



BEN S. REEDER

**TRUE
COLORS**

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Ben Reeder

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*For Roanen and Angie.
The truest friends anyone could ask for.*

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Chapter 1

*~ Life is a fatal condition. There is no cure. But everyone still acts surprised at the end... ~
Paracelcus, physician and wizard.*

Love hadn't chilled Dr. Corwin out nearly as much as I'd hoped. In fact, things had only gotten worse since his girlfriend Kim had come back into his life. Now I not only had to train as a mage, I had to get myself to the point that I could use the fighting skills that Kim had stuck in my head without hurting myself. Not that I wasn't grateful for knowing how to kill or disable most things with my bare hands, but days like today, I could have done with a little less to be thankful for. A lot of the things my brain knew how to do, my body wasn't up to, and some would injure me if I even tried. My head was pounding after three hours of non-stop casting with Dr. C, and then he'd sent me to train in the dojo two hours ago. After busting my ass for a couple of hours, we were finishing with stretching, and it hurt almost as much as the workout did.

"You are fighting it," Kim told me in that infinitely serene way she had. With my legs stretched as far to either side as they could go, I felt my eyes start to roll, then quickly suppressed the urge. One did not roll the eye at a Yakuza trained assassin. She stood behind me, her hands a steady downward pressure on my shoulders, pushing me deeper and deeper into a sideways split on the wood floor of the dojo we'd built in Dr. Corwin's backyard.

"I'm trying not to," I said. "But it feels like I'm about to strain something here." My feet slid a fraction of an inch further apart, but it felt like they'd moved half a mile.

“You won’t,” Kim said. “Trust me, you can get another few inches before there is any danger of injury.” As much as I trusted her, my legs weren’t getting the message. The burn along the inside of my thighs wasn’t letting up no matter what my brain tried to tell my legs.

“It is simple mind over body,” Kim said. “You must learn to control your muscles, not let them control you.”

“His groin controls too much of his thinking,” Amanda said from beside me. She walked around in front of me, her white *gi* fitting much better than my black one did. Her belt was black, with a single red line near the end. Mine, on the other hand, was still white. She had her brown hair pulled back into a long ponytail that managed to highlight the white streak that ran through it. She stood in front of me, brought her hands together, slid down to the floor in a sideways split, then turned her pale gray eyes on me and smiled. Several biting remarks came to mind, but aside from the fact that I wasn’t that kind of asshole, I knew better than to piss off Kim’s daughter. The belt she wore meant she was a martial arts instructor in training, at least in Kim’s style, which made her more lethal than cyanide. Besides, she was right, and I was at least self-aware enough to know that.

“Amanda,” Kim said, her tone sharp enough to cut steel.

“He knows I’m right,” Amanda said. Her hands moved so that her right fist rested on her left palm, then she rose into a crouching stance in one smooth motion.

“Being right is not an excuse for being cruel,” she said. “What is the first morality of deed?”

“*Qian*,” Amanda recited. “Humility.”

“Exactly. Mocking Chance will not help him, will it?” Kim took her hands off my shoulders and walked between us.

“No, *sensei*,” Amanda said. Her tone was flat, and even if the right words were coming out of her mouth, I knew she

wasn't going to stop giving me shit. Kim stepped in front of me and leaned forward so she could put her hands on my shoulders again.

"Now, let us use your resistance to help you relax," she said, pressing down again, the pressure building little by little. "Use your legs to press against my hands, but not too hard." I flexed the muscles along the inside of my thighs, and felt myself rise a little against her hands. After a few seconds, she nodded. "Cleansing breath, in through the nose..." I inhaled slowly, letting my chest expand with the breath and with *qi*. "and out through your mouth and relax your legs." I exhaled, and Kim pushed down harder. My feet slid a couple of inches further apart, then a few more.

"Whoa," I said. There was a little bit of a burn along the inside of my leg, but nothing painful.

"The muscles forget, sometimes, how to turn off," Kim said. "By flexing them, you remind them that they are on, or tense, and show them where the switch is. In a manner of speaking. Now, horse stance!"

I scrambled to get to my feet and take up the stance. By the time I had my hands in place and my knees bent, Amanda had been holding her stance for a few seconds. Kim held out a padded square a foot above her head, and Amanda's right foot came up, snapped out and hit the pad three times in quick succession. She moved to hold the pad above my head and nodded to me. I pivoted and brought my foot up. The first kick hit the pad, but the second fell short. I leaned back a little more and got it the third time, but the blow was off center. My feet ended up next to each other, horse stance resumed. I knew *how* to do the kick in my head, but my body didn't have the capabilities to match what my mind knew.

"Again," Kim said, and I pivoted again. The first kick missed, the second and third hit. I dropped back into the

stance and waited for the inevitable.

“Again.”

“Again.”

“Again.” Finally, I got all three kicks on the target, though it took longer between kicks. My legs were shaking and I felt like I was walking on jelly when Kim bowed and declared practice at an end.

“Thank you, teacher,” I said when I straightened from my bow. She smiled, and I caught the slightest shift in her eyes and an all but imperceptible change in her center of balance. It was all the warning I had.

I dropped and rolled to the side just as I heard the cough of a paintball gun going off. From the floor, I could see Lucas in the doorway with his paintball marker, the barrel tracking toward me for another shot.

“*Obex minor!*” I said, and a smaller version of my shield spell popped up in front of me. The second ball left a black splat mark on the shield. “*Ictus mollis,*” I added, and the half strength telekinesis bolt knocked Lucas away from the doorway. As he flew backward, I could see he had put on heavy sparring pads, so I didn’t feel so bad about tossing him around with a low-level TK bolt.

“Wow!” I heard Dee’s voice from my left. I turned to see her crouched by one of the support posts, her eyes wide and a wide grin on her face. She stepped out and pointed behind me. “How did you catch it without breaking the paintball?” I looked to where she was pointing and saw Amanda shimmer into view with a black paintball suspended in the air in front of her. She had her left hand up, index and middle finger extended, and her thumb touching her ring finger. It was a gesture I had seen Dr. Corwin use a lot, and she used it as if it was genetically programmed into her

“By robbing it off its kinetic force instead of trying to ‘block’ it,” Amanda said. She put her right hand out underneath the ball and opened her left hand, letting the little black sphere drop into her hand. Dee ran up to her, and I saw that she had her curly black hair pulled back into a thick ponytail.

“Showoff,” I said, getting to my feet and heading for the door.

“Chance,” Kim said. I stopped and turned to face her, an eye roll ready. “You are still in the dojo.”

My feet came together, and I sketched a quick bow. “Yes, teacher,” I said. The eye roll was forgotten. In the dojo, there were two things that were always demanded: discipline and respect.

“What is the third morality of deed?”

“Respect, teacher,” I said.

“And the second morality of mind?” she asked, her expression softening into a smile.

“Patience.”

“Correct. Patience with self is as important as patience with others.”

“Yes, teacher,” I said. I struggled to keep myself from frowning. None of what she was saying made sense to me, but, like most things Kim said, I figured it would make perfect sense later. But instead of asking questions that would lead to more questions, I bowed and headed out into the August heat.

Dr. Corwin had Lucas up and was helping him unstrap the thick padded body armor. Lucas had a big smile on his face as he pulled the arm covering off and dropped it.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Dude, that was great,” he laughed. “Better than the roller coasters down in Branson.”

“Lucas, there are hills downtown that are more exciting than some of those roller coasters,” I said while I undid my *gi* top and pulled it off. I headed inside to change into my favorite Suicidal Jester t-shirt, cargo pants, and boots and grab a cold soda from the refrigerator. I grabbed one of the bottles from beside the fridge, too.

Dr. Corwin was waiting when I came back out of the kitchen. “Your control is improving,” he said.

“But?” I asked.

“You could do better,” he said. “You’ve already made great progress in working past the setbacks Dulka’s training created, but...you’re capable of so much more, Chance. You could do what Amanda did, with a little work.” I bit the inside of my lip to keep my mouth under control, but that only lasted a few seconds.

“Not really my style, sir.”

“Chance,” Dr. C shook his head, “You don’t need to do it all the time, you just need to be *able* to do it.” He turned and looked away for a moment, then brought his attention back to me. “Do you realize how close you are to your mage trials?” His brows collided over his nose as he said that and his mouth tightened up.

“I thought I was years away from that.” Beside me, Lucas backed away, his movements slow and smooth.

Dr. C shook his head again and brought his hands up for a moment. His face took on a pinched look, then he dropped his hands. “No, we...*you* don’t have that kind of luxury. Every attempt to bring Mammon back weakens the seals on his prison. Even if the attempt fails, it still helps him.”

“Sir, I’m just one guy,” I said. “With some badass friends, maybe, but still, only one dude in a big room that’s

full of badassess.”

“You’re ready, Chance,” Dr. C said. The words fell like a bomb between us. The kind that doesn’t go off right away, and just sits there while you look at it.

“No, I’m not.” It was my turn to shake my head. “I’ve got another three and a half years or so before I’m even old enough to take the mage trials. And I’m pretty sure Amanda or even Lucas are better prepared for that than I am.”

“No way you’re dragging me into this,” Lucas said from ten feet away. “I’m *never* going to be a full on mage. Anything beyond Siegfried and Roy is above my weight class, remember?”

“He’s right,” Dr. C gestured at him. “He’s an apprentice on a waiver. Hard earned and well deserved, but his talent isn’t as strong as ours. And Amanda is half-kitsune. Hers is a different kind of power, too. Neither comparison is fair to them or you.”

“Expecting me to take the mage trials early isn’t fair, either,” I growled. “So, if the lesson is over for now, I’m outta here.”

“Just be back before five. And tell Shade hi for everyone, okay?” he said. I grunted something I hoped sounded positive, then whistled for Junkyard. His head came up from his favorite napping spot on the big wicker seat that he wasn’t supposed to be on. A hundred pounds of mutt hit the porch with all four paws, and he came trotting across the yard to fall in beside me. The wards at the gate barely shimmered when we passed through them, and Junkyard hopped through the open window of my black 67 Shelby Mustang to take his customary place in the passenger seat. Eight cylinders rumbled to life along with the radio when I turned the key, and I pulled away from the curb.

My trusty steed didn't have air conditioning, but I didn't mind so much, even in the ninety-five degree Missouri heat. Unlike newer vehicles, my beautiful beast was designed without AC in mind, with a couple of small sections at the front of the windows that swung open to bring in more air. Junkyard put one paw on the door and stuck his head out the window, and I leaned back in the seat to enjoy the drive to the Mark Twain Forest north of town. Heat rippled the air in front of us as the Mustang devoured the miles, Alice In Chains played on the radio and for a few minutes, life was okay. Hell, it even resembled normal if you looked at it from a distance and squinted a little...in the right light. For those few minutes, I wasn't a mage-in-training, I wasn't worrying about a prince of Hell trying to make a comeback, and I wasn't a former demon's slave with more issues than a comic shop. I was just a guy in a cool car, listening to the radio, heading out to meet my girlfriend. Diamond Lake lived up to its name, sparkling in the sun on my right, its surface dotted with the white triangles of regal sailboats and streaked with the wakes of their faster, motorized cousins.

Before long, I was past the lake, and following a winding road into the forest that eventually led me to a shaded drive with a red gate across the gravel road. I got out and unlocked the chain that held the gate closed, pulled through, then locked the gate behind me before I got back in the car. Another five minutes, and I was where I wanted to be most in the world. Shade's Ninja was parked near the trailhead, and I pulled in beside it, got out, and grabbed my backpack before I took off down the trail. A hundred yards in, I emerged in a clearing to the sound of a waterfall, and the sight of a goddess.

Shade rose up from the water, a vision of alabaster skin, red hair and gray eyes. Her green bikini left just enough to my memory and imagination to make me stop and stare for

a moment or three while she walked across the clearing toward me.

“Hey, handsome,” she said, putting her hand on my chest.

I leaned in and kissed her. “Mmm, hello, yourself, beautiful.” I put my arm around her waist and pulled her to me, not caring if she got my clothes wet. Up close, I could see the light brown freckles across the bridge of her nose and below her eyes, and I wanted to kiss every single one of them. Instead, I went for her lips, and for a few minutes, the world went away.

“Did you miss me?” she asked when our lips finally parted.

“Every second we were apart.”

“Every second?” she giggled. “That must have been a lot of seconds.”

“Seventy-two thousand of ‘em,” I said as I picked her up. “I counted.”

She wrapped her legs around my waist and smiled down at me with a twinkle in her eye. “Then I better not keep you waiting.” She tilted her head to one side, and I grazed the side of her neck with my teeth, nipping at the base of her throat. Her body melted against mine for a few seconds, then I felt a sharp nip at my ear.

“Hey!” I protested. Shade arched her back so that she fell away from me into a handspring that brought her to her feet a few feet away. A wicked grin crossed her face, and she turned, then scampered back into the water. A few steps in, she dove forward and disappeared, only to emerge in the middle of the creek.

“Come on in,” she called. “The water’s fine!”

“I’ll say!” I stripped my shirt off, pulled off my boots and shucked my pants in record time. Shade put her hand to her mouth, looking at her bikini top as it floated in front of her.

“The water’s not the only thing that’s fine,” she said, her voice husky. “Damn, you just make my clothes fall off.” More green fabric floated to the surface. “Get in here.”

I mimicked her entrance into the water and came up in front of her, taking her in my arms and pulling her to me. We didn’t say much after that.

I didn’t do time very well when I was with Shade. All I knew for sure was that the sun had moved a good ways across the sky when I became aware of anything but her eyes, her voice and her body. We lay next to each other in a dreamy state of bliss for a few minutes. Finally, Shade put her hand on my chest and propped herself up beside me.

“I’m so in love with you,” I said. My right hand trailed from her shoulder down her side.

“I never get tired of hearing you say that,” she whispered, her eyes bright. “And I never get tired of saying I love you.” She paused for a second, looked to one side, then back to me. “If I wasn’t a werewolf, would you still love me?”

“If you what?” I sputtered.

“If I was just a normal girl,” she said. She came up to her knees and looked down at me. “Would you still be in love with me?”

“As long as you’re still you, yeah. Why? Is there a cure for lycanthropy I don’t know about or something?” I asked.

“No, but,” she let the sentence trail off. “I learned how to do something...something that will make it easier for us when we...when we...”

“Make love?” I offered.

Her smile got bigger and she nodded. “Yeah, Sinbad taught me to....well, it’s easier to just show you. But...I just....maybe I won’t be as pretty.”

“I’ve seen you wolf out, baby,” I said. “And you’re still beautiful.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath, and for a second, she seemed to deflate a little. Then, she looked back at me, and I could see what she had been afraid of. Her features had changed slightly. Her freckles were more pronounced, her nose was a little broader, and her whole body was a little softer and rounder in some places. Her hair was turning a darker shade of red, as well. Suddenly, I heard Junkyard growl, and something moved in the woods.

In an instant, I was on my feet, accessing a folded matrix I’d stored a bunch of energy in. Junkyard was at my side, head low, ready for a fight. A black wolf stepped out of the woods, one I recognized, except the woman who should have been that wolf was crouched beside me.

“Shade?” I said.

“It’s okay, baby,” she said. “This is what Sinbad taught me. I can let my wolf out for a little while, let her run free. But it makes me...like this.” She gestured at herself.

“Like what?” I said. The differences were there, but my heart refused to see them. She was still the same girl I loved, and the slight differences in her looks didn’t change that she was a goddess to me. “Shade, you’re still beautiful. You’re still *you*. You’re still the one I’d stand in front of a horde of demons for.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” she said. Her cheeks flushed pink when she smiled at me. Junkyard leaned against me for a moment, making me look down at him. His nose came up, then dropped toward the massive black wolf

trotting toward us. I knelt and let Shade's wolf lick my face while I ran my hands through the fur behind her ears.

