark ward. "But if I need to, you'll be my first call."

Charles sighed. "Good. Don't take that thing on alone. I'll spread the word to Wallace, and after he's gone, to the rest of town. Stay safe." Charles hung up.

I forced myself not to slam the receiver as I hung up and glared at the useless lab. I couldn't get a culture done. Unless... I checked my watch. That orderly, Brian. Maybe he could get me in at his hospital.

I crossed the ward and opened the lab door. The Templar jerked as I tore the magazine out of his hands. "You have a patient in bed three, gargoyle; monitor her vitals over the next three hours and check the drainage of her side wound. Do nothing else without contacting me." I threw the journal into the trash and left the lab and then the wing, only to remember that Atticus wasn't being watched. I cursed, went to the empty church office, and dialed Ranulf. All I got was a call can't be completed recording. I slammed the receiver down, cracking the phone casing. I was going to have to chance leaving Atticus. There was no other choice.



## Rina

The wind danced through the trees, bringing with it the smell of the sea. Smiling, I walked through the bright-green, knee-high grass. Birds chirped and waves crashed. It was stunning.

Movement caught my eye. Sitting near the edge of the cliff, looking out at the ocean, was a man with brown hair and wide shoulders watching the waves. Falk. My heart stuttered in my chest; I froze. I was in his head. In the dream of a man who had driven his hand through a vampire's chest... My breathing grew shallow as I took a step back. Then another. My foot landed on a stick; the snap ricocheted through the woods.

Falk turned. His dark eyes found me.

I swallowed hard and stayed still.

"Corrina?" His voice was deep, rich chocolate. It moved through my mind like honey as he frowned. "What are you doing here?

I licked my lips, my pulse pounding in my throat. "I...uh...." Nothing could seem to come out...

His eyes grew softer, his jaw clenched. "You're scared of me."

I nodded as I took another step back. "I did just watch you throw someone off a train."

His face grew shadowed as he watched me back away. "I'm a lot of things, Rina. Not all of them are good. But a male that hurts a female has never—and will never—be one of them." His rough voice had a tired note in it. His face was weary as he turned back to the ocean.

"What are you then?" It barely came out as a rasp.

He shook his head. "Only God knows anymore..."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't.

"What do you mean?" I stepped a little closer.

"I'm the boogeyman." Weariness dripped from his voice.

"What do you mean?" The boogeyman?

He shook his head. "You'll find out soon enough."

I wrung my fingers. My head told me to run, but my instincts told me to stay. His shoulders were slumped, his body still.

I should run. It was the smart thing to do. But something kept my feet rooted to the spot. That voice, those eyes...they showed something else entirely. The need to change them, make them lighter, came out of nowhere. "So, you're not mad?"

He turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder. "Why would I be angry?"

I shrugged. "Because this is your head, your dream. I really didn't mean to jump in, it just happens when I'm asleep."

The corner of his lips twitched. "You're so worried about my privacy when I'm just grateful I can speak to you."

Oh... His eyes lightened a little as my pulse slowed. He went back to watching the water.

Something inside me told me I was safe, some instinct I didn't know I had. I slowly walked closer. The ocean waves crashed on the chalk cliffs a hundred feet below. Oh no no no. I took a couple steps back from the edge before sitting down. The wind ran over me and through the trees of the lush woods that reached the very edge of the cliffs.

I watched the light-blue water that was almost clear enough to see through over ten feet down. "Where are we, anyway?"

"An island off the north of Germany." He pushed his hair back out of his face. "Now, it's called Rugen Island. I lived here before it even had a name."

"Wow." I couldn't believe I was looking at the Baltic Sea. "It's beautiful."

He was quiet as he looked out at the ocean. He shrugged. "I guess you would see it that way."

"You don't?" My eyebrows rose to my hairline.

"There are at least a few thousand places just like this in the world." His eyes grew darker.

"So what? It's still beautiful."

His eyes unfocused. "I don't see it."

Something in his voice ate at my heart. "Maybe you aren't looking right."

He turned to look down at me. "How else is there to look?"

I smiled a warm smile, then pointed at the trees dancing in the wind along the cliff line. "What do you see there?"

Clearly just trying to humor me, he turned and watched the trees move. I watched as his eyes unfocused.

"Trees. Wood. Heat source. One can drop in a storm, or several could be hit by lightning." His voice was almost robotic. Huh.

"Okay." I pointed over the edge of the cliff at the small beach the waves were washing over. "And down there?"

He looked down. "Dangerous. High tide comes in fast, without much warning."

My heart sank. "You see the danger there could be, not what it is now. Why is that?"

"That's been my life for centuries." His gaze darted to my ears before looking out at the ocean again. "What's your life been like?"

It was such an odd question that it took me a minute to answer. "Good. I have a big family. Both of my parents are still healthy. My four older brothers are all happy and healthy."

"You didn't mention yourself." He picked up a pebble between his fingers. "Are you healthy and happy?"

My throat grew tight. "As much as I can be."

"Why did you hide that you wear hearing aids?" He tossed the pebble over the cliff.

I absently ran my fingers over the back of my ear. "Because now I won't be able to."

He grew still. "You're losing your hearing?"

"Yeah." I looked out at the ocean.

"How?"

I turned and met his eyes. They were amber again, warm and curious. "Genetics. My family didn't even know my dad carried the gene." I swallowed hard. "I've been lucky so far. I didn't start having trouble until I was fifteen." I shrugged as if it was no big deal. Though the pain never quite went away.

"It can still be difficult." His voice softened as he turned towards me.

I wiped my face while ignoring the pain at the center of my chest. "It is. I never say it, but it is."

He hesitated before he reached over the space between us and took my hand carefully in his. Instead of pulling away, I slipped my fingers through his. My fingers tingled from his touch as his big hand enveloped mine.

"I keep listening to music every chance I get. But..." Tears rolled down my face, my heart raw.

"But it'll never be enough."

I nodded as I wiped my face. "I'll never hear any child I might have say 'Mom.' I'll never hear them cry. Sing..." I shrugged. "It's just a fact in my life. And I'm trying to deal with it the best that I can. Enjoy everything now so I can remember it when the world is silent."

He scowled down at the water as I took a deep breath.

I sniffed. "My brothers were lucky; none of them have any hearing problems. Just me."

"And telepathy." His fingers squeezed mine.

"That particular torture is my own special brand." My eyes began to clear as my voice sharpened with an edge of bitterness. "No one in the family ever had any abilities, at least as far as my parents know. So, I'm a freak all around."

"I pull wings from my back and can fly." He looked down at me, his face blank. "We're different, and that's not a bad thing."

I chuckled. "As a woman terrified of heights, I can't imagine that."

"I had noticed that you didn't like flying on the plane." Something in his voice made me think that he was teasing me, though his voice didn't change at all.

How? How was I talking to him like this? "Why am I telling you all of this? I never even talk about it with Evie; not even with my mom."

Several emotions battled it out in his eyes before he answered. "Who else would understand?"

The wind picked up again, throwing some of hair into my face. He reached down and gently tucked it behind my ear, his fingertips brushing my cheek. My body throbbed; my heart raced as my face warmed. As he pulled back, I touched the back of his hand with my fingertips. Those warm eyes met mine. A horn blared through the air.



## Falk

IT WAS like an ice pick pierced my brain. I jerked awake and covered my ears. The fucking horn! I bent over as my head pounded so hard, I saw double. Cringing, I started rubbing my ears to get the ringing to stop.

A soft hand went to the back of my shoulder. Some of the pain eased. "You okay?" Her voice was still full of sleep as I continued to rub my ears.

When the ringing finally stopped, I sat up. Why did they have to blow a horn at all? She pulled her hand back as if she just realized she'd touched me.

She shifted in her seat. It was some time before she broke the silence.

"Do you think we'll make it in time?" she asked, her voice quiet.

I turned back to her. We have to. Atticus will slaughter half the city if Evelyn doesn't wake up.

She raised an eyebrow. "Half the city?"

I nodded. And I could understand why he'd do it. Rina got under my skin. And that was just after a few hours of knowing her. What would a few days do?

How much stronger would this bond grow if I stayed with her? A large part of me wanted to find out; the rest of me knew I'd only bring her pain. She's a direct link to his heart. It doesn't matter how closed off a gargoyle is. It doesn't matter if you don't want to be affected. Your mate is a direct link to your heart. They give you peace. Feel like home.

She swallowed hard.

This is the one person for you. No one else will make you feel this way again. But that doesn't mean it will work out. There are matches out there that never become mates. They fight, they refuse to work on their issues. My eyes ran over her face. The sweet curve of her jaw, the line of her cheekbone. The flecks of green in her hazel eyes. Or they know they'll only end up hurting each other. So, they go their separate ways. It's for the best sometimes.

Her eyes filled as she turned away. "That's heartbreaking. To meet someone who is supposed to be yours, only for them to walk away..." She ran her eyes over my face.

I had to tell her, even though nothing would come of it. She should know. Watching Atticus bumble his way with Evelyn had showed me that. I knew I'd have to, but now wasn't the time or place. We were trying to save Evie's life. And I didn't want to hurt her for as long as possible. She looked out the window and watched the rain coming down in sheets.

I tried not to notice the way the scent of lavender floated off of her. I was going to have to leave her at some point. It was for the best...

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#### **ASTRID**

fter dropping off the samples to David to analyze, we headed over to my loft. I needed a shower and to pack a bag for the church. I was still trying to figure out how hunters could have found Ben when, as I crossed my apartment, my front door slammed shut, the echo sending hot chills down my spine. I turned to Ranulf. His eyes were boiling with heat. He was still furious. He stalked towards me; my heart started pounding in my chest and heat began pooling between my legs, my mind going blank. His hand grabbed my shirt and jerked me to him. His mouth crushed mine as he held me against him. The wolf inside me rolled over happily. I kissed him back hard, tasting him until I was lost.

His fingers moved to my hair and wrapped it in his fist, pulling me from him. I gasped as sparks shot down my spine. Loving his touch, I put my hands on his chest and shoved him back several feet. His eyes heated, that devilish smirk I was starting to love back on his face. He pulled his shirt off, then came towards me. I stepped back, my hands going to the hem of my own. I pulled it off and threw it to him. He caught it, then let it drop. He stepped towards me; I stepped back. My hands went to my jean buttons. Fire burned in his gaze as he strode towards me, grabbed me around the waist, lifted me and pinned me to the wall. The pictures dropped and broke, but I didn't give a damn. His mouth took mine, demanding everything I had. Everything I was. I wrapped my legs around his hips, pressing my core against him. He pressed me into the wall, his hands moving up my body, his fingers pinching my nipples, building the fire higher.

I whimpered in need as I shifted against him, his fingers gripping my breast harder. I cried out as lights danced behind my eyes. More. I needed more. I used my hips to shove him away from the wall. He stumbled back. I dropped my feet to the floor and pushed him toward the couch; he fell hard. Something cracked; the couch leaned to the left. Breathing heavy, I straddled him and moved my hips hard against him. His hands went to my waist, gripping tightly. He forced me up to my knees as his mouth took in my breast. I cried out, my fingers burying in his hair. My back arched, pushing more of me between his lips. His teeth bit down; pain and pleasure charged through me like lightning.

Ranulf growled deep in his chest as he got to his feet, carrying me. My back touched the wood of the coffee table. His pulled back enough to grab the front of my jeans and rip them off. My shoes disappeared, along with what was left of my jeans. Ranulf moved over me. The coffee table creaked, then gave out, dropping us to the floor. His eyes on mine, he lifted my legs to his shoulders, his hot breath running over the inside of my calves as he undid his pants. He bent my legs back over me, my knees over his shoulders as he pinned me to the wood. I growled deep in my chest. His eyes met mine a heartbeat before he drove into me. I cried out as he filled me completely, hitting the end of me. Full. Fuck... so much...

Needing to touch him, I reached up to him. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head in one hand. I shivered as heat rolled through me; my body gripped his tighter. He moved his hips, pulling out almost completely, then slamming home with a powerful thrust. I whimpered, pain, pleasure, everything mixed as I took all of him. He pounded me into the coffee table as that wave rose inside me. I tried to move my hips to meet him but I had no room. All I could do was burn. Closer, closer...electricity ran over my skin; my body tightened around him.

"Ran..." I whimpered. So close...just one more...I was teetering on the edge when Ranulf stopped moving. My eyes snapped open. "Don't stop!"

That smirk was back on his face as he stayed in place. My body cooled, stepping back from that edge.

"Ran!"

He drove into me again, knocking the breath from me. The way his hips moved, how his body rubbed against mine... "Oh shit! Yes!" Everything I was shook as that crest came closer. Then he stopped again. "Ran! What the fuck?" So close! I met his eyes. "Why are you stopping?"

"Frustrating, isn't it?" His deep, low voice rolled over me, making me clench around him. His lips moved to my ear. "When you trust someone to

stay with you, only for them to run off."

Oh shit! He was getting even... He rolled his hips, giving me enough of him to stay near the edge but not send me over. I tried to shift against him but in the position I was in, he had all the control. Mouth dry, breathing heavy, I knew he was right. I shouldn't have run off. "I'm sorry, Ran... Please..." His hips thrust harder against me. I cried out as he filled me completely again. He growled against my ear, his body stretching mine. The sting set in as he picked up that body-melting pace. One of his hands left my wrist and moved down my chest. His fingers teased around my clit, so close, but not close enough. My blood pounding. My body taut. Every nerve waiting. Yearning.

I couldn't think; I was on that edge again. One breath and I'd shatter. "Ran..."

He drove into me and stroked my clit, shattering me into a million pieces. I cried out as waves of pleasure crashed over me, drowning everything else out but the feel of him inside me, his hand gripping my wrist, his cock filling me, his fingers stroking the flames higher and higher. He gave me everything I asked for, everything I needed, wanted. He growled, pulled out of me, and came. Hot cum landed between my breasts.

Even through the haze, my heart sank. Why...? He let go of my wrist and lowered my legs. I stayed limp as he pulled me to him then lay on the floor, sprawling me over him. I let him manhandle me into a comfy position, then listened to the beat of his heart under my ear. His hand ran down my spine. As I came back down to earth, I realized his fingers were stroking the scars that crisscrossed over my back. I didn't care. His touch was soothing.

His cum cooled on my skin, making my heart ache. After our first time, he never finished inside me again. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask why, but a part of me was afraid of the answer.

"You were mad," I said instead.

His hand moved down my skin to my ass. He squeezed it in his large palm. "Ya bet your fucking arse I was. Something could have happened to ya."

My heart warmed at the heat in his voice as his fingers flexed on me.

"You can't just fly out to a crime scene in the middle of the day." My voice was still a husky rasp. "We're still hiding us, remember?"

"Yeah, I know." He growled deep in his chest. "That doesn't mean I have to fucking like it."

"Ran..." I ran my fingers over his chest. "They'll exile me, if not kill me."

"I know." He held my hand to his sweaty skin. "And the gargoyles... well."

I didn't want to think about what could happen to Ranulf. Every time I did, it became hard to breathe.

"You know, demons can't go out during the day..." I looked up at him. "So, I could—"

"No." His hard face told me he wasn't going to change his mind.

I sighed. "We have to get back to the church."

"I might not be able to sneak into your room tonight," he warned, his face softening.

I smiled. "That's okay, I'll sneak into yours."

He chuckled as I climbed off of him, got to my feet, and picked up my ruined clothes. "Could you pick up a bit while I pack?"

"Aye, goddess." He rolled over, giving me a wonderful view of his muscular ass before he pushed himself up and got to his feet.

I went to the bathroom to clean up, then packed a duffel bag full of clothes for me and a few for Evie. When she woke up, she'd need something to wear. I looked over the railing to my living room and smiled. Frames were broken, a lamp smashed, the sofa tilting to the side, and the coffee table destroyed. Ranulf was sweeping up the glass while the rest of the room lay in ruin. If he was that mad just for leaving...what else could I do to piss him off? Heat curled through me at the thought.

When we were ready, I opened the front door to leave and froze. David was standing in the hallway with his hand raised to knock.

"Good, you're home." His eyes darted over me to Ranulf. "What is he doing here?"

I bit back a growl. "What do you want, David?"

His eyes came back to mine. "I wanted to continue our discussion from last night."

No. No. Oh shit. "Now's not a good time. Someone broke in and trashed my place. So, I'm leaving for a few days." I shook the strap of the bag to draw his attention.

"This won't take long—"

"Now, is not a good time, David," I bit out through my clenched teeth. If Ranulf knew that David was trying to marry me off to another pack, he'd kill him in a heartbeat.

"I've negotiated your terms," David stated. "Their alpha has agreed that marriage isn't required for you to be Thunder Bay's alpha female. However, he doesn't want to take it off the table."

My heart stopped as Ranulf grew still near me. Oh fuck. "I'm not talking about this now!"

"Yes, we will!" David ordered before looking up at Ranulf. "Get lost, gargoyle. This doesn't concern you."

I went still, certain that Ranulf was going to announce himself as my mate. My heart pounded in my ears. Don't...please...

Instead, Ranulf met David's gaze and slowly lumbered out of the apartment and down the stairs. When he disappeared, I turned on David. "I never said I would take the position."

David's eyes narrowed on mine. "Why wouldn't you?"

I stepped closer and got into his face. "Just because you've got a new mate and a new life without me doesn't mean I am going to disappear. This is my home too, and I love it here."

"You need to move on." His face was cold as I looked up at him. "You haven't even given anyone a chance since..."

"Since you dumped me the day before our wedding—by text," I finished for him. "Five years, David, and you didn't even have the balls to tell me to my face."

"That's not what this is about!" he snapped. "This would be good for our pack and you."

"You don't get to decide these things for me," I growled. "This is my life."

His eyes narrowed as they ran over me. "Why wouldn't you go?"

"My bar is here—"

"No." He shook his head. "You know you can start another bar in Thunder Bay. You'd even have pack funding to get it started." He eyed me again. "There's something else..."

My wolf bared our teeth. "Whatever reason I have, it's mine."

I shoved past David and started down the hall.

"Astrid." The wolf in his voice stopped me dead. "You will consider this."

I turned around and shot him a look. "Or what?"

He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and turned to me. "Or you'll be exiled."

My heart dropped. He wouldn't...

"I'm not ordering you to say yes." He stepped closer, trying to tower over me. "But at the end of this year, you won't be a part of this pack one way or another."

My wolf growled deep in our chest, her energy running just below our skin. "You can't do that."

"I can." He moved even closer. "If you say no, you will be putting yourself before the pack, and that is a large enough offense."

"That's not what it means, and you know it."

"You will leave this pack," he stated. "How is up to you. Rogue or alpha."

"I'll call for a public trial," I countered. "And you'll have to explain to the pack what offense I've committed." And it wouldn't go well for him. Free will existed within the pack. We controlled our own lives and made damn sure we kept it that way.

"I don't want it to go that far, Astrid," he stated. "But I will get this alliance." He walked past me and was on the stairwell when he paused. "Did you change your perfume?"

My heart sank as a cold shiver ran down my spine. He smirked over his shoulder at me before heading down the stairs. I leaned against the wall, cursing myself. Of course; he could smell Ranulf on me. It was so stupid to think he wouldn't notice. I banged my head back against the wall and sighed. Rogue or alpha. I was going to lose my bar and my pack no matter what. And Ranulf... He was going to be furious.

It wasn't long before footsteps came back up the stairs. I pushed away from the wall and walked back into my apartment. I really needed a drink for this. He walked in while I was in the middle of pouring a tumbler of scotch.

"Start talking."

I emptied the tumbler in one go before refilling it and turning to him. "The alpha from Thunder Bay is looking for an alpha female to set the foundation for his pack."

"Aye, I got that." He stalked towards me. "Now, what aboot the part that it's ya!"

"I only heard about the offer last night." I looked up at him. "I was never going to say yes."

"Why didn't ya fucking tell me?"

My wolf paced inside me as she came closer to the surface. "Because it wasn't that serious."

"Not that serious?" he bellowed. "It was a bloody fucking marriage proposal!"

"And I said no." I took a drink. "That should have been the end of it. But now he's threatening to exile me."

Ranulf was in front of me in a heartbeat, furious. "What was that, lass?"

I lifted my head. "He said, whether I take the position or not, I won't be part of this pack anymore."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "Can he do that?"

I took a deep drink. "He can if he loads my trial with his strongest supporters."

"How important is the pack to ya?" he asked.

I shot him a look as my wolf growled in my chest. "How important are the other gargoyles to you?"

"They're my family," he admitted.

"Well, then you have a clue how important my pack is to me!" I slammed the tumbler onto the table.

He shook his head. "I'm gonna to kill him." He turned and headed for the door.

I ran around him and blocked the door. "No, you won't!"

His hands went to my arms. "Move, goddess. I'll make it look like an accident."

I grabbed onto his arms as he forced me to move out of the way. "If you do that, you might as well exile me yourself!"

He froze and met my gaze.

"If you go after him, he'll know something is going on. He'll figure it out. And I'll be tried for treason." He couldn't; not if I was going to keep my pack.

"You have nae control over who yer mate is!" He clenched his hands into fists.

"I know!" I yelled back. "And that will save me from punishment. But that won't keep me in the pack!"

"What the hell do you get from the pack?" His eyes blazed with blue fire. "Every day, one of 'em have pissed ya off and you've talked about leaving!"

"The run! That's what I get. I can shift and run with someone since I sure as hell can't run with you!" The words were out of my mouth before I even knew it.

Silence fell like a cloak. Heavy and full of unspoken things. He dropped his hands from me. "And ya can't fly beside me." Pain filled his eyes. "I thought it dinnae matter."

"A werewolf has to run," I whispered as pain racked my chest.

He scowled. "You're considering it."

"I could do it without marrying him," I pointed out. "Be an alpha and keep our secret."

His jaw clenched and unclenched. "We need to be heading back." He picked up my duffel and headed out the door. I locked my loft door and followed, heartsick.

I CURSED under my breath as I walked into my bar. Ranulf was on the roof; he refused to let me go to work alone. Which wasn't really surprising. But at least he agreed that he could leave me with the pack if he had to. That had been a fun argument.

The bar was packed. Usually, it made me happy, but after today, it just made my heart ache. I moved through the crowd and behind the bar with a fake smile.

"Hey, Astrid." Advar sat down at the bar. "How's your night?"

I got his usual and set it down in front of him. "Fine. How about yours?"

Advar frowned at me. "What's wrong?"

I shrugged and turned away to pour myself a tumbler of scotch.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?" Advar demanded as I turned back around.

"Nothing, just a long day." I took a drink and gave him a fake smile.

"Did that guy dump you or something?" He took a drink. "Give me a name and he'll be limping."

I smiled a real smile. "We had a fight."

"About what?"

Normally, I'd talk to Evie about this, but...I took a deep drink before asking, "Could you ever give up running with the pack?"

Advar's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "What?"

My heart dropped. "Nothing, never mind." I started to walk away.

He grabbed my arm. "Are you thinking about...?"

"I don't know what I'm thinking about," I admitted before taking another drink and pulling away to refill my glass.

"Whatever you are or aren't thinking about," Advar said, "you can't pretend to be something you're not."

I sighed as I finished refilling my glass. "That's not the problem."

"You didn't tell him..."

I turned back to him. His mouth was gaping, his eyes wide. Then it hit me what he was thinking. "Advar, you're so far out in left field it's not even funny anymore."

"Good, you don't need word to get to any hunters." His shoulders relaxed. "Now, what's going on?"

I shrugged with a fake smile. "Just one of those days today."

"Excuse me!" a deep voice called from the bar.

I looked down the bar and found the cutie from yesterday trying to get my attention. "What do you want to drink?"

"Nothing." He grinned. "I actually was hoping to speak to you."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not looking, hot stuff. But check out our brunette server, she's single."

A wave of heat rolled off him as he called his wolf to the surface. Like wind off the desert sand it hit every wolf around him. They were backing away when the energy rolled over me, hot, dry, abrasive. There was nothing there that I or my wolf liked. Without thinking, my wolf came to the surface and smacked him with our own energy. His head snapped around as if he'd been hit, which my wolf had basically done. His light eyes met mine as a growl trickled out from between my lips. He was an alpha, no doubt about it. And I could guess who he was. "I don't care if you're Thunder Bay's alpha. Keep your wolf reined in."

He bowed from the neck, acknowledging he was wrong. "Sorry, it was a reflex."

I scoffed as the crowd went back to their usual noisiness.

The alpha held my gaze as he walked down the bar to me. "You have a strong bond with your wolf. It's impressive."

"Thanks." I made a point to stay polite. "What will you have to drink?"

"A beer would be great." He sat down beside Advar.

I got his beer and set it down in front of him. "Now, what do you want?"

"I wanted to introduce myself to the female that might become my alpha partner," he said. "I'm Liam."

Advar's eyebrows disappeared for the second time that night. He sent me a "we're going to talk later" look.

"Astrid," I muttered.

"I know." He grinned. "David has spoken highly of you for the last few weeks."

"Weeks?" I asked, my nails digging into the bar as my wolf prowled just under our skin.

"Yes." His eyes narrowed. "He did talk to you about it beforehand, yes?"

"No," I growled. "I only learned about everything last night."

His eyes filled with understanding. "Then the sudden addendum makes sense now."

"Look," I sighed. "I'm not giving you an answer right now. There's a lot to consider." I gestured around the bar. "My business is here, my friends, my home."

He nodded. "I understand that. And I'm not looking for an answer. I was only hoping to get to know you before the run tomorrow night."

I started tapping my nail against the bar as my gut knotted. It wouldn't hurt to learn about him, right? Figure out what I'd be getting into if...

Before I could decide, the phone for the bar rang.

"Moonlight Bar." I stepped back from the bar and leaned against the counter behind me.

"Where is Evelyn?" A sickly-sweet voice with a fake southern accent shot through my ear.

"Lemora. Vamp Queen of the city. Nice to hear from you. She's unconscious at the moment." I was starting to feel like I was stuck on repeat. "What do you need, your Majesty?"

She huffed, "Well, one of my vampires is dead in a warehouse and from the looks of things, it was done by the witches."

I straightened. "You don't know that, Lemora. You'll need to wait for Evelyn."

"And when will she be waking up?" she asked in a clipped voice. "Evidence is degrading as we speak."

I sighed. "I don't know, but I can come out there and process the scene while we wait for Evelyn to wake up."

She snorted in my ear. "As if I'd trust a wolf to collect evidence."

Calm, Astrid...calm. "My degree is in forensic science, Lemora."

"It's not your qualifications that worry me, Astrid," she countered. "It's your loyalty to your species."

I rolled my eyes. "You just said that you thought it was the witches."

"I need Evelyn."

"I can give you the number of one of the other gargoyles; they could fill in for Evelyn." I gave it a shot. "It's that or you wait until she wakes up. You know that."

Lemora muttered in French. "All right, I'll take the substitute."

I gave her the number to the church before I hung up. When I turned around, Liam was watching me carefully. "What?"

He smirked. "Why is the Vampire Queen of Chicago calling you?"

"I'm the backup in case Evelyn can't be contacted." I poured myself another tumbler of scotch.

"That's quite a system," Liam said as I turned back to him. "I'd love for Thunder Bay to have a system like this. It'd keep misunderstandings to a minimum."

"It's worked well enough for us." I tapped my fingers on the bar, took a deep breath, and finally asked, "So, what's Thunder Bay, Ontario, like?"

His smile was warm as he answered, "It's beautiful. But like all large cities, it has its problems."

"What about the area?"

His smile grew. "Most of us actually live out near Sleeping Giant Park. It gives us easy access to the woods and it keeps us close to each other."