"She likes you," Shade said. "But that was never a question." Her wolf laid a paw on my shoulder and rubbed its face against mine then took a step back. Junkyard walked up to her with his nose in the air, sniffing at her. They traded looks, then bounded off into the brush, leaving Shade and me alone again.

"So, when she's running free, are you still as strong and stuff?" I asked.

"No, that's the trade off," she said. "I'm pretty much normal while we're separated. So, I don't have to worry about losing control, either." She tilted her head to one side, letting her hair fall away from her neck and shoulder. Pale white scar tissue stood out against already fair skin in a double row of puckered wounds.

"Is that where he...?" I didn't quite ask. My hand reached out, but I stopped a few inches away from the bite marks, knowing what this wound was: the place where Dominic King had bitten Shade to turn her.

"Yes," she said, taking my hand and guiding it to the scar. "You're the only person who's seen it since it happened. It faded after the first full moon. He visited me the night they started to fade, said he wanted to see his mark on me. He told me it meant I was always his." Her voice was soft, and her eyes were downcast. Telling me this was costing her, I could tell. I leaned in and kissed the marks on her skin, carefully remembering where they were.

"Dulka told me the same thing when he put his mark on me," I whispered after I had kissed my way around the bite mark. I took her hand and laid it on the one smooth spot on my left shoulder.

“It’s gone.” Her hand caressed the smooth patch of skin, then her lips graced it with a warm kiss.

“He left me plenty of others. That was the only spot he didn’t touch.”

Shade took a slow, deep breath and her eyes took on the heavy lidded look I knew meant she was suddenly aroused. “I want it,” she said, her voice rough again. “And I want you to have mine. Take me from him.” She tilted her head again, exposing the bite marks.

“Shade, I...” I tried to protest, but the thought was too appealing. My whole body was reacting to the thought of biting her there, of claiming her as mine so deeply.

“I’m *giving* this to you, Chance. He took it from me. Please, help me take it back.” Her eyes welled up, and I couldn’t resist any longer. Growling, I leaned forward and took her flesh between my teeth. “Please,” she whispered, and I bit down. Her cry rang through the trees, then I felt her teeth on my skin. The familiar sensation of skin tearing was the sweetest pain I’d ever known, and I tasted blood.

“Mine,” I said, my own voice rumbling. Neither of us said anything else while we made love again, but the whole forest heard it when we finished. Sweaty and exhausted, we laid side by side on the blanket, warmed by the sunlight through the leaves, breeze blowing soft on our skin. After a few moments, I rolled to my side and put an arm across her stomach, my lips against her shoulder for a moment. Blood from my bite trickled down her pale skin.

Shade turned her head and smiled at me, her eyes beautiful and bright. “Yes, I am,” she whispered.

“What?” I asked.

“Yours,” she said. She grabbed my arm and turned so her back was against me, then put my hand over her breast. The scent of her hair filled my senses, and I kissed the back

of her head, then put my lips to the bloody ring of the bite I had left on her shoulder. Warmth touched the arm that her head was laying on. I knew the feel of tears on my skin too well to miss it.

“Are you okay?” I kissed the bite marks again. “I didn’t...did I?” I wasn’t even sure what I was asking.

“No, I’m...okay. For the first time in a long time...I’m okay.” She snuggled up closer and wrapped her arms around mine. “I feel safe. Like this, with you holding me. I guess I’m crying because I don’t know what else to do.” I couldn’t do anything but wrap my arms around her, hold her tight and savor the moment.

Laying there, holding Shade in my arms, made me think of a story Dulka had told me once, about a human that the Devil gave a pocket watch to as part of a deal. According to the story, all the man had to do was unwind the pocket watch by turning the knob backward three times, and time would stop for him; he would live the moment he was in forever. In the story, the man never used the watch, but for me, it had become a sort of benchmark. If I had the Devil’s timepiece, when would I unwind it? What moment might be that perfect? This was the first time I could think of that felt that good, that I would be willing to live in it forever. But even if I couldn’t actually do that, I could hang on to it, just like I was holding Shade.

“This is a perfect moment,” I said. “If I could, I’d make it last forever.”

“I wish you could,” she said.

“Me, too. But I might be able to do the next best thing.” I ran my fingers through her hair, coming away with a few loose strands, then did the same thing with mine. With a quick twist, I wrapped the strands together and pulled them into a simple overhand knot. *“Memoria mea memoria vestra, nostras semper insertas semper. Magis memoriam*

hoc locorum temporumque semper et ubique.” The magick coursed through my limbs, down my fingers and into the strands of our hair. The twin strands glowed for a moment, then disappeared in a cloud of golden motes.

“What did you just do?” Shade asked. “What did that mean?”

“Roughly, I said ‘Memory mine, memory yours, always intertwined, always ours. More than memory, make this time and place always and everywhere.’ I think. My Latin has never been great. The spell, though? You can relive this moment any time you want, just by thinking about it. And if we’re together, or if we’re remembering the moment at the same time, we’ll both be here, together.”

“So, in a hundred years, we can both relive this moment, and it’ll be just like this?” she asked.

“Yep,” I said. “You’ll still look as hot as you do now.”

“In a hundred years, I’ll still look this good anyway,” she said. “You, on the other hand, might be all gray haired and distinguished looking. Like a grownup wizard and everything.”

“If I survi-” I started to say, but Shade’s hand was over my mouth. Before I could start to protest, she was straddling me, her eyes streaming and her face inches from mine. Her hand was still covering my mouth, her body shaking.

“Don’t you dare say that, Chance Fortunato,” she said, her voice as unsteady as her body. “Don’t you even think it. I couldn’t bear it if something happened to you, so don’t go making me think about it.”

“Shade, I’m sorry,” I said when she pulled her hand away from my mouth. She ran her hand over her eyes, looking down at me, suddenly her usual, perfect self. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Yes, you were,” she said. “I’m the one who should be apologizing. After what happened at prom...I really thought I was going to die.” She laid down on top of me, her hair making a curtain on either side of my face. “And I remember thinking, when you picked me up, that if I died in your arms, well that wouldn’t be so bad. Ever since then, it’s really hit me hard, how many times I’ve come close to losing you. When you fought King, going up against Etienne, facing the Council because of that, then when Dulka almost got you back. And Boston.” She closed her eyes and shuddered. “Those two months when you were at Franklin were the longest months of my life.”

“They weren’t easy for me, either,” I said.

“Oh, God, I know,” she said. “And you lost a good friend. I just...call me selfish, but I don’t even want to think about losing you. Especially not now.”

“Now that you know what an amazing lover I am?” I asked, cupping her face in my hands and pulling her down to kiss me.

“Well, you’ve got potential,” she said. Suddenly, she sat up straight, her head moving.

“What is it, baby?” I asked. She was on her feet in a heartbeat, and when she turned toward me, her eyes were yellow.

“I hear something,” she growled. I flipped my feet back over my head and rolled to stand, facing behind her. With a breath, I opened my Third Eye, letting my mystic senses kick in. Almost immediately, I saw what might have Shade alarmed.

Standing at the edge of the clearing was a human shaped figure. But even with my Sight, I couldn’t get a clear read on it. It was like a person shaped hole in reality, a dark spot where light never went. I tapped Shade on the shoulder

and pointed, but by the time she turned, it was gone. But it hadn't left without a trace. In its wake, it had left a powerful imprint.

"What is it baby?" Shade asked as I walked to the place where the figure had been.

She turned in a slow circle, head bowed a little. "I can't make sense of it," she said. "Getting my senses back all at once sort of overloads them for a few seconds. Shit!" Her head came up. "That's my phone." She took off toward the trail, leaving me to follow. I looked to the spot where the figure had been. It felt like a powerful spirit had been there, but I didn't get any of the creepy vibes I would if a demon or some other entity had been there. And if it wasn't an outright threat, it took a distant second place to whatever was important enough for someone to reach out to Shade on her dark phone, the separate phone she maintained was only known to her pack, Wanda, Lucas and me. If that phone was ringing, it was more important than whatever random weirdness New Essex might be up to. I just wasn't as comfortable running around naked in the woods as Shade was. I grabbed my pants and practically jumped into them, then grabbed my boots and shirt before I followed her down the trail.

When I made it up to where we were parked, she was leaning over, her hands on the seat of her bike. The phone was still in her hand, and her shoulders were shaking. The second I stepped off the trail, she turned and looked at me, her eyes blazing amber.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Someone killed one of my pack. Tyler's dead."

Chapter 2

*~ Justice may be blind, but she isn't stupid. ~
Charles Donovan, lawyer*

For once, Junkyard wasn't eager to get out and pee on something. Maybe he sensed the way Shade and I felt. Maybe he could smell it when death was on the wind. When I got out of the car, he stayed put, laying his head on the door instead, and looking at the scene with puppy-dog eyes. Shade waited for me at the door to the old camp lodge, talking with Galen, Tyler's best friend. His eyes were red and his expression was one of pure grief. Shade had one hand on his shoulder, her own voice soft and reassuring as I came close enough to hear.

"It's just that...I talked to him yesterday," Galen said. "We were going to go hang out at the lake today. But when I got here, I could smell it. I knew he was dead."

"Did you go inside?" Shade asked. "Did you touch anything?"

Galen shook his head. "No, I just opened the door and saw..." He closed his eyes and looked down, fresh tears sliding down his cheeks. "All I could think to do was call you."

"You did the right thing, Jester," Shade said, calling him by his pack name. "You did exactly the right thing." She pulled Galen to her, then looked to me and nodded. Taking care of her pack members was her job. Taking care of the details was mine. I took a few steps away, pulled out my dark phone and hit the speed dial for Lucas.

"Hey," he said as soon as he answered. "Dr. C's not happy with you, dude."

“He can wait,” I said. “This is more important. I need you to get ahold of Detective Collins.”

“Collins?” Lucas said, his voice rising a notch. “What happened?”

“Nothing good,” I said. I was tempted to end the call there, but Lucas deserved better than that. “Sorry. Someone killed Tyler. I gotta go. I need to call Sinbad next.”

“I’m on it,” Lucas said. “I’ll make sure Dr. C knows, too.” He ended the call, and I hit the speed dial for Sinbad.

“What?” he answered after a few rings.

“Whisper’s dead,” I said.

“What?” he repeated, this time sounding less surly and more surprised.

“Someone killed him at the lodge. Shade and I just got here. I’ve already called in help to deal with this. But we thought you should know, too.”

“I’ll be out there in an hour.”

“She can handle this,” I told him. “We’ve already got this under control. *She* has this under control. She doesn’t need you coming out here and taking over or tearing her a new one on top of everything else.”

“I’ll be sure not to do that,” he said, his tone a little lighter. “But I’m still coming out there.” The phone clicked when he hung up. I slid the phone back into my pocket, shaking my head while I walked back toward Shade and Jester.

“I heard,” she said when I got closer. “I want to take a look before they get here.”

“You know the drill,” I said. Jester turned away, and she opened the main door to the lodge.

Tyler was laid out on an old table from the dining hall that was off the lodge. Two of the legs had been broken so that it was at an angle. His head was at the lower end, his arms were spread out to his side, and his right leg had been bent so that his foot was next to his left knee. One eye stared at us, the gaping eye socket of his left eye bloody, and slashes all over his body. But most disturbing was the gaping hole in his chest. Beside me, Shade took a slow, unsteady breath and put her hand to her own chest. My own brain replayed the memory of a demon running a claw through her a few months back. It was just one of a hundred nightmares that played in my head every night, but it was one we shared. I blinked, etching the image in my memory, then I looked around the room, blinking every time I saw a detail I wanted to remember.

Blood splattered the walls, straight lines and arcs of brown dots or streaks, and smears of it were on the floor, the furniture as well. The rest of the room was trashed, the TV and game system smashed into little pieces, most of the furniture either splintered or slashed to reveal foam stuffing. Whatever happened here had been brutal, and it hadn't been quick.

"Can you see anything I can't?" Shade asked.

"Haven't tried yet," I said. I took a cleansing breath, let it out, then let my eyes unfocus a little to open my Third Eye, the source of my mystic senses. Violent death left powerful impressions on the world around it, and this time was no different. Dark red spots marked where blows had landed, with a brighter shade that followed Tyler's movement around the room, his fear getting stronger and stronger all the way. The trail of bright red ended in a dark gray patch. I blinked for a moment, not seeing the faint trail leading from the dark gray area to where his body was. Most times, the aura of death would linger on the body and follow it around. But not here. The other thing I didn't see was the

imprint of the other person's aura. Usually, a killer left just as strong of an impression as the victim, since killing someone violently normally involved equally violent emotions. But whoever it was had somehow masked themselves. I blinked, then turned to Shade.

"I got nothin'," I said. "You smell anything?"

"Yes," she said. "Another wolf. But only in the room. It's as if they simply vanished."

"And I'm not seeing any signs of a teleport or any other magick. This is all kinds of messed up."

"Poor Tyler," Shade whispered. "Why would anyone want to hurt him?" I put my arm around her shoulders and stepped back, guiding her away from the door.

"I don't know, baby," I told her. We took a couple of steps away, and I whispered "*Traho*," with an underhand gesture to close the doors.

"You're my *gothi*," she said, the waver in her voice making her smile a lie. "You're supposed to know everything."

"What I don't know," I said, "I can find out. We'll find who did this. And we'll rip his heart out."

We sat on the bench outside the lodge, and when Collins got there an hour later, we hadn't moved. Truth was, I had to check my phone to see how much time had passed. Lucas's Barracuda pulled in behind him, and Wanda's red VW filed in after that. Collins got out of his car and took a quick look around before he stepped out from behind the car door and shucked off his light gray suit jacket. Without the jacket, his shoulder holster was in plain sight, the black leather straps wrinkling his white shirt. After another look around, he pulled the round badge from his belt and tossed it into the car. Behind him, Wanda, Lucas and Monica got out of their cars.

“Don’t get up,” Collins said when I started to move. “You’ve both been through enough. I’m sorry about Tyler, kid.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Sorry won’t bring him back,” Shade said. I put my free hand on her shoulder, drawing a look from her.

“We already took a look before you got here,” I turned back to Collins. “But we didn’t go in the room.”

“You get anything?” His eyes went from Shade to me and back again. I shook my head. “Okay, so how do you need to handle this?”

“Like a crime scene,” I growled. “Whoever did this managed to mask themselves magickally.”

“So you need forensics and legwork to catch them,” Lucas said. He’d changed into jeans and a sleeveless black t-shirt. Monica was in a black satin corset over a fluffy, white blouse with off-the-shoulder sleeves and black leggings. Even though the blouse was oversized, it still stretched tight across her chest. The gravel crunched under her boots as she walked past him and came straight to Shade and me.

“Guys, I’m so sorry,” she said, her hands reaching for ours. Eyes brimming, she held our hands in hers for a moment before letting go of them. Only when we broke contact did I realize the absence of the weight in my chest. It had been there from the moment we knew Tyler was dead, and it had been slowly weighing me down. But now, the lethargy in my limbs was absent, only noticed because it was suddenly gone.

“Monica, whatever you did,” I started, then took a breath.

“I did it again, didn’t I?” she said before I could go on. She was looking over her shoulder to Lucas, though. He came to her side and put an arm around her shoulders.

“I don’t think they mind this time, babe,” he said with a reassuring smile.

“I’m kind of empathic,” Monica said. “It just started happening a few days ago. It comes and goes, and sometimes, I just start...”

“Projecting,” Lucas finished. I felt Shade tense beside me, and squeezed her shoulder to get her attention.

“I’m really sorry, guys,” Monica said. “I don’t mean to do it, and I know it’s really rude. I just-”

“It’s okay,” Shade cut her off, her words tense and clipped. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“No way, Ms. Cooper,” Collins said. She stood and faced him, her lips tight and her hands balling into fists. “You’ve already been through enough today, and there’s no way I’m letting you work a scene when you have a personal involvement. You either, Fortunato.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that,” Shade growled.

“I know, kid,” Collins said, his voice softening a little. “You may be Shade, badass alpha of the pack and all that, but right now, you need to remember that you’re also a teenager who just lost someone you care about. Your headspace is all fucked up right now. The *best* thing you can do for Tyler is let someone with a clear head work this scene, so we can find who did this for you.”

For a second or two, Shade looked like she wanted to punch him, then her shoulders slumped a little and she bowed her head. “I guess you’re right,” she said. “Do what you need to.”

“We will,” Collins said, his own face going blank. “Wanda, Lucas, you two glove up. Wanda, photograph the scene. Lucas, you and me bag and tag after her.”

“Can I do anything?” Monica asked. Collins turned toward her, then his eyes narrowed.

“You’ve got no forensics training,” he said slowly. “But...you got that empathy thing going on. Does that just work with people?”

“I don’t know,” Monica said. “Usually.” Collins pulled Monica toward the doors, and Wanda came up to us. Her clothes were hidden by a pair of black coveralls, and she carried a bulky toolbox with both hands on the handle.

“What about after?” Wanda asked. “I hate to ask, but I’m pretty sure this is the last place you want to be officially declared a crime scene.”

“We’ll....figure something out,” Shade said. “I need to talk to Sinbad, first. But we’ll take care of Tyler. He was Pack. Just...get me something, help us find who did this so I can rip his throat out.”

We watched our friends go into the crime scene, neither of us wanting to leave, but neither really wanting to get elbow deep in things. I led Shade to the parking lot, and we watched as Monica came out and threw up after a few seconds, then straightened and turned around, heading back in with a determined look on her face.

“I hate this,” Shade said after a few minutes. She laid her head on my chest. “I hate not being able to do anything. But I can’t just leave.”

“Then we stay,” I told her. “We stay as long as it takes them to get what they need. Dr. C would probably call it standing a vigil.”

“Sounds better than just sitting around and waiting.”

“Yeah, we’re standing around and waiting with a purpose.” She gave a single soft chuckle, then fell silent.

Eventually, we heard Sinbad's bike. He rolled up beside us and took his helmet off, setting it on the gas tank in front of him.. "You guys got this?" he asked.

"No," Shade said without moving. "I don't know what to do about...about Tyler's..."

"We have people who can handle that," he said, his voice gentler than I had ever heard it. "What's with the cop and the junior detective brigade?"

"Whoever did this masked their aura and their wolf," I said. "So we're using good old fashioned detective work."

"I didn't ask you, boy," Sinbad said.

"Well, I didn't answer you, old man," Shade pulled away from me and turned to face him. "He's my gothi. He speaks with my voice on this."

"They ain't pack."

"They're part of *my* pack, even if they aren't wolves. They've fought beside us, they've shed blood with us, and they've kept our secrets. Or did you forget that they stood beside you against a horde of demons a few months ago?" Sinbad's eyes narrowed at the mention of the demon attack on prom night. He'd lost a few of his pack before we had given the order to retreat.

"That wasn't our fight," he growled.

"That's bullshit and you know it," I said. "If they had gotten what they wanted..." I stopped as he came off the bike with his arm drawn across his chest like he was going to backhand me. He, in turn, stopped when Shade stepped in front of him with one hand on his chest and the other drawn back in a fist.

"Are you here to help out, pick a fight, or just be a dick?" she asked through clenched teeth. "Because I've only got patience for one thing on that list." Sinbad glowered at her

for a few seconds, then stepped back and offered Shade a wry smile. I lowered my hand, my shield spell still ready.

“That’s the alpha bitch your pack needs,” he said.

“If you had hit him...” Shade growled, not willing to let it go.

“He would’ve had to *let* me, girl,” the old man laughed. “I’ve seen you two fight. There wasn’t a snowball’s chance in Hell I coulda laid a finger on him. So, let’s say I’m gonna let them work this. What’s your game plan?”

“Let’s say I give a damn about how you want me to track down the asshole who killed one of *my* pack. The plan is to get a lead, find the bastard and rip his throat out.”

“And you think, what? He was a local?”

“How should I know?” Shade asked. “For that matter, shouldn’t you know?”

“If it was, I would’ve known, but I don’t recognize the scent. This is no wolf I’ve met this side of St. Louis, that’s for damn sure. And that complicates things.”

Shade narrowed her eyes at him and took a step into his space. “How?” she demanded, her voice barely carrying to me.

“If it isn’t one of mine,” he sighed, “then we need to get the Conclave involved.”

“I thought you didn’t want outsiders,” I said.

“I didn’t say I *wanted* the damn mages involved, I said we *need* them.” He leaned back against the seat of his bike, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with a Zippo. The lighter closed with a *clink*, and he exhaled a stream of gray smoke before he spoke again. “Back when I first set up here, packs used to get a little...ambitious. They’d raid hunting grounds, stampeding cattle and horses, things like that. I let packs handle things on their own, mostly, but after the War

Between the States, I'd get some of those damn blue bellies down here, and we got damn close to all out war a couple of times. The clans back in Beantown tried to make a case to take over, saying I was too close to things, that I didn't have shit under control. So I made a compromise with the Conclave. Local packs handle their own problems, but when there's an outsider, the Conclave gets involved. Neutral third party and all that shit."

"What if it's something between two local packs?" I asked.

"I handle it," Sinbad said. "Just about every local pack split off from mine at some point. But this? This ain't local. Which means we gotta get the wizards involved. That means you got a new job, kid," he told me.

"Messenger boy?" I said.

"Liaison has a nice ring to it," he said. "Kinda French and pompous. Yeah, I like liaison. So, you go talk to Corwin, tell him what went down here, and let him know I'm formally asking the Conclave to get involved. Shade and I will take care of things here."

"Are you sure you want me to-" I started to say.

"She's got this," Sinbad threw my own words back at me. Shade glanced at me and nodded with a half-smile, then put her arms around me and kissed me.

"Love you," she whispered.

"Till the sun never rises," I answered. Junkyard moved over when I opened the door, but he put a paw on my leg as soon as I pulled it shut. Always the sucker for his sad face, I rubbed behind his ears for a moment, watching Sinbad lead Shade back toward the lodge. I wanted to stay and it burned in my gut to have to leave her there. Still, it was what she needed me to do. That thought gave me a little comfort when I started the Mustang, but it didn't keep me from

watching in the rearview mirror as I pulled away. The drive back to Dr. Corwin's place felt like it took forever, but I felt like I'd only just left the camp when I pulled to a stop across the street from his front door. Junkyard followed me in, and I could hear people talking from the kitchen. The sounds of silverware on china reached me, and I took a quick detour into the small sitting room off the foyer. The door clicked shut behind me, and I dropped into the chair by the window. Junkyard sat beside me, pushing his head under my hand.

After a few minutes, I felt the cooling trails of tears on my cheeks, but even that seemed like something distant. I could feel the weight behind my eyes and in my throat, something wanting to get free. But it wouldn't move from its hiding place.

My thoughts went to Tyler, the peacemaker, the first one who had extended a hand instead of throwing a fist. He'd been the one to help me get through Phys Ed., the one who helped me pass Drivers' Ed with a B, and the one who was always at Shade's side to back me up when I spoke up. The first time I'd gone to a gathering of the pack after Shade had chosen me as her *gothi*, he'd been the first one to step up and greet me like a fellow member of the pack. I remembered the second week of school, after I started wearing the few new shirts I had, him taking me out to the lodge to give me a bag full of clothes that he said he'd gotten the rest of the pack to donate. There had been some truth to it, because I'd seen about half of the shirts in the bag before. But all of them were the right size, and he'd missed the price tag on one of them. I remembered the way he'd tried to lie about it, saying he'd just never worn it because he didn't like it. But Tyler wasn't a very good liar, and I liked that about him. Seeing him laid out on the table, his chest torn open, his face set in a mask of agony wasn't right, and my brain rejected the image as hard as it could, trying to replace it with the memories of my friend at his

best. His was another name on the growing list of people I cared about who were dead, people who made my world a better place. Hell, they made pretty much anyone's world better.

"Chance," I heard Dr. C's voice, and I started. The shadows were almost across the room, and my mentor was at my side, looking worried. "Your mom is going to have my ass if she hears I let you skip dinner." His tone was light, but it didn't hide the concern.

"You're not my babysitter," I said.

"That's true," he said, moving to sit in the chair across from me. "But your well-being is still important to me. Both as a mentor and as a friend, Chance. Someone close to you just died. That can't be easy to cope with."

"I'm handling it," I lied.

"No, you're not." He shook his head and leaned back in the chair. "You're paralyzed. You've spent nearly an hour in here, staring out that window with tears running down your face. That isn't handling it."

"What do you expect? Should I just bawl my eyes out or something?"

"That's one way to go," he said. "Personally, I think how you handle this isn't so important just now. What *is* important right now is that you can function. So, why don't we start with what's on your mind?"

I looked back out the window for a moment to get my head back into the place it had been for the past hour. "I was wondering when I was going to stop losing people. *If* I was ever going to stop mourning people who didn't deserve to die. Mr. Chomski, Desiree, now Tyler. I keep wondering, keep asking myself why it was them instead of me. I've seen the face of the Divine, Dr. C. I carried her Gift to Wanda, and I brought Her wrath to Etienne. She's talked to

me. Why? Why do I keep on living and better people keep dying? Why won't She tell me that much?"

"I think I actually know this one," he said with a knowing smile.

"Don't you even try telling me it's because there's some mysterious plan for me."

"No," he laughed. "I mean, yes, I think there is a plan, but it isn't so mysterious. Look at it logically. King and Etienne are dead, Talbot wishes he was dead. In fact, everyone who has hurt or killed someone you care about is either dead, crippled or in jail. People who threaten your family and friends don't tend to live very long, either."

"Still not seeing the plan here," I grunted.

"Then let me spell it out for you," he said. "You get results. You said it yourself, you bring the Wrath. It's one of the less fun things about being a mage. Sometimes, we're called on to balance the Universe when it needs a nudge in the right direction. Whether we like it or not, we become the agents of karma."

"Why us? Why me?" I asked.

"Because we're given the ability to alter reality itself," he said, leaning forward, eyes almost glowing. "That power isn't given lightly, and not without cost. You survive because magick protects the wielder. Because you serve magick as much as it serves you, and the more powerful you become, the more will be expected of you. And right now, whoever killed Tyler still has to answer for that."

"And that's supposed to be on me?"

"It falls to us to do the hard things, Chance," he said, his voice suddenly softer than a whisper. "The things no one else can. In time, you'll understand that your guilt doesn't help the people you've lost, and it won't bring them back."

The best...sometimes the *only* thing you can do to honor the dead is to avenge them.”

Chapter 3

~ *Fate is fickle.* ~
11th Oracle of Delphi

New York City was at its hottest the next day. Because of course, the day we needed to wait the longest to see the senior members of the Council was the day we picked to show up. All of them were scheduled in some kind of meeting or another until around two that afternoon, and of course, the line to see them after that was a long one. We were lucky enough to get a place near the front, but it was still a bit of a wait.

“So, we can leave the building,” I said to Dr. C while I tried to keep up with him. Dodging New Yorkers was almost as hard as dodging spells. “But we can’t leave the city?” I wove my way between a knot of tourists and a news stand and caught up to him. My back would have been soaked if the sweat wasn’t drying in the heat.

“We can leave the city,” he corrected. “We just lose our place in line if we do. Hurry up. We only have about ten minutes.” The light changed, and the knot of people at the crosswalk surged forward, taking us with them. We stayed in the middle of the crowd for a few yards after we got back onto the sidewalk, then ducked to our right in front of our destination.

Babylon Tower wasn’t quite hidden from sight to most New Yorkers. That would have taken more magick than even the Council could muster. Instead, it just seemed to blend in. The technical term for it was an *odiosis* enchantment, which I just called boring as Hell. Looking at it with the enchantment intact, it was a beige stone building with nothing to set it apart. Square, uniform and slightly shorter than the buildings on either side of it, it didn't stand out in

any way. To my mind, it screamed of the world's most average accounting firm. Looking at the front, I knew that the name was illegible, but it came across to my conscious mind as being utterly forgettable. Dr. Corwin compared it to reading something in a dream, where you somehow knew what it meant but not what it said.

Past the enchantment, the Tower was a thing of beauty. Over a hundred stories tall, it was a spire of gleaming white stone and glass, with balconies every few stories that arched out over the streets. Fanciful winged figures clung to each corner along its height, supporting the balconies from below and roosting above them. An open area at the top held a garden and open forum area that I had heard about but never been to, with four bronze columns supporting a gilded, pyramidal roof. Glass covered most of the sides, so the inside was mostly visible. We headed in through the glass doors and up the broad white staircase that led to the elevators. The car waiting for us was closed in on the bottom, and a wire cage on the upper part. A Blemmyes waited inside, its face peering at us from the middle of its thick chest.

"What floor?" it asked in a voice that was deep enough to rattle my skull a little when we stepped into the car.

"Ninety-eight," Dr. C said. The headless man reached out and touched the series of runes inscribed on the metal panel next to the door, right where a normal elevators buttons would be. The runes glowed for a moment, then the elevator shot upward, and I got split second glimpses of the other floors as we passed them. Moments later, the car slid to a smooth stop, and the doors slid open on our floor. The last time we'd been here was in May, when we'd come to ask for protection for a group of cultists that Kyle Vortigern represented. Off to one side, the transit rings floated above their platform, and to the left was the doorway into the Council chamber.

“Wizard Corwin!” we heard the moment we stepped off the elevator. “Wizard Corwin! Over here!” A young apprentice practically sprinted toward us, her almost-white robes held up in one hand, the other reaching out toward us. She skidded to a stop and panted for a moment before she tried to talk again. “Master Moon...moved...appointment...”

“Whoa, sister,” Dr. C said. “Stop to breathe for a second. Now try again.”

“Master Moon,” she said. “He wants to see you two right away.” She turned and headed for the double doors leading into the Council chamber, not waiting for us to acknowledge her.

“Girl’s in a hurry,” I said, moving to follow.

“Lazarus is in a hurry,” Dr. C said, his eyes narrowed. “That poor apprentice is just trying to catch up.” We followed the girl past the other petitioners, every step earning us dark looks. When we stopped at the table outside the door to disarm, the Sentinel there shook his head and waved us forward. Half the glares turned to slack jawed stares. Only Sentinels were allowed carry weapons or focuses into the Council chambers, and both Dr. Corwin and I had a reputation for going armed most places. Okay, he had a rep for being armed, I was mostly known for collateral damage. You blow up a couple of schools, a nightclub and a city park, and suddenly you’re a walking natural disaster.

We followed the apprentice into the Council chamber, but instead of stopping in the circle of light that was in the center of the room, she led us back past the curved table where the Council members usually sat and through a door at the back of the chamber. The room we found ourselves in was done in dark wood paneling, with padded chairs flanking round tables. My feet barely made a sound on the deep, green carpet when we crossed to the knot of Council members gathered at the far side of the room. Even across

the room, it was obvious who was who. Master Moon's white hair stood out against his button down gray shirt, and Polter's mass in his shiny, puke yellow suit, sucked all the joy out of the air around him. From behind, I could tell the woman facing away from me was Master Hardesty because her iron gray hair didn't dare budge an inch, and her stance was very proper. To her right was Master Morrigan, looking perfect and enticing with her red hair flowing down her back, and on the other side of her was Master Delacort, one hand held over the other in front of him as he watched with a distant look in his eyes. The only person I didn't recognize was the younger man standing behind Lazarus. In this room, he was underdressed. Even Master Moon wore slacks. This guy was in jeans and a leather vest over his t-shirt. Even more noticeable by his absence was Master Draeden. While he wasn't always at the Tower, he had a habit of showing up when I was involved.