"So, your pack is close-knit?" I asked before I took a sip.

"A pack is supposed to be family," he reminded me. "And we take that to heart. We take care of each other, support each other. The way a pack should."

It sounded nice. For the last year it seemed like this pack had forgotten that. I eyed him. Was I really considering this?



## Zahur

I was more than just irritated as I landed in the warehouse district. The messenger I sent for Ranulf had been slow enough to grate my nerves.

Evelyn wasn't improving; in fact, she was getting worse. And where was I? Out looking at a vampire crime scene. I muttered under my breath as I buttoned my shirt and dropped off the roof to the asphalt below. Two vampires instantly showed fang.

"Where's Lemora?" I didn't beat around the bush. "She asked me to come out."

One of the guards eyed me a moment before opening the door to the warehouse. "She's inside."

I walked in and was hit with an overwhelming stench of rot. He must have been dead a while. Then again, vampires tended to decompose quickly after death. I strode through the room toward where several halogen lamps were set up at the scene when I was met by a leggy brunette with a perfect, pale complexion.

"You must be Lemora." I stopped several feet from her.

She smiled a strained smile. "Mr. Zahur. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"As I said on the phone, I'll do what I can; but my first priority is Evelyn's health." I crossed my arms over my chest.

She nodded. "As it should be. How is she?"

"Recovering," I hedged. I didn't know this being, and I wasn't going gossip about patient health.

"Good." Lemora sighed as we reached the center of the room. "Here he is."

A vampire hung upside down from the ten-foot-tall ceiling. His arms were cuffed behind his back, his face paler than pale. He hung in the center of a circle drawn in blood and chalk. Outside the circle were symbols I'd never seen. Runes; but I'd never been able to keep those straight. Outside of that ring of symbols was another circle, both in blood and chalk again. I walked around the circle, careful of where I set my feet. The vampire's throat had been slit; it looked like all four jugulars cut. It wouldn't have taken less than a minute for him to bleed out.

Despite popular mythology, vampires aren't dead. Though their bodies were souped-up to the point that they dry out their own blood quickly and need to replenish their supply often. Faster, stronger, and no aging. It all came with a price. No afterlife. This world, and this life was all they had.

I knelt down and examined the circle again. "How old was he?"

"Thirty-three. He was one of our regular blood donors. When he found out he had terminal pancreatic cancer, he asked to be converted." Lemora's answer had me turning to her. She smiled. "He has a daughter to support, no other family. Evelyn gave her permission."

I turned back to the scene and got to my feet. Along with the floor, chalk-and-blood-smeared symbols were on every wall. "Where is she now?"

"She's in my penthouse." Lemora sighed. "She was having a sleepover at a friend's home for a few nights and just came back today."

I shook my head as I pulled out my phone. Poor kid. "And you think it's safe to have humans living in the nest?"

Lemora's face grew hard. "It is perfectly safe for several reasons. One, I screen my vampires carefully before conversion. All of my vampires are good, decent people. Second, human safety is guaranteed by my word. Third, we are not a nest of monsters, Mr. Zahur."

I nodded; that may be so. "But we both know that not all nests operate like yours."

Her eyes grew shadowed. "Murderers? Yes. Sadists? Yes. Psychopaths? Absolutely. But not in my nest."

"The Van Doren nest." The history of the nest that ran Manhattan wasn't a secret. It was caked in blood and bodies.

She nodded. "The Van Doren nest is full of vipers. They've put it to good use as assassins for hire for at least the last century."

"And vampires allow it?" I shot her a look.

She lifted her chin. "Vampires don't police each other, Mr. Zahur. We have our general rules of respect and our territories. If there's an issue, it's handled within the nest."

No governing body? I stored that away for later as I went back to work. "What happens to the little girl now?"

"I'm her guardian now." Lemora dropped her hands from her hips. "Her father had insisted."

I began taking photos of the symbols. "Evie might be awake tomorrow and be able to tell you what the symbols mean." I moved around the room, being sure to take pictures of everything.

"What happened?" Lemora asked.

I gave her a rundown of what happened on Christmas Eve. She started muttering in French. "I'll have my people warned. And tell them to keep an

ear out. But the city seems to be trying to tear itself apart at the moment."

"It does indeed." I was still taking pictures when I noticed something. "Did any of you touch or clean up anything?"

Lemora gave an elegant shake of the head. "Of course not. Evelyn has always been clear on procedure."

I nodded; that's what I was afraid of. "Where's the blood?"

She grew that absolutely still that only vampires can achieve. "Pardon?"

"He's hung upside down to be drained, the floor should be covered." I gestured at the practically pristine floor. "Where did his blood go?"

Her face grew paler. "That's a good question..."

"What can vampire blood be used for?" I asked, stepping closer to her.

She shrugged. "Not conversion; that has to be from the vein... I don't know."

"We'd better figure it out."

One of the guards from the door reached us. "There's a Redcap asking for you, gargoyle."

I cursed. "Over six feet tall?"

He nodded.

It was Helix. I headed out of the warehouse and out into the night. Stepping outside, I looked up at the goblin. "What?"

"We have another fully formed demon sighting." Helix's voice was tired.

Shit! What the hell was happening?

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# Rina

pulled my coat closed against the chill as Falk lowered the throttle until we were almost idling. The rental company had been closed; it was Christmas, after all. So, Falk stole a boat from a marina. Well, borrowed. I was going to make sure to fill it up before we dropped it back off.

The water was calm as far as I could see, giving the whole place an eerie feel of stillness. Like the calm before the storm. All right, Evie, you've already had me jump off a building; what kind of surprises am I in for now?

The sun warmed my shoulders while I turned to watch as Falk checked the GPS again. I looked out at the water, hoping I remembered the numbers right. I had only had a few seconds to jot them down before my memory faded.

Falk signed to me. We're here.

"Give me a minute to set the anchor." I got to my feet before moving to the front. I opened the hatch at the nose of the boat and pulled out a large, yellow nylon bag with a smaller red bag attached. I set it to the side and tied an anchor rope to the bow. I threw the bags over the side. The sea anchor unfurled itself underwater and turned into a small parachute, which it pretty much was. It would keep us from drifting, especially in the calm water.

I shut the hatch, straightened, and turned around. Falk's eyes snapped up from where he was looking. Was...was he just checking out my butt? My cheeks burned. "Uh, um, shut off the motors."

The silence was surprising. I started to pull the cooler closer to the nose of the boat. Falk bent down and picked it up effortlessly. I stepped back and

let him deal with opening the cooler. My stomach rolled a little as he reached in and lifted the dead piglet out. He set it on top of the bow. It wasn't that I was a vegetarian, it was just that it wasn't a full-grown pig. Then he pulled out a bag of pig's blood and quickly poured that into the water off the bow.

He dropped the trash back into the cooler on his way over to me. *What now?* 

"Now, we wait," I said. "She said it would take some time."

He nodded as we sat down in the back of the boat in the sun.

Going into the middle of nowhere with a man I didn't really know wasn't the smartest thing I'd ever done. Add in that he had killed a vampire without hesitating and threw a man off a train, it was guaranteed suicide. But Evie trusted him. And some instinct I had was telling me I was safe. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. It was crazy, but my instincts were rarely wrong.

Maybe it was because of the woman he helped get off the train. When the train had finally gotten to Jacksonville, we had been on the platform when I spotted a woman struggling to get her baby stroller off the train. The stroller was stuck on a step, and her two other kids were on the verge of throwing tantrums.

Falk didn't say anything before he left my side and went to the door of the train. He simply reached up and lifted the stroller off the edge and set it carefully on the platform. While I watched, stunned, he moved out of the way so the woman could get her other two in line.

The woman thanked him profusely before heading for the station. Falk came back as if nothing had happened.

I turned around and looked out at the sun getting closer to setting. It had been sweet. Something I hadn't expected from the scary boogeyman gargoyle. Boogeyman? Why did that pop into my head?

I rubbed my temple. At least out here, my head could finally stop hurting. For some reason, my barriers were getting weaker and I didn't know why. They usually got weaker when I was in a huge city, but not this much. A vibration along the rail had me turning back to Falk.

He stopped tapping when he got my attention. *Are you feeling all right?* You were pale in town.

He noticed? "My barriers are thinning out and I don't know why. The further we get away from the city, the better." Thankfully, my barriers had

never come down all the way before. It wasn't something I was eager to try.

How did you manage before you met Evie?

"It wasn't that bad until my second year in college." I tucked a stray hair that slipped out of my braid behind my ear. My fingers brushed the mic on my hearing aid as I remembered the constant voices of other people in my head. "The headaches were almost constant, but it was livable. Then it started getting worse. Nose bleeds, throwing up; I couldn't sleep because it was loud in my head. It was really...I was miserable."

*How did you function like that?* The boat rose and fell with the water.

"I didn't." I gave him a half-smile. "I started staying in my dorm room as much as possible, missing all my classes. Anytime I went out, for even an hour, I was in bed the rest of the day, sick."

What changed?

"Evie," I said. "She found me."

The corner of his lip twitched. *How?* 

"She tracked me down." I relaxed a little more against the seat cushion. "Apparently, when I was finally sleeping, I was projecting my dreams across the city. It was strong enough that she managed to find me at the campus."

His eyes grew lighter, from dark to a slight amber. *How did that go for you?* 

I grinned. "Not well. She slipped into my head and told me to wake up and answer the door."

The corner of his lips lifted into a grin.

I shrugged. "I did, and there she was. With that look she gets on her face when she's angry."

He nodded. I've seen it. It's a mix of disappointed and 'I'm trying not to kill you.'

"Exactly. So, this strange woman walked into my dorm with that look, slammed the door, then proceeded to lecture the hell out of me. That I was lucky she was the one to find me; that I was most likely shoving my dreams into every sensitive person across the city."

He tilted his head to the side. What then?

"Then, she sat me down. Explained what I was doing and then made barriers for me." I smiled as the memory filled me with warmth. "That was the best night of sleep I had in years. I've been working at the shop and learning from her ever since."

His gaze ran over my face, then met mine again. *What's it like? Telepathy?* 

I thought about how to explain it. "It's like a crowded party. And I can go from person to person and eavesdrop on what they're thinking on the surface. But if I wanted to, I could climb into their head and see their entire world. That's the most accurate way I can describe it."

Silence fell again while we waited. I shifted in my seat. Yeah, my instincts weren't screaming at me to run. But they weren't saying get comfy.

He looked out at the water, his jaw clenching, before turning back to me. Evie said you're going to university for computers?

My shoulders relaxed as I smiled. "Yeah, I like programming. I want to get into making video games, but right now I'm working on an app that will do speech to text as a default on a smart phone..." I continued to explain to him what I was doing. Why it would be neat, and how I was trying to program it. I told him everything I could think of that would bore him. But instead of looking bored, his elbows were on his knees as he listened intently. It was...nice.

When I was done telling him about the project, I asked, "What do you do? I mean, gargoyles have jobs, right?"

His shoulders grew rigid as he looked down at the floor of the boat. He leaned back before answering. Yes, we have doctors, teachers, just like every town. But we're also the only protection our people have. So, we have military-type positions that humans don't anymore.

"What do you mean jobs humans don't have anymore?" What kind of jobs were those?

He paused for several moments before he signed, *I'm the person you call when you need to get rid of a problem*.

My brow drew down. "What, like, pest control?"

He grew still. *Executioner*.

It took me several heartbeats to realize he wasn't joking. "Executioner..."

He clenched his jaw.

"Your job is to kill people?" Holy...

He was completely still as he waited for...something. As if waiting for me to condemn him. Instead, I asked the first thing that popped into my head. "Is that what you want to do?" His gaze snapped to mine, his face hard. My pulse in my ears was the only sound as he watched me. Eventually, he shook his head.

The relief had me sinking back against the cushion. "Then why don't you quit?"

His face was dark again. *Because there aren't many who can do what I do.* 

"But you don't want to." It just slipped out.

He focused on me again. Someone has to do the jobs that no one wants.

My chest ached. "That sucks."

He looked out at the water, turning away. The warmth that seemed to radiate from him fell away. Something inside me didn't like it. "What do you like to do?"

He grew still. Woodworking.

Woodworking. I didn't expect that. He seemed more like the kind to drink and play pool.

Why did Evelyn ask you to get these components?

I smiled. "Probably because I may or may not, but definitely do, have a slight fascination with mythical creatures."

He raised an eyebrow. What about it fascinates you?

"I don't know, lots of things. Um, the fact that they are so rare. Why is that? How intelligent are they? Are the myths anything like the real thing?" I shrugged. "All of the above."

We fell into silence after that, but strangely, not an uncomfortable one.

An hour or so later, something nudged the underside of the boat. I sat up straight, my heart already starting to pound. I got to my feet and looked over the edge at the water swirling around the boat. Falk did the same on his side.

Okay, that's supposed to happen... The boat was nudged again. I hit the floor of the boat as it rocked back and forth. "Holy crap!" Using the rail and the console, I pulled myself to my feet.

Falk somehow kept on his feet with his hand on the side as he made his way towards me.

It rose out of the water, slowly. First, the deep-blue scales poked out of the water. Then the actual skull rose, the size of a school bus. I swallowed hard as the creature's head continued to rise. Yellow eyes watched us as the giant mouth and teeth cleared the edge of the boat. It was beautiful. Different shades of blue and green feathered her scales in a beautiful pattern along her face and down its long neck.

I cracked my barrier and sent a tendril of thought out to brush the creature's mind.

"Evelyn sent me," I sent gently as I stepped out to the middle of the bow of the boat. "Please, she's in trouble."

Warmth and concern answered me. I smiled.

The long, thick, graceful neck brought her snout down to my level. My heart raced, my hand trembled as I reached up and touched her scales gently. They were more pliable than I thought they'd be. You see scales and think armor. But that wasn't what this was. My fingers traced the lines carefully. They were thin and pliable, like a snake. Light burst through me as I touched this amazing creature. A leviathan. I was touching a leviathan! I could barely believe it. They were thought to be extinct by those who even knew they really existed.

Curiosity flowed through my mind.

"She's hurt pretty badly," I told her as I forced myself to drop my hand. "She needs a scale from you."

The leviathan lowered its head, bringing it up close to the bow. She turned her head and scraped her massive jaw along the rim. I dropped to the floor as the boat rocked hard, almost tipping. Falk managed to get to my side and help steady me to my knees. The creature put its snout down to touch the deck just past my foot, stopping the rocking. She lifted her head and considered Falk. Welcome burst through my mind.

Without hesitation, I grabbed Falk's hand and moved it slowly up. He didn't fight me as I placed his large hand on her jaw. His eyes were wide and sparkling as he ran his fingers over the scales. She nudged his hand once more before lifting out of our reach.

She opened her mouth and picked up the pig in one enormous bite. My fingers tightened on his hand. She gave us one last look before slipping back into the water with her prize.

We sat in silence. I focused on just trying to get my heart rate back to normal. A quick glance at Falk's face told me that he might be doing the same. When I was calm enough, I looked around. Along the rail of the boat was what we had been looking for. A full, scraped-off scale from a leviathan.

Falk got to his feet and picked it off the rail. The damn thing was the size of his hand.

He turned to me and looked at me as if I was insane.

I giggled as I got to my feet. "That was amazing!" I practically screamed. "I've always wanted to see a leviathan, but I figured they were a myth. And once I knew the truth, Evie said they were almost extinct." I grabbed Falk's shirt and jumped up and down like a schoolgirl. "I touched a leviathan!" He let me hold onto him as I jumped as much as I wanted with a baffled look on his face. When I finally stopped, I was beaming. "That was awesome!"

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**FALK** 

y the time we got back to the mainland, it was dark, and the weather was changing for the worse; the sky rumbled with thunder as we moved through Jacksonville. But that didn't worry me. What did was how Rina winced at the bright lights and kept rubbing her temples. I didn't like it. Making the decision, I took us to a motel. Unfortunately, with all flights grounded, the only one that had a room left was one that also rented rooms by the hour.

As we walked across the parking lot, human males took notice of Rina. One whistled and grinned. At least until I stepped into the light outside our room. His thin, pasty face had grown even paler as my gums burned. As she opened the door, I bared both sets of fangs at him. He fell back through his doorway and slammed it shut with his foot before he even got off the floor. Thankfully, Rina didn't seem to notice as she stepped inside and flipped on the light. The room was clearly from the seventies. With its fake wood paneled walls to avocado shag carpet to the orange flowered bedspreads.

I had just closed the door behind me when moaning and thumping came from the room next door on the left. Rina stiffened; her face darkened to a rosy tint. She avoided looking at me while she turned on the old, clunky tube television and turned up the volume on The Weather Channel. When it drowned out the noise for her, she dropped the remote back on the dresser and sat down on the bed furthest from the door. I locked and chained the door before turning back to find her rubbing her temples again.

I squatted down in front of her to get her attention. *Will this place work? Will you be able to sleep here?* 

She gave me a tired smile. "Yeah, it'll be fine. I just need to focus on my barriers or drown them out."

I searched her face for a lie but there was only those beautiful hazel eyes. What do you want to eat?

She shook her head. "I'm not really hungry."

She had said that on the train for lunch today and at the airport. *What is your favorite food?* 

"Chicken Pad Thai. But I don't think they'll deliver to this neighborhood," she said absently.

Let me deal with it, I signed. Go take a shower; it'll make you feel better and help ground you.

She blinked, her eyes focusing on me again. She nodded. I moved out of her way as she grabbed her bag and headed for the bathroom. When the water turned on, I pulled up a food delivery app on my phone. After I made the order, I added a generous tip for incentive to come to this area of the city.

As I waited, I set out my blades, oil, and the whetstone I had bought earlier. The edges were ridiculously dull on the knives and it was bugging the hell out of me. Keeping an ear on the water in the bathroom, I slid the blade down the stone. The noises from the rooms around us continued; at least I could hear them. I doubted she could hear much over the television and water. I started tapping my foot as the sounds grated on me. Normally, I wouldn't care. I would barely notice it. But Rina was more...innocent than I was. And her blushing, while it made her glow, grated on me. If it didn't mean leaving her alone in here, I'd go take care of it. But with the area and the humans noticing her...I wasn't leaving her side until we left in the morning.

Her smile on the boat came back to me, making my lips twitch. The joy on her face lit up her face and made her shine. She was so happy just because she got to touch a leviathan. I shook my head as I picked up a different knife and began to sharpen it. How could something so simple bring her so much happiness? Jeers sounded outside, stopping me from sharpening the blade.

There was a timid knock on the door. Hiding the blade in my left hand, I checked the peephole. A delivery boy was standing there, looking around him at the area. His brown eyes were wide as he swallowed hard. He didn't even look eighteen years old. Who the hell would send a child into this part of town alone at night? Furious, I unlocked the door and jerked it open. His gaze jumped to me; the color seemed to drain from his face as I stepped out

into the hallway. Several human males were drinking in the parking lot. One was the man from earlier. Only, now I noticed the track marks on his forearms.

The delivery boy stepped back quickly, a small squeak coming from him. The males stopped jeering as I glared at them. The man from earlier slunk back to his room. Not taking my attention off the two males that were left, I held out my hand for the bag. He swallowed audibly and handed it over. I turned to him and gestured for him to go to his car. Then gestured at myself, my eyes, then the humans.

The color came back to his face. "Thanks, man." Without wasting a second, he turned and rushed back to his car. The males said nothing as I watched them until he was in his car and out of the lot safely. I stepped back inside and locked the door again. Mentally cursing whatever manager would send a young kid out like that, I set the bag down and pulled out the cartons of food I'd ordered. The water in the shower shut off as I sat down and picked up a set of chopsticks.

It wasn't long before she came out in the nightclothes I had picked out for her. The gray capri leggings looked soft; so was the long, loose, light-purple Henley shirt that reached her mid-thigh. She was still drying her hair with a towel when she looked up. The breath left my lungs. Damn, she was... I swallowed hard as she lowered the towel.

"They delivered?" Her voice had an edge of strain.

I didn't answer, I simply put my chopsticks down, then pulled out the container of Chicken Pad Thai and I set it down in front of her as she took a seat at the small table. I went back to eating while she opened the container. That brilliant smile was back, kicking my heart up a notch and sending a strange peace through me.

She lifted her head and caught me staring at her. "Thanks, Falk."

I forced myself to focus on the food in front of me as she started eating. Shouting started in the room above us. She winced, her fingers going to her temple.

Wanting to distract her, I signed: What are we picking up, and what do these components do?

She sent me a grateful smile. "Well, I've already got reaper's tears, which will bring her back even if the worst happens. We're going to St. Louis for gorgon blood, which will cure any poison in her body by covering the wound with it. And the leviathan scale is to seal the wound and make

her heal in minutes, and fill in any flesh that had been destroyed." She dunked one of the dumplings I ordered into the sweet chili sauce and took a bite.

I nodded; it made sense. She kept talking about other rare components that she'd learned about and wondered how they would work with human technology. Could there be a better material for a transistor? She talked about it with the same passion she talked about programming. I simply ate and watched her glow as she explained another component. But when she went for the last dumpling, I used my chopsticks to trap hers on the side of the container.

She looked up at me with big eyes and a smile spreading across her face. "What?"

*That one is mine.* The urge to smile hit me, surprising me.

Her face turned that dusky rose I was starting to like to see. "Oh my gosh. I just ate all of your dumplings, didn't I?"

I nodded, a half-grin slipping out.

She covered her face as she cringed. "I'm sorry! I get to talking about something and I don't think about what I'm doing."

I chuckled. It came out a rusty croak, then disappeared with a rasp. She dropped her hand from her face, then smiled an embarrassed smile.

If it bothered me, I would have said something sooner. There's also some sticky rice and mango in the bag if you're interested.

Her face lit up. "Sticky rice and mango?" She dug into the bags and pulled out the last two cartons. "Yes!" She placed one in front of me and opened hers. She cut off a piece of mango and scooped it up with a bit of the sweet rice and took a bite. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. She made a low moan in the back of her throat that instantly had me hard and aching.

Son of a... I slowly took a deep breath as she happily ate her dessert with relish. *I've never seen a woman eat so fast*. Most human females I'd observed picked at their food. She seemed to relish it.

She chuckled. "I grew up with four brothers; it was eat fast or starve."

I smiled. Four brothers?

She nodded. "And I'm the only girl."

I shook my head. That must have been fun.

She grinned, then began telling me about her family and growing up with those brothers. The pranks, the jokes, and the mischief they constantly

got into that turned their mother's hair gray. By the time she finished her dessert, I wanted to meet these brothers of hers.

She put her empty containers in the plastic bag. "So, what about your family?"

I set my chopsticks down. They're dead.

Her eyebrows shot up. "All of them?"

I nodded.

Shadows filled her face as her smile disappeared. "I'm sorry. That must...I can't imagine my life without mine."

I put away my trash before answering. *It's been over a thousand years. You get used to it.* 

She tilted her head to the side. "You got used to being alone?"

I went still. How did she manage to get that out of what I said? And how the hell was she so accurate? *You should get some sleep*.

Her face was somber as she got to her feet and threw the bag away. Without a word, she went to the inside bed and pulled the sheets back. I went back to sharpening knives as she began to pull her long, wavy hair back into a braid. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed she winced several times as she hit a snag. Eventually, she took out her hearing aids and pulled the batteries out before lying down. I turned off the lights for her and continued sharpening my knives.

My mind wandered as the night quieted down. It was getting harder and harder to ignore her pull. She was light, smiles, and laughter, all bundled into a person. I watched her shoulders rise and fall in the dark as she breathed. She made me laugh. And the way her eyes lit up when she got excited... I watched her shift under the covers. The world was dark and gray, but with her around...she showed me the colors. And I really didn't want to lose that. I stopped sharpening the knife in my hand. Oh shit... I closed my eyes and cursed myself. I had other things to worry about. The others were still back in Chicago with the angel and Abaddon. And the cell phones still weren't working. I was going to have to try to use a landline in the morning.

Trying not to think about it, I cleaned up my gear and put most of it away. After taking off my shoes, I laid down on top of the covers on the bed closest to the door. I propped myself slightly up and got comfortable.

What the hell was I going to do? It was getting harder to be around her... I closed my eyes and tried to think of a way to keep her at arm's

length. When I came up with a few ideas, I fell half-asleep, being sure to listen to the world around us.

It was at least an hour later when a soft whimper shot my eyes open. I was halfway off the bed with a blade in my hand before I even woke up. Nothing. The room was empty and still. Rina shifted under the blankets, pressing her forehead into the pillow as she made that sound again.

Without thinking, I moved to her bed and put my hand on the exposed skin of her shoulder. She turned towards me and blinked.

Something warm and light as fog brushed against my mind. "Falk?"

I squeezed her shoulder in response.

Her hand covered mine and pressed it tighter against her skin. Her jaw dropped in the dark. "I can't read your mind."

She couldn't? Setting the blade on the nightstand, I flicked on the light. When my eyes adjusted, she was sitting up, staring at me. *You can't?* 

She shook her head. "That's never... hell, Falk. Somehow, you've made everyone else's thoughts quieter."

How was that possible? I slipped my hand from her shoulder. She immediately closed her eyes in pain. My palm moved to hold her slim neck. She blinked up at me just as confused as I was. *Lay down and sleep*.

She reached up and held my hand against her throat. "Can...can you stay close?" Her cheeks turned that lovely rose again.

I nodded before taking her hand in mine and turning off the light. She shifted over in the bed, giving me room. I propped several pillows up, just as I had on the other bed, and settled in next to her. My fingers held hers in my palm as she relaxed into the bed again.

It wasn't long before she was muttering, "Tulips...they're pretty..."

I mentally cursed myself. I had just signed up for a night of torture. The sweet lavender scent of her skin, the way her warm body felt close to mine... It all felt right and fucked with my control. She deserved a normal life. Which she couldn't have with me... I grew still. When did I decide I wanted her?

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# Astrid

picked up Liam's beer bottle and threw it in the trash under the bar. The bar had closed ten minutes ago when I kicked everyone out for the night. The last couple hours had been mostly talking to the Thunder Bay alpha. Getting to know him, what his pack was like. He talked about the changes he was hoping to make. Incentive programs to help members start businesses. He had a lot of good ideas and was a nice guy. Charming, polished...but seemed to keep his feet on the ground. He'd be a good alpha. Becoming the alpha female with him wouldn't be too difficult.

"As alpha female, I'd simply expect you to do what you've been doing here for years," Liam had explained before he left. "David says you're levelheaded—"

I had burst out laughing. "David said that?"

A smile had moved across his face. "He did also say you are stubborn."

I finished wiping down the counter and started unloading the dishwasher. As long as Liam understood there was no way I'd marry him... It sounded like it could work. But then why did I want to puke just thinking about it?

The faint scent of smoke caught my nose. I took a deep breath. Fire. I reached under the bar to find the extinguisher as the front door caught fire. The white-and-orange flames ran over the door, quickly turning it to cinder before spreading to the walls. My hand slid down the underside of the bar as I called my wolf to the surface. My fingers touched cold metal as the heat shattered the windows and climbed the walls. That wasn't normal... The blaze reached the ceiling and fanned out over it. It was spreading too

fast. I pulled the twelve-gauge tactical shotgun out and pumped a shell into the chamber.

The door crumbled into ash as I braced the stock against my shoulder. A man stepped inside, his face illuminated by the flickering light. Matt. Or rather, Abaddon in a Matt suit. Shit.

"Where is she?" Abaddon hissed.

I answered him with a shot to the chest. Abaddon fell back half a step as I started moving down the bar.