"You're quite sure, Lazarus?" Master Polter said as we got closer. "This is highly irregular."

"But well within the bounds of propriety," Morrigan said. "Given the circumstances, not only are they within their rights to demand an immediate meeting, the Council is obligated to do exactly what we're doing now."

"To include allowing the other clans to be represented," Master Delacorte said. "If they so desire."

"Which they do," a man said from behind us. His voice filled the chamber, and I could feel his footsteps through the soles of my boots when he strode past us. He was tall, broad shouldered and blond, his flowing locks brushing the collar of his sport jacket. He stopped when he reached the gathered Council members, then turned and surveyed the room before offering a broad smile that would bankrupt a dentist from its sheer natural perfection. In a word, he was

everything I was supposed to want to be when I grew up. I hated him.

“Elder Kain,” the unknown man said. The words sounded the least bit forced, like his upper and lower teeth never stopped touching. “How good of you to join us.”

“Of course,” Kain said. “Happy to lend a hand where I’m needed.”

“I don’t recall anyone asking for the clans’ help, however.”

“When the *gothi* for the Branson pack comes to the Council instead of to the clans, we take notice,” Kain said, his smile as sincere as a politician’s promise.

“Your offer is welcome,” Master Moon said. “If a bit premature. No formal request has been made yet.”

“It’s all but done,” Kain said, turning to Dr. Corwin and me. “You two will have to wait. Something more important has come up.”

“Elder Kain, if you please, I will conduct the Council’s business on my own,” Master Moon said. “Apprentice Fortunato is here as *gothi* to the Diamond Lake pack. He’s the one making the request.”

“Then hurry it up, boy,” Kain said to me.

“Are we doing that now?” I asked, looking over my shoulder toward the door to the main chamber.

“Yes, Chance,” Morrigan said. “This isn’t something we feel should be recorded in normal session.”

“It’s also not something we should be doing,” Polter added.

“Chance, tell us what happened,” Moon said after a pointed look at Polter.

“Someone killed Shade’s beta, Whisper,” I said. My throat tightened, and I took a second before I went on. “We couldn’t find any trace of their aura, and their scent disappeared at the edge of the crime scene.”

“Crime scene?” Kain said, taking a step toward me. “You let law enforcement into your pack territory?”

“Not officially,” I said before turning back to Moon. “Sinbad felt we should ask the Council for help, since the killer wasn’t one of his packs.”

“This seems like an internal matter,” Delacorte said in a slow, measured tone. “Why does Sinbad, of all alphas, suddenly want the Conclave involved in Were’ politics?”

“I concur,” Hardesty said. “This seems strictly a pack matter, one we would be better off staying clear of.”

“Speaking for the clans,” Kain said, “you are correct. You need to let us handle this on our own.”

“Which means you can go home, Jacob,” the unknown man said. “If you think this is an internal matter only, that means it’s under Sinbad’s control alone. The Boston clans have no say in Sinbad’s territories.”

“I go where I please, Moon,” Kain growled. His eyes turned amber and he took a step forward, but toward the newcomer, not Lazarus.

“Killian, Jacob, stand down,” Master Moon said. When the two didn’t move, he held his hand out, and a rune-adorned staff flew to his palm. “Now!” he slammed the staff down, sending a minor shockwave out that knocked the two men he’d addressed back a couple of steps. “The Council will decide if this is an internal matter or not.”

“Sinbad doesn’t think it is,” I said, stepping forward. “Whoever did this is not one of his packs. It isn’t internal, so we need the Conclave to help keep the peace if it involves

another pack. It's part of the deal he set up with the Council."

"Indeed it is," Master Moon said. "More importantly, it is an agreement he hasn't invoked for decades. Sinbad is not known for his reliance on outside help. For him to ask for help now..." He let the sentence trail off.

"Is an indication of how weak he has become," Kain said, his tone dismissive.

"Or, an indication of how seriously he takes the situation," Delacorte said. "Shade is your girlfriend, correct? As I recall, all of her pack are kids your age. If someone killed a teenage boy, then I think Sinbad would take that *very* seriously indeed."

"I find," Polter sighed, "that I agree with Master Moon. If an alpha as fiercely independent as Sinbad is asking for the Conclave to get involved...officially...then things are probably as bad as he says they are. Maybe worse."

"Agreed," Delacorte said. Hardesty and Morrigan nodded as well.

"Then it is resolved that the Conclave lends its official support to the alpha of the Ozarks Clans in this," Moon said.

"Then the Boston Clans demand to be represented as well," Kain said. "As is our right."

"Your right?" Killian stepped forward again. "We are independent of you. You get no oversight."

"It is their right, son," Lazarus said. I gave Killian a closer look, noticing the similarities in their eyes and nose. "If you're asking for our help, the other clans also have the right to at least observe."

"I will go, then," Kain said. "Fortunato, return to New Essex and wait for me. I'll report to the clans and come as soon as I can so we can resume the hunt."

“You can catch up to us when you get there,” I said. “We’re not waiting for anyone.”

Kain moved toward me. “You will wait for me, if you know what’s-”

“Don’t even finish that sentence,” Dr. C said, stepping between us. “Chance is my apprentice. No one tells him what to do but me, no one disciplines him but his mother, and no one threatens him and lives.”

“That will change,” Kain said. “He is *gothi* to an alpha. That puts him under *my* authority right now.”

“He’s a mage, not a Were’.”

“He’s standing right here,” I said as I stepped around Dr. C. “You may be an alpha, but you’re not my master, you’re not Shade’s alpha and you’re not part of her pack. We’ll keep looking for Whisper’s killer on our own. We’ll tell you what we’ve found when you get there.” I turned and headed for the door.

“Fortunato,” Kain said from behind me. I stopped and turned far enough so I could see him over my shoulder. “That mouth is going to get you hurt one day.”

“Look who’s talking,” I said, and started walking again.

Killian caught up to us halfway across the Council chamber. “Chance,” he called. I stopped and turned around. Him, I’d face. “Kain might be a pretentious dick, but he’s still an alpha. Be careful about how hard you push him.”

“Like Dr. Corwin told him, I’m not a Were’,” I said.

“That won’t matter to him. As far as he’s concerned, you’re lower status than him, pack or not. The Boston clans are serious about that shit. Status is everything to them, and they won’t think twice about putting you back in your place.”

“That might work in Boston,” I said with a cold smile. “But it won’t fly in New Essex.”

“You better hope you can back that up,” Killian said with a shake of his head. “Because he’ll shove those words down your throat if he can.”

Sinbad and Shade were waiting in front of Dr. C’s place when we got back, both leaning against their bikes, neither looking happy. Shade came to me as I walked toward them and put her arm around my waist when I stopped a few feet away.

“Well?” Sinbad said.

“They said yes,” I told him. “But the Boston clans are sending some asshole named Kain to ‘observe.’ Only he thinks that means he’s in charge.”

“Heard of him,” Sinbad turned his lip up. “Never met him, but that sounds right. He’ll try to play dominance games with you all the time. Boston alphas like to remind everyone that they’re in charge. From what I hear, Kain’s better at it than most.”

“Great,” Shade said, “just what we need, a puffed up asshole swinging his dick around, trying to make sure everyone strokes his little ego and kisses his ass hard enough for him.”

“Kain may be an asshole, but he’s earned his place,” Sinbad said. “Even if you don’t kiss his ass, show him respect, at least in public and to his face.”

“So, behind his back and in private, we can diss him all we want, huh?” I asked, only half joking.

“As long as he never hears about it, yeah.”

“All that fun aside, where are we with finding our killer?”

Sinbad looked to Shade, and after a few seconds, she answered. "Lucas found some hairs and claw fragments using a divination spell, and he's trying to separate them so he can find the killer. Wanda found saliva in the wounds, so Collins sent it off to be tested."

"So, we're an inch further along than we were," I said. "Beats nothing."

"Not by much. Every minute they're still out there pisses me off more." She turned and kissed me before stepping away. "And if that isn't bad enough, I have to go play good daughter for my parents this afternoon."

"Don't break anyone," I said as she put her helmet on.

"No promises," her muffled voice came back, then the bike's engine roared to life, and she sped away from the curb.

"Suck that lip back in, kid, before you step on it," Sinbad said after a few seconds. "You'll survive one afternoon with your damn clothes on."

"Tell that to Tyler," I said. "Then tell me not to worry."

His eyes blazed amber for a moment and he bared his teeth, then he stopped. "Shit," he spat as he put his helmet on. "I'll keep an eye on her, but you get your ass inside." He kicked his bike to life and pulled away fast enough to leave the smell of burnt rubber behind. Me, I took his advice and hustled my ass inside.

For the rest of the day, Dr. C kept me occupied with busy work and routine. By the time he sent me home, I had two more touchstones filled and a half dozen charms ready to enchant. My head was also pounding when I dragged my ass up the stairs that night, and I barely got the sheet pulled up before the world was fading. I felt Junkyard lay down beside me, and then I was out.

The ping of Shade's text message was enough to wake me up. One eye managed to open and focus on the white glow of my phone's screen, and I made out the words

>> Shade: Meet me for breakfast? >>

The other eye opened and I grinned, sleep forgotten at the invitation to slip away for a while. My grin widened into a yawn, and I blinked a few times until I could make out the time. It was closer to midnight than noon.

<<Me: Love to<< I texted back.

Sleep could wait. Junkyard stirred beside me and gave me a bleary-eyed look before laying his head back down.

>>Shade: The alpha from Boston arrives at ten. You can tell Mom we're going to meet him. Love you.>>

<<Me: Be there in half an hour. Love you more.<<

Twenty-five minutes later, I made a liar of myself. I got out of the car and took a few seconds to listen to the sounds of the world waking up on a summer morning. Birdsong was a raucous melody over the background whisper of wind in the leaves, and the gray veil of night was giving way to a deepening green as the sun cleared the horizon. It was a beautiful morning, and there was a beautiful girl on the way to meet me...

...and Tyler would never see another morning. The thought hit me like a fist in the gut, making me lean back against the Mustang for a moment so I could catch my breath. On its heels came another thing: How many mornings had it been since Mr. Chomsky had died? Since Desiree had died?

The cold, wet touch of Junkyard's nose against my hand brought my focus back to the moment, and I leaned down to run my hand across his head and rub behind his ears. He leaned his weight against me, his tail making his butt

wiggle. In the distance, I could hear the growl of Shade's bike.

"Can't bring them back," I said. Junkyard turned his head to look at me, then I felt every muscle in him tense before he sprang away from me. He turned around and lowered his head, his teeth bared in a low, rumbling snarl. I stood up and turned.

Chapter 4

~ The Blood of the Covenant is thicker than the Water of the Womb ~

Ancient saying of the Mulani Roma

“He’s waking up,” I heard someone say. The voice was familiar, but my thoughts were sluggish. Everything sounded so far away and muffled. I tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids felt like they weighed a thousand pounds each. After a couple of tries, I got my eyes to stay open. Ceiling tiles greeted me, then two faces floated into view over me, the one on my left, a fabulously beautiful redhead with red-rimmed gray eyes and trembling, kissable lips. On the right was the most welcome face I could imagine, and I knew the world was going to keep spinning for a little while longer. My Mom’s dark, curly hair framed her face, and her eyes were just as red as Shade’s.

“Chance, honey,” I heard Mom say. “Welcome back.”

“Where did I go?” I asked. I tried to turn my head, but my neck had a lot of unpleasant things to say about that.

“What do you remember, babe?” Shade asked. She looked to her left, then back at me.

“Lots of things,” I said, but my mind was a blank. “What am I supposed to remember? Did I miss something? Why does my neck hurt? And why can’t I move my hands?” I asked after trying to reach for her and failing.

“You were attacked,” another voice interjected. Deep, rumbling, irritating. Only one person fit that bill, but he was still on his way to New Essex. “The restraints are a precaution.” Jacob Kain stepped into the edge of my vision, but I could feel him as much as see him.

“When did you get here?” I asked. I turned my head left. “Weren't we going to meet him?”

“Baby, that was two days ago,” Shade said. She stopped for a second and pressed her lips together, then wiped at her eyes. “You were attacked by another werewolf. It bit you.”

“This was no random attack,” Kain said. “And it didn't just bite you. It tried to kill you.”

“That will be enough, Mr. Kain,” Mom snapped. “My son has been through enough already. He doesn't need you throwing more at him right now.”

“He needs to get used to this as soon as possible. I am an alpha werewolf. There is no better judge of what he needs than me.”

“I am his mother,” Mom said, turning toward Kain. “And I am the *only* judge of what he needs right now. You can advise, Mr. Kain, and you can complain. But if you want to stay in this room, you will do as you're told.” A scent flooded my nostrils, musky, sharp, angry. My breathing quickened, and I felt the urge creep over me to punch Kain.

“Woman, he is no longer your son,” Kain said.

“Back off,” I said. “Before I make you.” Kain turned toward me, his face twisting with anger, and I called up the TK spell in my head. My magick still felt a little distant, but I know that even at half power, I was capable of throwing him through a few walls.

“Kain,” Shade said, her voice sharp. “You're not helping. He can smell her anger.” She put her hand on my shoulder, and the urge to strike out faded a little.

“All the more reason she shouldn't even be here,” Kain said.

“Kain,” Shade said slowly. “Leave. Please.” He glared at her, then took a step back. With a final dark look at Mom, he turned and left the room.

“Shade, what happened?” I asked. “You said I was attacked by a werewolf?”

“What do you remember?” she asked.

“I was waiting for you, and Junkyard...he turned and growled at something. I turned around, and...is he okay?” I tried to sit up, and pain flared all down my left side and down my back.

“Junkyard is fine,” Mom said. “Ren’s looking after him.”

“Just a couple of cuts and scrapes, baby,” Shade said. “You shielded him.” A flash of memory hit.

I throw a shield up in front of Junkyard a split second before a giant, gray Were in hybrid form lands in front of him and tries to claw him. The shield goes down, and Junkyard goes flying with a yelp. The Were’ turns toward me, and I hit hit with a TK bolt. It goes flying, but something hits me from my left.

“I...I do remember that,” I said. “So he’s okay. Good. But there were two of them. I knocked one away, and then...something hit me.”

I’m on the ground, my neck and shoulder hurt like crazy, and there is something big and furry on top of me. I put my hands against it and unleash a full power TK blast. It goes flying, but it makes the pain in my neck even worse. I struggle to get to my feet. I hear Shade’s bike getting closer, and I look for the wolf I just blasted. It’s running back toward me, so I unload a wide TK blast against it. It disappears mid stride, then reappears a few feet closer. It leaps at me before I can get another shot off, and I go down, skidding across the grass. The wolf lunges for my throat, but I get my right arm up in time to stop it. I feel and hear bones

break as its jaws close. The world starts to go hazy. Shade slams into the wolf, knocking it off of me. I want to get up and help her, but nothing seems to be working right. She stands over me and wolfs out, going to her hybrid form. Claws out, fangs bared, she swings and I hear a yelp of pain. She turns and bellows at someone else. For a moment, it's quiet, then Shade is cradling me to her, and the world turns gray...

"I should have died," I said after a few seconds.

"Your heart stopped twice before you stabilized," a new voice cut in. I looked to my left to see a dark haired man in scrubs and a lab coat standing in the doorway. Kain stood beside him, his expression neutral. The guy in the labcoat stepped into the room and pulled the chart from the end of my bed. "But, once you did stabilize, you started healing with extraordinary speed. So you were transferred here."

"Where is 'here' exactly?" I asked. "And who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Evans. You're in a private facility, specializing in cases like yours," the doctor type said. "Your identity and condition haven't been disclosed, and your records have been sealed."

"Whoa, a private facility?" I said. My heart started beating faster, and I looked over to Mom. "We can't afford that!"

"You don't have to," Kain said. "I've seen to it that your bills are covered. There are facilities like this in every major city where a Pack is present. They're designed to keep newly Ascended Weres' safe while they recover, and to keep their families safe from them."

"Ascended?" I asked. "Is that what you call being turned into a werewolf?"

"Yes," Kain said. He turned to my mom and smiled. "Miss Murathy, I truly do have Chance's best interests in

mind, whether you agree with my methods or not. The next eleven days are crucial for your son. He is undergoing changes that would be impossible for him to understand without a more experienced Alpha wolf to guide him. Chance, being turned isn't the curse you think it is. You're going to become stronger and faster, your senses will become amplified many times, and you will become practically immortal. And that, boy, is only the most superficial part of your new reality. You need my help to make it through this, and Shade, you'll need to learn how this is done properly, so you can teach others someday."

Shade straightened beside me, and her brow furrowed a little as she turned her head. "I know what he's going through, Kain," she said, her voice dangerously soft. "I went through the same thing."

"No, Shade," Kain said. He shook his head and put a hand on her shoulder. "Your Ascencion was tainted by a weak and abusive Alpha. You need to learn how it's done properly, and the only way to do that is to learn from a better qualified, more experienced Alpha." She held her frown for another few seconds, but I could see that her anger was fading. What he said made sense. I knew better than almost anyone else what she had gone through with Dominic King. I could imagine what it must have been like for a thirteen year old girl to deal with what I did, and to wake up without her family, without anyone to tell her what had happened. To wake up under the control of the werewolf that bit her, especially when that Were was an asshole like Dominic King.

"Shade," I said, "He's right. It's like Dr. Corwin helping me get over my training with Dulka. We both have a lot to unlearn."

"Okay," Shade said after a moment. She closed her eyes and looked down. After a moment, she nodded and raised

her head. "Okay. You're right. I wish it was me, baby, but...this is important. If you're going to be a werewolf, then I need to know when to stand back and let the right person do this. We have a lot of years together ahead of us." Her left hand touched my face, and I leaned into the feel of her skin against mine. Always before, it had been pleasant, but it had become a deeper experience than ever before. I could feel her aura even without trying, feel the energy coursing over her skin, the texture of it, the warmth, smell the cinnamon scent that I had always associated with her, only now there were layers to it I'd never even guessed at. I could hear the blood pulsing in her veins, feel the texture of her skin. Her pulse quickened, but it felt like something else changed, too. Like she was excited but calmer. On impulse, I turned my head and nipped at her wrist, then smiled up at her. Her scent took on a musky flavor, and her eyelids dropped a half-centimeter, but she never moved her hand.

"Now isn't the time to be talking about long-term plans," Kain said, putting his hand on her shoulder again. "Shade, we should leave for now. There is a great deal we need to discuss, and Chance needs to focus on other things right now." He moved his hand across so the his arm was around her shoulders and turned her toward the door. She turned to look at me over her shoulder, then let him lead her out of the room.

If it had been anyone else who had touched her like that, I would probably have wanted to rip their eyes out. And somewhere in my gut, I felt the urge to do that flicker, but I buried it. Shade didn't even like Kain that much, and he was too old for her anyway. *Then why am I trying so hard to convince myself there's nothing to worry about?* It was a valid point, but one I didn't have a good answer to.

"Well, you don't seem to be too aggressive," Dr. Evans said. He moved to the spot Shade had just vacated & started working the buckle on the leather cuff around my

left wrist. "I'm going to release you from the restraints for now. A nurse will be in soon to draw some blood and evaluate your wound sites. Barring any unforeseen complications, you should be ready to go home soon." He reached across me to unbuckle the other restraint, then offered me a smile that I guessed was supposed to be reassuring and left the room.

"So," I said, rubbing my wrists, "I'm a werewolf, or I'm going to be. That's...big."

"Son, are you okay?" Mom asked. "This is a huge change for you." She put her phone in her purse and came back to the side of the bed.

"Mom, change seems to be the norm for me. Escaped from a demon, went to high school, got my own father arrested, went to boarding school, now I'm a werewolf. Makes puberty seem pretty boring."

"Well, I don't like this man Kain," she said. "He makes sense, but it still doesn't feel right. I've called some people who might also be able to help. They should be here soon. And...I called Trevor. He and your friends should be here soon."

"Do they know about...?"

"Your condition? Sweetie, they've been here since it happened. I had to send them home last night, but I think they were setting up shifts if you were out for much longer.'

"What about Dee?" I asked, my stomach suddenly feeling like a bottomless pit. "Does she know?"

"Of course she knows," Mom smiled. "She's having a little trouble accepting it. She keeps insisting you'll get better. But you're still her big brother. And, in time, she'll learn to accept it."

"I'm just trying to focus on the positive-" I stopped as my arms suddenly flared with pain. A heartbeat later, I felt it

in my ribs, too. My body bent double and my arms curled up against my chest. I heard the machines hooked up to me start beeping faster, and an alarm started going off. Even over my own cries of pain, I heard feet pounding down the hallway.

“Chance!” Mom cried out. “What is it, honey?” Her hand on my back gave me a point outside the pain to focus on, and my body seemed to react to her touch. The pain faded and my breathing slowed. With the pain at a more manageable level, I could finally start to focus on what I was actually feeling. I could hear the popping of bone breaking and the grating sound as it set itself and began to heal.

“My arms...unh!..it’s like they’re breaking and healing all over again,” I grated through gritted teeth. A nurse came through the door and was at my side a heartbeat later. Given how fast my heart was pounding, that was saying something.

“Sir,” she said after a moment, “have you ever broken a bone?”

“Lots...of times,” I said, gasping.

“Your body is rehealing the breaks and getting rid of the damage. It’s going to hurt, but after it’s done, it’ll be like the bone was never broken.”

“Isn’t there something you can do for him?” Mom asked. “He’s been hurt more than most people. He’s in a lot of pain!”

The nurse pushed me back down on the bed and held my shoulders. “By the time I got back, it would be over,” she said. My vision went gray, then red, then I was laying in the bed, exhausted. The room was darker and my breath was coming in ragged gasps. When I could open my eyes again, the nurse was looking down at me with a frown that looked more troubled than angry.

“Ow,” I moaned.

“Ow is right,” the nurse said. “I’ve never seen it go this long. Did you have a lot of breaks?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. My throat was sore from yelling, and my jaw hurt where I’d been clenching it.

“How many?”

“Don’t know. At least once a week for about seven years. Used to belong to a demon.”

“Damn,” she breathed. “That explains a lot. But, the good news is that you won’t go through *that* again. Are you hungry?”

“Hungry?” Mom repeated. “How can you even *think* about something like that right now?”

“This is actually normal for newly Ascended Weres,” the nurse said with a placating gesture.

“*This* is what you call normal?” Mom said with one finger pointing toward me.

“For most people, it’s not this bad, maybe a little discomfort as an old injury heals or something, but your son’s case is... unusual, to say the least. His body just healed seven years worth of damage. He’s going to be hungry.”

“Starving,” I agreed.

“I’ll have a meal sent down to you,” the nurse said. “Probably two meals.”

“Make it four, and I’ll be happy,” I said with a weak smile.

“Four it is,” she said. After she left, Mom put her hand on my arm.

“Your sister might be right,” she said. “It’s possible this won’t last forever.”

“Mom, as far as I know, there isn’t a cure for this,” I said. “It’s like herpes, once you’re infected, that’s it.”

“Maybe not,” Mom said with a conspiratorial smile. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about your mother, honey. I made a couple of calls. We’ll see what happens.”

“Mom, please, don’t get your hopes up,” I said, fighting down the surge of emotion that had my stomach fluttering. Did I *want* to be cured? Or did I want to be a werewolf? Footsteps down the hall reached my ears, and I caught scents that were familiar. “Whatever you do, don’t say anything to Dr. C or anyone else when they get here, okay?”

Mom looked to the door, then back at me. “Are they here?”

“Just got off the elevator a few seconds ago. Dr. Corwin, Kim and Amanda, Lucas, Monica and Wanda.”

“Can you smell them?”

“Hear them,” I said. “They’re not subtle. Well, Kim and Amanda are, but I can still hear their footsteps. Barely.”

“Hey, look who’s up,” Lucas said from the doorway. “Glad to see you with your eyes open.”

“Hey, dude,” I said. “Come on in. You just missed Mister Congeniality.”

“That’s just too bad,” Dr. C said, following him into the room. Kim and Amanda filed in behind him, both scanning the side of the room they were on, then stepping out of the doorway as soon as they could. Lucas’s sweat-heavy scent hit me first, then Dr. C’s crisp aftershave-tinted smell. Wanda brought sandalwood and vanilla to the mix, and Monica added a spicy smell that carried a lot of Lucas’s sweat on it. It took me a moment to figure out what I was getting from the two of them, then it hit me and my eyes went wide for a moment. Kim and Amanda left a subtle

musk as an undercurrent, though I was getting another layer of musk from Amanda and Wanda.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “He was all kinds of pleasant.” For a few seconds, no one said anything, and the silence went from uncertain to awkward.

“Okay,” Lucas said. “No one knows if this sucks or if it’s awesome, and no one wants to lead one way or the other so they don’t come off as stupid or rude. That about cover it?” He looked over his shoulder at the rest of them, then back at me and smiled. “So, yeah, there’s the elephant in the room, or in this case, the wolf.”

“Subtle,” Amanda said, her voice barely audible.

“I’m his best friend,” he said without missing a beat. “I have a little extra room to act dickish sometimes, without actually being dickish.”

“Lucas is right, Amanda,” I said. “But he’s not the only one who should be able to point out something like that. It does need to be addressed. Needs to be said out loud. I got bit. I’m turning, or, as Jerky McJerkwolf likes to say, I’m Ascending. I’m a werewolf. Or, I’m gonna be.”

“Are you okay with this, Chance?” Dr. C asked. “It means you’re going to lose your magick. That’s a big part of who you are.”

Hearing Dr. Corwin say it out loud made my stomach drop to my feet. As much as it meant Shade and I could be together without worrying about her losing control, and it meaning we had this in common, some part of me knew that the shine was eventually going to wear off. I tried to smile through it, but being a mage was...had been one of the best things in my life. I looked to Mom, remembering how I had used magick to help her and Deirdre. My gaze went to Lucas and Wanda, and the memory of all that we’d done together hit me even harder. Finally, I looked to Dr. C,

and the thought of not being his apprentice anymore felt like a kick in my gut. For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

"I'm trying not to think too hard about that, sir," I said. "It means I'm not going to be your..." I let the words trail off, unwilling to say it out loud.

"You won't stop being a part of my family, though," he said.

"Will my...will my memories fade?" I asked. "The ones I got from you?"

"I'm afraid your stuck with them," he said with a smile. "And the ones you got from Kim, too."

"Which means you *will* continue to train in my dojo," Kim said. Her words should have been stern, but the smile on her face took the edge off of her tone and made my insides feel kind of warm and fuzzy.

"Great," Amanda said with a tone dry enough to make me thirsty. "I've inherited a spiritual half-brother. Just remember, you're adopted."

"It's hard to tell when you're joking," I told her.

She came to the side of the bed and laid a hand on my shoulder. "I'm not very good at it. You helped me save my mother from the Yakuza. That alone makes you my brother. Whether I like you or not."

"And I still have no idea where I stand with you," I said.

"As it should be," she offered a hint of a smile and stepped back to stand by the door.

"So, seriously, you're going to lose your magick, but you're getting super-strength, senses and regeneration. All you need is some claws or a red costume and a pair of swords, and you're a superhero, dude." Lucas grinned at me, and I could see the effort he put into the smile, but I

could also hear the way his scent was losing the acrid bite that I somehow knew came from stress.

“Great, leave it to you to make it dorky,” Wanda said.

“He’s just thinking like a game master,” Monica said. She leaned closer and put her lips to Lucas’s ear. “Play your cards right, and you can be *my* master later on.” Lucas didn’t seem to react, but I could hear his heartbeat speed up, and see the slightest darkening of his cheeks. Monica licked his earlobe before she pulled away, and I wondered how Shade lived like this, knowing everyone’s secrets in spite of their best efforts. Lucas turned and spoke in a soft voice.

“Don’t make me spank you,” he said, almost under his breath. Monica’s eyes went a little wide, and Lucas got a smug grin on his face. “Score one for me,” he said to himself. Suddenly I understood the game they were playing. The objective seemed to be to get a reaction out of the other, without anyone knowing. Once again, I wondered how Shade kept her cool.

I realized Wanda had said something to me, and I looked her way. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get that.”

“Really?” she said, putting one hand on her hip. “You get super-hearing, and suddenly you act like you’re deaf?”

“It’s male super-hearing,” Amanda said. “It lets him ignore women better.”

“No, I keep hearing and smelling a thousand different things, it’s hard to keep track.” As I said it, I noticed the look Wanda snuck toward Amanda, and the scent of her got sharper in my nostrils, more musky.

“I was asking if they were letting you eat solid foods yet. You look like you’ve lost weight.”

“They’re bringing me something,” I said. “I hope it gets here soon, too. I’m starving.”

“At least that much stays the same, then.” Mom said. She started to say something else, but my nose picked up the scent of food, and my saliva glands went into overdrive. Seconds later, the nurse pushed a cart into the room with the promised four trays of food. For a few minutes, I wasn’t aware of much else except steak, hamburger and cheese. I devoured everything in front of me, even the vegetables. I stopped short of licking the tray, but it was tempting.

“Dude, you act like you haven’t eaten for a week,” Lucas said.

“I just healed seven years worth of broken bones and injuries,” I said. “Remember what it was like last time I did that?”

“You ate three or four of everything on the menu at Dante’s,” Wanda said. “Same principle, huh?”

“I guess so,” I said. “The energy has to come from somewhere.”

“No wonder Shade’s so...healthy,” Monica said. She looked down at her own full figure, and Lucas stepped in behind her.

“You’re my kind of beautiful, baby,” he whispered. “And don’t you forget it.” She took a sharp breath in and straightened slightly, and I could smell her arousal. But her heartbeat slowed, and she smiled contentedly, the stress in her posture gone.

I turned toward the door as two new scents came to my attention. One was Dr. Evans, the other was the nurse from my healing bout. Everyone turned toward the door, Kim and Amanda reaching behind their backs, Dr. C for his coat, and Lucas stepping in front of Monica and dropping his right hand toward his pocket. Wanda’s hand went to her pentacle, and Mom put her hand on my arm. My lips drew up at everyone’s reactions. I pitied anyone coming my way with ill

will. Even Death would have to wait at the end of a long line if my friends had it in for someone. By the same token, it was sobering that their first reaction was to get ready for trouble. Everyone relaxed a little when the doctor walked in.

“If I could ask for a little bit of privacy for my patient,” Evans said with a thin smile. “Visiting hours are ending for today, I think.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Dr. C said. Everyone else murmured something similar as they left, and in a few seconds, only Mom was beside me.

“I’m just going to take a little blood,” the nurse said, laying out paper wrapped medical things on the table next to my bed. Her name tag read Michaels, now that I could focus. She took my arm and swabbed the inside of my elbow, then pulled a needle from the array of instruments. Mentally bracing myself for the sting of the needle, it was almost disappointing when I barely felt the stick. When she pulled it out, though, I yelped as much in surprise as in pain.