He made it through the door, snarling. I fired again, and again. I only had five shots left, I had to make them count. A shoulder shot forced him to turn. Four shots left. He turned back in time to take a blast to the face. He staggered back as half his face blew off, leaving behind only bone and one eye. Three shots left. I aimed for his leg and took off half his calf; he dropped to his knee. Two. Walking around the bar, I strode towards him and blasted him in the center of the chest. His chest exploded. Flesh and bone burst out his back as he dropped to all fours. One. Black blood poured from his chest as he gargled a growl.

"Do you really think this matters?" It bit out as the smoke-filled air charged with static. Every hair on my body stood as Abaddon's eyes glowed red and his flesh began to crawl like worms back over the exposed cheekbone. The stench of burnt flesh and rot mingled with the smoke pouring across the ceiling. He staggered to his feet; the pitted tibia splintered, making him lurch forward.

Oh shit... I took aim and shot the rest of his lower leg off to buy time before I stepped up and bashed his face with the stock of the gun, driving him to the floor. Heart slamming, I turned and ran. The wolf in me snarled, she wanted to fight, but the human wanted to live. I burst through the kitchen door and ran for the stairs. Ranulf wouldn't be far. I just hit the landing for the stairs to the roof when a roar ricocheted up the stairwell. Not even slowing down, I hit the door and sprinted across the roof. I leaped off the ledge. Rolling as I hit the tar of the building next door, I popped back up to my feet. Arms pumping, heart racing, I ran for the next roof. A fireball whooshed past me and hit the stair access of this building. I swerved to give him a harder target.

Ran!! Where the fuck are you?

The demon cackled as another ball of fire shot past me so close it singed my hair. I needed some distance... I called my wolf closer to the surface and put on a burst of speed. Thankfully, the demon's teasing calls grew further away because another building was coming up. I threw my entire body behind the jump. My fingertips burned as they shifted to claws a heartbeat before I hit the wall. My claws dug into the crumbling brick; my entire body hung for a moment before I was bracing my feet on the side of the building and launching myself up the wall to the edge of the roof. I scrambled over the ledge before he could try again. Adrenaline pumping, I rolled to my feet and kept moving. Another ledge came up; this time, I had to make it across the street. I didn't think, I jumped. I was airborne as a streak hit me, hard. The air was driven out of my lungs as Ranulf's wings lifted us higher out of Abaddon's range.

I dropped my forehead to his shoulder while I wrapped my legs around his waist and clung to him. He held me tighter as he turned us toward the church. He was silent until he set his feet on the roof. I let my legs drop from his waist. His hands immediately ran over my arms and down to my waist, checking for injuries. Eventually, his hand dug into my hair and forced me to lift my face to his. His lips crushed mine as relief coursed through me. He dove into my mouth and made the sky disappear. It was a while before he eased up and lifted his head.

His furious gaze met mine. "From now on, where I go, ya go."

"That's not going to work, sexy," I whispered.

He growled as he stepped back away from me. "This isn't up for negotiation."

"I took care of myself."

"Ya could have been killed, or worse!" he snapped, stepping closer.

"I would have been fine if the fucker couldn't grow shit back!" I shouted.

"That's what high demons do!" He dragged his fingers through his hair. "That's why we need at least four gargoyles to take care of one!"

I stepped closer, getting into his face. "I am not some delicate human," I growled, my wolf's energy running up my spine and over my skin. "I'm a fucking werewolf that can rip a steel beam apart."

He growled deep in his chest.

"Stop your yelling." Zahur's voice cracked like a whip across the roof.

We turned to find him standing in the doorway to the church tower.

"Abaddon went after her." Ranulf took a step away from me.

"My bar's gone," I added before turning to Ranulf. "And I'm fine."

"Because I saved your arse." He clenched his jaw.

"Enough," Zahur bit out. "We have enough problems right now without you two trying to kill each other."

I took another step back from Ranulf, needing the space to cool down.

"Is Evie all right?" I asked as I began to pace.

"She's in the med wing." Zahur suddenly had my complete attention. "It looks like she has an infection, though I'm waiting for some test results from the hospital."

Ranulf turned at that. "Not the lab here?"

"No." Zahur sent him a look. "The lab here is incomplete and ten years out of date."

"How the hell did that happen?" Ranulf crossed his arms over his chest as he scowled.

"We'll need to figure that out." Zahur shook his head. "There's also a witch missing, but I haven't even had a chance to look into it. A vampire's been killed, and I can't get ahold of Falk."

"We're missing a wolf. It looks like hunters found him." I turned to Zahur. "How'd it go with Lemora?"

"What happened?" Ranulf demanded.

"A vampire was found dead in an empty warehouse. It was definitely murder. Whoever did it took his blood with them," Zahur supplied.

I cringed. That was...

"Why the hell would someone do that?" Ranulf snapped.

"What would they use it for? Conversion?" It was the only thing I could think of.

Zahur shook his head. "That won't work unless it's from the vein."

"Then what the hell did they want it for?" Ranulf asked.

"We don't know," Zahur snapped. "Frankly, I'm more concerned about Evelyn at the moment."

"What do you mean?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Evelyn has streaking in her veins and it's not from turning to stone. There's also some necrotic tissue," Zahur announced. "Which could be the infection, or something worse."

My heart stopped. "Something worse?"

Zahur met my gaze. "I won't know until I get the culture back from Brian at the hospital."

"We need to hunt down Abaddon," Ranulf stated. "That demon went after Astrid."

"I'm sorry about your business," Zahur said to me before turning to Ranulf. "Right now, Atticus is a wreck. Evie is unconscious and getting worse. We have no idea where Falk or Rina are. We don't have the strength to hunt down Abaddon. At the moment, we're just trying to do Evie's job and keep the different species from attacking each other."

I nodded. "Yeah, it's a bit busy."

"Everyone go get some rest." Zahur rubbed both his eyes with one hand. "It won't be long before we're going to be called to get up and go out again."

### $\sim$

### Zahur

I LED the way down the stairs and into the church. Astrid and Ranulf snapped at each other under their breath as they headed toward the dormitories. I pinched the bridge of my nose as I headed for the med wing. Ranulf and Astrid were horrible at hiding their relationship. If they thought they were fooling anyone, they were both delusional. Beeping caught my ear, so I hurried through the doors.

Alarms were blaring. Atticus was at the side of the bed. Evie's body was rigid and convulsing. Atticus held her just enough to keep her on the bed while the Templar stood with a look of utter terror on his face. I ran to the bed. Her breathing was rough, gasping through her teeth; saliva ran from her mouth as she continued to convulse.

Atticus's face was desperate when he turned to me. "Help her."

My heart ached; I remembered that soul-deep terror of my mate being sick and the hopelessness of not being able to help. "Almost all seizures are over in a few minutes."

His face was tortured as he turned back and continued whispering to her. A heartbeat later, the convulsions grew less, then stopped. She was still gasping through her clenched jaw, her lips tinting blue.

"All right, Atticus," I said in a calm voice. "We're moving her onto her left side so we can keep her airway clear."

He wrapped his arms around her upper body while I took care of her hips. "One, two, three." We carefully rolled her to her side facing us. My hand touched hot liquid. I looked down and froze. The drain had filled and disconnected, probably during her seizure. Milky-green discharge had

slowly dripped down the drain tube to her side and the bed. I cursed as I grabbed an oxygen mask, tore open the packaging, and hooked it up to the airline on the wall. I handed it to Atticus. "Put that on her and watch her lip color." He obeyed immediately. I turned to the Templar.

"Get me a new drain, and enough gauze for a dressing change." When the Templar kept gaping, I lost it. "Now!"

The Templar took off. I turned to Atticus, whose posture was rigid, his face deadly calm.

"What is wrong with my wife?" he growled low and deep in his chest.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I'll figure it out."

He looked like he was about to be sick.

"Stay with her," I told him.

"I..." He swallowed hard. "She can't die before I tell her..."

"She won't." My shoulders settled into knots. "Talk to her."

I left her in his arms and went after the Templar in the lab. I slammed the door open and grabbed him by the shirt. "What medical experience do you have?"

His eyes grew wide. "I'm a lab tech, sir!"

I let him go. A lab tech. Templars were required to have a doctor on staff at all times. It was a rule. Having enough, I met his gaze. "Get the First Templar in here."

He blinked and checked his watch. "Uh, he's sleeping."

I pointed at the lab door. "I have a female who's dying, and I can't figure out why because your fucking equipment is a disgrace!" My gums burned as both sets of my fangs slipped out. "Drag him down here."

He nodded, handed me the new drain and gauze, then ran out the door. I went back into the ward and rifled through several unorganized carts before getting what I was looking for.

When I got back to the bed, Evie's face was cleaned, as well as the linen and her clothes. I set everything down on the metal table and pulled on some gloves. I quickly changed the drain and the dressing, noting that there was more necrotic tissue before moving her shirt further out of the way. The black veins were almost up her ribs now. Carefully, I used a butterfly needle to draw a vial of blood. The culture was taking too long. It was obviously not a bacterial infection. I had to figure out what this was now.

"Her color is better," I told Atticus as I cleaned up the contaminated gauze.

He watched her face as he nodded slowly.

"Watch her." I got to my feet, taking the blood sample with me. "I'll be in the lab." I left him there and tried not to look like I was rushing.

I was preparing a slide when the door opened. A Templar around the age of forty walked in, still in his silk pajamas and with an attitude. "Why did you get me out of bed?"

I turned, grabbed him by the throat, and slammed him down over the empty counter where the incubator should have been. "Why is the med wing this out of date and short-staffed?" Rage had my talons sliding out and creating indents in his skin.

"We're underfunded," he croaked out, his face turning red.

Anger had me tightening my grip. "You've been fully funded since the beginning." I moved closer so he could see my fangs. "Try again."

"I...I..." he stammered, his eyes beginning to bulge. "We started sending our people to the regular hospital. Our last doctor quit."

"And you never hired another." I shoved away from him. He fell off the counter and hit the floor. "You're fired. Get. Out."

He scowled up at me. "You can't do that!"

"You're lucky I'm not breaking your neck!" I snarled.

I turned to the other Templar lab tech standing in the doorway. "We are the ones who have been financing you. We gave you rules for a damn good reason. You follow them or get out." The lab tech was gaping until he stepped forward, pulled their now fired leader to his feet and marched him toward the door. "Now. Get me a complete, up-to-date lab." I sat back down and continued to prepare the slide as he ran off to do as I ordered.

When I finally looked through the microscope, I cursed long and hard. I didn't recognize the strain, but I sure as hell recognized a neurotoxin in a blood smear.

It wasn't long before I shoved away from the counter and ran into the med ward. I broke open cabinets, drawers, wherever the medication could be. I found everything I might need and rolled it all over to Evie's bed.

Atticus's jaw clenched. "What?"

"She's been hit with a neurotoxin." I made a point to keep my voice calm. "One I've never seen. So, we're preparing." I hurried to the bed beside hers to make room for the ventilator. I shoved it into position and plugged it in.

Quickly, I ran through her vitals and checked her oxygen and respiration. She was on the low side, but still in normal range.

"What does that mean?" Atticus snarled.

I met his gaze. "She might stop breathing."

Atticus's face grew icy as his left hand gripped the top of the bed.

I took her temperature while keeping track of him. "Atticus, stay calm." "Calm?"

"Yes. Calm." I kept my voice smooth and even. "You can't help her if you lose your mind."

"But finding out what the toxin is will," he countered.

My heart dropped. "You're not..." He was out the door before I could finish my sentence. "Shit."

I went to the landline and through the directory, I found Ranulf's room number. "Ranulf, get Astrid and go round up Atticus. He's gone demon hunting."

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urry it up!" I shouted as I ran full speed around the corner after Atticus. We had finally caught up to the male. The gargoyle had somehow found a pack of ghouls and torn through them as if they were tissue paper. That had been in the sewer twenty minutes ago. My wolf was so close to the surface that my skin was rippling. Shifting as I ran through the damn shopping district was a horrible idea.

"I can't exactly drop on him here." Ranulf's sarcasm dripped in my ear through the earpiece of the old ham radio.

I growled as I dodged shoppers and spotted Atticus running out of the shopping center. "He's leaving now!"

"I'm on him," he snapped. "Too many people."

"I can't keep this up forever without shifting!" I barked as Atticus turned a corner ahead of me.

"He's coming up on an alley, yell at him and he'll turn," Ranulf ordered. "Three, two, one—"

"Atticus!" I barked. Atticus turned left into an alley just as Ranulf said he would. "You're up!"

Ranulf dove from above and disappeared to the left. I hauled ass around the corner and into the dark corridor. Ranulf fought to hold Atticus on the ground. Growling, Atticus bashed his head back and head-butted Ranulf.

Ranulf cursed in Gaelic as he shifted his grip. "Move yer arse!"

As I ran, I pulled the syringe from my pocket and pulled off the cap. Atticus tried to buck Ranulf off, but my mate's mass kept the gargoyle down. I ran around them, skidded to a stop, jerked Atticus's collar back and

drove the needle into the meat to the left side of his neck. Atticus cursed as I depressed the plunger. Ranulf held tight until Atticus grew limp.

Ranulf lifted himself off Atticus and turned back to me. "And ye were saying?"

I shot him a look as we both reached down and pulled an unconscious Atticus to his feet. "It's not like I have a lot of options," I grunted. The damn gargoyle was heavy.

Ranulf took most of the weight as we started down the alley and away from the shopping center. "Ya marrying another male should nae be one of them."

I dropped Atticus. Ranulf shifted to adjust. "I didn't say it was!"

Ranulf cursed again, set Atticus down against the wall and turned back to me. "Why the hell didn't ya mention it then? It was a marriage proposal!"

"It was not! I told David that I'd never marry that alpha, so he went and negotiated that requirement out!" I barked back, my blood starting to boil. My wolf was still too close to the surface. "The fact is, I'm not going to have a pack or we have to hide us. What do you want me to do?"

"Do you want to leave Chicago?"

"No!"

"Then fucking fight him on this!" His face turned red, the veins in his throat bulged. "Don't just fucking roll over and accept his bullshit."

I shook my head. Wow. He really had no clue how a pack worked. "I can't. I'm not a—" Then it hit me. I actually could...there wasn't a law against it...

"Not a what?" he snapped.

"A male," I muttered, thinking out loud. "But there isn't a law that says I can't challenge the alpha male."

"Then fucking do that."

I shook my head. "You don't know what it would do. It could destroy our pack structure completely—"

"Who the hell cares? You'll still have yer pack and you'll still be here."

"I'd have to be willing to kill him," I stated. "That's what a challenge is. To the death."

Ranulf growled as he walked further down the alley. "And you don't want to." He turned back to me. "It's going to be a choice between you or him, Astrid. Pick ye."

"That's not how it works!" I shoved my hair out of my face. "I can't put myself before my pack!"

"I gave up me home for ya!" he countered.

"I didn't ask you to!" I screamed.

"You dinnae have to!" he shot back. Fire and shadows filled his face. "I dinnae even think twice, Astrid. But ya do. All the time."

Fury burned in my chest as I stepped up to him. "You don't think twice? Why won't you come inside me?"

His walls went up with an almost audible clank. His face was hard as he stepped away and dragged Atticus to his feet. "We'd better get back."

The walk back towards the church was filled with a painful silence that hung between us.

## Zahur

I RUBBED the bridge of my nose and sighed. I had given Evie everything I thought might work. Poultices, anti-venoms, anything I could think of. And nothing had helped. But at least now, she was comfortable. I think...

Several Templars were still coming in and out of the room while I sat with Evelyn. The lab was almost set up. I should be able to get better results soon.

Ranulf walked in carrying a limp Atticus over his shoulder. Astrid was several steps behind him, her face hard.

Ranulf dropped him onto the bed next to Evelyn's. I winced as Atticus's head hit the plastic headboard.

"Anything else?" Ranulf bit out.

I eyed the two of them. Both of them were tense, both angry. Great, they're fighting. "No, that's it. Thanks."

Ranulf nodded silently, turned, and headed back out the door. Astrid stayed for several seconds.

"Astrid? Are you all right?" I asked.

She lifted her head. "Fine." She turned on her boot and walked out of the med ward. Shit. That really wasn't good. Being matched was never easy. It wasn't supposed to be. Love, being mated...it all took work, understanding, and patience. I smiled to myself. Of course Ranulf would match with a woman that fit him in every way.

A Templar walked up. "There's a messenger for you, sir." I raised an eyebrow. "For me?"

He nodded. "It's in the chapel."

It? I sighed and left the med wing. The chapel was dark and empty except for a few streams of light coming through the windows.

A pale figure stepped out of the shadows. White, waist -length hair, moonlight-pale skin. Pointed ear tips... Fae. Silver eyes met mine. He bowed his head. "I have a message for the gargoyles from the Shadow Court."

I met him halfway down the aisle. "Why? We haven't had contact with the Fae for centuries."

His face was serene. "Your people haven't. Evelyn has."

Evelyn? Of course, she'd have contact with the Fae. Who didn't the female have contact with? "What's the message?"

"Something is waking up," he stated. "Something ancient."

"That's it?" I asked, frustration eating at my throat. "Something old is waking up? You can't be any clearer than that?"

"It's in your world, not ours. I'm bringing this message as a courtesy to Evelyn." He blinked slowly. "How is she?"

I cursed under my breath. "Declining. I haven't been able to figure out what's been making her worse."

"I suggest that you do." He frowned. "Evelyn is the center of a great many circles."

"I'm starting to realize that," I muttered dryly.

"Just pass the message along." He turned and disappeared into the shadows. I rubbed my temples. What the hell was going on around here?

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**RINA** 

was in the woods with a salty ocean breeze dancing through the trees. It was familiar... Oh no... I closed my eyes and groaned. "Damn it!"

A deep chuckle echoed from somewhere.

I shook my head as my face burned. "I'm sorry, Falk."

"I was wondering if you remembered." He stepped out onto the trail through the grass.

My face caught fire. "Yeah, it just hit me."

"It's all right," he said. "I don't mind the company."

The way he was looking at me...made my heart beat harder. To distract myself, I looked around at the woods. Tall, rich, green grass stretched out before me. Sprinkled throughout were tulips of every color imaginable. "Wow. It's beautiful."

Falk looked at all the flowers. "This is new."

I bent down to touch the petals of a flared, bright-red tulip. "What do you mean?"

"These kinds of tulips don't really grow on the island."

I straightened and turned to him, beaming. "Not in the real world; but they do in your head."

He eyed me. "Maybe."

"What else is here?" I made my way through the grass towards him.

The corner of his lips lifted into a half-grin. He held out his hand to me. "I think I know something you'll enjoy."

Without hesitation, I took his hand and started walking where he led. His fingers were warm and calloused in mine. His grip light. The scent of ozone reached me, though here, there was a touch of cedar. It was a peaceful walk, with the birds chirping and the waves crashing. The sounds of the ocean grew louder. The grass changed to white sand under my bare feet. Falk led me out onto a large stretch of incredibly pristine white beach.

"Holy crap!" I let go of his hand and ran for the ocean's edge.

His deep chuckle followed me as my feet were surrounded by icy saltwater. Smiling, I reached down and felt it flow through my fingers. It was so real... "Your mind is incredible!" I turned to him. "Most of the time, people only have memories that are fuzzy and out of focus. Yours aren't."

He sighed as he watched the waves. "This is where I was the happiest, I think."

I turned back to him as the water surged around our feet again. "How long did you live here?"

We started walking down the beach. "Almost ninety years."

I kicked at the waves as they hit my feet again. "Why'd you leave?"

With unfocused eyes, he moved between me and a surging wave that reached my knees.

I splashed as we continued down the sand.

"If this was your mind, where would we be?" His voice was a rough rasp.

I thought about it. "I guess we'd be in my parents' basement playing video games or working on my computer." It wasn't nearly as pretty as the beach, but that was the closest thing to a happy place I had.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his gaze move over my face as the corners of his lips turned down. "Why is that your happy place?"

I looked down at the sand and shoved my hands into my pockets. "It's where I was happiest in high school."

"Why is that?"

I continued to focus on my feet moving over the sand. "I know people liked the way I look." My face burned. "I hate how that sounds, but..."

"You're beautiful." His matter-of-fact tone had me stopping and lifting my head. For the first time in years, I liked that a man thought that.

"People think so, yeah." Somehow, when he said it that way, it was just easier. "But I wasn't always. I didn't get that way until before my senior year in high school. I was a happy, normal girl who had just gotten my first gaming system." I shrugged. "Then I grew four inches, my skin cleared up, and"—I gestured at my breasts—"my curves kicked in. It felt like,

overnight, I wasn't invisible anymore." I turned away from him and started walking down the beach again.

"Everything changed."

"Suddenly, everyone wanted to know who I was; they wanted to be my friend and I didn't understand why." Another wave washed over my toes. "Then my friends started to change."

His fingers wrapped around my arm and pulled me to a stop. "How?"

I shrugged. "My girlfriends started talking about me behind my back. The guys started flirting, and the girls seemed to disappear. My hearing was getting worse. I didn't know who to trust." I shrugged. "I started staying home most of the time, gaming online or learning how to program."

"You started avoiding people."

I trailed my toes through the water. "Online, no one knows what you look like. They don't care. Not as long as you don't act like a jerk." Needing to change the subject, I bent down and picked up a tiny seashell. I held it up to him. "Nifty."

His fingers squeezed mine gently as we started moving again. We spent some time combing the beach for shells and talking about nothing important. When my hands were full of tiny shells, he held them for me so I could keep collecting. I made horrible jokes, hoping to get a laugh. He was entirely too serious for where we were.

We had just come across a tide pool when he finally cracked. He chuckled that deep laugh and smiled. All it took was being a little silly. I smiled up at him before looking back down at the tide pool. I knelt on the rock as I ran my fingers over a starfish.

"Your memory really is amazing." I could feel every bump on the starfish.

"Having an excellent memory is part of my job."

My smile dimmed as my hair blew in the wind and I got to my feet. "Do you like it?"

His eyes snapped to mine. "Killing people?"

I nodded, my heart sinking.

When he said nothing, my need to know doubled.

"I love life, Falk." I needed him to understand this about me for some reason. "I can't imagine what ending one would be like. You don't even have to answer..."

He looked out at the water over my shoulder. "No. I don't like it."

I gathered my hair in my hand and kept it out of my face. "You didn't want to talk about it when we were awake."

His eyes were shadowed as he watched the waves. "I didn't want to see your face when you realized what I am. Here, I can't seem to keep my mouth shut."

I tilted my head to the side. "What do you mean?"

He turned back to me with a somber face. "I'm a monster, Rina. It doesn't bother me to kill like it does others."

I tilted my head back to look up at him. "How so?"

He shook his head and gave me a sad smile. "The lives I've taken don't haunt me. I don't regret one of them. My own people don't even want to be around me because of it."

That just made me mad. "They avoid you?"

"Mothers grab their children and hurry them across the street when I walk down the sidewalk. They use my name to get them to eat their vegetables." His voice was emotionless but his eyes...they held the pain of centuries.

"Who do you kill?" I hated to ask, but I needed to know it all.

"Anyone who has committed a crime that was handed down a death sentence." He kept his gaze on the ocean.

"Murderers?"

"And worse."

Something about him finally clicked. "You do the job no one else wants."

He grew still. "It doesn't bother me."

I reached up and forced him to look down at me. "But it would bother them."

His eyes met mine.

"You do the job because it doesn't bother you. So they can go home at night and not have ghosts running around in their heads." It was amazing. He had taken a fault of his and used it to prevent others from having to... He was incredible. What he gave to his people. "And they leave you alone because of it." Yeah, that irritated the hell out of me. "You're not a monster, Falk."

"I feel nothing, Corrina." His gaze met mine and held it. "Do you understand what that means?"

I ran my gaze over his face. His face was weary, tired. Permanent frown lines were practically engraved. His lips were in a tense line. But it was the look in his dark eyes that held me. It wasn't of a man drowning. It was of a man who had drowned a long time ago and had given up on ever finding the surface again. "I think it means that you've lost the hope of finding anything else."

He blinked down at me, surprise sparking on his face. "I'm not some fucking white knight, Rina. I'm the monster under the bed."

"The monster who sacrifices pieces of himself to spare the people around him." I held his gaze. "Until there is nothing of himself left."

He said nothing, but his clenched jaw told me I wasn't wrong.

"You need people to help you feel again," I whispered.

"I don't need people, Rina." His amber eyes held mine. "Just one person."

My heart hammered in my chest as the breeze ruffled his hair. "Who?" It was insane. I barely knew him but at the same time...

His eyes moved over my face and rested on my lips. "You."

My heart pounded in my ears. "Me?"

"You're my match," he rasped.

"Match?" Evie had said something like that about Atticus...

He reached out, his fingers stroking the line of my jaw. Heat surged through me; warmth filled my chest. I moved closer; his body heat warmed me. A sense of belonging wrapped around me. Some part of me longed for it. I wanted to press against him and soak it in. His fingers slid down my throat to the back of my neck. My breathing grew faster as he leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. A strange noise caught my attention. I pulled back and looked at him with my brow furrowed. Something slid against a hard surface...

I WOKE WITH A SMALL JERK. What... I took a deep breath; the scent of ozone was close. Falk...but there was something else...musky. I opened my eyes. The room was still dark. But something was there...the scrape of something... I shifted closer toward the ozone scent; his warmth radiated off him. My fingers found his shoulder. "Falk."

He took a deeper breath but stayed perfectly still. But I knew he was awake...

"Falk—" Something cold and strong wrapped around my ankle and dragged me down the bed. I screamed and scrambled for a grip on the blankets. Before I could, Falk's hand snapped around my wrist and stopped me from sliding. Heart pounding, I looked up at him. His eyes were glowing bright amber in the dark, his fangs bared as he snarled over me at the bathroom door. Heart pounding, I clung to his hand as whatever had me pulled even more. I cried out as a stinging pain shot up my knee.

With one hard pull, he jerked me free, bringing me up the bed under his crouching body before he leapt over me into the shadow of the bathroom.

A snarl vibrated through the room. My chest tight, I reached over and turned on the light with fumbling fingers. Tile broke, glass shattered in the bathroom. Drywall crumbled. Something big was thrown through the wall and door. I dove off the bed to the floor. Whatever it was hit the wall where I had been with a wet, sickening thud.

I scrambled back across the carpet, gaping slack-jawed at the thing on the bed. Big. Tentacles... holy shit! I was still trying to make sense of it when a hand grabbed my arm. The fear drained from me, leaving me shaking as Falk pulled me to my feet. His shirt was torn, with patches of blood here and there. And a black goop...my stomach rolled. Falk left me by the door before moving around the room, gathering our bags before moving back to me. Everything was a bit fuzzy when he opened the door. His arm wrapped around the back of my legs a heartbeat before he lifted me over his shoulder and ran. I didn't ask, I didn't argue. I just held on, grateful to be alive.

We had to be well over a mile away before he stopped in a park and set me carefully down on a bench. He pulled my shoes out of my bag, then handed them to me. Before I could put them on, he squatted down and pulled up the leg of my pajama bottoms. A shadow of a bruise was forming around my ankle but otherwise, I was fine. He ran his fingers over my ankle, then looked up at me with demanding eyes.

My heart stopped pounding and I could finally take a breath. "I'm okay."

He examined me before letting me put my shoes on. I stuffed my feet in them while he pulled his own on.

That's when I noticed again that his shirt was covered in blood. "Falk, you're bleeding."

He nodded as he tied his last shoe, then straightened. He pulled something out of his pocket and held his hand out to me. My hearing aids.