“Shouldn’t it hurt more going in?” I asked.

“It’s a side effect of your new healing ability,” Nurse Michaels said. “Your body healed around the needle.” She dabbed at the spot, but only got a tiny drop of blood. “Less than one centimeter staining,” she turned and told the doctor.

“That’s good,” he smiled. “Well, Mr. Fortunato, you appear to be well past any physical crisis stage. You’re wounds are closing at an acceptable rate and your body has undergone the initial healing surge. You’re ready to be discharged. Mr. Kain has listed himself as your alpha, so as soon as he gets here, I can let you go.”

“My son is coming with me,” Mom said. Her tone was deceptively calm, and I recognized the same calculating

look on her face as I sometimes got when I was thinking of terrible things to do to someone.

“Miss Murathy,” Evans said, blinking. “Your son isn’t the same as he was two days ago. He needs guidance from an alpha. If you take him home with you, he would be a danger to your entire family. Himself included. It’s also not customary for a newly Ascended pack member to disobey an alpha’s wi-”

“I can handle my own son, doctor,” Mom said. “I am Mulani.” The doctor frowned at Mom in confusion but the nurse did a double take. She touched Evans arm to get his attention, and when he turned to her, she nodded.

“It goes against my better judgment, but I’ll let you take him home,” he said, casting another look at the nurse. “But once he leaves, we are not responsible for anything that happens.”

“I understand,” Mom said, her tone formal. “I accept it.”

“Then I’ll have the discharge papers drawn up, and you’re free to take him home.” They left the room, and I turned back to Mom.

“Are you sure, Mom?” I asked her. “I mean, I don’t think I’ll do anything but I don’t know what to expect. Kain my be a di...a jerk, but he knows what he’s doing.”

“Chance, you’re not going to hurt me or Deirdre,” Mom said. She went to the closet next to the door and pulled out some clothes, then brought them to the bed. “Just get dressed so we can get you out of here and back home.”

I slid out from under the sheets and got my pants and socks on under the hospital gown, then shucked it off and pulled the shirt over my head. When I was done, I turned to see Mom looking out the window. She turned back to me and led the way out of the room. The hallways were a tranquil green color that invited depression. There was brief

stop at the nurses desk to sign some paperwork, then were headed for the elevator. Wood paneling was a thin veneer over burnished steel, and we stepped on when the door slid open. Two floors passed with apathetic dings, then the doors rolled aside to let us out in the darkened lobby. The lone guard at the desk occupied the oasis of light just inside the doors, and he watched us as we walked past. My newly enhanced senses picked up his scent, a heavy smell that was not human. It took me a second to realize that he smelled a little bit like me. It made sense. Werewolves to protect other werewolves.

The glass revolving door pushed us out into the afternoon sun, and I was hit by a barrage of new scents. Car exhaust, a thousand different types of pollen, fresh cut grass, and cigarette smoke all hit my nose at once. My eyes watered from the intensity of it at the same time as my ears caught the sound of the whole city at once. The building must have been soundproofed, because it felt like I could hear every conversation in a one mile radius, every car, every radio, and every footstep. I stumbled, my senses overwhelmed.

Mom was at my side before I staggered two steps. "Chance, honey, what is it?" she caught me and held me upright.

"Too much," I hissed. "Noises, smells," I managed.

"Okay, just concentrate on the sound of my voice, son," she said. I shook my head and opened my eyes. I'd done this before, when Dulka had opened my Third Eye. I'd been unable to see the real world for days. Now I did what I'd been shown by a woman named Kari: I focused on the senses that I still had some control over. Concentrating on one voice in a storm of noise was almost impossible for me in a storm of noise because everything hit me at the same time. I could no more concentrate on Mom's voice than on

the squirrel darting through the bushes nearby or the car rumbling by a hundred yards away. I needed something that wasn't part of that to zero in on. Kari had been blind, and she had taught me to use my hearing to keep my bearings, my sense of touch to detect the air or temperature changes around me. The things I knew how to react to. So now, I stared at Mom's van.

With that to concentrate on, everything else faded away, and I could get my equilibrium back. I could listen for Mom's voice, her heartbeat, and ignore everything else. I could sift out everything but the smell of her shampoo and vanilla body spray and...gun oil. Footsteps, leather on concrete.

"Mom, get behind me," I said. My right arm went out and I tried to step in front of her. "Someone's coming." Being my Mom, she did exactly the opposite and stepped in front of me.

"This is my son," she said to the three men who approached us. "'You're not going to hurt him.'"

"You know the laws," the one in front of us pulled his jacket aside to reveal a holstered pistol. His two companions angled around to either side of us. All three shared Mom's olive skin tone and jet black hair. They wore slacks and blazers, which was a little odd for August. "Get on either side of him, but keep her out of the crossfire," he added.

"Better than you," Mom said back. It took me a second to realize that the leader's last comment had been in Romani. "And you're *not* going to hurt him." I heard metal on leather, and my brain honed in on the sound. I turned to my right and stared at the guy who thought he had the drop on us, his gun halfway out of his holster. He froze in place the second I turned my head.

"Don't," I said in English. No sense in letting them know I spoke Romani. I reached down and picked up a rock from

the decorative bed next to the sidewalk. "In my hands, this will hit you harder than a bullet." It was more than half bluff. I had no idea how strong I really was yet. Then again, neither did they.

"Come peacefully, and no one will get hurt," the man said, putting his hand to his jacket.

"We will," Mom told him. "If you let us." She tilted her head toward his hand, and he lowered it.

"We'll take your van," he said. Mom smiled and led the way to her minivan.

"Who are these guys?" I asked Mom when I caught up to her.

"Shut up!" one of our escorts snapped. Something hit me across the back of the head. Before I knew what I was doing, I had him by the wrist, with his arm in a painful joint lock, and my left hand was pulling back from a strike. The guy who hit me was gasping and clutching at his throat with his free hand. I heard metal clear leather, and I dropped to one knee. My left hand snapped forward, and the rock I'd picked up flew at the other guy who had tried to flank us. It struck him in the cheek and knocked him to the ground. The leader spun and drew his pistol, but I was faster. My guy's gun was in my hand and pointed at the leader before he had turned around.

"Put your gun away," Mom said, pointing at the Romani. She stepped in front of me, and I lowered the pistol. "You too, Chance," she added. I tossed the gun aside.

"He attacked my men," he said.

"Your men attacked *him*. You're lucky he didn't kill both of them. I told you we would come peacefully if you let us." The Romani leader lowered his pistol and called to his men. I let mine go so he could get to his feet.

“Go with the others,” he said in Romani. “I will go with them.” The other two men trotted off, then the leader holstered his pistol and motioned toward Mom’s van with his left hand. He took the back seat, and I was pretty sure he had his hand on his pistol from the second I got in the passenger seat beside Mom. He gave terse directions that led us north of town. In the rearview mirror, I could see two cars behind us. We ended up turning west a few miles past the city limits, which put me in unfamiliar territory. Almost every time I’d gone north of Diamond Lake, I’d ended up on the east side of the highway. The sun was low in the sky when we pulled into an open lot in front of an empty building. RVs, campers and tents were set in a rough circle. Our guide pointed us to a spot near a gap in the circle, and Mom parked.

He led us through the middle of the camp. Men and women in jeans and t-shirts looked up from whatever they were doing, eyeing us every step of the way. A mix of music came from radio speakers, rock trying to overpower country and jazz. We circled around a smoldering fire pit made of a fifty-five gallon drum sawed in half and folded open like a clamshell. At the back, we came upon a large RV set back a little from the rest of the circle, so that the two campers flanking it made up the sides of an impromptu courtyard. The RV had an awning covering the area beside it, with a shade fly added to that. A white haired man with a tanned, weathered face sat at a folding table that held a chess board and two brown bottles. A younger man sat across from him, both men intent on their game.

For a couple of minutes, neither man spoke nor moved. Then the older man reached out and moved the white knight to take a black rook. The younger man’s face fell, and he reached for a piece on the board but the older man raised one hand to stop him.

“Don’t make the move yet. Make it in your head, then look at what you would do if you were on this side of the board. I have business to see to. Come back a little later. We’ll continue then.” The younger man got up and walked past us, his gaze on us until he passed.

“Teaching chess?” Mom asked.

“Patience,” the older man said. “Something you never learned.”

“You never set a very good example,” Mom said. “So I had to learn it from others. But I didn’t call you to teach me patience, father. Or to go over my many, many failings.”

“Then why did you call me?”

Mom stepped forward and gestured at me. “To help your grandson. He’s been bitten.”

“I have no grandson,” the old man said. “You gave birth to a *gadje* child. He is not Roma.”

“And you wonder why I never learned anything from you,” Mom spat. I shook my head and went to her side.

“Wait,” I put my hand on her shoulder. “This is your father?”

“Unfortunately,” she said. “He’s what passes for one, at least.”

The old man...her father...stood and walked over to her. He was taller than she was by a few inches. He looked her in the eye, then brought his hand up and slapped her.

“You will show me respect, girl,” he said. “I am still your father, and you are still my daughter.”

“No,” Mom said with her hand on her cheek. “You might be related to me, but being a father? That’s more than just blood. That’s something you earn. You want my respect? Then *be* a father. Be a grandfather to my son. Help him. Help us!”

“He is *gadjje*,” the guy who led us there said. “There is no help for him here.”

“Do you speak for the entire clan, then?” Mom asked. “Do you speak for him?” She pointed at her father.

“He doesn’t speak for us,” another man said. Several older men and women had come up behind us, and in the gathering gloom, they were little more than shadows against the backdrop of the camp.

“But he does speak the same words. There is no help for your son here.”

“Then why did you even bother to come here?” Mom asked. The shadowy elders stepped closer, and her father turned toward me.

“Because the creature must be destroyed,” he said. “It’s bad enough that you mix Mulani blood with *gadjje*, but then to let him take the curse of the wolf...he is a stain on our clan’s name.”

“Who is going to judge you? You are Mulani, Ghost Clan. The other clans don’t even know you exist. You’re whoever you need to be, you use whatever name you need. Kale, Kalderash, Romanichal, or Boyash.” Mom stepped up close to her father and put her finger in the middle of his chest. “It isn’t your honor that got bruised. It’s your pride. And it isn’t worth my son’s life.”

“It isn’t up to you to decide, Mara,” another elder said. Mom whirled to face the man, then started walking toward him.

“I’m his mother,” she hissed. “He’s not your child and according to you, he’s not clan, thank the Goddess. He’s *my* son, *my* blood, and his fate is *not* for you to decide.”

“Arrogant child,” an old woman said. “You can’t stop us.”

“I don’t need to,” Mom said. “But, you can try. You might even succeed. But know this. If you do try, my son and I will not be facing you alone. We have friends and allies. And if you try, whether you succeed or not, we will come for you, and when we find you...and we *will find you*... you will all take a *long* time dying.”

“You would threaten the clan?” her father growled.

“No, father,” Mom said, turning to face him. Her words came slow as she walked back toward him. “You threatened the life of my child. I’m just advising patience. Make the move in your head, then look at what you would do if you were on my side of the board. Now, if I were you, I would leave. Another country would be wise. Probably another continent. Come on, Chance. We are leaving.” Mom turned her back on her father and walked past me.

“Mara, wait,” her father said. “Please.” Mom stopped, then turned to look over her shoulder at him.

“Talk fast,” she said. He reached behind his back and drew a revolver, reversing it so he was holding it by the cylinder with the barrel pointing at him, the butt proffered to Mom.

“Take this, Mara” he said, walking toward her. “It’s only a matter of time before someone has to put him down. If you love him, then it’s best that you be the one who does what needs to be done.”

Mom took the gun and looked down at it. “One day, both my son and I will stand in front of you and prove you wrong.”

“No, you won’t,” he said. “You will end up pulling that trigger, Mara.”

“If I do, I’m not just pulling it once.” We walked away, and I could hear my grandfather calling Mom’s name behind us.

“It’s weird,” I told her as we got to the van. “I still don’t know his name, and I honestly don’t know if I want to.”

“I won’t burden you with it,” Mom said.

Chapter 5

~ *Knowledge comes at a price.* ~
Saying among wizards

Shade wasn't answering her phone, and her texts were sending back autoreplies. Without her, I wasn't fit company for anyone else. Even Dee had avoided me except to give me a good night hug and kiss. So, I was sitting alone outside my window, looking out over the street. Moping. The moon was still a few days from full, and I didn't feel the need to howl at it or watch it or anything.

I also didn't feel like sitting around.

My feet hit the front lawn. My body went into a roll, but my legs were telling me I didn't need to shed the momentum. I had handled the jump from the roof to the ground easily. I still didn't know much about my limits, and now seemed like a good time to test them. I took off at a run. My stride lengthened as I gained speed, and in seconds I was moving faster than I ever thought I could. I got to the end of the block, and jumped across the street. This time I didn't try to roll. Instead, I kept running. Another block went by, and another, and suddenly I was standing in the middle of a park. My breath was coming a little fast, and a fine sheen of sweat covered my forehead, but I wasn't tired. Running felt...good. I wondered why I'd never realized how much fun it could be.

The first spasm caught me off-guard and doubled me over. The second brought me to my knees. I clawed at my shirt, feeling confined and hot by the fabric against my fur. *Fur?* The offending garment came free, and I ran one hand down my chest and stomach. My fingertips met thick fur. Another convulsion ripped through me, tearing a cry from

my throat. My bones felt like they were breaking, my insides felt like they were turning inside out. I held my arm up and watched in horror and fascination as my skin split and twisted, revealing a new shaped to my hand and forearm. My fingers elongated and the tips tore open to let out inch long claws while my legs bent and twisted in strange ways. The world around me turned brighter, but got a little flat. Then I felt my face start to shift. My nose and chin started to jut forward and my face felt like there was a vice against my cheeks. The pain faded slowly, at least to me, and I found myself lying on my side on the grass. Everything felt wrong, out of place, and I found myself wishing Dr. C had covered transformation magick with me.

Come to me, I heard in my head. I started to tell the voice where it could stick that idea, but after a second, it seemed like the only thing that made sense. The voice in my head was calling, and if I went to it, everything would be okay. Everything would make sense. My pack was waiting for me.

I tried to get up, and pushed off with my hands...no..feet? Front feet, then back feet. I stumbled to one side, then fell. Next time, I planted my front feet wide and got my butt in the air before I tried to balance. Then I had to figure out walking.

Trust yourself, the voice said. *Trust the Wolf within you*. The urge to run hit, and I let myself do it. Instead of face-planting, my feet moved on their own, and I flew across the park, the grass tickling my paws, wind in my nose and fur. I was free, and I wanted to thank my Alpha for the gift he'd given me. So I ran until I reached the edge of the park, and leaped the fence into the cemetery. I crossed it, the smell of death and undeath a foul layer in the air. I jumped the chain link fence at the edge and hit the ground on the other side, knowing only that I had to head west. The smell of water touched my senses, and I angled toward it. I splashed along

the bed of a stream, wishing for the clean smell of runoff, of the scent of snow from the mountains, of rain and pollen, of animal musk and dirt, not the stagnant muck that was lining this streambed. My wolf drew up short at the square concrete opening that I found myself in front of. I didn't blame the wolf in me for stopping. I look back at the sky, then at the square of black in front of me. To go in there was to go into the places of Man. It was to abandon freedom for safety. Even the lowliest free Wolf was stronger than an Alpha sitting at the foot of Man.

The inky darkness in front of me moved, took form, and a massive wolf stalked into the light before me. Gray fur covered his top half, with white making a V between his front legs. Easily twice my size, his appearance was a message all by itself. Inside that darkness might be a place built by Man, but we were still wolves. Men would still fear us. He stood there, looking out into the night, seeing something beyond me, a majestic Alpha revealed in all his glory. His eyes fell to me, and he turned to walk back into the darkness. I followed, lured by the promise of the Pack.

The smell of stagnant water, wet earth and mold accompanied us through the tunnel, until the passage widened into a large, circular chamber. Work lights on the walls lit the place, leaving six shadowed tunnels at even intervals. I smelled humans nearby, and looked to the shadows. Before I could give more than a cursory search, though, the Alpha was on me, trying to get his teeth on my neck. My wolf recognized it as a play for dominance, and wanted to submit, but I was still human enough that I resisted. Only one wolf got to put her teeth to my throat.

I snarled and nipped at his nose then backed away, my hackles up. He lunged at me, barking loud and snapping, so I nipped at his nose again, this time drawing blood. He drew back, then arched his back. Bones popped and his flesh flowed, his arms getting short, his legs getting longer and

his face drawing in to look a little more human. The white fur made a long V from his shoulders to his hips, emphasizing how broad he was across the chest. Undaunted by his superior size and obvious strength, I looked up at him in his hybrid form and bared my teeth again.

“Obey!” he yelled, and I felt my will start to crack under the strength of his command. I growled at him, a deep rumbling in my chest. I wanted to rip his throat out, and I gathered my back legs beneath me to leap at him. Before I could move, he stepped toward me and threw a low punch that caught me in the chest and threw me backward. With the contact from his fist, a surge of something dark and primal hit me, and I felt myself transform. Between the moment he hit me and the moment I smacked into the wall, I went from wolf to human again. My back and head impacted with the stone, and I saw stars as I bounced off the wall. The rebound brought me to my hands and knees, and Alpha came at me again.

“Submit, damn you!” he yelled. His foot came forward, but I was already rolling to the outside of the attack. With his left foot in the air, it was easier to spin around and kick his other leg out from beneath him. But he managed to turn a fall into an attack, and I had to throw my feet back over my head to dodge the elbow he tried to drop on me. The move turned into a backwards somersault, and I came to my feet with my hands up.

As ready as I thought I was, he moved so fast my defense might as well have been an invitation. By the time I registered that he was back on his feet, he had hit me twice with rapid jabs, his form flawless and his speed impossible to match. The shots staggered me, and he followed up with a series of powerful body blows, then an uppercut that knocked me off my feet and onto my back. Then he was on me again, too fast and too strong to resist. Another wave of dominating willpower struck me, overwhelming me to the

point that my anger died. His hand at my throat was just a little bit of insult to injury. The will to fight, the desire to hurt him just drained from me, and I let my arms go limp.

“Submit,” he growled at me.

“Okay,” I said. “You win.”

“I am Alpha,” he said. “I always win.” He looked up and said, “The rest of you, come into the light.” Footsteps announced six more people coming into the chamber.

“We came, Alpha,” one of them said.

“Why?” Alpha demanded.

“To ask for the gift of Ascension.”

“To be like you.”

“To become werewolves.”

“To be bitten.”

“To ask for the gift of lycanthropy.”

“To be strong like you.”

Alpha stood, taking his knee off my chest. He looked around the chamber, then went to the ledge that circled the room. He gestured for the others to come closer, and they shuffled past me. They were all pretty similar. All in the same demographic, white teenage male. Three of the six wore all black, two of the others wore logo shirts. One had a superhero on his chest, the other one had a Batman logo on his shirt. The third guy wore a blue Polo shirt and khaki pants. They ranged in height, but they hit one of two extremes. Either unremarkably average, or chubby. Only the Polo wearing guy seemed more than average looking, and he didn't seem to think much of his fellow aspirants.

“What do you think you saw here tonight?” he asked with a wave of his hand toward me as I was getting to my feet.

“You totally powned that beta loser,” one of the black wearing guys said in a grating voice.

“Beta?” another one, this one wearing heavy boots and black leather wristbands said. His hair was pulled back in a thick ponytail. “He’s a gamma, at best. You showed him what real power is.”

“Are you ready to learn the same lesson, then?” Alpha asked. They shuffled a little, eyes down on the floor. “I didn’t think so. Let me tell you what you really saw. You saw Chance there earn his place in this pathetic excuse for a pack. Like you, he knows I am stronger than he is. He knows he can’t beat me. But he still fought. He didn’t back down until I made him. You came here to ask for something, to *ask* me to make you all alphas. Lesson one: an alpha. Does. Not. Ask! He commands, or he takes what he wants. He doesn’t sit around being nice to a woman, he shows her his strength, and he lets her know how things are going to be. He only submits to greater power, and even then, he makes sure it’s earned. So, you got one part almost right. You came and submitted to my power. But, you didn’t make me earn it. Now, you must show that you at least have the potential to be part of my pack. An alpha isn’t ruled by the weakness of others. He doesn’t let pity sway him. An alpha knows he has to kick his enemy when he’s down, sacrifice a friend to win. An alpha leads because he knows how to be ruthless in order to survive. So, there is your own pack mate, weakened, beaten. If you want to be a member of this pack...kick him while he’s down. Attack him. Hurt him. Show no mercy.” The floor reverberated with the sound of their shoes as they rushed me. I managed to roll onto my side, but beyond that, all I was able to do was curl up into a fetal position. Feet slammed into my back, my face, and fell on my ribs. I heard bones snap, and felt the pain in a disconnected place.

I came to slowly, painfully, to the all-too-familiar sound of bone grating as it shifted back into place to heal. My eyes were swollen almost all the way shut, and I could only see through slits. Every inch of me hurt, and I felt something thick and crusty on my face. Blackened flakes of dried blood stuck to my hands when I reached up and touched my forehead. My movements were slow, and every inch cost me in pain. But with each passing second, the pain faded, and I felt the swelling in my face go down. I still groaned when I could sit back up. Alpha sat on the low ledge beside me, still in hybrid form.

“Well done, beta,” Alpha said.

“Piss off, asshole,” I muttered.

“Take your victories where you can, Chance,” he said. “You’ve proven worthy to be my beta. You’ll never be an alpha, which means you’ll never be worthy of Shade.”

“She doesn’t see it that way,” I said through swollen lips.

“Kain will show her the truth. And she’ll see that she was wasting herself on you. It’s only a matter of time before she realizes she deserves a better man. And when she does, I’ll be there to show her what that looks like. God knows that idiot Sinbad hasn’t taught her anything worthwhile.”

“Sinbad is cool,” I said. Alpha brought the back of his hand across my cheek.

“He’s weak!” Flecks of spit hit my skin. “I don’t want to hear his name again. At least...at least Kain will show her how a real alpha acts. He can see true power when it’s in front of him. But you...you’ll never be worthy of her. The best you can hope for is this.”

“I’d rather eat a silver bullet,” I growled.

“But I won’t let you. You’ll come around. In time, you’ll see the truth. You’ll be doing her a favor by letting her go. At

least you can serve an alpha who is worthy of her.”

“Oh, yeah, there’s a comforting thought,” I said. The pain had receded to the point where I could get to my feet, even if I wasn’t very fast about it.

“It will be,” he said. “Now, go home, little beta. Keep this between us.” He waved his hand at me, and I was on the floor, my body changing again. The wolf in me seemed stronger this time, and I could feel that it knew where I was supposed to go. It was a good thing that some part of me did, because I was still having a hard time adjusting.

The run home got harder and harder to focus on, and at some point, I stopped being able to. All I knew was that I was naked and lying on cold concrete when I was able to think clearly again. And even that only came in short bursts. I rolled onto my back and looked at the wooden ceiling above me, and recognized my own back porch. For a long moment, that was the most fascinating thing in the world to me. Then I was looking up at a pair of lavender eyes with a purple blur in the background. Moments, or was it days, later, I heard Mom’s voice in my ear. Then Dr. C and Kim hovered over me.

“It was little more than a matter of time,” I heard Kim say. “It was his first transformation. He should have been allowed time to adapt, to learn how his new form worked. Instead, it appears that he overdid things.” My eyes opened on the room I usually stayed in at Dr. C’s place. Kim stood at the door with him and Dee, her hand on my sister’s shoulder.

“That sounds like Chance. Don’t just do it, overdo it.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I said. My stomach rumbled when I sat up, an empty pit below my rib cage.

“What happened?” Dr. C asked.

"I...It was..." The words died behind my lips. "I'm really hungry," I said after a few moments.

"Are you okay?" Dee asked, coming to my side. She knelt beside me and put her arms around my shoulders, and I realized they had put me on the floor. I hugged her back, gently.

"I'm okay," I told her. "I'm just really, really hungry right now." I got to my feet, and found it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be.

"Come on," Dr. C said. "You woke up in time for lunch."

"I smell steak," I said, following him downstairs. "And bratwurst and... cheeseburgers."

"Kim warned me you'd wake up hungry," he said. "And I've seen you eat your way through an entire menu before. So, I made sure there was plenty." He led me out through the kitchen door to the picnic table in the yard. Potato salad, baked beans and coleslaw rounded out the barbeque feast on the checkered tablecloth. To my senses, it was as delicious to smell as it was to eat. And I ate...and ate. It seemed like my body used the food almost as fast as I could shovel it in. It wasn't until I had gone through more than half of what was on the table that I started to feel full.

I was finishing off a bratwurst when two new scents hit my nose. One was Shade, the other was Kain. Both of them smelled of sweat and lust. I turned toward them.

"I see you've completed your first transformation," Kain said. "You should have waited for me to show you how to do it right." He was shaking his head as he came toward me. He opened his mouth to say something else, but I spoke first.

"*Ictus!*" I snarled. The first bolt barely budged him, so I tried again. "*Ictus!*" The second knocked him off his feet, but it didn't send him nearly as far as it should have. I

stepped away from the table and reached into my pocket for a touchstone, drawing on its power as I got ready to hit him again. He leaped into the air, his fist drawn back, teeth bared. I set myself and brought up a full strength shield. "*Obex!*"

His punch shattered the barrier and drove me to my knees. Reeling, I tried to focus for another attack, but he backhanded me and sent me crashing into the porch. Then he was on me again, and I was in the air, his hand around my neck.

"Never try that again, boy," he said. He shifted and slammed me to the ground, then stood back. I gasped and moaned. "You will treat me proper respect, or you will suffer the consequences. Am I understood, young man?"

Shade was at my side as he started talking. She helped me sit up, then looked at my jaw. "Are you okay, baby?" she asked.

I nodded, then turned back to Kain. "You should have been there last night. I needed help, and you just left me on my own. Where the hell were you?"

"Do not question me-" Kain started, but Shade turned on him.

"He's right, Jacob," she spat. "I'm an alpha and I've been doing this for years. Last night's hunt and the lecture could have waited. It was Chance's first night after Ascension. He needed us more than I needed your guidance."

"He took too long to recover," Kain said. "His first transformation should be tonight or tomorrow night. There is no way it would have happened so fast on its own." He came to me and pulled me to my feet. When I was standing, he looked down at my arm, then back up at me. "What's this?" he asked, turning my hand to show the inside of my

forearm. Dark purple bruising had faded to pale yellow and green under my skin.

“I was...I ...” Again the words refused to come, and Kain tilted his head to the side. I felt a strange warmth pass through me, then it was gone.

“You were forced,” he said. “Only a very powerful alpha could have done this. They forced you to change...more than once... and you were beaten. Severely. On top of all of that, your new alpha compelled you not to talk about it.”

“Chance, nod if that’s what happened,” Dr. C said. My head bobbed up and down, and I let out a relieved sigh.

“How did you do that?” Kain demanded. “He shouldn’t have been able to counter an alpha’s command like that.”

“It’s a wizard thing,” Dr. Corwin said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” Kain said. Shade pulled me to the side, her musk getting stronger the longer we were together.

“I want you so bad right now,” she whispered when we rounded the corner of the house. I took her in my arms and kissed her, trying to say the same thing with the kiss instead of repeating what she’d just said. She held me tight, kissing back just as eagerly.

“Shade! Chance! Get back here!” Kain’s voice cut through our bubble of bliss.

“Asshole,” we muttered together. Shade smiled at me and giggled.

“Come on, we better get back before his highness starts doing more than yelling,” she said. She pulled away and took my hand, tugging me after her with a smile that promised to finish what we’d started. We walked back to the adults hand in hand. Dr. C and Kim smiled when we came

around the corner, but Kain's face went dark. He came up to us and shoved us apart.

"This isn't the time to be playing kissy-face and grab-ass," he said, turning to Shade. "You have responsibilities to something other than your crotch, girl. And you need to be setting a good example for how an alpha should be treated, even by an equal."

"I'm not one to kiss ass," Shade said.

"You don't have to like me or agree with me, but I *am* an alpha, and you do not set the kind of example you just set for a lesser pack member. Now, get out of here. I need to start teaching Chance here how to behave." Shade glared at him, but kissed me and headed for her bike. "You, come with me. It's time you learned how a real pack works." He headed for his bike, and all I could do was follow, since my car was back at the house, as far as I knew.

"Chance," Dr. C called after me. I stopped to let him catch up. He gestured, and the air was filled with a low buzz while he stepped around in front of me, putting his back to Kain. "Be careful. Your magick is getting weaker. You can't rely on it any more."

"I'm starting to develop other gifts," I said.

"I know, but you still need to learn how to use them. Look, I don't exactly...trust Kain. He's got another agenda here."

"He's not the one you need to worry about," I said softly. Dr. C nodded and smiled, then patted me on the shoulder and moved out of the way.

"Corwin was trying to sow distrust, wasn't he?" Kain asked when he tossed me a simple bowl helmet. "Trying to tell you I was up to something, isolate you from your support as a Were'."

“Not your business,” I growled. “It was between a master and an apprentice.”

“You don’t keep things from your alpha, boy,” he said. He started the bike and gestured for me to get on.

“You’re not my alpha,” I said as I climbed on behind him. He pulled away from the curb and headed east, until we were circling the edge of the lake going north, through the country club section and the marinas where the big, fancy boats waited for their owners to come play on them. Once we cleared the weekend condos and high end tourist traps, we were heading northwest, into the national forest. Kain took a side road that was marked with an old sign that read “Nevada 2” in white on a brown background. We drove past side streets full of overgrown yards and abandoned houses, and turned onto a four lane road that ran between old brick buildings. My hackles went up, and my mystic senses started a buzzing in my head as we headed further west. Dark magick permeated the area ahead, even my dulled perceptions could tell that. The town was too quiet, not even the sound of birds reached my ears. Kain turned south, and the harsh sensation fell to the edge of my senses. He turned left, past a sign that read “Radio Springs Park.”

We stopped in the open area of the park, and I pushed myself off the back of his bike. Even this far away from the source of whatever darkness permeated the town, the place felt oppressive. The air was heavy, the silence almost a feeling of sound being absorbed more than absent. I took my helmet off and set it on the back of the bike, then looked around. Nothing felt right here. Kain set his helmet on the handlebars and got off the bike to face me.

“Who is your alpha?” Kain asked. I looked at him and struggled with how to reply. The part of me that had been Dulka’s slave for eight years wanted to say no one, but the wolf in me knew who it was subject to, and couldn’t answer

the question. "Oh, that's right, you can't talk about that. But you do recognize that you have one. And don't worry, we'll fix that whole issue with the alpha who turned you. But here is what you need to remember. First, there is a hierarchy in a pack, one that you are at the bottom of now. You are no longer Shade's equal. None of the pack is, save me."

"And Sinbad," I said.