I couldn't believe he remembered after... I took them, still eyeing his shirt and the spreading blood stains. "You need to stop the bleeding." I put the batteries in and slipped them in. The world wasn't so quiet anymore. A distant rumbling meant thunder was on the way.

Falk put my bag next to me and got to his feet. *I need to clean up; come on.* 

I nodded. There was no way in hell I was going far from him. My ankle throbbed as I got to my feet and picked up my bag. He led me to the men's room of the park bathroom. He quickly picked the lock and led me in. Surprisingly, it was clean and thankfully, empty. Falk went to the center sink, set his bag on the ground, and pulled out the first aid supplies. Slowly, he peeled his now ruined shirt over his head. My heart dropped. Across his sculpted shoulders, old scars shone in the light of the bathroom. His wings were nothing but a highly detailed tattoo down his back. He dropped the shirt to the cement floor before opening a bottle of rubbing alcohol. Blood sluggishly ran down a large cut across his shoulder blade. He poured the alcohol over the cut on his hip and across his chest. He leaned on the sink, head hanging, taking deep, controlled breaths.

Without a word I moved to his side, took the gauze, and held it to the cut over his Adonis belt. He grew still as my eyes ran over the rest of his chest. Scars were everywhere. Even bite marks, old ones. They looked... like human teeth. His gaze was like a touch on my face as I taped the gauze over his hip. My fingertips brushed the hard, enticing lines of his stomach and hip. I swallowed hard before I did the same for the one on his chest. Then I picked up the alcohol and moved behind him, thankful he couldn't see my burning face anymore. I cleaned his shoulder. His body grew rigid as he hung his head and took deep breaths.

I hated to say it, but... "This one needs stitches."

He reached over the sink, picked up a tube, and handed it to me over his shoulder. It was superglue.

"Really?"

He nodded.

Okay... I did as he wanted and closed the wound with superglue. I cringed as I held the skin together until it could set. When it was done, I

wetted several paper towels and cleaned the blood off his back. "What was that?"

*Barghest*, he signed into the mirror before he reached into his bag and pulled another black shirt out.

"How are they finding me?" I didn't understand it.

He finished pulling on his shirt before turning to me. *The first barghest tagged you*.

"What?" Was he serious?

He reached out, took my hand, and brought my wrist up to my view. The light bruise had darkened to a deep purple and black.

I looked up at him. "Falk..."

His thumb moved over my skin gently on the back of my hand, calming my heartbeat before he signed, *Nothing is going to happen to you*.

I swallowed hard; my throat suddenly dry.

Go change into warmer clothes, it's going to rain.

I took a deep breath and nodded again as I picked up my bag and headed into the handicapped stall. I changed into a light-blue pair of skinny jeans, a black cami, and a berry sweater that reached mid-thigh. I pulled on my boots and swept my hair back into a ponytail. I slipped my jacket on before I stepped out. By then, Falk had everything put away and was ready to go. I slipped my bag on my shoulder and followed him out of the restroom.

He shortened his stride to keep me beside him as we started out of the park.

"Where are we going?" I wrapped my arms around my stomach.

*The bus station. We're taking the first bus out of town.* 

I nodded as I watched the shadows around us. Where was the next attack going to come from?

His large, warm hand moved to my lower back, easing the tension in my body. Warmth moved through me. Unconsciously, I moved closer to his heat as I pulled my jacket closed. His touch was familiar, comforting. Something nagged at the back of my mind. Images came to the forefront. Falk. Sand. The last wisps of images slipped through my fingers. "Seashells."

He glanced down at me, his brow drawn.

I stopped walking. His hand slipped from my back as he stopped with me.

I looked up at him, my chest tight. "Falk, did you have a weird dream?" His face grew blank as a wall.

I wrung my fingers as the scent of cedar and sea came back. "Did I jump into your dream?"

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard.

"Falk?"

His eyes met mine a heartbeat before he gave a curt nod.

My face caught fire. "Oh, God." I covered my face with my hands; the last time I jumped into a man's dreams we...oh shit! "What did we do?"

He pulled my hands from my face and lifted my chin so I could see his hands. *We talked*.

I waited for him to finish, but he didn't. "That's all? We talked?"

"Okay..." Then something occurred to me. He was entirely too calm about this. "Falk, how many times have I jumped into your head?"

This is the second time.

I shifted on my feet. "Twice?"

He nodded.

I wasn't supposed to jump into anyone's dream twice. It could create a link. A permanent telepathic connection. The more often it happens... I fidgeted with my fingers. "What did we talk about?"

He considered me for several heartbeats before stepping closer. *Look at my memories*.

My heart pounded in my throat as his heat reached me. "Are you sure? I could screw up. I'm not great with precision work."

His eyes held mine as he nodded. Thunder rolled through the sky, close enough that it vibrated over my skin.

Before I could overthink it, I moved closer and reached up to place my fingers against his temple. I cracked my barriers and sent a tendril of thought out. His mind was like stepping into a hot spring. Warm and welcoming. His memories flowed into mine. Images slipped through my head. Watching me walk out of the woods, the laughter rumbling from him. Sitting on the cliff. The tulips. Walking on the beach. With every image, every memory, his emotions swept through me, leaving me shaking from the strength. Welcome, warmth, longing, awe, fear. It was all mixed into every memory, every touch. His voice... My eyes burned. His voice had been incredible...

I looked up at him, drowning in the gentle waves. His expression never changed, never showed what he was thinking, feeling. His surface never matched his heart. And his heart was so...mine. He was mine. I was his. "Mate."

His eyes were glowing amber as I pulled that tendril of thought back and closed my barriers.

We need to talk.

"Then talk." That's...that's what Evelyn called Atticus... Everything she said about mates rushed back to me. Mates...

Lightning cracked across the sky. I looked up in time to get hit in the face with a big drop of rain. I wiped my face with trembling fingers as Falk took my arm and steered me off the park path. He led me under a wooden gazebo. I set my bag down as rain began to fall. It hit the roof, filling the silence.

"I don't know where to start...what does this mean?" I swallowed hard as I tried not to panic.

It doesn't need to mean anything.

"Falk. Obviously, it means something, or it wouldn't exist." I looked up at him and shook my head. "Don't lie to me. Please."

His hand rubbed across the stubble on the lower half of his face before he answered. *It means we'd have healthy children*, he signed. *No more. No less.* 

"Chil-children?" My chest grew tighter. "I'm...I can barely remember to take care of myself half the time."

The corner of his lips twitched before he stepped closer. You don't have to worry; I'm not expecting you to accept this. I wasn't even going to tell you.

All the energy drained out of me as I took a step back. "You weren't going to tell me?" What he said about mates echoed back through my head. A direct link to his heart. And he wasn't going to tell me. "You don't want me..." My voice was a quiet rasp in the rain. My eyes filled. Why did it hurt? I braced myself against the pillar, trying to understand the chaos rushing through me.

He stepped closer, drawing my attention. *It just won't work. You're human.* 

"And that's not good enough for you." My throat tightened; it shouldn't hurt...I barely knew him. But it always sucked when you weren't wanted.

That's not it. I've tried this before. It doesn't work, he signed as his face filled with shadows. You'll hate me in the end, and I'll deserve it.

"But you're taking something away from me." Kids. I always imagined having kids. Didn't he see that?

His gaze stayed on mine as he signed, *Matching is how gargoyles find* the person who we can have healthy children with.

"And you're going to walk away?"

Falk shook his head. *You're human. This limitation is from my species. Not yours.* 

I shook my head. What was he trying to say?

You can have a normal life with someone you choose.

I held his gaze as his meaning sunk in. He wasn't taking away my chance for children, he was taking away his own. Stunned, all I could do was look at him. His wild hair moved in the wind, the angles of his face, the line of his jaw... In that moment, I saw him for who he was. A man that put everyone else first. Yeah, he was the executioner. He did the job that no one wanted to do. His people were afraid of him because of it. He was willing to walk away from me because he thought I'd be happier with a normal human. I shook my head at him, amazed. "You were just going to walk away."

It will be better for you.

"What about you?"

His jaw clenched. *I'll continue as I always have*.

Alone. Giving to people who don't appreciate what he does so they can sleep well at night. My throat grew dry. Something about that made my chest ache. "Is that what you want?"

He took several steps back away from me.

I pushed off the pillar and moved with him, demanding an answer. I stayed with him, wrapping my jacket around me, suddenly chilled.

He stopped moving. Not saying a word as he looked out over my head, just watching the rain—or looking for a possible threat, I wasn't sure. Though he did take a deep breath that made his chest brush against mine.

"Is that what you really want, Falk?" My voice was a wisp; soft, barely there. The memory of the way he smiled down at me in his dream came back to me. The way he held my hand on that beach. The way he always thought about me first as we traveled... Those weren't the actions of a man who wanted to walk away. He was a man desperately clinging to what he

thought was right because he couldn't feel what right was anymore. "What do you want? Not what you think is best for me. Not whatever idea of the 'right thing' you have in your head is. What do *you* want?"

It was several heartbeats before he looked down at me. His hand came up to my face to gently brush along my cheekbone. Warmth and that sensation of home filled me. I reached out a tendril to his mind and found him waiting.

"No. It's not what I want," he sent. "But it would be better for you. You'd be happier."

"Or I could be miserable. You can't see the future." I held his gaze as rain continued to fall around us. "I don't even know how I feel about this yet."

"Then why are you so angry?" His soft touched moved over my mind.

"Because you're trying to walk away without even giving it a shot." I shook my head. "You've accepted that this will be the outcome, without ever giving me a chance to decide for myself."

He cradled my face in his palm. "I want you to have a happy, fulfilling life more than anything else in existence."

"Then let me decide for myself." I swallowed hard. "Don't hide. Don't run. Stand here with me and let me see you. And I'll let you see me." I waited, heart pounding in my chest in the silence.

"All right." His eyes held mine. "But we're taking this slow."

I smiled up at him. "I'm only twenty-two, Falk. I'm still trying to figure me out. Slow is good."

His lips moved to a small smirk before he nodded and dropped his hands from my face.

I cringed up at him. "You do realize I've never been in a relationship in my life. And my chances of screwing this up are astronomical."

He chuckled that raspy laugh.

I smiled as I tried to pull back from his mind. Only this time, the connection didn't fade. The blood drained from my face.

"I don't like that face; something must be wrong."

He signed, asking me what was wrong. Clearly not realizing I'd heard him.

"Oh shit." I buried my face in my hands as my stomach knotted. "I screwed up."

"Rina? You can hear me?"

"Yeah." I dropped my hands and looked up at him. "I'm sorry, I must have...I didn't mean to make it permanent."

"It's okay." His hands were warm as they slid over my arms. "It'll make communicating with you easier."

"I'm sorry, Falk." I couldn't seem to stop apologizing.

"It's all right." He dropped his hands from me and looked around at the rain.

I turned to look out at the world that seemed to suddenly emerge. "It's really coming down right now."

"We need to get moving; we've been here too long already." Falk stepped away from me and went to his bag. He pulled several small plastic squares from inside.

After he handed me one, I smiled. It was a poncho. "You really do think of everything."

The corner of his lips twitched as warmth moved through my head. "It's part of my job."

I pulled my pack on, then my poncho. We hurried out into the rain, his hand wrapped around mine.

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### **ASTRID**

roaning, I rolled over and threw the covers off; there was an annoying pounding on the door. Already growling, I stumbled across the room and jerked open the door.

Some Templar that looked like he was barely old enough to shave held out a note. I took it before he scurried back down the hall.

Ben's been found. Dead. And not alone.

An address followed.

"Fuck!" I bit out before shutting the door and turning to my empty bed. I had slept alone last night—if rolling and punching my pillow to a pulp was sleeping. I missed Ran...

I quickly got dressed before I went through the dormitory, ignoring the looks the Templars threw at me. When I reached the doors, I hesitated. I had agreed to not leave without Ranulf. But right now...I didn't even want to speak to him.

Saying fuck it, I left the church muttering under my breath the entire way to the crime scene. The sun was up, but it was still gray and overcast. The clouds were black, and all but blotted out the sun.

The address was in one of the picturesque suburbs outside the city. Between the snow and the morning traffic, it took longer than I would have liked to get there. It gave me too much time. Trying to get Ran off my mind, I started tapping the steering wheel. Where the hell were Rina and Falk? Wait...we all knew the cell phones weren't working from the storm... I turned on the radio.

"—storm has spread over several states, destroying any hope of cell or satellite communication. All planes have been grounded as cities prepare for conditions to grow worse." Hearing enough, I shut off the radio. How the hell were Rina and Falk going to get back through that?

Worried, I pulled up behind a Mercedes Benz at the address. The car was David's. Great, they weren't outside. Which meant they were contaminating the hell out of my crime scene. Super. I got out, pulled my field kit out of my trunk, and headed up the walkway.

The neighbors were probably watching from inside their houses, pulling the curtains back and whispering to each other. The area was picture-perfect for raising a family. I stopped before my hand touched the doorknob. Please, please tell me there weren't kids inside... I took a deep breath. The overwhelming coppery scent of blood told me there was a lot of it. With only two dead, they would have to have been adults for that much blood. Or...no. No or! I let out a breath and turned the knob. David and Jax were waiting in the small family room. I closed the door behind me.

"About time," David snapped from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm sorry, David," I said in a sickly sweet voice. "My bar was burned down early this morning. Forgive me for getting some sleep."

Jax's jaw dropped. "The bar's gone?" Was that seriously the only thing he asked about? Fucking wolves...

"Yeah, that high demon I warned you about paid a visit," I muttered as I opened my kit and pulled out my gloves.

"That's what happens when you're friendly with gargoyles," David said in an arrogant voice.

I shot him a look as I pulled on my gloves. "Say another word and I walk away."

Jax's eyebrows went up. Fortunately, David kept his mouth shut.

"Where are the bodies? I have more shit to take care of today." I snapped my glove.

Jax gestured to the back of the one-story house. "This way."

He led me through the living room and into a nice kitchen past David. I expected to head out back but instead he opened the door into a sunroom. The smell hit me hard. A metallic scent and sickness slid over my tongue. I swallowed hard as I looked around. The body of two wolves hung upside down in the middle of a circle of blood and chalk. Two skinless bodies. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth as I realized what I was looking at. Blood covered the stone tile, spreading out across the symbols and floor. They had been alive... for that much blood... they had to have been alive.

I suddenly wasn't in that sunroom; I was back in the woods. Heart pounding, throat raw from screaming as they took a blade to Erica's wolf. My insides shook as I backed out of the room and swallowed back bile. My skin broke out into a cold sweat as I took another step, and another. I couldn't do this. I left Jax in the doorway. I made it to the kitchen before I was sick in the sink. Memories poured through my head, echoes of her yelps and whimpers.

When I finished, I turned on the faucet and ran cool water over my face and the back of my neck. My hands shook as I turned it off and picked up a kitchen towel.

Someone walked in behind me as I finished drying my face. "Did you take your samples?" David demanded.

I growled at him. "You knew what I was walking into in there." "Yes."

"And you didn't fucking warn me." I set the towel next to the sink before turning around and leaning against the counter.

David watched me with indifference.

He knew my past. Knew what I'd been through. He knew what I saw. He had been the only one that I ever trusted with that piece of me. He knew how bad it had been. How much it still haunted me. And he still let me walk in there without a warning. Holding that cold gaze, I began to pull my gloves off.

He frowned. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving," I bit out between clenched teeth.

"We need evidence, Astrid." His voice was hard.

I walked around the counter and shoved my gloves into his chest. "Be my guest." I was at the door before he recovered.

"Astrid. Get back here and do your job!" he barked; his voice was deep with his wolf.

I looked over my shoulder at him. "No." I slammed the door behind me and strode down the walkway. I was pulling out in my car when he finally pulled the front door open. I peeled out and drove away.

Memories tore through my head all the way back to the church. What he had done in there... I had to keep wiping my face as I drove and parked in the parking lot. I barely managed to push those memories back behind their door before getting out of my car.

I strode into the church only to come up short. Ranulf was waiting in the chapel with crossed arms and a scowl. Memories slammed through my head. I didn't want to remember; I couldn't handle it. Right now, I needed him to touch me. To make the memories go away. Need clawed at me as I met his gaze.

His eyes softened a fraction before he strode towards me. "I swear, if you take off like that again, I'll bend you over my knee."

My heart raced as my panties soaked. I breathed, "Please... now..."

His eyes narrowed on me, then began to burn. He turned and pulled me with him to the side of the church. Ranulf jerked open the confessional booth, the hinges protesting before he pushed me inside. It was small; my knees hit the chair as he closed the door behind us.

His fingers buried in my hair and pulled until I was looking up at the ceiling, my breathing getting faster. The wolf inside me might as well have purred with the feel of him. "Take off your pants," he growled into my ear. Hot shivers ran down my spine.

I didn't even think. My hands went to my jeans, undid them, and shoved them down my hips.

He used my hair to push me forward until I was kneeling on the chair with my hands on the back of it. My breathing grew faster; sweat rolled down my skin as his fingers stroked over my ass. Sparks ran over my skin to my breasts, my nipples pressed against the fabric of my bra. "Ran..."

His fingers dipped between my legs, stroking through my folds. I whimpered as he found me wet and aching. His fingers slipped out from between my thighs to run over one cheek. His hand disappeared, then came down hard with a smack. Stinging pain covered one fleshy cheek along with electricity shooting down my nerves. My knees pressed together as my core throbbed. More...I needed to feel more. I moaned as his hand left me, then came down hard. I bit back a cry as he hit my other cheek, harder, from a different angle. The heat built higher and higher as his hand came down over and over. Whimpers came from my throat as every inch of me burned. I pushed back, craving more. More touch, more pain. It drove everything else away with every hard, open-fingered slap to my ass. Liquid ran down the inside of my thigh as I began to tremble. My ass was on fire, my core clenching when he stopped. His fingers gently ran over the bright-red flesh.

Gasping, I pressed back against him even more. "Don't stop..."

His fingers dipped between my legs again. A shaking moan slipped out. His fist in my hair pulled me back onto my knees and leaning back against him before disappearing from my hair, only to cover my mouth. The other wrapped around my hip to slip inside me. Oh fuck! Two fingers. That's all it took to make me want to scream. My breath came faster and faster through my nose as his hand worked me. Higher and higher, blood pounding in my ears. My heart raced in my chest as I clung to him.

His lips brushed my ear. "You're mine."

I nodded; the back of my head rubbed against his chest.

"Now, you can come." His thumb brushed my clit. I shattered. His hand over my mouth muffled my cries as my entire body was crushed under the wave of pleasure, every nerve fired, every inch of my skin burned, every muscle stiffened. Dark spots appeared in my vision. All the while, Ranulf whispered in my ear. Telling me that I was his. That I belonged to him.

I grew limp against him. His hand slipped from my mouth to my waist. He lifted me gently, turned me, and set me in his lap. I moaned low at the rough feel of the coarse fabric of my jeans against my sensitive cheeks as he pulled up my pants. Ranulf held me closer and rested his cheek against my forehead. I floated in blissful warmth. Not thinking, not moving. Just simply existing. I slowly became aware that he was rocking me gently. I reached up and rested my hand on his chest.

He stopped rocking. "Is my goddess back?"

I smiled at his soft voice. "Yeah...I think." I opened my eyes and blinked a few times.

One of his hands went to my face and lifted my chin so that I met his eyes. "What happened?"

"We found Ben. And...the bad memories kept coming." I pressed my cheek into his palm. "I'm fine." Memories surged through my mind. I shifted on his lap, trying to sit up. His arms tightened on me, taking my breath away again and shutting off my brain. I stopped moving. The scent of rain surrounded me as the fight drained out of me.

"Don't lie to me." His lips brushed against my temple. "I carry your memories now too."

I blinked back tears and fought not to crumble to pieces. "They were in their wolf forms and skinned."

He held me tighter. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

I sank further into the heat of his body. "I didn't wake you up."

"You think it was hunters." It was a statement, not a question.

I nodded, my fingers stroking over his shirt.

"The big question is, did they only find them? Or the entire pack?" he thought out loud.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. "I don't know. And we won't unless another wolf goes missing or dies."

His hand moved to hold my cheek. "They'll never touch you."

I smiled a sad smile. "You've never seen how hunters are, Ran."

His arms tightened. "Tell me."

I looked up at the ceiling of the confessional. "You already know."

"Tell me." His voice was soft as he pressed against my hair.

"They attacked in the middle of the night." I licked my lips as memories came back into the light. "We lived out in the woods. We liked it there. It was quiet and isolated. Too isolated, as it turns out." I brushed my cheek against his shirt. "Everyone was asleep when they shot the lock off the front door. Dad went downstairs while Mom grabbed us and had us climb out on the roof." I took a shaky breath. "By then, they were coming up the stairs. Mom told us to run." I looked up at him. "She stayed behind to buy us time."

"I'm listening," he whispered.

I swallowed hard again. "They were waiting in the woods. We ran. But Erica shifted. They shot her immediately."

"She gave them what they wanted," he muttered.

I nodded. "Eventually, they caught me. I was only seven, I couldn't outrun them. They stuck me in that..." I swallowed back the bile that rose in my throat. "That silver-reinforced dog kennel and then took me out of state. But not before skinning Ericka."

"She was only four," Ranulf finished for me.

Tears ran down my face as I shook in his arms. "They tried everything to get me to shift. Cuts, fire, anything they could. Hell, they would press the silver cage against my back."

"You never gave in," he said.

I nodded. "Then they got the bright idea that they could sell a werewolf on the underground market here in Chicago. After fitting me with a soupedup shock collar."

He held me tighter.

"That's where they slipped up," I admitted. "One of the packs saw them in the underground market and got the others. They tore the hunters apart and finally got me out of the fucking cage. It had been a month."

He buried his face in my hair. "They'll never touch you."

I smiled a small smile at the determination in his voice. "They might, while I'm ripping their throats out."

"Not even then."

I smiled as I wiped my face.

"Thank you for telling me."

I looked up and met his eyes. "You already knew."

"But you telling me means more," he whispered.

At peace for the first time in a long time, I kissed him softly, slowly, while breathing in his scent of the fresh rain.

When he pulled back, his face was warm, his touch soft. "I've got you."

I took a deep breath of his smell and just floated. He'd hold me as long as I needed him to.

It was almost an hour before I was able to face the world again. Ranulf didn't push; he didn't say a word. He just held me to him until I was ready again. I opened the door and came face-to-face with a priest. Confusion filled his face as I noticed the line of people along the wall waiting for the confessional. Jaws dropped as Ranulf followed me out. I winked, while Ranulf's face burned red. He took my arm and hurried us out of the church and into the living quarters while muttering under his breath about going to Hell. I laughed the entire way through the chapel.



## Zahur

The distinct sound of machines beeping filled the silence.

The heavy weight on my shoulders seemed to triple. She shouldn't have been in the hospital bed. She shouldn't have needed anti-seizure medications. She shouldn't need oxygen. But here she was...

I stood across the bed from Atticus. He hadn't spoken a word since he woke up. Bags still hung under his eyes like bruises. His face was blank except for the tortured look in his eyes. It was easier to watch Evie's shallow breathing than to look at him.

The door to the med wing opened. I leaned my head back and waited.

"What the hell happened?" Astrid shouted. Running footsteps came toward the bed. Her eyes watered as she looked down in horror at her friend. My stomach knotted as I focused on Evie's heart monitor.

Atticus said nothing; he simply continued to hold Evie's hand.

"She's been exposed to a neurotoxin." I rubbed my eyes wearily. "It's shutting down her organs one by one. Eventually, I'll have to put her on a ventilator to keep her breathing."

Astrid looked at me with fear in her eyes. "Can you fix her?"

Ranulf's hand went to her shoulder as she began to shake.

"I've tried everything," I reassured her. "Normally, a neurotoxin would run its course and once it was done, everything would come back."

"Why do I hear a but in there?" Ranulf crossed his arms over his chest.

I sighed as I met Astrid's eyes. "Because if it was a normal neurotoxin, then she'd be getting better already."

She stepped back into Ranulf's body. "What do you mean?"

"I'm doing everything I can—" The phone on the nurses' desk went off. Son of a... I strode over and answered it. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Zahur." Dahlia's voice hit my ear. "We've found a body."

Of course they did. I eyed the others. "Give me the address. I'll get someone there as soon as possible." I quickly scribbled it down, hung up, and turned to them. "Astrid, the witches just found one of their own dead. I need to send you and Ranulf to investigate."

Astrid was already shaking her head. "The witches have a major stick up the ass about working with any wolf except for the occasional phone call. Besides, I have a run tonight."

"A run?" Ranulf looked down at her.

Astrid nodded. "The pack is running tonight. I have to be there." She shared a look with Ranulf before turning back to me. "Sorry."

I cursed in my language. "Ranulf, get out there."

"I've got to cover Astrid on her run." Ranulf turned back to me.

Astrid turned to look up at him. "Just get back by nine."

His face was hard as he met her eyes. "You'll wait?"

She nodded.

"Fine." Ranulf muttered before taking the address and walking out the door.



# Ranulf

Muttering under my breath the entire way, I drove out to the scene. Astrid said she'd wait, but did I believe her? I didn't know. She was

stubborn as hell and liked to keep secrets, apparently. A heavy weight in my chest had me pulling over. I rested my head back on the head rest and took several deep breaths. What was she thinking? Joining another pack to be the partner of another man? My shoulders grew tense. She needed her pack. I got that. This pack had saved her in the market. But...was it selfish of me to want her not to go to Thunder Bay? Not to even be close to another male... I closed my eyes and cursed. That was it. That was my problem. This alpha male was a wolf. He could run with her, shift with her, understand her more than I ever probably could. I was fucking jealous. I slammed my fist into the roof, relishing the pain radiating down my knuckles.

She needed a pack. That was the reality of it. And if she could be an alpha without marrying the wolf... If that's what she needed... I needed to support her.

"You don't think twice? Why won't you come inside me?" Her voice rang through my ears. How could she think that was me thinking twice about us? I gave up everything for her and I'd happily do it again. But going to Thunder Bay? Leaving what's left of my family behind? *That* I didn't want to do... No more than Astrid.

My heart dropped. I still had the others. She'd have no one. Cursing myself, I hit the steering wheel. I may have given up going home, but I still had the others. If she left the pack, she'd have no one at all. I was an asshole. I took a deep breath. She needed the pack to run with. It was instinct for her.

It all came down to whose happiness mattered more. Hers? Or mine? I lifted my head and opened my eyes. Fuck. That was an easy answer. She said she needed a pack. And I'd do anything to see that beautiful smile on her face. Looks like I'm moving to fucking Thunder Bay. Shit! Hating it, I pulled back out onto the road.

I was in a foul mood by the time I pulled into the empty lot in front of a dark four-story dark building. The area was deserted except for two women standing near the entrance. Well, one was standing, the other was bent over with her face in the shrubs. As I got closer, it was clear she was vomiting into the bush. That didn't look good for what I'd find. Cursing, I shut off the SUV and got out. The still standing witch's posture stiffened.

"I'm Ranulf. Zahur sent me," I announced. "Where is she?"

The upright witch smiled and reached out her hand. "I'm Tabitha, it's nice to meet you."

I didn't shake her hand; you never touch a witch whose intentions you don't know. "I don't have a lot of time, so let's get to it."

Tabitha eyed me before turning and heading into the building.

The entire building seemed to not have power, which was made clear when we stepped into the stairwell and the door closed behind us. Plunging us into darkness. Thankfully, I could see in the dark.

Tabitha fumbled with a flashlight. "The building is still under construction." She started up the stairs.

"How did you find her?" I asked as I followed.

"We started using a tracking spell for a lost witch and it led us here," she answered as we continued to the top floor.

When we reached the fourth floor, I followed her down to the other end of the building to an unfinished section.

"We found her in this conference room," Tabitha announced as she stopped by a door.

I didn't hesitate. I pulled out my own phone, turned on the flashlight function and stepped into the room. The light bounced off a shining pool of crimson. A bloody, shredded stump of meat with a bone protruding lay in the middle of a rune circle. Shoulders moved out from it... Oh, the stump was the neck. Shit. I moved around the edge of the room, avoiding the blood and runes. I carefully took pictures of the runes for Zahur.

"How did you identify her?" I asked as I took another picture of the body.

"She's the only person we're missing," Tabitha answered.

"No ID?" I took a close-up of one of the runes.

"I didn't exactly pat down the body," she snapped.

Cursing under my breath, I stepped over the circle and checked the back pockets of the woman's jeans. I fished out a small wallet-cell phone combo.

"What was the woman's name?"

"Glenda." Tabitha sighed.

"Well, fuck." I raised my voice so she could hear me. "This isn't her. It's Cassandra McBride."

"What?"

"This is a different witch," I stated clearly.

"Oh, mother..." She swallowed hard, running off for the stairwell. Darkness filled the hallway while I took the last of the pictures.

I headed to the stairway and down to the first floor. Two witches. One dead. One missing.

It sounded like the start to some horror movie.

Tabitha turned to us, tears running down her face. "Jenny said that Cassandra hasn't been heard from all day. She's not a part of the council, but we all keep tabs on each other."

"I'm going to need her address to check her apartment," I said as I checked the time. I had to get back to Astrid.

Tabitha dabbed her face and gave me the address. "The others are coming to help us get her out of the building before sunrise. The last thing we need is for someone to call the police."

"I need to get going," I told her. "I'll take a look at her apartment when we get a chance."

Tabitha's head snapped up. "Not tonight?"

I sighed. "Cassandra isn't the only person murdered in the last few days. We're trying to cover everyone."

She looked at me with rage as I walked toward the car. They should report a missing person to the police. It's not like she won't be missed. She probably had family somewhere. If not... Well, it was disturbing how someone could disappear and have no one notice. My thoughts were dark all the way to the church.

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rost began to crawl over the bus window. The temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees. I wrapped my arms around me as I started to shiver. When the sun rose today, it was still dark. Black and gray clouds boiled over head, blocking out the sun.

"What's going on?" My breath came out in a fog.

Falk's gaze ran over me before he reached up to my heater and turned it on full blast. He did the same to his and pointed them at me. "It looks like we've gone further into the storm."

The wind took a swipe at the bus, but the driver managed to keep it on the road. I shivered. The voices in the back of my head grew louder. It had been getting worse over the last few hours. Sitting all day in a bus full of people wasn't easy on my barriers.

Falk shifted, moving his arm over onto my side of the armrest. The heat coming off him doubled. Without hesitation, I wrapped my arms around his, pressing against his arm. His heat seeped into me, stopping the shivering. Even the voices in the back of my head quieted down. I rested my cheek against his shoulder while his hand hovered over my leg. Clearly not knowing where to put it since I had pulled his arm over the armrest. I simply reached out and pressed his hand against my knee. His fingers wrapped around the inside of my knee. His touch burned through my clothes, but I didn't care. I was cold.

"How do you make the voices back off?"

A warm, soft brush moved through my mind that I was starting to recognize as Falk. "I'm not sure. Perhaps I act as a buffer?"

"Maybe." I watched the frost grow on the window. "It's easier to talk to you like this."

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"It is."
I chewed on my bottom lip. "Falk?"
"Hm?"
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"What happened? To your voice?" I looked up at him. His face was hard; he looked over my head out the window. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. I understand not wanting to talk about things."

His thumb started making circles on my kneecap. Warmth spread up my leg, along with tingles. "I was with a different squad a hundred and fifty years ago. We were clearing out a nest of vampires who had been on a killing spree. We underestimated their numbers. My team was slaughtered, and I was taken prisoner."

Oh my...my chest burned. "How long?"

He looked out the window over my head for several seconds before meeting my eyes again. "Twenty-two days. Gargoyles heal quickly, which means"—his jaw clenched—"I was a guaranteed deep feed at the end of the day. They slit my throat to keep me quiet."

"I'm sorry." My arms tightened on his as I looked down at his hand on my knee. What he described... "I shouldn't have asked."

His fingers tightened on my knee, making me lift my head to meet his eyes. "It's all right, it was years ago. Before you were even born."

I jumped at the topic switch. "How old are you?"

His face was dead serious as he answered, "Older than you."

I narrowed my eyes playfully at him. "Which is how many years?"

He didn't say a word. Just held my gaze.

"Eight hundred?" I grinned up at him.

His eyes grew slightly lighter as he shook his head.

"Higher or lower?" I teased.

"Higher."

"A thousand?" I tried again.

"Higher." His thought was soft and warm as it slipped through my mind.

I eyed him. "Fifteen hundred?"

The corner of his lips twitched. "Higher."

"Really?" I smiled. Was he serious?

He nodded.

"Two thousand?" There was no way...

"Lower." His face softened.

"Seventeen hundred?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Eighteen hundred and some change."

My smile faded a little. That's...how could he ever come to like me? He's mature and serious. And I...I still spun in my computer chair when programming got boring. "Wow." Feeling like a toddler, I tried to look out the frost-covered window.

"What's wrong?" His fingers squeezed, getting my attention.

"What do you mean?" I looked up at him.

"I can feel you through the link. You're embarrassed for some reason. Why?"

I looked down at his scarred hand on my knee. "Because I just realized how immature I am. I still do silly things. Spinning in my chair when I'm bored. When I get upset, I eat waffles for dinner."

Amusement came down the link. "You find joy in the little things."

I looked up and met his warm gaze.

"That's one of the things that's special about you." His thoughts rumbled in my mind just as if he was speaking out loud. "I've watched millions of sunrises, and the first time I think I truly saw one was on the plane with you. You see beauty everywhere, when I don't think I ever have."

Stunned, I opened my mouth to say something when a hard blow shoved the bus off the road. Fear burst through me as Falk grabbed me. Metal crunched, glass shattered. Screams erupted as we hit the side. Grass covered my window before the world went upside down. My heart pounded in my ears as the bus was flipped. Falk wrapped his body around mine as we slammed into the ceiling. I clung to him as the world kept flipping. Then we were flying. We hit the ground. Falk grunted as we rolled to a stop. I took deep, shaking breaths as I slowly opened my eyes. I somehow ended up on top of Falk with his arms around me.

"Are you okay?" I lifted my head to look up at him. There was a cut on his forehead that was bleeding.

"Yeah, you?"

I nodded as I carefully climbed off him and lay on the snow beside him. "What happened?" I took stock; a few aches and cuts, but it looked like Falk had kept me from hitting most things.

He grew still, then slowly moved to a crouched position beside me. I went still, shivering in the cold. He searched the area; his shoulders grew rigid. He pressed his finger to his lips and pointed. I followed, only to

finally see what had hit us. Shadow and fire, long horns, walking upright and glowing, red eyes. A minotaur.

Falk's hand went to my shoulder. "Run."

I looked through the trees toward bus and I shook my head. "My bag has everything for Evie."

He clenched his jaw. "Fine. I'll get it away from the bus and the humans. But after you get your bag, you run. Understand?"

I nodded. "Where?"

He turned to me. "Head north, along the freeway. I'll find you."

"Be careful."

Falk winked down at me before he charged the creature. Heart pounding, I got to my feet and ran back to the bus. Everyone was climbing out and milling around in the gusting wind. I ran past all of them.

Adrenaline pumping, I climbed into the bus through the one of the roof's emergency hatches. The side of the bus was covered in bags that had fallen from over the seats. I started going through bags to find ours. I found my jacket and slipped it on before digging again. When I did, I opened mine and pulled out my baton and taser. After tucking those in my pockets, I zipped up the bag and picked both of them up.

I stumbled back through the bus and tossed the bags out onto the ice. I climbed out of the hatch and caught myself on the ground. The ground shook. Everyone gasped. I went still. That was close. People started talking about a sound. I couldn't hear it, but how close were they? I searched the area as I picked up the bags. There was nothing... Then there was a loud crack. The ground shook again.

"The wind is probably blowing down some trees," one of brunette men suggested as he spotted me as I shouldered the bags. "We really shouldn't separate."

Ignoring him, I took a guess at what direction was north. I had told Falk I would run. Hating myself, I hurried into the trees. My pulse raced in my ears as I made my way through them and the underbrush. I slowed to a walk when I couldn't jog anymore. Damn, the packs made running harder. I took deep breaths as I moved along the woods while keeping the freeway in sight. Cars in the right lane showed me I was headed in the right direction.

The wind continued to howl, tilting mainly to the east. Teeth chattering, I pulled my jacket closed against the bite and started moving. I just tried to keep an eye out for any trees that looked like they were going to fall.

A hand grabbed my shoulder. I yelped and turned, scrambling back.

The brunette man was out of breath. "Run, there's two monsters back there!"

I tried to stay calm. "What?"

He started past me, looking at me over his shoulder as he went. "Two monsters. They came out of the woods and are tearing each other apart. Everyone took off. Come on!"

I swallowed hard. Falk wasn't able to keep the minotaur away from the bus. The wind began to ease up as I started jogging again.

The man ran beside me. "My name is Andy."

I nodded that I heard as my feet found a path through the snow and trees.

Eventually, we slowed down for rest. I watched as cars shot by at the bottom of the hill on the freeway. How much further to town?

When he got his breath back, he turned to me. "We can hitch a ride to the closest town."

I shook my head. No way. Falk didn't say anything about hitching a ride.

"Let's get going," he said as he gestured toward the freeway.

I shook my head. "You go; I'm heading north."

"Come on, it'll be safer for us to hitchhike together," Andy said. "Safety in numbers and all."

I adjusted the bags on my shoulders. "I know where I'm going. You'd better head down the hill." I started to head north again, wanting to get the freeway in sight.

He grabbed my arm over my jacket and pulled me to a stop. "We should really go to the freeway, Rina."

My heart pounded in my chest as dread filled me. I turned toward him and pulled my arm from him. "How do you know my name?"

He looked at me confused. "You said it back when we met."

I shook my head. I know I didn't... I backed up a step, my hand sliding into my pocket.

"Look, we should get down there before the weather gets worse," he reminded me.

I backed up again and tightened my grip on the stun gun. "Walk away, Andy."

His pleasant face disappeared as if it never was. "Damn, you're annoying."

My heart dropped as I took another step back. "Walk away." It would be my last warning.

He stepped closer and reached for me. I hit his gut with the stun gun; he grunted. I pulled back, turned, and ran. Adrenaline giving me a second wind, I pumped my arms and ran through the underbrush.

A noise I couldn't make out came from behind me. Shouting? That stun didn't last long! I needed to get some distance. I was hit from behind, knocked to the snow. I grunted as the air was knocked from my lungs. Something latched onto me; stabbing pain radiated up my leg. I dug my numb fingers into the ice and tried to pull but only got dragged back several feet. Heart in my throat, I looked over my shoulder to see what had me. Holy... A giant, demonic black dog, with spines jutting from its back had my calf locked in its jaws. I kicked out with my other foot and continued to slam my heel into its snout. All while it continued to drag me. My shirt rode up; my stomach was dragged over ice. I reached into my pocket and grabbed the baton, flicked my wrist and swung. I cracked it across the eye; it yelped and dropped my leg. Not wasting time, I pushed to my feet and ran. Fire burned up my leg, almost dropping me. "Shit!"

I couldn't afford to baby the leg. I hobbled as I rushed through the trees holding tight to the baton. A howl went up; it was more a pressure against my skin than a sound. Shit! Shit!

Legs burning, I kept moving, kept pumping my arms. Something hit me, knocking me to the snow. I grunted as I tried to get to my feet again. A black mass streaked out of the woods and knocked me to the grass again. Cursing, I rushed to my feet and froze. Six of them. On all sides. Oh fuck. I let the bags drop and pulled out my stun gun again. They stayed put, growling and snarling at me as I tried to stay standing on my torn-up leg.

Andy stepped out of the trees, smirking; his eyes now glowing red.

Possessed human! Possessed human! Oh, shit. My skin crawled as I tightened my grip. "I'm not going with you."

"So bothersome for a meat sack," he growled as he walked around me. I turned, keeping him in my sight.

"What? Not going to cry?" he taunted. "Not going to beg for mercy?" I snorted. "You're a demon. Why would I give you the satisfaction?"

He lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "Good, that'll just make this go faster." He strode towards me. Body tired and aching, I brought up the stungun.

He snapped his fingers. The stun gun grew hot, burning my fingers. I dropped it without thinking. Then he reached for my baton. I knocked his hand away with it and moved backwards, trying to get some room to think. He didn't let me; he moved with me. I swung at his face. He grabbed the baton with both hands and pushed hard. The air left my lungs as I hit the grass, his heavy body dropping on me. Lights danced across my vision as I struggled for air. He jerked the baton away, twisting my wrist in the process.

"You'll be coming with me whether you like it or not," he growled as he pulled a knife and held it to my neck. The cold metal sent an icy chill of reality through me. This was really happening... I wasn't going with him. That was it. It'd be over my dead body. This was going to hurt. I dropped half my barrier.

Thousands of voices swarmed into my head; anger, hate, envy, love, lust. It all jumbled into one brain-shattering mess. Instinctively, I threw up a shield of hope and light around the me in my head. It helped. But it wouldn't last long. I stood in that storm and linked with his mind. His eyes grew wide as I channeled all those voices, all those emotions, into his human mind. Yeah, he was a demon. But the body he possessed wasn't. It had a limit. My head pounded; something warm ran down my face.

He dropped the blade and clamped his hands over his ears, screaming. I grabbed the knife, cut the connection, and drove it into his chest.

His mouth gaped as he dropped on me. Scorching blood poured over me as the red left his eyes. Black smoke rose off his face and disappeared into the wind. Something brushed against my mind. No words. Just gratitude.

My chest aching, I watched the light fade from his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I whispered as I shoved him off me, then scrambled away across the snow until my back hit a tree. My stomach rolled; he was dead. Whoever Andy had been before the demon…he was gone. I turned and was sick over and over. The blood rushing through my ears was the only sound in the world.

With a trembling hand, I wiped my mouth. My gaze went right back to the body. I killed someone...it was in self-defense...but I killed someone. The dogs... Shaking, I raised my head to find them gone.

My mind was raw. Sore. As if it had stayed too long outside in the sun. I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes. But I needed to keep moving. Shoving everything back behind a door. I got unsteadily to my feet. I picked up the bags, slung them over my shoulder, and started moving north. My leg throbbed and ached, making me limp through the woods. It didn't matter. No one was chasing me now. He was dead in that clearing. More bile rose in the back of my throat. I swallowed it down.

That moment kept running through my mind; the feel of the blade sinking in. The widening of his eyes... The blood... I swallowed hard and tried to focus. Move. You've got to move. Rina...move! I forced one foot in front of the other. Picked a tree for a goal. Reached it. Then picked another. I don't know how long I walked running that hell through my head, or how far. But eventually, something large dropped into my path.

My teeth chattered as I leaned against a tree, my legs shaking. My eyes stayed on the underbrush. His hand lifted my face so I was forced to meet his dark eyes. Bringing me back to the present.

"I killed a possessed man." My voice cracked. "He attacked me...I didn't have a choice."

His face grew hard a heartbeat before he began running his hands over me, checking for injuries.

"I'm ok—" My throat tightened down on the lie. Everything seemed far away and that was good for now.

He straightened and held me against him, even with the blood covering me. I buried my face in his chest as he moved his arms around me. I slipped my tired arms around his neck and held tight. His scars were thick under my fingers. I took a deep breath of that charged scent as his hand ran down the back of my braid. I closed my eyes and wished the world would go away.

Falk swept me off my feet; he cradled me against his chest before he jumped. I kept my face buried in his chest as he flew us somewhere. Too tired to care about the heights or where we went, as long as it was away from the woods. The cold, biting wind battered at me for some time, but it didn't matter.

I was numb. My mind mercifully blank. Everything seemed to fade into a blur in the background. The only thing real and solid was Falk, and his touch.

It only came back when Falk carefully set me down in a room. I blinked. Dated carpet, faded art, a queen-sized bed. Motel.

Falk put down the bags, then gently guided me into the bathroom. "We need to get you cleaned up, Corrina."

I looked down at myself; the blood had dried and was starting to cake. My vision dimmed as I nodded. The world began to spin.

He closed the toilet lid and had me sit down. "*Put your head between your knees*." I did as he said; it didn't matter anyway. I took deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. I kept my gaze on the vinyl floor. I didn't have a choice…

When I was able, I sat up.

Falk crouched in front of me, his frown back. His brow drawn. "You need to take a shower and check your wounds. Can you do that?"

I nodded. The doubt was there in his gaze before he reached up and carefully took my hearing aids out. They whistled before he opened the battery compartment. That gaze ran over me one more time before he got to his feet and left the bathroom. Falk hesitated before shutting the door.

My hands shook as I pulled off the blood-soaked clothes. Even my underwear was covered. Fucking shit... I took deep breaths again as I leaned against the sink.

When I was naked, I limped to the shower and started the water. Changed the temp and pulled the knob. I got in, closed the curtain, and began to scrub. I scrubbed until my skin turned pink. I found every bump, every scrape with the washcloth. The road rash on my stomach was particularly stinging. Eventually, the water ran clear. The world spun again. My legs shook. I sat down under the spray, holding my knees to my chest. As long as I stayed in here, I didn't have to face it. It could stay hidden away. Not yet. Please...just not yet. Blood still dripped from my calf. I watched in macabre fascination as it dropped into water, then swirled down the drain in a streak. One. Two. Three.

The water shut off. I lifted my head only enough to see Falk. As he pulled back the curtain, I vaguely noticed he was shirtless and had several new, large bandages covering his chest and arms. He draped a towel over my knees and arms. He wrapped another around my shoulders, covering me. Falk knelt by the tub and wiped my face with a hand towel, getting my attention again. His face was serious as he grabbed a smaller towel and began to soak up the water from my hair. I watched him in silence as he carefully dried each section and finger-combed some of the knots out.

I slowly reached up and touched the edge of one of the bandages on his chest. He got hurt. I didn't like it. His face softened along the edges. When

he finished, he got to his feet and reached a hand down to me. I met those eyes again. He waited with his hand out. As if he'd wait there forever if that's what it took.

If I left the shower...if I left the bathroom, it'd be real. It couldn't be this ridiculous dream I had. I swallowed hard, took his hand, and held the large towel to my chest. Falk lifted me to my feet. He kept my hand as I stepped out of the tub. I clutched the towel to me. My fingers were clumsy as they brushed his. Warmth tingled along the tips, but nothing else. Both of us were being extremely careful to stay out of the other's mind. He pointed at the closed lid. I sat down. He left the bathroom and came back with his first aid stuff.

I watched without really seeing as he held my calf and examined the bite wound. Four deep punctures were in the muscle of my leg. The edges were torn and spread out. It was still dripping crimson to the tile. One. Two. Three. Falk began to clean it. When the burn of antiseptic came, I welcomed it. Falk wrapped it, glancing up at me every now and then before proceeding to examine the rest of me. When he found a cut, he cleaned it. When he found a bruise, he clenched his jaw so hard I could practically hear his teeth crack. When he touched my wrist, I jumped and took in a quick breath of air. He examined my wrist, watching me as he moved it. Soon, he stopped. I simply sat there and felt his touch.

He slipped a finger under my chin and lifted until I met his gaze. His question clear.

I blinked several times, then nodded. He squeezed my fingers before he left me in the bathroom. My bloody and ruined clothes were gone. On the counter was a clean set of clothes. Falk... He thought of everything. I dried off and pulled on the black boy short underwear and enormous black shirt that smelled like him. But no pants. It didn't matter. The damn thing reached my mid-thigh.

When I was done, I stepped out of the bathroom and into the room. Falk was sitting on the corner of the bed holding a bottle of clear liquor. Without a word I limped up to him and took the mostly full bottle from him. I took a deep drink that left me coughing; it burned all the way down. I sat in one of the chairs near the corner of the bed. He got to his feet and opened a plastic bag. He set a plastic-wrapped sandwich in front of me.

I looked up and shook my head.

His gaze was understanding as he put the sandwich back and pulled out a box of saltines.

I thought about it. Looking down at the bottle in my hand, I saw the label. Everclear. Yeah, I should eat something... I lifted my head and nodded.

He opened the box, pulled out a sleeve and set it in front of me. Then he took the bottle from my hand. His meaning was clear; eat, or no more drinking.

I opened the sleeve and slowly started eating a cracker. Falk sat back down on the corner of the bed near me and took a long, deep drink from the bottle.

I stared off into space as I forced myself to eat more crackers. I maybe got five down before my stomach started getting angry. I pushed the crackers away. He crossed the room to the ice bucket and pulled out a small bag of ice. Falk came back, squatted next to my chair, and pressed the ice to my wrist. His face was blank as I held the ice to my wrist in my lap, the fog lifting a bit. He sat back down again and took another drink before holding it out to me.

I took the bottle and drank. He said nothing. He didn't ask me questions. We just sat and drank in complete silence.

Eventually, he got to his feet and scooped me up in his arms. The world spun as I curled into his heat, barely avoiding his bandages. He set me down in the center of the bed. When he let me go, I leaned against the headboard and looked up at him as he sat down facing me.

It wasn't your fault, he signed.

The numbness pulled back, leaving me shaking again. *I killed him*.

His fingers squeezed my leg gently. His death was a fact the second the demon took possession. By killing him, you saved his soul from being destroyed.

Was that really what happened to the souls of the possessed? *Really?* He handed me the bottle and nodded.

At the end, it wasn't the demon that died. He left; it was the person he was possessing that died. I took another drink, wiped my lips, and held it out to him.

I know. Hellhounds have a unique skill at body jumping. It won't actually die unless it's his own body. He took the bottle from me and took a

drink. Whoever that soul was, he was being tortured by that demon. Held prisoner in his own body. He would have thanked you for freeing him.

That burst of gratitude at the end. He was right. His fingers brushed mine as I took the bottle back. His hand moved to my mid-thigh as I took a deep drink. My eyes filled as I set the bottle on my other leg. *I still killed someone*.

The lines on his face deepened as his hand squeezed my thigh before he wrapped that arm around me. I moved to press against his chest as he slipped his arms around me. Uncaring of his bandages, he held me tight. Tears flowed down my face as I laid against his chest, needing his touch, his heat, as I broke apart. He buried his face in my hair and let me cry. Eventually, after my eyelids swelled and my throat grew raw, I fell asleep in his arms.

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#### **ASTRID**

he drive out to the woods was a long one simply because Ranulf was tense beside me. We were four miles from the pack's usual meeting site when I turned into a pullout on the side of the road.

"I know you're going to watch and listen all night." I gripped the steering wheel.

"Damn straight." He shifted in his seat.

"Ran..." I turned to him. "They're going to want an answer."

Ranulf opened the car door. "Then give them your answer."

"It's not that easy..."

"This is a choice that only you can make." His face was warm. Calm even. "I will support you no matter what you do. If you go, I'll go." He got out of the car and shut the door behind him. I took a deep, shaky breath as I pulled back on the road.

Whatever I want to do? What the hell did I want? I wanted Ran. I wanted my pack. I wanted to live in peace. But what if those were mutually exclusive? What if by having Ran, I had to give up my pack?

My shoulders where in knots by the time I pulled into the parking lot. Ran was my mate. He was my other half... The pack is a huge part of being a wolf too. The urge to scream tore through me. I rested my forehead against the wheel.

I turned off the engine. What was the smart thing to do? It wasn't hard to answer. Take the alpha position in Thunder Bay and make sure Liam understood that I wouldn't marry him. It would be the safest course of action. But would Ran be able to come with me? I lifted my head and thought about it.

Ran was part of a team, and they were here in Chicago. Just because he cut ties with the gargoyle community at large didn't mean that he would leave the others. But he just said he would... A sharp pain shot through my chest, taking my breath away. What did I want to do?

I got out of the car, vaguely nauseous, and started toward the clearing. The music was light and fun. Little kids jumping, dancing, and laughing as they ran. The rest of the pack talking to each other, laughing. Having a good time. My throat grew tight. I had to go to Thunder Bay, right?

I was barely in the clearing when David found me. "You really needed to finish that scene today, Astrid."

My wolf paced inside me. "Why? Couldn't stomach it yourself?"

He scowled at me. "I handled it just fine, but you're the one with a degree. You know what to look for. And now, we might not be able to find these hunters."

"Well then, maybe it's a bad time to try and marry me off." I started walking around him.

"Astrid." He growled as he grabbed my arm. My wolf reared up inside me and snapped at him.

He jerked his hand back off me. The music stopped as everybody felt my bond with my wolf roll through the clearing like a hot summer wind.

I turned on him. "Don't you ever put your hands on me again." That familiar feeling of my eyes shifting to wolf went through me. "You are not my mate, you are not my boyfriend. You have no right."

David stepped towards me, his bloody hand dripping in the snow. "You attacked your alpha." He kept his voice low enough that only we could hear. "You know the punishment for that."

That's it. I was done. I stepped closer. "Or I could simply challenge you."

He flinched. "Don't be—"

"There's no law against a female challenging for the position of alpha male." I smiled as I leaned a little closer so there was no mistake. "And you know I'd probably win. Then I could give the position to someone I choose. I wonder if Liam would be willing to move?" I turned and walked past the others; some were gaping.

My wolf continued to prowl inside me, wanting nothing more than to take another bite out of him.

I walked across the clearing and into the trees. Finding a log, I sat and took deep breaths as I calmed my wolf. That had felt good. Really fucking good. As in, jumping Ranulf later good. I was almost back to normal when Alia joined me.

"Astrid, could I talk to you?" she asked in her soft voice.

"Yeah." Stay calm. It's not her fault your ex is a douche.

Alia sat on the log across from me. "David said you'll be taking the alpha female position with Thunder Bay."

"He did, did he?" I shook my head. "David doesn't speak for me."

She smiled. "I know. That's one of the things I like about you, Astrid. You know who you are and you stay true to that."

I shrugged. "I try."

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Astrid, I'm sorry I've had to ask you to do my job so often."

Stunned, I grew still.

"I know I'm not alpha material," she admitted, her voice lowering to barely a whisper. "I don't have the strength, I don't have the confidence, or the experience... I'm not an alpha."

"Then why won't you step down?" I leaned forward and lowered my voice too.

"David won't let me." She gave me a sad smile. "He says being an alpha is something he's wanted for years. So, I need to learn how to do it. He's always comparing me to you. And I can't blame him;, you are a great alpha."

My heart ached for her. Damn... I've always wanted to hate her but deep down I couldn't. "Being an alpha isn't a choice. It's who your wolf is. It's not something you can learn," I told her gently.

"Do you know what it's like to be a disappointment to your mate?" She asked, a tear rolling down her cheek. "To constantly be reminded that you don't measure up to what he wants? It's..."

"Crushing." I finished for her.

She met my gaze and nodded.

Ranulf... I'd never be able to fly beside him just as he would never be able to run beside me. Was I a disappointment to him? No one knew that different species could be mates, it probably never even occurred to him that it could happen. But it did. He had said it didn't matter to him.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to say thank you for picking up my slack." Her sniff brought me back to the woods.

"I'm sorry, Alia." I said, my throat tightening.

She looked at me quizzically.

"I'm sorry for being so cold to you." I shook my head. "Everything that happened wasn't your fault. I knew that. But seeing you with him... it was so hard. I was pissed for months. At you, at...fate. Whatever decides who ends up mated to whom."

"You had every reason to be. So, I tried to stay away most of the time." She tucked a stray blonde hair behind her ear. "I didn't want to make things harder on you."

"Thank you." I looked out at the pack. I debated for a heartbeat before asking a real question. "Alia, what would you give up for your mate?"

She tilted her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

I licked my lips. "Would you give up the pack? Would you leave all of this behind? If your mate was rogue?"

She looked down at the snow. "For my mate? No." She looked out at the pack. "But if it would make me happy..." She turned back to me. "If it would make me happy, and if he was a good wolf? Yes. I wouldn't let anything get in my way."

An odd sensation filled my chest—respect for Alia. Something I thought I'd never feel for her. "You don't like it here."

She gave me a sad smile. "It's not where I am. It's...who I'm with."

For the first time, I really looked at the female. Her face was paler than usual; bags were like wings over her hollow cheeks. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes filled again as she moved her hand to her stomach. "I love him, but when he's acting like an alpha... I'm nothing but a disappointment in public, but in private, it's different. He's the wolf I love. I can't help but wonder if he'd do the same to our children."

My mind went blank. "You're..."

She nodded. "He doesn't know yet. And with the way he's been lately, I don't know if I want to stay."

My wolf wanted to whimper for her as I remembered something my mom once said. "We have no choice in who our mates are. But we do choose if we stand beside them."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a choice, Alia. Accepting them as our mates is a choice."

"I guess it is." She ran her fingers over her stomach. "I just never really thought about it that way..." Her eyes cleared as her gaze went over my head. "And here comes the alpha from Thunder Bay." She got to her feet and smiled a perfect smile. "Evening, Liam."

I got to my feet and turned. "Hey."

Liam smiled at us both. "Happy run night, ladies." He turned to me. "I heard about your bar. I'm sorry."

My bar...in the middle of everything, I forgot about my damn bar burning down. "I forgot to start the insurance claim. Shit."

Alia smiled. "Don't worry, I called your insurance agent as soon as I heard. We'll make sure you're taken care of."

"Thanks, Alia," I said sincerely.

"No problem." Her voice faded as David began to make his way over to our little group.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Liam." David put on a charming smile as he reached us. He slipped his arm around Alia's waist. "So, now that you've spoken to Astrid, do you think the two of you would work as an alpha pair?"

I fought not to roll my eyes as David put Liam on the spot.

"Uh, I was going to discuss that privately with Astrid," Liam said, his voice growing hard. "If you don't mind?"

David turned to me with that fake smile. "Well, I'm sure Astrid's answer will help."

I clenched my fists at my sides. It was the smart move. It would protect both me and Ranulf... I opened my mouth to say yes but my throat tightened. I couldn't get the words out. I couldn't do it...

Liam noticed. He turned to David. "If you don't mind, we'd like to discuss this in private."

"Of course," Alia supplied before giving David a nudge to get him walking away.

I turned away from Liam and stepped further into the trees, trying to breathe as everything hit me at once.

He walked beside me deeper into the woods. When we were out of earshot of any wolf, he turned to me. "Astrid? Are you all right?"

I turned to him, my heart still racing. "I can't." The enormity of that fact threatened to swallow me whole. "I can't marry you. I...I can't be your alpha female."

"We don't have to get married, Astrid," he reminded me gently. "I'd be happy with being friends and working together as alphas."

"Liam, David is my ex-fiancé." I didn't even mean to say it. It just came out.

"Seriously?" he asked, stunned.

I nodded. "He met his mate, Alia, the day before our wedding. That was eight months ago."

His face grew hard. "And now, he's trying to marry you off." His wolf came to the surface. Energy rolled off him before he could stop it.

"There's more." I swallowed hard. "If I don't go with you, he's threatening to exile me."

Liam's jaw clenched and unclenched. "He's threatening you?"

I nodded. "The only reason I'm telling you is so you know what a slimy bitch he is."

He shook his head, his anger clear on his face. "Oh, believe me, I'll take it under advisement." He turned back to me. "If you want out, you're more than welcome to join my pack. Even if it's not as an alpha."

I gave him a smile. He was such a good wolf. "There's someone else... and he's not a wolf."

He blinked in surprise, but then met my gaze. "You love him."

I nodded. "More than I ever thought possible."

He gave me a sad smile. "I hope he deserves you. What are you going to do now?"

I smirked. "I'm going to leave the pack. Be happy."

He chuckled. "Bloody moon, you would make a great alpha."

"I already am." I smiled.

"Time for the run!" David's voice echoed through the clearing. Cheers rang out.

I shared a smile with Liam before we headed back to the clearing. Once there, everyone began to strip down. Shifting in your clothes just destroyed your stuff and frankly, sucked when you needed to get home. My wolf was awake and pacing inside me. Her energy already moving over my skin. God...that felt so good. Shifting for a wolf, at least after the first one, was amazing. It was like stretching after being cooped up too long. I dropped to my hands and knees and reached for her. I let go that last little bit and let her energy roll over me like a wave in the ocean. There was nothing to hold onto, no thoughts, no fears. Just being. The crack of breaking bones filled

the night as my body broke and reshaped itself. It hurt, yeah. But much like Ranulf's spanking, it was a good kind of hurt. My fur rose from under my skin like bubbles to the surface of a pond.

When I lifted my head, I was on all four paws. I stretched before rising with the other wolves. My heart pounded, my tail wagged. I needed to run. I looked around the pack and felt...nothing. My tail stopped wagging. The pack felt off. Just...wrong. I backed up several steps, weary of the others. They were the same pack as last month, only now...the urge to keep them in front of me was overwhelming. They no longer felt like home. I raised my head to look up. Ranulf was a spot in the sky. That feeling of home washed through me. Safety... I looked at the others as they got to their paws slowly. If any of them knew about Ranulf, they'd turn on me.

The night filled my senses and I ran. For the first time in my life, I ran parallel to the pack. With them, but apart. The only thing that allowed me to run was knowing my mate was watching from above.

I WAITED, making sure the others had left before pulling out of the parking lot. I drove several miles until I veered into a pullout on the side of the road. This time I got out and waited while my wolf rolled through me happily. My heart pounded against my ribs as I waited. It seemed like days had gone by when he finally dropped to the side of the road. My eyes devoured him as he straightened to his full height and pulled his wings into his back. Scars, muscles...all man. And all mine.

When those amazing turquoise eyes met mine, they were full of shadows. "What did you decide?" he asked, his voice rough.

"You stupid asshole." I moved my hands to my hips. "Before you came along, I was doing just great! I wasn't happy, but I managed to find some bit of joy in my life."

His fangs flashed at me. "Oh, I'm sorry, lass." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "I didn't know my existence would fucking destroy your life—"

"Let me finish!" I stepped towards him until I had to tilt my head back. He growled deep in his chest but stopped talking.

"I love you, you big, stupid ass," I said, my voice growing warm and softer. "And every day of my life, I'll choose you over anyone or anything. If you want me for the rest of my life, that is."

His jaw unclenched. "You stupid bitch. Of course, I fuckin' love yae." His hands moved to hold my face; he pressed against me as my heart

soared. "I'm not living in this world without yae." His lips brushed mine. My body throbbed as I kissed him. I reached up, grabbed him by the hair, and crushed his lips with mine. I took possession of his mouth just as he had my life. Hard, rough, and breathless. His hands went to my jeans, popping the buttons and shoving the material down my hips. I bit his lip hard; he growled into my mouth as his fingers found me dripping. He left me to kiss down my body, shoving my clothing out of the way of his hungry mouth and hands. He dropped to his knees in the snow before his eyes met mine. His lips and tongue buried between my thighs; I moaned as that edge came up hard and fast. In barely three heartbeats, he threw me over and sent me flying. I cried out as I pressed against his amazing tongue. His mouth left me. He pulled the rest of my pants off along with my shoes. I shivered at the heat in his eyes.

"Get in the car," he ordered.

I smirked. "You get in the car."

The corner of his lips lifted to a half-grin as he got to his feet. He opened the back door and slid into the middle of the back seat. I didn't hesitate as he unzipped his leather pants, I climbed in after him and shut the door. His hands were on me immediately, pinching, touching, rolling over me, sending every thought out of my head. I straddled his lap, my knees pressed into the leather seats. Pressing against the hard muscles of his chest, I rolled my hips to bring the head of his thick cock to my throbbing entrance. My eyes met his before I dropped onto him. He filled me completely, hitting the end of me. Everything I was sparked and shook. He groaned as his hands went to my hips. He was perfect, as always.

I moved, sliding him over all my sensitive spots. I was gasping by the time he filled me again. My nipples brushed against his chest, his scars shooting sparks through me. His body met my rhythm, making me whimper as my body grew tighter. We'd had sex many times before, but this was different. There was no frenzy, no urgency as I slowly moved up and down his shaft. We simply moved together, feeling each other, seeing each other as if for the first time.

Groaning, he took my mouth as sweat ran down our bodies. The windows fogged with our heavy breathing. Lights danced over the windows, showing the absolute worship on his face. Oh fuck! My body clenched around his as I blew apart. I cried out, my back arching, my head back as he drove into me. His grip on my skin bruising. His hips kept

moving, keeping me flying so long I thought I'd never come down. When I dropped against his chest, he was still like stone inside me.

"I promise." His deep rasp had me meeting his gaze. "To love yae every day of your life."

"I promise to love you every day of yours," I whispered back. My left forearm slowly began to burn, sending delicious shivers through me.

His hips continued to drive me crazy. "I promise I'll always try to be the male ya deserve."

My entire body broke out in goosebumps as the air charged, my body burned. "I promise to always choose you over everyone and anything else. Always."

A wave of fire burned through me. He drove harder into me. I cried out as we moved together.

Love filled the amazing depths of his eyes as he continued to make lights dance in my vision. "I promise I will always pick ya. Over anything and everything." He grunted as his thrusts grew harder.

That ledge was coming fast. I wrapped my arms around his neck and brushed my lips against his. "I promise, I'm yours." One last thrust threw me over the edge. I gripped his body as I cried out his name. Pleasure crashed over me, threatening to drown me as he moved inside me. The world was gone; everything was gone but him, his touch, his taste. His hands lifted me off him. He slipped out of me to rest against my lower stomach. He growled as he came on his hard stomach. My heart dropped. Even now....

I grew limp against him, my face buried in his neck as he held me close. Our breathing grew quieter, our heartbeats slowed. Everything was perfect. Except the cum cooling on his skin. When I could finally form a thought, I asked. "Why?"

His arms tightened around me as his face buried in my hair. "I don't want to kill yae."

I sat up. "What?"

His face was shadowed as he held my cheek. "My sister died in childbirth, goddess. I don't want the same to happen to ya."

Everything I was, melted; that was it? "You don't finish inside me so I don't get pregnant?"

His eyes were warm as he nodded.

I snorted. "We don't even know if I could get pregnant, Ran."

He pressed his sweaty forehead against mine. "I won't risk ya."

"I get it," I whispered as I ran my fingers over the muscles of his abdomen. There was one thing I had to know... "Do you regret that I'm not a gargoyle?"

He looked at me as if I'd slapped him. "No," he answered softly. "Do you regret that I'm not a wolf? That I'll never run with ya?"

"I ran with the pack tonight," I whispered. "And I still felt like I was running alone. Seeing that you were flying above me; that's what made it a good run. So, no."

The light in his face as he smiled down at me sent my heart soaring.

"You're my home now. You're my family now." I ran my fingers up the muscles of his chest.

He kissed me lightly, his lips barely brushing mine. "You're my everything."

I smiled as happiness bubbled inside me. Who needed someone to run with when you had a man that could fly?



### Falk

I was in my wood shop, sanding down the high chair when the door creaked open behind me.

I didn't even have to look to know it was her. "Come on in, Corrina."

She walked to my side with her arms wrapped around her stomach as if she were cold. "I did it again?"

"Yeah." I stopped working and straightened as I looked down at her. "But it's all right. I like having you here."

The corner of her lip lifted a bit. "I like being here."

My chest ached at the lost, haunted look in her eyes. "Whenever I need to think, I create something." I gestured at the project. "It helps my mind quiet down."

She looked over the carvings on the high chair. "It's beautiful."

"Thank you." I surveyed her, growing more worried. "Want to give it a try?"

She shrugged. "I'm not great with my hands unless there is a keyboard involved."

"It'll help," I said softly.

She thought about it and nodded.

I walked her over to the large, half-hollowed-out tree I was carving a canoe from. She stood beside me and looked down.

"Now, this is easy." I picked up the tools. "You don't have to be smooth or even precise. You're just taking layers off." I handed her the chisel and mallet. She stood the tool straight up. I bit back a smile while I moved my arms around her and showed her the angle she wanted to hold the chisel at. "You can't go at it straight on, or you'll get stuck. To take the layers off, you need an angle."

"Couldn't you do this with an ax or something?" she asked, looking up at me.

"I could, but I figured you'd be more comfortable with the chisel," I explained.

She smiled a little more as she turned back to the canoe. I walked her through the first few strokes, then dropped my arms and stepped back. She concentrated completely on her task. Her hits with the mallet grew harder, her movements quicker. It wasn't long before she began to take off chunks of wood.

Tears rolled down her face as she pounded the back of the chisel over and over. I stood silently, watching as she worked her grief out. Killing didn't bother me, but Rina cherished life. She loved it. She wasn't broken. And I didn't want this to break her.

Eventually, she was out of breath, her arms shaking as she dropped the tools from her weak fingers.

I gently turned her toward me, wiped her face. "Feel better?"

She blinked several times, then nodded. "How'd you know?"

I ran my thumb over her cheekbone. "Because you're a good person. That's why I was waiting for you here, schatzi."

She shook her head. "How do you do it? How do you kill people and don't let it affect you?"

My heart clenched. Did she really want to know? Would the truth be too much? Would she run from me, screaming that I am a monster? "I grew up in a different time. My corner of the world was very dark. I grew up seeing death every day. I wasn't always this way. But over time... Eventually, you get used to it. After a while, it stops bothering you. Eventually, if you live long enough, you stop feeling."

She pressed her lips together. "I don't want to get used to it."

I held her face in my hand. "You'll never have to." I brushed my thumb across her cheekbone. "I don't see things the way you do. All I see is the dark and blood. You see the light, the good. You focus on what life has to offer. I don't want that ever taken from you."

Her face softened as she moved closer. "Why do you look at me like that?"

"Like what?" I whispered, my heart hammering.

"As if I'm the only woman in the world that you see." She stepped closer until she had to tilt her head up to meet my eyes.

"Because you are," I answered. My hand dropped to my side "And you terrify me."

Her hand moved to my chest, burning through me. "How do I scare you? You're an executioner."

No. It wasn't time. I wasn't ready to see her look at me the way she would. "I'll tell you another day, schatzi."

She looked up at me. "What did you call me?"

"Schatzi." My fingers stroked her jaw. "It's term of endearment in Germany."

"What does it mean?"

"Little treasure," I answered without thinking. My face burned as I realized what I just said. The smile that spread across her face shined so brightly it was worth the humiliation.

Her fingers curled into my shirt as she went to her toes and met my lips with hers. Everything stopped. Heart pounding, my lips moved with hers. My arm wrapped around her waist only to hold her tighter against me. Light, warmth, and happiness burst inside my chest; I'd never felt the like before. Everything I was, was at peace. Everything I'd ever be, changed, by that one, simple, chaste kiss. She slowly lowered herself until she was standing flat-footed on the floor of the workshop.

"We haven't taken this slow at all. Have we?" She looked up at me through her lashes.

"If we weren't, you would already be on your back, writhing in pleasure beneath me." It slipped out before I could stop myself. Shit! All my blood was centered around my groin at the moment.

Her face turned a deep rose color as her gaze dropped to my chest.

Cursing myself, I pressed a kiss into her hair. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that."

"It's okay, I just didn't expect you to be that blunt." She stepped back and looked up at me. "I'll, uh, see you in the morning." Her figure faded like a mirage in the desert. The scent of lavender lingered long after she had gone.

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#### **ASTRID**

t had taken every ounce of charm to convince Ranulf to stay behind at the church this morning. This was pack business and I had to handle it. He had bitched, a lot. But a few whispered promises, a few touches in the right places, and he gave in.

I pulled through the gates and around the driveway. My heart raced as I got out and headed inside. And no, I didn't bother to knock.

"David!" I shouted as I closed the front door.

One of the other wolves came down the hall. "He's in his office."

"Thanks." I went to the door and pushed it open.

David looked up from his desk and papers, his face already hard. "Next time you walk into my house without knocking, you'll regret it."

"This'll be the last time." I didn't care if he was pissed. I just needed to do this and leave. "Listen, I'm not taking the—"

"The alpha position." He leaned back in his chair. "Liam told me."

Well, that made this much simpler. "I'm leaving the pack." I reached up and slipped the long white gold chain off my neck. The pack's emblem glinted in the light as I set it down on the desk in front of David.

"Liam also decided against the alliance." David voice had a razor's edge to it.

A chill ran down my spine. "Sorry to hear that." I stepped back away from the desk. "But it's not my problem anymore."

"Arthur! Neil!" David shouted. His two bodyguards appeared in the doorway behind me.

My heart pounded as I met David's furious gaze. "You wanted me gone. I'm out. I'm gone."

His eyes were all wolf as he got to his feet. "As we were leaving the site last night, I spotted your car on the side of the road. The windows were fogged."

My stomach dropped. Hands grabbed my arms. I struggled against their grip, but they held my arms out to my sides, taking away any momentum I might have gotten. Fear tore through me like an icy wind as David pulled the left sleeve of my long-sleeved shirt back, exposing what looked to be a cuff of armored Celtic knots. My mate mark. The wolf inside me paced, growling.

David turned to me. "You chose a gargoyle over your pack."

"I'm not part of your pack anymore. I turned in my medallion," I reminded him, through the rock in my throat. "You have no authority over me."

He growled in his chest. "You put what you wanted above the pack. You chose the gargoyle."

"I have no control over who my mate is," I bit out through clenched teeth, my anger boiling in my stomach. His eyes went back to his human. "That's what he is. You of all people know we have no say in who that is."

"He's the reason you didn't take the alpha position," he growled. "Isn't he?"

"No!" I bit out. "I didn't want it. So, get your fucking hounds off me. I've done nothing illegal."

David shook his head. "Take her downstairs. Put her in the cage."

My stomach dropped. "David. Don't do this." My voice was a mere whisper. Memories poured through my mind. A tremor moved through me. He couldn't...he wouldn't...

David simply shared a look with the wolves behind me and they began pulling me from the room.

"I left the pack!" I screamed, fought, and struggled to break free as they dragged me out the door and down the hallway.

"Come on, Astrid," Neil grunted. "It'd be easier if you just get it over with."

"No!" I shouted. "I'm not pack anymore!"

"It's bullshit," Arthur snapped. "But orders are orders."

"Not the cage!" I dug my nails into the doorframe as they tried to carry me downstairs. Arthur brought his arm down on the bend of my elbow, forcing me to lose my grip. They continued to carry me down the stairs. "David! Please!"

Skin scraped off my back as I was dragged across the rough basement floor; the cage came into sight. It was bigger than the hunters used...but still a cage. Terror consumed me; my heart pounded against my ribs, my wolf leaped to the surface. Bones broke and reknitted as I shifted only my face to give me teeth. I bit down on Neil's arm, tearing at the flesh. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth as I latched on. Every inch of my skin began to burn as I started to shift halfway. My nails grew to claws. My limbs elongated.

"Get her in before she finishes!" Arthur bit out. They both tightened their grip on my clothes and threw me into the cage. My hand hit the grid and immediately began to smoke. Burning pain shot up my wrists as I pulled my hand away. A burn mark that matched the grid sat in the meat of my hand. The door slammed behind me. Panic gripped me as I turned around on my knees in the center of the short cage. Neil and Arthur were both out of breath as they quickly threw the silver locks, using gloves to protect themselves. My whole body shook as I tried to breathe. I took long, shaky breaths as I met Neil's gaze.

"Why?" Tears poured down my face as the memories kept coming.

"Orders." His voice furious. Orders? They knew how I came to the pack! They started across the basement.

"I turned in my medallion." I barely managed to stifle the urge to scream. "I'm not pack anymore."

Neil stopped and shared a look with Arthur. Arthur shook his head. They left me in the basement, in the cage. I wrapped my arms around my knees and stayed away from the sides. Tears poured down my face as the room disappeared. I was in the woods again. Erica was still breathing....



### Rina

I WOKE UP SLOWLY, my head pounding. Even the light shining through my eyelids hurt. I groaned and pulled the blanket over my head. Too bright. I don't know how long I stayed under there but eventually, my bladder demanded attention. Grumbling under my breath, I pushed off the covers and looked around the empty room. Where was Falk? Rubbing the sleep from my face, I swung my legs over the bed, wincing as fire raced up my calf as I got to my feet. My stomach rebelled as I found the motel notepad

on the table standing next to a glass of water and pills. On it, scrawled in masculine script, was,

Rina, I'm picking up a rental car. I'll be back soon, and I'll bring breakfast. Please drink the water and take the aspirin-Falk.

After drinking the water and taking the aspirin, I headed into the bathroom.

I turned the water on as hot as I could stand and stood beneath the spray, letting the water run down my body, soothing bruises and aches. Was Falk someone I could be with? I stepped out of the spray and wiped the water from my face before grabbing the little shampoo bottle. He had no problem killing someone. But he still helped strangers around him. I started washing my hair as I tried to figure out how I felt. It wasn't just this matching thing. I actually *liked* him. I rinsed out my hair and grabbed the soap.

As I showered, I kept running through what I knew about him. He took care of me last night. Heck, the first thing he did when he shut off the water was cover me. Most men probably wouldn't do that. At least not the creeps I knew.

I soaped up, careful of my bruises and cuts. He was so serious. So dour. But when he did laugh or smile...it was like touching the leviathan. Amazing and heart-pounding all at the same time. And that kiss... Damn. The man could kiss; but that can't be all there is.

Still running circles in my head, I stopped washing as I looked down at my wrist. The handprint was now black and purple. And getting darker.

I swallowed hard as I went back to washing. They were going to keep coming after me. How long could Falk hold out before he didn't have any more left? His bandages from last night slipped back into my mind. He couldn't protect me forever; even he'd wear out... An icy finger slid up my spine and settled in my chest. Falk was going to get killed if we kept going this way...

"Corrina?" That soft, warm touch was back, brushing over the surface of my thoughts. The tension between my shoulder blades disappeared. "What's wrong?"

Not wanting to worry him, I asked, "Why do you call me Corrina? No one does. Not even my mom."

Another brush of warmth and peace moved through my head. "Because it's as beautiful as you are." Embarrassment vibrated down the link.

I smiled into the water from the shower.

"I'm on my way back now."

"Did you get the car?" I started showering again.

"I'll fucking steal one later. I don't want to leave you alone that long."

My cheeks warmed as he broke off the connection.

I finished up my shower and got dressed. Everything was a jumble in my head. Falk, hellhound, mates, and last night... I pulled on the long sweater. One thing at a time. I opened the bathroom door.

Falk was just closing the room door as he held up a bag. "I brought breakfast. Waffles and sausage."

Hell, marry him now.



#### Falk

Finally, after driving all day from Atlanta, we made it to St. Louis. The weather was getting worse. Thick storm clouds covered the sky, making it twilight all day. The wind had eased up a bit the further north we went, but we hit the snow. Reports of road closures were going to make it tricky to get back to Chicago, but we had no choice.

Even with all of that, it was still the best eight and a half hours of my long life. I was able to utilize the telepathic link between us to talk to her while driving. She usually answered out loud, which should have been odd or awkward but was instead familiar and relaxing. As if we'd been doing it for months

Finally, after following the directions from Rina, who had the physical map, since GPS wasn't working—we got lost three times—I pulled up to the curb. Dried ivy clung to the brick house while several plants were covered by plastic for the winter. But from the amount of plants and the setup, it would be stunning in the spring. Yelling sounded from the house. A kid came barreling around the corner in a snowsuit, laughing so hard he couldn't breathe. A taller kid rounded the corner and threw a snowball. It hit the first kid in the back of the head. Laughing hysterically, he fell into the snow and kept laughing. I smiled as I remembered doing the same thing to my brother Vano.

The taller kid ran up and hit the other one with another. "That's for Maddie!"

The front door opened. A woman with olive skin, in a wool sweater with a scarf-covered head came outside and crossed her arms over her chest

as she shouted, "William! Richard! Get your sisters and come in for dinner!"

"Okay, Momma!" the tallest called back as he ran towards the back of the house. The smaller boy got up and hurried through the plants to the small front porch. The kid ran inside while the woman turned her head to look at the car

We got out and started towards the picket fence. She walked down the walkway and met us at the gate.

"Can I help you?" she asked. She was stunning. A lovely face with high cheekbones and long lashes. Bright-green eyes watched me carefully.

"Evelyn Dalca sent us," Rina announced as she stepped up beside me.

I kept my gaze on the female. Gorgons were notorious for being as deadly as they were beautiful.

She smiled with warmth. "How is she?"

"In trouble," Rina admitted.

Her smile disappeared. "Come in, please." She opened the gate and turned to lead us up the small walkway. She showed us into a quaint foyer and then into a small family room where the younger boy was pulling off his shoes.

"Richard, darling, dinner is on the table. Tell your brothers and sisters to help themselves," she said. "Your father is already there, so don't even think of starting without them."

The kid grinned, left his shoes on the floor, and hurried out of the room.

She turned to us. "I'm Cali. And you are?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm Rina." She held her hand out to her. "This is Falk. I work for Evie in her bookstore."

She eyed me before she shook Rina's hand gingerly, then gestured for us to take a seat. "It's nice to meet you. Now, what's happened to Evelyn?"

"I only got bits and pieces." Rina sat down while I stayed standing as she explained what she remembered from the short connection she had with her. That Evie was poisoned, and didn't notice in time to counter it. Now time was running out.

Cali sighed. "That really isn't much to go on."

"Tell me about it," Rina muttered. Down the link, I could feel how tired she was. She needed to get some sleep in the car after this.

"Your blood," Rina stated simply. "From your left side."

Cali nodded. "I expected so." She got to her feet and went to a small desk and began going through drawers. "Did she tell you why?"

Rina didn't answer. I signed for her without thinking.

Warm thanks radiated through the link as she answered, "No, we didn't have much time."

"Graham. Could you give me a hand?" Cali pulled a syringe and vial from a drawer, then moved back to the armchair.

A tall, silver-haired man walked in, wearing a sweater vest. "What do you need, bunny?"

Bunny? Did he just call a gorgon bunny?

Cali smiled. "Evelyn needs my blood."

Graham turned to Rina. "Well, Evelyn has changed."

Rina grinned while Cali chuckled.

"This is Rina," Cali explained with a smile.

"Nice to meet you." Graham moved to his wife's side and knelt down in front of her. "The left, I imagine?" He began to tie a strip of rubber around her arm.

"It seems she's been poisoned," Cali said as Graham found a vein.

Graham shook his head. "That woman takes on too much." He inserted the needle into her arm.

"If she didn't, I wouldn't be here," Cali pointed out.

Graham grinned. "That is true. And that would be a travesty."

They smiled at each other; it was warm, full of shared secrets and time. I found Rina with a small smile of her own as she watched them. Would we get there someday?

Graham undid the strip of rubber, finished drawing her blood, pressed a ball of cotton to the spot and removed the needle. As Cali pressed down on her arm, Graham filled the vial with blood.

"Momma!" a child's voice called from the hallway. A little girl around four years old slid into the room on her socks. Her green eyes were bright against her olive skin. She was a beautiful child, but what caught my attention was the bright-green vipers that hung to her shoulders instead of hair. She held one limp snake on the backs of her fingers as her lips trembled.

"What is it, baby?" Cali asked as she scooted forward in her chair. Graham moved out of the way as the little girl came to her mother.

"It's Iola. She's not moving," she sniffed.

Cali smiled gently as she lifted the limp snake. The others on the little girl's head moved gently, rubbing her neck as if trying to comfort her.

Cali ran her finger over the viper's head. "Well, if she's dead, then we'll have to cut her off."

Instantly, the snake lifted its head, opened its red eyes and flicked its tongue.

"That's not nice, Iola. You scared Maddie," Cali chided the serpent. Maddie gave a happy squeal and rubbed the snake's belly before she left the room.

Graham sighed. "Only our daughter would name every snake on her head." He held out the vial to Rina. "This should cure anything in Evie's bloodstream."

Rina took it carefully. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Cali said. "Now, it's getting late. Why don't you two stay with us? I'll make up the guest room."

"An excellent idea," Graham added. "The snow has really started coming down outside."

Rina shook her head. "We need to get back as soon as possible. Thank you so much though."

Cali waved her hand. "You're having dinner with us first." She got to her feet.

"We have a hellhound on our tail," Rina admitted. "We don't want to put your family in more danger."

"Oh, pish. Staying for dinner won't make us a target." Cali took my arm and began walking me out of the living room. I sent a desperate look over my shoulder to find Rina smiling on Graham's arm too. We weren't getting out of this.

Laughing, Cali filled Rina's wine glass again.

"So, Perseus wasn't a monster hunter?" Rina asked as I tried to stop laughing. Dinner so far had been surprisingly fun. Rina was so full of questions about Cali's species that she barely had anything. We finished eating over an hour ago and even the kids hadn't left the table. They watched us and laughed at the things we didn't know about them.

"Oh, goodness no." Cali set the wine bottle down. "He was our great, great, hundreds of times grandfather."

But, didn't he kill Medusa? I signed, confused. Rina repeated my question out loud.

"Yes, he did. To save their children." Cali took a sip of her wine. "One of the villagers had seen Medusa's snakes and ran to tell the others. Perseus was in the village. He heard the mob forming to kill his wife and children. So, he hurried home. Explained the situation, then he and Medusa hatched a plan. Their children ran, while he distracted them with Medusa's head."

I shook my head and signed. I would rather have killed the villagers instead.

Rina snorted and repeated what I signed.

Graham chuckled and raised his glass. "Hear, hear!"

Everyone chuckled.

Rina shook her head at me before turning back to Cali. "But that was his wife."

Cali nodded. "And he loved her deeply. But their daughters' lives were at stake. Our great-many-times-grandmother wouldn't let anything threaten them. The story is that it was her idea."

"Did he ever see his daughters again?" Rina asked hopefully.

She shook her head. "Because of what we are, they ran for a good six months before stopping in a seaside village."

Rina shook head. "I can't imagine that..."

"You get used to it. If your snakes get spotted, you run." Cali pulled off the scarf and revealed her long snakes held back in a tie. "Thankfully, they're smart and know when to stay low. Otherwise, our species would have been wiped out or still hiding in caves in the most remote parts of the world."

"But..." Rina's face lit up as if it was Christmas. "How intelligent are they?"

I bit back a smile. Rina's excitement rolled down the link and slipped to me. She really loved learning about all of this. Her excitement bubbled out of her.

"Extremely," Cali answered. "It has to do with how long they grow. The longer they are alive, the more intelligent they become."

Maddie, the littlest girl, tugged on my shirt. I turned to her. She mouthed something I couldn't catch so leaned down to hear.

"Do you have wings?" Maddie asked, her eyes hopeful.

I smiled down at her as I nodded.

Her eyes grew wide. "Can I see?"

She looked so excited that I couldn't find it in me to say no. I pointed at Maddie's chest, then across the table at Graham.

Maddie understood instantly. "Daddy! Daddy! Can I see Mr. Falk's wings?"

The other kids chimed in with yeah and please.

I chuckled as Graham tried to get them to calm down. "All right, all right. If Falk is okay with it. We can go out back—"

Every child dove out of their chair and raced to the back of the house, leaving us laughing.

"Coats and boots!" Cali shot after them with a smile on her face.

"Yes, Mom!" one of the boys called back.

"Stop pushing, Rick!" William grunted.

Cali sighed.

Graham turned to me. "You've just made their year. They've been asking why their mother and sisters didn't have wings like in some of the myths."

Cali got to her feet. "I kept telling them, we never did."

Everyone got to their feet and bundled up. The couple took extra-special care making sure the females were covered and warm. Even their brothers asked if they had their gloves. I hid a smile as everyone began going outside. My fingers brushed Rina's, sending warmth through me.

Her fingers wrapped around mine as she looked up at me. "You're sweet to do this."

My cheeks heated. "Kids are curious."

She smiled before squeezing my fingers and heading out back.

I stepped out onto the back porch. Cali and Graham were lecturing the kids on keeping their hands in their pockets and to stay in their spot. I moved out a ways so I wouldn't leave a mess. Pulled off my shirt and in a breath and with a quick flex, I pulled my wings out of my back. Blood and sinew burst out of my back and dropped into the snow, steaming. I unfolded them until they reached their nineteen-foot wingspan. The kids oohed. I watched Rina's face as she really saw my wings for the first time. Her face was soft as her gaze moved over the raptor feathers. Then grew hotter when she ran them up my bare chest. She met my gaze. My body throbbed at the look in her eyes.

Cali and Graham shushed the kids.

"There, you've seen his wings," Cali said. "It's time for bed."

The kids whined, but they headed in with their parents after saying thank you. I didn't move, I couldn't; my body was heavy and aching. Moving might have killed me.

Rina walked over to my right and looked closely at my feathers. A light brown near the shaft, then a gradual darkening toward the end of the long, thin feathers. They were shaped for speed and agility in the air. But none of that mattered when she reached up and ran her finger along the crest of one wing. The breath left my lungs as every nerve in my body fired. That single finger stroke doubled me over.

"I'm sorry." Rina backed away. "I didn't realize it would hurt."

I straightened, grabbed her hand and pulled her against me. My rigid cock pressed into her soft stomach. Her eyes met mine and grew a little wider.

It didn't hurt, I sent the thought, laced with heat. There was no point in trying to hide how much I wanted her. Her soft curves molded against me, her breasts pressing into my chest. My hand eased up on her hand as it shook. Her eyes met mine. My heart slammed at the desire in those hazel depths. My gaze moved to her lips. Would she taste just as sweet in the real world? I dipped my head and captured those soft lips with mine. She made a soft noise that had me pressing harder. Her lips parted. Honey and almonds rolled over my tongue as I cupped her face with one hand. I kissed her as if I had all the time in the world because nothing mattered more than the next stroke of her tongue. Her next breathy moan. Her hands moved to my chest, burning my skin with her touch. When I reached the edge of my control, I lifted my head and brushed my nose against hers. "Too soon?"

"No. Perfect." She opened her eyes and met mine. "You feel like home."

My heart pounded in my ears so loudly, I almost didn't hear the shouting from the house. I lifted my head, hoping I was hearing things.

"Get the kids!" Cali ordered from inside.

No. No. No! "Stay here!" I pulled my wings back into my back and bolted for the house. I jerked the door open and ran through the kitchen. By the time I made it to the living room, it was too late. The front of the house was in flames. Shouting upstairs got my attention. I grabbed Rina's bag and darted toward the stairs. I ran up them two at a time. They were in the girls' room at the back of the house.

Cali's face was hard as she turned back to the door, her snakes hissing with their fangs showing.

I held my arms up, showing I was unarmed.

She stopped hissing as she pulled Maddie to her. "Are the stairs clear?"

I stepped into the hall. The stairs were burning; one of them cracked as I watched. I came back in and shook my head. I gestured to the window behind them and headed for it.

"Okay, kids, we're going to climb out on the roof," Graham announced. "Falk, can you get them down?"

I nodded as I opened the window and climbed out onto the roof.

"Girls, you first." Cali's voice was calm. "Boys, you'll be next."

Graham picked up Maddie and helped her climb out to me. "The girls are more sensitive to temperature."

I nodded that I understood as I picked Maddie up. Her little arms shook as they wrapped around my neck. Graham helped their second daughter, Lilly, out onto the roof. I wrapped my arm around Lilly and lifted her. She grabbed onto my neck a second before I dropped into the yard. I set them down and gestured away from the house. Lilly grabbed Maddie's hand and pulled her away from the house. I leaped back onto the roof where Cali and the boys waited. Cali wrapped an arm around their youngest boy as Graham climbed out onto the roof. She dropped down to the grass below. Flames were now in the girls' room. I gestured to Graham. He muttered under his breath as he climbed on my back. I dropped down to the grass with one of the boys in my arms. Graham was off my back in a heartbeat. I set down the oldest boy and straightened. We joined Cali and the girls. Everyone was safe.

I searched the area, only to find an empty yard. My heart dropped. "Rina!"



#### Rina

"*Rina!*" Falk's bellow was unmistakable in my head. Head aching, I forced my eyes open. It was dark...stuffy, carpeted...an engine... My head was killing me.

"Here..." I sent, trying to understand what was going on. The last thing I remember was standing in the backyard and... Oh yeah...

"Where are you?" he demanded.

"I don't know." Rhythmic thumping came from under me. "In a car. The trunk, I think."

"I need more than that, Rina." His rage boiled through me.

"Falk." I shifted my arms and realized I was handcuffed. "You need to calm down, you're swamping me. Let me work."

His emotions pulled back; not much, but enough for me to concentrate. I reached out and barely brushed over the thoughts of the driver. It was that demon again. I resisted the urge to knock him out. That'd just cause a wreck, and I'd had enough of those. Making a point not to sink into his thoughts, I focused on his senses.

We were going over a bridge...in a police car. Great. Come on, come on, where's a damn sign. There! I pulled out of his senses and back to mine. "We're crossing a bridge on I-62 West in a cop car."

"I'm on my way," he growled in my head. "Stay connected with me."

"My head hurts." I closed my eyes again.

"I know, I can feel it." His thought was softer, easier on my mind. "I'm coming."

"How are the kids, Cali, and Graham?" I asked, trying not to panic.

"Safe. Why didn't you call for me?"

"You were helping to get them out of the house; I wasn't about to stop that."

"So, you let him take you?" Falk roared through my head, rattling my bones.

"Yeah, it wasn't well thought out," I admitted. "But I knew you'd be able to reach me—"

"When I find you, we're going to have a talk about the kind of risks you can take and those you can't!" he snarled.

"Yeah, that's not going to go how you think it will." I smiled to myself. "They want me alive, remember? I figured we had some time..." There was a long turn.

"I think we're getting off the interstate." My heart began to pound. I reached out and looked through the demon again. Please, please... "Prairie Lake."

"I'm already in the air," he promised.

The car began to slow down. My stomach knotted.

"Um, Falk..." I swallowed hard as the car slowed to a crawl. "I think I may have overestimated my nerve by a bit."

"What's happening?" he demanded.

"We're slowing down, I think we're about to stop." I started to pull on the cuffs as the car stopped. "Falk, I'm scared."

"I'm almost there." His voice was gentle on my mind, bringing me calm.

A car door shut. My chest grew tight as I tried to maintain my calm. The trunk opened. My arm was grabbed in a harsh grip as I was pulled out of the trunk.

"Ow, ow!" I chirped as I all but fell to the snow-covered gravel of the parking lot.

"Ow, ow," he mocked. "Shut it, meat sack."

"Then stop twisting my arm," I countered from the ground.

"What's happening? Rina?" Falk's thought was harder in my mind.

The cop pulled me to my feet and almost dragged me around the car and down a small trail.

"I'm okay," I sent as I scrambled to keep my feet under me. "What do you want?"

"My bounty," he bit out. "But first, I need to kill off your bodyguard."

Once we reached the small lake, he shoved me off my feet. The air left my lungs as my back hit the tree. When the stars were cleared from my vision, I finally looked around. The shore wasn't empty. Those black, wolflike creatures with long, sharp spines down their backs stalked out of the woods. Four this time.

My heart slammed in my chest; icy fear filled me. "It's a trap. There are four barghest waiting for you."

"I'm not worried, schatzi," he whispered through my head, making my chest grow tight.

"Falk..." I swallowed hard as the cop walked back towards me.

"Trust me." His thought wrapped warmth around me.

As the cop moved towards me, he changed. His skin began to turn dark gray, his face elongated, creating a muzzle. My throat tightened as he grew a good two feet. He looked like Anubis... Is...is that where the Egyptians got the image? Was Anubis really a hellhound? Damn it, Rina! Not now! "Falk, this guy just shifted into some Anubis-looking thing."

"Good."

Good? How the hell could this be good? The night was silent; the only sound was the pounding of my pulse in my ears. Every monster's head

raised, their snouts going to the sky.

A streak dropped out of the sky into the middle of the circle of demons. Falk landed in a crouch, his eyes burned amber as he lifted his head. His lips lifted into a bloodthirsty grin that showed the tips of his fangs. Before he even straightened, the barghest were on him. He dodged the first, caught the next with a claw across the throat before ducking another. He moved with a strange grace I'd only ever seen in dancers before. His movements were smooth and fast. Almost as if they were effortless as his talons tore through the gut of another hound. Snarling, whimpers, it was all over in a few heartbeats. My breathing was loud as the hellhound prowled toward Falk.

My mate didn't move an inch as he waited.

"I'm going to enjoy this." The hellhound growled.

Falk's lips twitched a second before the bounty hunter leaped at him. Falk simply met him in the air, his talons driving deep into its chest. They hit the ground. The hellhound clawed at the hand buried in his chest cavity but Falk wasn't budging. He jerked his hand out of the creature with its heart firmly in his grasp. The creature stopped moving. Falk got to his feet, dropped the heart, stomped it into the snow before he made his way to me.

My heart pounded as the metallic stench of blood reached me. He crouched in front of me. "Lean forward."

I shifted and did as he asked. His jaw clenched and unclenched as he reached behind me and broke the cuffs off.

His anger drove over me in waves. "Falk?"

"Silence would be best at the moment," he bit out in my mind before he got to his feet and took long, angry strides toward the lake. I got to my feet as he washed the blood off his hands and talons while he took deep breaths.

I pulled my coat closed and waited while bouncing on my toes.

He scrubbed his hands for some time, longer than he probably needed to. When he finally got to his feet and started back towards me, his eyes were glowing in the dark again. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"That I could buy you some time while you helped get Cali and Graham." I barely resisted the urge to squirm. "That we could move the fight away from them."

"So, you just put yourself in the hands of a fucking hellhound!" he bellowed through the link, making me jump.

"I didn't say it was a good plan." I cringed a little. He was furious. His rage poured into my mind, hot and boiling. But underneath, deep, deep, below that...was fear. Soul-deep fear. I frightened him. And he wasn't a man used to anything scaring him.

"Never again. You will never again put anyone else's life over yours," he growled as he held my gaze. "Do you understand?"

My heart melted as I realized his fists were shaking at his sides. I closed the distance between us and looked up at him. "I understand." I moved even closer, until I could feel his body heat.

He grew still.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I sent in a soft thought. "I'm sorry."

His hands cupped my face; he pressed his forehead against mine and took a deep breath. "You can't…" He opened his mind completely. Fear tore through me, crushing me under its weight. The terror of losing the one person who could touch you, the one person who mattered to you. It left me with tears rolling down my face.

It hadn't occurred to me that I wasn't just risking my life, I was risking his as well. If I had died...he would never see the world as I saw it. He'd never see the good in it again. He'd only see the monsters... "Never again."

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**FALK** 

ina sat beside me, her head against my shoulder as she slept. And there was almost nothing in the world that could get me to wake her up. After I had dealt with the body of the hellhound, I drove her back to the city. Cali was with the kids at a hotel while Graham dealt with the police and fire department. Cali had hugged Rina tightly, relieved she was okay after everything. She tried to get us to stay, but Rina had insisted on pushing forward.

Snow fell heavily as the wind rattled the windows. Lightning forked from cloud to cloud. Lighting up the sky in a dangerous light show. The temperature in the train car had already dropped almost fifteen degrees the closer we got to Chicago. The snowdrifts had started getting bigger. Soon, the train wouldn't be able to get through either. She whimpered in her sleep, shifting in her seat. Without looking away from the window, I absently reached down and settled my hand on her leg. She stopped shifting. I ran my thumb over the outside of her denim-covered knee and tried to figure out a way to get to Chicago that didn't involve flying through that storm with Rina. Car? No, not unless it was a snowplow. I could hotwire a snowplow... No, Rina would veto that idea. We were desperate for the boat in Miami and we'd be getting desperate here soon too. She rubbed her cheek against my shirt. I looked down at her in time to watch the first drop of blood roll from her nose.

My chest clenched as I held her cheek and brushed the blood away with my thumb. Those hazel eyes opened. She winced and closed them again. Her fingers went to her temple as she whimpered.

"What's wrong?"

"It's too much. It's like thousands of voices are in my head. It's too loud." More blood flowed from her nose. She pulled out some tissue and caught it.

I dropped my hand from her face. We were just passing Braidwood. If she was having trouble now...this wasn't good. "What can I do?"

She put her head back on my shoulder. "Just keep touching me, it helps." I spread my palm out to touch as much of her thigh as possible.

She closed her eyes. "It makes it quieter."

I squeezed her knee gently. "Would getting distance from people help?" She nodded. "But there's nowhere to go."

For humans maybe. I needed to get her away from the other humans as fast as possible. My decision made, I squeezed her knee, stood up, and helped her to her feet. She grabbed her backpack and followed without asking. We moved to the section between cars. I broke the latch on the door and forced it open. Wind howled as it went by. I pulled off my shirt and looped it through a belt loop. Rina closed her coat while I leaned out. Finding the ledge, I swung out and over to the roof of the car.

"Falk?" she called, the worry in her voice making me smile. No one had worried about me in centuries.

I reached over the edge and offered her my hand. She gave me a "are you kidding" look but grabbed it anyway. Quickly, I pulled her up and settled her beside me. I pulled my wings and immediately punched my talons through the metal of the roof as the wind tried to knock me off the train. I pulled her to me and leaped off the train. She squeaked as I took us higher, her arms clinging around my neck. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

She did as I said, pressing the heat of her against my stomach. My body grew hard as I moved one hand to her thigh to give her more support. She buried her face in my chest as lightning flashed around us. We were almost through the storm clouds when she shivered. I raised my body heat as I hurried higher.

When we finally punched through over the storm, the flying was immediately easier. The stars glittered overhead like diamonds over black velvet. The moon shined brightly, making the clouds below glow. Lightning arced in the clouds, creating a dazzling light show. Before her, I never would have seen it. I would have seen an easier flight path. But now... "Corrina, lift your head."

She shook her head. "I don't want to watch us die, thank you."

I chuckled as we continued flying toward Chicago. "Please?"

She cautiously lifted her head, still clinging to my neck. She gasped as she looked around. I smiled as awe and joy resonated down our link.

"It's beautiful."

I took her a little lower, right above the clouds. Taking my hand off her thigh, I took one of hers and reached out so her fingers could brush through the clouds as if it was fog. She laughed and smiled as we flew over the storm. The happiness that radiated from her filled me with the same. "Thank you."

"For what?" She wiggled her fingers through the cloud.

"Because of you, I can see this through your eyes," I sent. "The beauty, the fun...thank you."

She turned back to me, her arm wrapping around my neck again. "You take yourself too seriously."

"Probably."

She smiled that gorgeous smile, laid her head on my shoulder, her forehead against my neck. And was simply happy. Amazingly happy.



#### Zahur

THE DISTINCT SOUND of machines working filled the silence of the med wing. The band around Evie's lower cheeks held a tube. A tube that was going down her throat. Her chest moved in an almost jerking motion. Up. Down. Up.

Weary, I rubbed the bridge of my nose. She shouldn't have been in the hospital bed. She shouldn't have needed to be put on a ventilator. But here she was...

I stood across the bed from Atticus. He hadn't spoken a word since I'd had to put her on the ventilator. His face was tortured as he watched her chest rise and fall. It was easier to watch Evie jerk with the ventilator breathing for her than to look at him.

There was nothing left to do except wait for Rina and Falk and their miracle cure. My eyes drifted back to Atticus. If we lose her, we'll lose him too. I eyed him. Probably heart failure; there was already a slight blue tint around his lips. Goddamn it! I'm a doctor with two thousand years of experience and I couldn't do a bloody thing!

The doors to the wing opened. Ranulf walked into the ward. "How is she?"

"Declining." I kept watching her chest jerk.

Ranulf cursed in Gaelic as he moved to stand beside Atticus. The phone in the med wing rang. Fed up, I crossed the room and answered. "What?"

"If you won't take the vampires killing my witches seriously, then I'll take care of it myself," Dahlia stated.

"There isn't any proof that the vampires are responsible." If I had to repeat myself one more time... "Or the wolves."

She hung up. I resisted the urge to throw the phone against the wall. Evie's pulse was getting thready. I didn't fucking have time for petty political bullshit!

The beeping grew slower. My gaze snapped to the heart monitor as I moved back to the bed. The beats per minute dropped. A single tone sounded; the monitor showed a flat line.

### $\sim$

#### Lemora

Something snapped free. I tilted my head to the side as I took stock. Something was wrong...Evelyn. That link to the treaty was gone. That could only mean... My heart ached a little. She had been a good person. An amazing gargoyle.

"Ms. Lemora?" Craig's voice brought me back to the present. Yes, the board meeting.

"Evelyn is dead," I announced calmly. The shock made the way around the table as I continued. "Without the treaties, the wolves will attack." I turned to the table. "Lock the building down and get everyone into the underground shelters."



#### David

THERE WAS AN AUDIBLE SNAP. The room spun as I steadied myself on my desk. The treaty... It was gone. Evelyn was dead. Well, that made things simple. I turned to Neil. "Evelyn's dead. Prepare to attack."



### Dahlia

Something inside me shattered. I cried out as I stumbled in the hallway of the manor. Everyone started asking questions as I looked within

and tried to understand what happened. No, not that, not a witch... There. The treaty.

I opened my eyes, shocked. "Evelyn is dead." I lifted my gaze and met my second in command's gaze. I smiled. "We have work to do."



#### Falk

We landed in front of the church. Rina already wasn't doing well. I set her down carefully. Her face was pale. Her headache had gotten worse and now blood was seeping from her ears. But it didn't matter to her; she ran towards the door and jerked it open. I was only a step behind. Heart pounding, we raced down the center aisle.

A blood-chilling roar shook the building. Rina dropped silently to the floor. I didn't stop. I scooped her up and kept moving towards the medical wing. Her eyes were closed; blood ran down her face and her throat, and sweat dotted her brow. There was no time! I slammed my shoulder into the door and ran into the ward. Everyone turned, gaping, as I handed Rina off to Ranulf.

"Where the hell have you been?" Zahur demanded as he put the paddles back on the defibrillator.

I didn't even try to answer; I tore off my pack and ripped it open. I pulled out the components as Ranulf put Rina on the next bed. I opened the vial of reaper's tears and carefully poured one drop on Evie's forehead and rubbed it in. The monitors started beeping again. I closed the bottle and pulled out the vial of blood. I pulled her shirt up so I could see the wound, then poured the entire bottle inside. The wound began to hiss and smoke. Last, I pulled out the plastic bag with the leviathan scale in it. Carefully, I laid it over the wound. It trapped the smoke inside it and began to mold to her body. Done, I stepped back. Zahur moved forward while I went to Rina. Her color was worse, almost translucent. I felt her forehead and felt the heat coming from her.

"She's stabilizing," Zahur announced. "Pulse, respiratory, everything is going back to normal."

I reached behind me, grabbed Zahur by the collar and dragged him to Rina's side. He didn't have to ask; he checked her pulse. Her breathing grew irregular; she began gasping.

"What took you two so fucking long?" Ranulf barked.

I ignored him and focused solely on Rina.

Zahur pulled out a penlight, opened her eyes and checked them. She began to shake. "She's in psychic overload. We have to get her to a shielded room now!"

My chest grew tight. I cradled her to my chest and ran after Zahur. Thankfully, the gargoyle was fast. He led us downstairs and into the stone cells. He jerked open one door and stood aside. I didn't ask, I didn't doubt. I simply ran inside with her and stood in the middle of a padded room. She finally stopped shaking, her body went limp. The vise in my chest eased. Holding her, I sat on the floor and I counted the breaths until her breathing smoothed out.

"Put her on the floor," Zahur ordered.

I looked up at him and growled. He'd have to kill me first. Zahur's eyes filled with surprise, then curiosity as he knelt in front of me. He examined her again, working around the fact she was in my arms.

He sat back on his heels. "She's doing better. How long was she out?"

I shot him a look. Really? How did he expect me to answer? I pointed at the ground.

"Just when you got here?"

Close enough. I nodded, frustrated that I couldn't fill him in.

"Why the hell haven't we heard from you two?" Ranulf demanded as he strode in. I only took my arm off Rina to pull my phone out of my pocket and threw it at him.

He caught it. "I know cell phones are useless because of the storm."

I nodded as I slowly started rocking Rina.

"Rina's too, I imagine," Zahur supplied.

Everyone's, you ass. But I couldn't say it. Frustration boiled in my chest as I was forced to just nod.

Zahur pulled out his phone and handed it to me. I refused to set Rina down, so it took a while to type out what happened.

Zahur took it back and read it out loud. "Evie contacted Rina, gave her a list of what would save her. We got the ingredients while a hellhound tried to take Rina. Her barriers have been coming down since New York. Cell phones everywhere have been down for days. Now, get a fucking bed in this room and enough supplies to clean her up."

Zahur's gaze jumped to mine. I met it so he knew I wasn't dicking around. Zahur's gaze moved to Rina, understanding filling his face. He got to his feet, went to the door, and called for Templars.

Zahur gave orders to the Templars outside while I checked to see if her nose had stopped bleeding yet. I ignored everyone as I grabbed my shirt out of my belt loop and used it to clean her face as much as I could.

"She's yours," Ranulf breathed.

Looking up, I found him just inside the door. I gave him a deadly glare, warning him to back off the subject. He grinned a weird smile. I went back to taking care of my mate.



### Ranulf

HEAD REELING, I backed up from Falk and Rina. Holy shit. It wasn't just us... Zahur came back inside, his sharp gaze watching the pair.

I had to tell Astrid. She'd been gone for hours now; what the hell was taking so long? I left the room and pulled out my phone. The cell phones were out, but still... Something was wrong. I headed back to the room. Zahur came out of the door just as the Templars began to carry a bed frame down the hall, muttering under their breath as they went.

"Astrid's been gone for hours," I told him.

Zahur frowned. "That's not unusual."

My gut knotted. "She went to tell her alphas that she was leaving the pack."

Zahur's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

I nodded.

His eyes narrowed on me. "Why would she do that?"

"She's my mate." Damn that felt good to say.

The world was silent as I waited for Zahur to absorb that bit of information. Then he smiled. "About time you said something."

My jaw dropped. "You knew?"

Zahur chuckled. "Of course; I've been mated. I know the signs. Besides, neither one of you are as sneaky as you think."

I eyed him. "Did you know we could match with a different species?"

He smirked. "No, that was a surprise. But considering the role our species plays, it shouldn't be too shocking that when our population runs extremely low, the magic would shift around to adjust."

I gaped at him. He was fucking serious... "Well, shit."

His face grew serious again. "So, Astrid is missing?"

I nodded.

"Let's go ask the alpha where she is." Zahur started back down the hall.

"He's not going to tell us without some motivation," I pointed out. Zahur grinned a dark grin. "Trust me."

What the fuck was Zahur thinking? Atticus still looked like shit. His face was covered in scruff, his suit wrinkled. Hell, even his hair was everywhere. But what sent an icy chill down my spine was the fury in his eyes. After several phone calls using the landline, Zahur found where the wolves were. Apparently, they were gathering in a building not far from Lemora's vampire nest. The morons were planning to attack this morning.

Not wasting any time, we dropped into the alley between buildings. I pulled in my wings, grabbed the side door and ripped it off its hinges. We strode into a stunned group of werewolves. David was standing in the middle of them.

"Where is she?" I growled.

David's eyes narrowed on me. "It's none of your concern."

I stormed toward the smug little prick, my temper riding me hard. Wolves tried to block me but they were simply thrown out of the way by Atticus.

I grabbed David by the throat as the others fanned out behind me. "Where. Is. She?" My voice dropped an octave and rumbled in my chest.

He said nothing.

"Wait!" A lithe blonde stepped out of the crowd. "What do you mean where's Astrid? I thought she was with you."

My fingers tightened around David's throat. He smirked. "She came to tell you that she was leaving the pack."

Gasps moved around the room.

"Where is she?" I repeated for the last time.

"If he did anything with her"—she looked at David—"she'd be in the manor, in the basement."

I dropped the weasel. He gasped and rubbed his throat. "Keep them here while I go get her."

"You got it." Atticus moved in front of David. I hurried outside and took off.

Astrid... Goddess. Please be okay... Terror clawed at me. It was a long flight to the mansion. Once I hit the driveway, I shattered the front door.

"Astrid!" I bellowed; it bounced off the walls. I searched the rooms calling for her until I found the basement door. I ripped the damn thing off

its hinges and leaped down the stairs. I turned and saw red. She was sitting in a large, silver dog cage. Tears running down her face as she hugged herself to keep from touching the bars. Surrounded by instruments of torture for werewolves that would have hurt her much less than that blasted cage... Heart clenching, I broke the locks. She desperately scrambled out of the cage and into my arms. Sobs shook her body so hard that I worried she'd break something. Her nails dug into my chest, drawing blood as she clung to me.

"I'm here." I held her tighter as relief washed over me. I had Astrid in my arms. Everything would be okay. Once I killed that little fuck. "I'm here, goddess. You're safe."

"He-he-he put me in the c-c-cage," she managed between sobs.

I closed my eyes as her memories poured over me. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner. I'm sorry," I repeated over and over as I rocked her gently. How long had she been in there?

"He knew," she whimpered.

I grew still. "What?"

"He knew about the cage," she cried against my throat. Everything inside me boiled. He was a dead wolf. And it was going to take time for him to die. A long, long time.

I held her close and rocked her. I didn't care how long it took, we weren't moving until she was ready. The sun could explode, the world could fall into chaos for all I cared. But I wasn't moving until my mate was ready to move.

It took time, kisses, and whispered promises that burned into my skin before she could get control again. When she let go of me, she sat back on her heels and wiped her face. "I want him to suffer."

God, I loved this wolf. "He will."

She shook her head. "My way."

I wanted to argue, but she was the one he'd tortured. "Anything, goddess."



### Astrid

BY THE TIME Ranulf touched down outside the building, I had finally stopped shaking. My stomach was still queasy, but I had emptied it hours ago. Voices started whispering but I didn't care. Ranulf kissed my forehead,

strength and calm moved through me. Do this now, fall apart later. I pulled away and moved through the door.

My former pack was spread out through the room. In the center was David and Alia. Along with Atticus, who looked like shit. And three dead wolves on the ground.

"What happened?" Ranulf demanded as he moved beside me.

"They tried to take control of the situation," Atticus said, his voice cold. "They learned they couldn't."

My eyes met David's. "How?" My voice shook as I raised it so it could be heard by everyone. "How could you do that to me?"

"You were punished for insubordination," David countered.

"I left the pack!" I shouted. Gasps washed through the crowd. "You had no right to stick me in a silver dog cage!"

Curses filled the room. Everyone knew how I came to this pack. It wasn't a secret.

David's face was hard as he gave no answer.

"I handed in my medallion," I bit out between clenched teeth. "I wasn't yours to punish!"

Alia, her face horrified, turned to David. "Tell me you didn't."

He glanced at his mate, then returned his gaze to mine. "Not now, Alia."

"No!" She bared her sharp teeth. "Right now, this minute. Did you do this?"

David turned to Alia, his face hard.

"Look me in the eye and answer me," she demanded. "Did you put Astrid, a woman whose history you know like the back of your hand, in a cage?"

He straightened his shoulders. "Yes."

Her jaw dropped; her face grew pale as she stepped back from him. Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head. "No." She took another step back. "You are not my mate."

The room dropped into complete silence; no one even dared to breathe.

His face grew as pale as a corpse. "Alia..."

She shook her head again, tears running down her face as she took another step back. "Any wolf that could that to a female he once loved...is no wolf at all." She straightened her shoulders, moved her hand to her stomach and lifted her chin. For the first time since I met her, Alia looked like an alpha. "I refuse you, human."

Shocked gasps ran through the crowd. David's jaw dropped.

Holy shit...she just...she just refused their bond. It was the equivalent of divorce for mates. Once that link was severed things could be rebuilt, but it rarely happened. Alia turned to the crowd. "I'm not an alpha, and I never will be. I'm all right with that. So, I'm resigning from my role to whoever is fit to fill it." Everyone gaped as she turned to me. "Take the justice you deserve." She turned on her heel and left with dignity.

Silence fell, stunned, shocked...there weren't enough words to describe it. The entire pack structure was in tatters.

David watched her go, his face...it was clear he never expected that from Alia. "I resign," he muttered as he started after Alia.

Neil moved into his path, forcing him to stop. "There's a pack matter that still needs to be addressed."

Arthur moved out of the crowd. "Astrid turned in her medallion. You ordered us to carry out her punishment."

Neil took a step toward David, forcing the smaller man back. "It was an illegal order."

"One with one sentence." Arthur moved closer to the center.

"There will be no war," Neil turned to the gargoyles, "but get out. This is a pack matter."

He was right. I didn't belong here anymore. I turned and looked up at Ranulf. "Get me out of here."

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#### **ABADDON**

turned and paced across the room again, the stench of rotting meat following my every move. The werewolves didn't attack. Why didn't they attack? They were primed, ready for blood for their dead!

The phone on the desk rang. I answered.

"You failed." The cultured voice on the other end of the line was like a whip.

I fumed. "For now. Give me a few more hours and I'll hand you this city." That hellhound should be back with the telepath any damn minute. Then, I'd have exactly what I needed.

"Your bounty hunter is dead," announced.

No... "What? How?"

"Falk was with her every step of the way." It paused. "They're also at the church. So, Evelyn has likely been cured."

I bit out a curse.

"You failed enormously. They'll be coming for you soon."

I licked my rotting lips. "What are your orders?"

"Take out as much of her support as you can before they send you back to Hell."

It made sense... "Our deal still stands?"

"Of course."

I hung up the phone. I had work to do.



### Cyrus

"CHICAGO IS the center of these storms and disturbances," I announced. It should be simple to see, even simpler to just agree with me. "We need to

find out why."

"You just sent a team and they've yet to report back in," noted Elder Morris.

"They're deserters. Nothing more," I countered.

"Deserters? Atticus?" Morris asked, his eyebrow raised. "One of the most loyal team leaders we have. Deserted?"

"What do you call it?" I snapped. This worm wasn't good enough to shine my shoes let alone question me.

"Cyrus, what exactly is going on?" Elder Kelder demanded. "You've sent a team to Chicago and now they aren't reporting. Our alarm spells are going off like mad. What is happening?"

"I'm not sure," I lied. "But I assure you, I will take care of it personally."

Kelder eyed me. "You will bring them back alive, and in good health. Is that clear?"



#### Ranulf

Zahur checked Astrid's pulse while I paced behind the bed. My steps in rhythm with Evelyn's heart monitor. Atticus was sitting on the edge of Evelyn's bed, holding her hand again. Though now that she was off the ventilator, he seemed more himself and less psycho killer.

"She's your mate." Atticus pulled my attention from her.

I stopped where I was. "Yes."

"Good."

I turned around, sure I hadn't heard him correctly. "What?"

Atticus met my gaze. "I said good."

I swallowed hard. "We'll leave if we need to."

He shot me a look. "Why would you need to? We're never going back home. So, why should we follow their rules?" He turned back to watch Evelyn sleep.

I smirked. I liked this Atticus.

"You're perfectly healthy, Astrid," Zahur announced as he stepped back from her.

Astrid shot me a look. "Told ya so."

My heart warmed as I smiled. Damn that wolf was beautiful...

"So, now that we have a chance to breathe." Zahur sat beside Astrid on the bed. "What have you two learned from the murders? Any leads?"

I stepped forward. "The vampire murder was ritualistic. He was strung up and bled to death for his blood. Which they took. No witnesses that we could find."

Zahur frowned. "Ritualistic? How?"

I pulled my phone out. "There was a circle, surrounded by runes. Drawn in chalk, then blood." I pulled up the photos and handed the phone to Zahur.

He grew paler. "It was the same at the witch's scene."

"Are you sure?" That couldn't be... I turned to Astrid as Zahur handed her the phone.

She grew paler. "It was the same for the wolves. Different runes, but...it was exactly the same."

"Let me see," Atticus said. I took my phone from Astrid and handed it to him.

His jaw clenched. "I know these." He lifted his head and met Zahur's gaze. "It's a circle the Templars use to execute supernaturals."

Zahur got to his feet. "Are you positive?"

Atticus nodded, the bags under his eyes more obvious now but at least his eyes were clear. "Yes, I remember it vividly. There's different runes for each species, but the circle is always the same."

Zahur got to his feet and stormed out of the med ward.



#### Zahur

Furious, I strode down the hallway towards the First Templar's office. I finally had enough. No medical equipment, not properly staffed... Now, there were murders in the city with Templar symbols! That's enough!

I crashed the door open, slamming it to the floor.

The new First Templar got to his feet and came around his desk. "What the hell are—"

My hand around his throat cut him off as I lifted him off his feet, then slammed him on his back onto the desk. My gums burned as both fangs slipped out. "Your men are out of control!"

He gaped up at me. "I've had the job for ten minutes!"

"Five murders across the city, and all of them have a Templar execution circle!" I bellowed. "What are you trying to do? Start a fucking war?"

Hands on my shoulders tried to pull me back. I snapped my arm out, knocking them back. I got into the Templar's face and loosened my grip. "Talk."

"Fine! The old First Templar allowed embezzling from the church," the new First Templar rasped. "For the last decade or so."

Disgust filled me. "What else?"

He hesitated until my talon tips bit into his skin. "We've also been charging for helping with possessions."

I had to fight not to sink my claws into his throat. "You pathetic excuse for humans." Forcing myself to let go, I stepped back.

He coughed and sat up slowly, trying to get his breath back. "We didn't know your species was still alive!"

"Where do you think the money was coming from?" I snarled. "Get out. You have five minutes to get every Templar involved out of this building. Anyone left will face a mind search and if they are guilty, they'll die."

His eyes grew wide as he scrambled to the PA system and made the announcement. "Templars, get out. Anyone who embezzled money or charged for help with the possessed. Get out or die. Five minutes!" The guy all but pissed himself as he ran past us and out the door. I stood still and tried to get control over my temper.

# Evelyn

"—Five minutes!" The crackle of white noise shut off.

What was going on? I opened my eyes to find a high stone ceiling. Someone was holding my hand. Atty... I rolled my head to find him and went still. I'd never seen him like this. His scruffy face...he looked like hell. His eyes were on my hand, holding it carefully.

"Atty..." His gaze shot to mine. I smiled. "Hi—"

"Fix your back. And make sure the toxin is gone. Now," he ordered.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and instead closed them. I dropped down into my body and assessed the damage. A lot of inflammation, but the light spinal fusion held while I was out. I pulled energy and soothed the red tissue. It didn't take me long before it was fused properly. Before leaving, I took a quick look through my systems and came up short. Was that...? My heart hammered in my ears as I looked again. There. Small, and just begun...but there. I pulled out of my body, stunned.

Atticus brushed the hair out of my face as I opened my eyes. Pregnant. I was pregnant... I met his eyes and smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." He swallowed hard. "You scared the fucking shit out of me."

I winced. "Sorry—" I didn't get to finish my sentence. His mouth came down on mine as he lifted my upper body into his arms.

By the time he lifted his head, I had forgotten my own name. "I love you."

My heart leaped, then soared as happiness filled me. Atticus laid me back down carefully. He loved me... We were... "Atty, I'm—"

The doors to the med ward swung open. Astrid, Ranulf, and Zahur strode in. Astrid saw me first. She screamed, ran, and hugged me.

I spit her hair out of my mouth as I put an arm around her. "I'm okay. I'm all right now."

"You can never do that again." She squeezed me tighter. "Do you understand? Gray hair, woman!"

I chuckled as she backed away and pointed at her hair.

"It's good to see ye, lass." Ranulf moved beside Astrid and took my hand.

I squeezed his back. "How was Atticus?"

Astrid snorted.

Ranulf smiled. "He tried to slaughter every demon in the city."

I nodded. That wasn't surprising. Though... "Where's Rina and Falk?"

Everyone shared a look. That wasn't good. "Tell me." I reached over and pushed the button to raise the head of the bed until I was almost sitting up. My muscles protested, but I needed to know what was going on. "I'm alive, so she made it here."

"Something happened to Rina," Astrid tried, but couldn't seem to finish. Something happened... I turned to Atticus. "My heart stopped. Didn't it?"

He nodded, looking like he might be sick.

That meant all my spells stopped working, which meant... I closed my eyes and wanted to curse. Rina's barriers. I opened my eyes. "Where is she?"

"She's in a shielded cell right now. Falk is with her and she's unconscious, but stable," Zahur answered quickly.

I nodded. Okay, I didn't have to run down there.

"What's going on with her?" Astrid asked.

I sighed. They might as well know. "Two years ago, I created barriers for Rina. So she could function, and learn how to handle it."

"You created her barriers. So, she never had her own barriers?" Atticus asked.

I sighed. "I didn't just put up barriers for her."

"What did you do?" Astrid crossed her arms over her chest.

I met her gaze. "Rina's abilities were maturing faster than her mind could handle. And the potential there..." I shook my head. "Was extraordinary."

"What do you mean?" Zahur frowned down at me.

"I mean, I locked the majority of Rina's ability away," I explained. "I created a spell that would degrade over the years, giving her time to learn control as more of her ability was unlocked."

"So she didn't have to learn it all at once," Ranulf supplied.

I nodded.

"How strong are her abilities?" Atticus asked.

I had been dreading that question. "Rina's telepathic ability is so great that she could slip into the mind of every living person in the city. And control them. At the same time." They looked at me, stunned.

"That's..." Astrid's face grew pale. "That's almost three million people."

I nodded.

"Is that even possible?" Ranulf asked.

I nodded. "That's why I never introduced her to the Witch's Council."

"Because they'd use her as a weapon," Zahur added.

I nodded. "And I wanted to make sure she had the life she chose."

"Will the shields on that room even work for her?" Atticus asked, looking up at Zahur.

Zahur's eyes unfocused. "For a normal psychic, I'd say they'd outlive the psychic, but..."

"A normal shield will keep her safe for a few days, but then I have to get her barriers and that lock back up. Or she'll burn out and die."

The room fell silent as everyone absorbed that information. A phone rang.

Zahur growled as he headed to the nurses' desk and answered an old landline. "Yeah?" His face drained of color. "On our way." He hung up and turned to me. "That was Helix. Abaddon is attacking the Redcaps' home base with demons."

My heart dropped. "Get me a phone."

#### Falk

RINA MUTTERED something in her sleep. She shifted, rubbing her cheek on my shoulder. I moved to my side and looked down at her just in time for her to open her eyes. The vise around my heart eased.

"Hey, you," she whispered. Everything inside me relaxed as warmth filled me.

I smiled down at her. "How're you feeling?"

"Better." She rubbed her temple. "It's quieter in my head."

"Good." I focused on keeping my thought soft and light. "We have you in a shielded room at the church."

She looked around the room. "Is this room padded?"

I mentally cringed. I had been hoping she wouldn't notice. "Yeah. It protects psychics from trying to hurt themselves."

She looked up at me like she didn't believe me; it made me want to hold her closer.

"So, I'm not a prisoner?" she asked carefully.

This time I did smile. "Never, schatzi. You're just in here because it's shielded."

Her face softened as she reached up and brushed her fingers along my jaw. "So, did it work? Is Evie alive?"

I took her fingers from my face and brushed a kiss across them before I answered. "It worked exactly as you said it would."

A grin spread across her face. "Good." She dropped her hand from my face. "I still can't believe I jumped off a building."

My heart gave a painful thump at the scene played in her mind. "I think it's best if you don't think of that very often."

She snorted as her fingers tangled with mine. "You don't like that, huh?"

I laid on my back and exhaled hard.

She whimpered; her eyes closed tight. I moved back to my side and held her face.

She took a deep breath and relaxed into the bed. "It's worse when you don't touch me." She met my gaze.

"Then I won't go anywhere." I ran my thumb over her cheekbone.

"*Just don't stop touching me...*" She closed her eyes.

I pressed my lips to her forehead. "I'm here."

She fell back asleep; this time, a normal sleep. I brushed her hair from her face just before the cell door opened.

Zahur came in and walked up to the bed. "We need to go."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Abaddon is attacking the Redcaps in some kind of assault. Evie needs us for backup."

I looked down at Rina just as she started muttering in her sleep about frogs. Shaking my head, I met his gaze.

Surprise lit his eyes as he pulled his phone out and handed it to me to text him what I needed to say.

I'm not moving. The shields on this room aren't enough. When I stop touching her, she's in pain. I handed the phone back to Zahur.

"Hmm." Zahur looked at Rina. "You must be sharing the psychic load..." He met my gaze. "All right; when we get back, I'll get Evie to add shielding to this room if she can." He tucked his phone back in his pocket and closed the door gently behind him.

She shifted, snuggling into my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and stayed put.

### $\sim$

## Evelyn

BY THE TIME we arrived at the Redcaps' home base, the fight was well underway. We ran through the gates to find bodies scattered everywhere. Human and Redcap, they were everywhere. We didn't have time to stop and see if anyone was alive. We followed the carnage through the town. Some Redcaps were working to put out the fire while others were tending to the wounded.

Once I was spotted, they directed us towards the town square. How did they get this far? We ran, Atticus staying beside me as we started finding bodies of wolves. My anger built with every body I saw, every pool of blood. By the time we ran into the square, I was furious. The square was a bloodbath. Blades clashed, magic flew, and claws shredded. The line of possessed and fully formed demons were pushing toward the other side of the square. I pulled my short sword out on the run.

"Stay close," Atticus ordered.

"Try to keep up," I countered as I sent a blast through the line of demons. We hit the line hard. I lost track of the heads I took, but it was over in minutes.

Novak flicked all four of his arms, snapping the blood off his swords. "Evelyn, good to see you up and about."

I snorted as I cleaned my own blades. "It's nice to be up and around."

He eyed the group behind us. "We need to go; they're making a push to where our children are."

I smirked. "Are they suicidal?" Redcap children were just as deadly as their adults. Only with less restraint. They'd start eating you while you were still alive.

He grinned a bloodthirsty grin. "Indeed."

"Why make a push there?" I asked out loud.

Novak shook his head. "They're going for kills, not control. They've ignored all strategy and seem to be completely seek and destroy."

My blood boiled. "Then let's go return the favor."

Novak shouted instructions to his people and everyone headed deeper into the city.

"What do you need to get rid of this demon that leads them?" Novak demanded.

"I need you to buy me time so we can open a portal and get him through," I explained before I turned to Atticus. "You and the others have to keep him distracted."

"How long will it take to build the portal?" Atticus asked.

I looked up and met his eyes. "Safely? Five minutes."

"Five minutes?" Astrid shook her head. "You can't cut it down any more than that?"

"I can by half. But it won't guarantee that it's only one-way," I explained.

"So, instead of what we have here, we might have fully formed demons coming through the portal too?" Ranulf asked, a vicious smirk on his face. "Fun."

Astrid snorted.

"Give me eight and it'll pull every demon in the area back through," I announced. Everyone turned to me. "And it will pull Abaddon."

Zahur nodded, an approving smile moving across his face. "We'll give you the time."



THE CAVERN WAS ENORMOUS, but not large enough to use our wings. Not without risking too much. We fought through the horde.

Finally, Abaddon came into sight, but so did the two fully formed demons with him. The creatures crawled up the walls and pounced on our allies. I hesitated. Evelyn needed cover... Several witches moved out of one of the caves.

"How can we help?" one of them shouted over the battle.

"Shield me!" Evelyn ordered, not even lifting her head. She backed up in a spiral drawing as she went. The witches moved to surround her, throwing up a glimmering dome of light.

"We'll take the full forms," I volunteered, sharing a grin with Astrid. She returned it. We took off into the fight. I hacked, kicked, and slammed a way through the chaos, taking out the demons as we went. Astrid ripped out throats with her claws, tore off limbs as we made a path. She suddenly dropped. Turning, I found one of the spider demons on her. I swung, hitting it with the broad side of my sword. The demon flew off and smashed into the wall. Astrid leaped after it, tearing out its throat and jumping back off the wall before the arterial spray could hit her. God, she was good... I took another head before a heavy weight hit my shoulders. Even in half-wolf form, I recognized her weight and touch. She pointed at the other fully formed demon skittering over the wall, and grinned. The woman was brilliant. I crouched down to give her the best launch I could.

"One, two, three!" I jumped as high as I could as she leapt off my shoulders. Astrid flew through the air and hit the demon perfectly. She tore it apart before flipping backwards off the wall and dropping into the fight. Heart pounding, I swung and bulldozed my way to her. But there was no point; she was already surrounded by a circle of corpses. It didn't take much to add to them. We kept moving, kept killing, until a blast shot through the cavern knocking everyone to the floor. A huge, flame-ridden gate rose until it almost touched the ceiling. Exactly where Evie had been working. Wind began to whistle throughout the cavern, growing louder and louder.

Astrid crawled to me. "Stay down!"

I did as she said, just as the wind began to spiral through the cavern back towards the portal. Shouts and screams echoed off the walls as possessed humans began to fly by overhead. Poor bastards. More and more, the demons lost their hold and were sucked back through the portal to Hell. Evelyn's voice rose over the wind, chanting. The wind grew stronger and

stronger until we were clinging to the rock. Finally, Abaddon flew overhead, bellowing as he went. We turned to watch him catch himself on the side of the portal.

He tried to pull himself out, tried to reach Evelyn. "I'll be back, and when I am, I'll destroy everything you love!"

"Goodbye, Abaddon," Evelyn said with a smile. She waved her arm. The portal closed; Abaddon's hands were severed. The hands dropped to the dirt. The cavern was quiet for several heartbeats as everyone stood up. Then the cheers began.

I turned to Astrid as she finished shifting back to human. Naked as the day she was born and covered in blood. She was magnificent. She leaped into my arms. I held her and kissed her roughly. She was my mate. My match. My everything. She pulled back and hugged me tight.

"I love you," I whispered into her ear.

"Sucker," she teased. I smacked her naked ass as she snickered. She pulled back and met my eyes. "I love you too, you ass."

I set her down and began to pull off my shirt.

She scowled at me. "What are you doing?"

I pulled my shirt off and handed it to her. "Covering yae."

She put her hands on her hips and glared at me. "I'm a wolf. I'm used to being naked."

"You're my mate, and I'm the only one allowed that privilege anymore," I growled as I tossed it to her.

She grinned that sexy smile as she began to pull on the shirt. It hit her about mid-thigh. "I knew you were going to be demanding."

I chuckled. She had no idea how demanding I could be...



### **Atticus**

I CLEANED off my blade and turned back to Evelyn. She had gotten pale. "Are you all right?" I asked as I put my sword back in its sheath.

"Yes, I'm just suddenly very tired," she admitted with a smile. I moved to her side and wrapped my arm around her.

Novak stepped out of the crowd. "Well done, Evelyn."

"You too," she said. "But now, I'm exhausted."

"You can always stay here," Novak offered.

I growled deep in my chest. Evelyn rested her hand on my chest, calming me.

Novak laughed. "It's like that, is it?"

"It's like that," I bit out.

He smiled.

"Thanks, Novak, but I think we'll head back to the church," Evelyn said more diplomatically.

"We'll patch up the wounded and send them on their way." Novak moved back into the crowd.

Now that everything was handled, guilt hit me hard. "Luv, I need to talk to you about something."

"I do too." She smiled as she brushed her hand over her stomach. "But I'm so tired. Is it going to be a long talk?"

I nodded, my throat tight.

"Then, let's wait until tomorrow," she suggested as she took my blood-covered hand. "I feel like I'm going to drop."

Not liking that, I knew she was right. It could wait one more day. I wrapped my arm around her and started for the entrance to the cavern. The others caught up and walked with us down the blood-stained streets. So many were dead. But with Abaddon gone, we should be able to take a breath. There was still the matter of the angel, but we'd deal with him soon. Today, I was going to just enjoy our victory.

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#### **EPILOGUE**

# Evelyn

n the way back, we stopped long enough for me fix the weather that I had screwed up. It would take a few days, but once I disrupted the spell, the energy dissipated. I really hadn't meant for that to get away from me like that.

Astrid and Zahur filled me in on what I had missed during the walk out of the subway tunnels. The wolves' structure was in tatters. The city had taken massive damage, not to mention the loss of life. My treaties were gone; those would have to be redone... The list went on and on. There was so much work to do...

After the battle, the witches that had shown up had pulled me aside and warned me that Dahlia was planning something. I'd have to deal with it after everything else.

But one thing gnawed at me. Where was the angel? What was it doing out there while all this chaos reigned?

Atticus opened the door to the SUV for me.

I stopped and looked up at him. How was he going to react to the news of the baby? I smiled. Not well. Panic was my first thought. But Atticus had a habit of surprising me. The way he felt about me was clear on his face as I got into the car. Shining and bright for everyone to see. I smiled to myself as he closed my door.

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#### **SNEAK PEEK AT BOS 3**

Sneak peek Evelyn

We walked into the church exhausted. The others had been running around trying to keep the city from falling apart while I was ill. And, well, dying really takes it out of you. I squeezed Atticus's hand as we walked through the doors to the chapel. He squeezed back and pulled me closer. Warmth spread out from my heart. I really needed to tell him about the—Gargoyles dropped from the rafters in front of us, wings out. I dropped his hand, pulled energy, and drew my blade in one motion. And I wasn't alone. Everyone else held their weapons at the ready.

No one moved. The door leading to the dormitory opened. A tall male walked through the chapel. My heart pounded as he walked up the aisle. Ranulf moved up to my right. Zahur grabbed my arm and pulled me back. Not understanding, I kept the ball of lightning in my hand. The male finally stopped next to his gargoyles. Square jaw and high cheekbones. Cold, blue eyes watched.

Atticus moved in front of me. "Cyrus." Energy crackled along my skin just waiting for a target. The man with a square jaw finally turned to Atticus. "Son." Did he just say...son?

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