"Maybe," Kain shrugged. "I'm sure now that Shade is stronger than he is, and I know I am. He's been struggling to keep her under his thumb these past two years or so, trying to pair her with lesser betas and cuckolded alphas in order to keep her in line. Either way, that isn't your concern. You are, at best, a gamma in the structure of the pack. And the absolute best you can hope for is to end up as a weak beta. Still far from ever being in her league, as far as real power is concerned."

"I don't do well with authority," I said. "And Shade had no problem with dating a mage."

"That's because she could overlook your weakness while that's all you were," Kain said. "She could ignore her true destiny without doing much harm to her pack while you were outside the structure of it. But now, you're subject to the same laws she is, and an alpha only mates with another alpha. You will only make her look weak, Chance. And that will end up hurting her. It will probably end up getting her killed. She won't be able to lead effectively if she has to protect you all the time, and she'll never command the respect of other, more powerful pack members if she's with you."

"They already respect me," I said. "And I've already killed an alpha. I can take care of myself, and so can Shade. Why is it everyone's so dead set against us being together?"

Kain's answer was a casual backhand that sent me flying back several yards. I hit the ground and skidded across the turf on my back. When I came to a stop, Kain was already hurtling through the air toward me. I rolled to the side and came to my feet, but I wasn't fast enough. A second backhand sent me flying again, but this time, I was ready and stuck the landing. Kain flew overhead, and I jumped up, then spun in a sideways roundhouse that should have sent him flying. It connected and knocked him off his trajectory, but he landed on his feet. I ducked under the flying kick and rolled in his direction, coming up under the punch he threw. He brought his knee up, and I kicked it aside at the same time I thrust my fists forward. The double punch caught him in the chest and staggered him.

The next thing I knew, I was on my knees, my skull pounding from a new assault, this one in my head. An immensely powerful will hammered at mine, seeking to overcome me by sheer force. I started to fight against it, only to face a new attack from Kain. I blocked the first few punches before I realized what was going on, but suddenly, I found myself overwhelmed, my will battered. The next punch connected, hard, and I hit the ground again. The shock stunned me, and in the next moment, my will crumbled, and I was on my hands and knees, my wolf whimpering in my head and begging me to stop. I would never beat Kain like this, he was too strong, both mentally and physically. The realization was like a relief. There was no shame in it, in knowing what was true. In understanding that he was right.

I shook my head. I knew mind control when I felt it, and the change was too quick. It didn't feel right. Still, I knew I wasn't going to win against him. That part was right.

"Submit to me," Kain demanded.

“Shut the hell up,” I said. I turned my head so I could look up at him. “And get out of my head!” I closed my mental shields up again.

“You dare!” he said.

“Yeah, I dare, and I won’t stop. I had a fucking demon rooting around in my head for years. If this is how you run things, you’re no better than he was, and I will do everything I can to kill you.” The assault in my head stopped, and Kain straightened.

“That’s more like it,” he said.

“Don’t give me some bullshit about this being a test,” I said, getting to my feet. Kain’s punch slammed me back down.

“It wasn’t a test, it was a lesson,” he said. “You saw how easily I beat you. And I was holding back. Another alpha won’t. You may have the respect of Shade’s pack, but you haven’t earned anyone else’s, least of all mine. Without a powerful enough alpha at her side to protect her, she is going to face challenge after challenge, and the first one is going to come right after they kill you to prove how weak you were. The best thing you can do is to be the one to walk away. Because you can think what you want, but I just proved that you can’t do anything to back it up. If you say anything about this to Shade, you’re going to look weak to her, and prove that you’re not worthy of her. It’s better for you to be the one to walk away, so she can at least remember you being strong.”

“Is that why you brought me out here?” I said. “To tell me I have to break up with Shade?” I got to my feet, my movements slow.

“No, I brought you out here to teach you to control your change, but I see you aren’t ready for anything of substance. You’re still clinging to your pride, so you’re not

ready to listen to your betters. And as much as you think you're in love with Shade, the truth you're not ready to accept is that you're letting your crotch call the shots here." He went back to his bike and grabbed his helmet, then straddled it and put it on. I started to follow, but he turned to me and pointed a finger in my direction. "If you can't accept the truth, you're on your own. So find your way home without me, boy." He gunned the bike and took off.

"Asshole!" I yelled after him while he roared away. I watched him ride out of the park, then started walking. If he was waiting for me to break down and beg for his help, he was in for a long wait. Besides, I'd gone further with less before. Dr. Corwin had started me on a fitness regimen a couple of years ago, the whole fit mind in a fit body approach, and if I was in decent shape before, I was a freaking werewolf now. If you have the time, pretty much everywhere is walking distance, or, in my case, running distance. I took off at a jog, my route already set in my head. I knew I could probably make it home at a full run, or, if I knew how to change, I could turn into a wolf and get there even faster.

Since I was out in the middle of nowhere, I figured I might as well test my speed and endurance, even if I couldn't go furry at will yet. I picked up my pace once I made it to the entrance to the park and went all out, to see how far I could go before I had to take a breather. Less than ten minutes later, I was passing the two mile marker sign for Nevada, and I was only just starting to feel the strain. I went from a dead on sprint to a more sustainable run, and realized that I was probably still moving about as fast as a normal person could sprint. Less than half an hour later, I was in the yacht and condo district, and looking at the ferry that plied the tourist crowd. It made regular runs across Diamond Lake, every half hour. The ferry was just pulling away from the dock, and everyone was looking forward,

listening to the tour guide extol the wonders of the lake and New Essex. If I was a normal person, I would have been stuck, with the ferry almost twenty feet away from the dock. But just then, I wasn't normal, not by a long shot. I could make that jump, I was sure of it.

Before I could doubt myself, I was running toward the edge of the dock, then I was in the air, flying across now twenty-five feet over the cold blue water of the lake. But my wolf had been the one to make the jump, and mid flight, I realized I was leading with my hands. Then my palms were making contact with the railing and pushing me upward so my feet could plant on the rail beside them and push off so that I bounded forward again in a low, flat dive that brought me to the deck right in front of a bench. Instinctively, I rolled under the bench and pushed myself to stand, coming to a stop two feet behind the crowd of rapt tourists as they listened to the guide go on about Hamblin Tower. My heart was pounding in my chest, and there was a light sheen of sweat on my forehead, but more than that, I was grinning like an idiot. Looking back at the widening gap between the dock and the ferry, the only thing I could think was that I was gloriously alive!

For the rest of the ride, I stayed at the bow, enjoying the wind on my face, the new scents and the sensation of movement. When the boat docked at the downtown marina, I was the first off, heading for the elevated train. An easy fifteen foot jump brought me to the roof of the awning over the platform. When the train started to move, I jumped to the roof of the last car and grabbed the edge of the vent on the top. Then the train got moving, and I just ducked my head down next to my arm and held on until the train got to the stop I needed.

The biggest way the transit authority kept people from doing exactly what I was doing was by making the tops of the cars almost impossible for normal people to get onto,

and equally difficult for them to get off those cars without being seen. But for me, the top of the awning at the next station was in easy reach, and I slid down the arched side until I was walking down the angled support beam.

It was another two or three miles to get home, and I made it to the back gate in under twenty minutes. I let myself in the back door, grabbed last night's leftovers from the fridge as I went through the kitchen, and bounded up the stairs to my room. My backpack and my keys were still on my desk, and I grabbed my dark phone from its hiding place in my closet. The message light was blinking when I pulled the flat black phone from its spot. I used my fingerprint to open it, and found Shade's text waiting for me.

>> Shade: Where are you? Are you okay?>>

My fingers danced across the glass.

<<Me: I'm fine. Just got home. Grabbing my keys and stuff. Kain is a dick.<<

>> Shade: He said you'd say that. Why did you take off? He said he would have given you a ride home.>>

<<Me: I took off? He's the one who took off. He left me in Nevada, told me I was on my own!!!<<

>>Shade: We need to sit down and talk about this, baby. Meet me at Dante's?

<<Me: Be there in a little bit. Miss you. Want you.<<

>>Shade: Miss you, too. See you soon.>>

By then I was out the front door, and I stopped in my tracks, staring at the screen. Shade usually ended our texts with "Love you." This time, that was missing. I sat there, staring at the screen, waiting for the words to pop up, trying to will them into existence. Not daring to be the one to say them first. Kain's words bored into my skull. I'd look weak if I

dropped the words first, trying to get her to say them back. Shade needed me to be strong, she'd said that the first time things went rocky with us. She needed someone to be in charge sometimes, to be an alpha to her, so she didn't have to be the big wolf all the time.

The first sign I was in danger was the sharp sting at my neck. Only when I looked up did the scent of other people register. The world started to go fuzzy for a moment, but I fought it off and tried to focus on my phone. More by muscle memory, I closed the text page and tapped the round, red icon on my screen. It turned into a red three, then two, then one and disappeared.

"Okay phone," I said, my words coming too slow. "Call Mom." I hit the grass after that, unable to move, barely able to make out sounds.

"Get the phone," I heard a voice say. "And help me get him in his car." The last thing I was aware of for a while was being picked up.

Chapter 6

~ The teacher who does not learn from the student is no teacher. ~

Proverb among Chinese mages

I woke up quickly, which was new. I'd been knocked out more times than glass-jawed boxer, so I knew a few things about regaining consciousness. Usually, it wasn't a quick thing. And usually, I spent a little more time being confused and disoriented. Evidently, my new condition meant I woke up fast. And alert. My eyes opened and I knew right where I was. The smell of woodsmoke, the spices in the air and the scent of the people around me all told me I was not far from the Mulani camp. I was stripped to the waist and my hands were chained over my head to the pole I was leaning up against.

"I am sorry it must come to this," my grandfather said from behind me. "But we will spare your mother the worst of it."

"That's real nice of you," I said.

"As far as she will know, you just disappeared tonight, running away to spare her the pain of having to kill you, and to spare yourself the fear of accidentally hurting her or your sister. Your body will never be found, and you will die with a clean conscience."

"I thought you were smarter than this, grandfather," I said.

"Your mother is Roma," he said from behind me. "She knows what we must do. But she refuses to see what must be done. But, it's understandable. You are her son. If it was her..."

"If it was her, you'd probably tell her it was for her own good right before you pulled the fucking trigger," I snarled, turning to face him. He stood there, out of easy reach, with a revolver in one gnarled hand. He shuffled his feet a little, the soles of his work boots scraping against the asphalt.

“You’d justify it in your head and never look back, you heartless bastard.”

“Never!” he yelled, walking up and bringing the pistol across my cheek. “She is clan! She’s my blood!”

“So is he!” Mom’s voice carried across the pavement. We both turned to see her walking across the parking lot toward us. Behind her, Mulani were emerging from the camp and heading toward us. Mom’s van was parked midway between where I was and the camp. I looked around and saw that I’d been chained to a metal pole that had supported a chain link fence once upon a time. We were near the edge of the open lot, not far from the trees.

“Mara,” the old man said, suddenly sounding less than sure of himself. He turned and pointed the pistol at me, but Mom pushed him to the ground and went to stand in front of me. He stood and raised the gun again.

“You’re going to have to go through me to get to my son,” she said, her tone hard as iron.

“You would really die...for this?” he demanded, gesturing with the barrel of the gun.

“Without hesitation,” Mom said. Dee ran up beside her and grabbed her hand.

“Why, Mara?” he asked. “Why do you choose this...thing, this *gadje* over your own blood?”

“Because you tried to *make* me choose you over my son. And when it comes to my kids, I will always choose them first.”

“*Gadje* know nothing of honor, Mara,” he said. “Nothing of loyalty. He is his father’s creature. He will turn on you. They all do. Just like you turned on me.”

“My son has risked his life to save me, to save his sister. More than once. He’s killed to protect us. I know my son

would sacrifice his own life to save his family. And you ask me why I would choose him over the man who is still pointing a gun at his own daughter? Tell me about loyalty, father. Tell me about honor and blood. Tell me you're better than he is. Go on...*lie.*"

Silence fell, and I smelled new scents on the wind. I smiled when I heard footsteps behind me. The gathered Roma took a collective step back, and my grandfather pointed his gun to one side of me.

"What's the matter, Jardani? Wolf got your tongue?" Shade said, her voice like a blade wrapped in velvet, both beautiful and dangerous. She filled out a pair of leather pants like they'd been poured onto her, with a sleeveless black spandex shirt. The rest of the pack came around us, two standing in front of Mom and Dee, the rest joining Shade. Dee darted around behind me, then I heard her grunting as she climbed the pole behind me. Moments later, the chain fell on my head.

"Sorry!" Dee tried to whisper. I smiled and shrugged the heavy links off my shoulders, then flexed my arms. Now that I had the leverage, the individual links popped with some effort. I helped Dee get down, then stepped in front of her.

"The only reason you're still alive is because you're related to Chance," Shade snarled at my grandfather. "And that's looking pretty thin right now."

"Shade, please," I said. "Don't." I walked past her, my emotions at war. "Grandfather, you too. Please, put the gun down."

"Never," he said flatly.

"Then," I said, overcome with a sadness I couldn't fight, "start with me." I walked up to him and took the barrel of the gun and put it against my chest.

"Chance!" Shade cried out. "What are you doing?"

“It’s simple,” I said. “I’m giving them what they want. And I’m asking you not to go looking for revenge, baby. He wants me, then fine, he can have me. I’m tired of seeing the people I love put in harm’s way because of me. Even if they do it themselves.”

“You think I won’t pull this trigger?” he asked, drawing the hammer back with his thumb.

“Kinda hoping you will,” I said. “The past couple of years, it’s like some kind of bad or another is always trying to kill me, enslave me or otherwise fuck me over one way or the other. At least with you, I figure you might actually think you give a damn about me. That’s something. Just...if you do? Leave. Leave the rest of my friends alone, and get the hell out of here. Okay?”

“No,” another man said. He stepped forward, his own pistol trained on me. “They were willing to come here and kill us all. What more proof do you need of the evil of your kind? This is why we hunt you and kill you.”

“What, you think you’ve been keeping tabs on *us*?” Shade said with a laugh. “You think we don’t know exactly who your agents are in this town? You think we don’t know that the second shift nurse at Mercy General is one of yours? Or that we don’t have a clue about the park rangers you bribe? The cops on your payroll?” She reached down and pried a chunk of asphalt loose. “You think you’re hunting us? Since when? Since you hit the state line four days ago? Or since you made camp here the day Chance got out of the hospital? We’ve known who you are and what you were doing for years. And in all the time you’ve been here, we’ve never grabbed one of you and tied you to a pole so we could execute you for the crime of being Romani. But if you want to lose a war, by all means, pull that trigger and start one. We’re only one of dozens of packs in the area.”

For a few moments, no one said anything, and no one moved. Then a woman stepped forward, her hair white and long, her face ancient but somehow untouched by age at the same time. She wore a long skirt and a gauzy white blouse that was embroidered in red. One hand held a gnarled wooden cane that she leaned on with each step. She walked up to my grandfather, looked from him to me, then back at him, and shook her head with a *tsking* sound.

“Jardani Murathy, give me that gun,” the woman said. He turned and looked at her with wide eyes, but didn’t resist when she snatched the pistol from him and let the hammer down with a casual confidence. She broke the gun open and looked down at the cylinder, then turned it over and pressed the plunger to push all the rounds out of it. They pinged and clattered on the ground, and she handed the gun back to him, still open.

“What are you doing woman?” Jardani said, sotto voice.

“What am I doing? Oh no, my beloved idiot, what are *you* doing? What are *we* doing? Look at this boy, ready to die to help his friends. You say he’s a threat, but what did he ever do to us?”

“He’s a werewolf, what more does he *need* to do? Kill your daughter?”

“Being a werewolf was never his choice, just like being Romani was never yours or mine. Are we any better then? Are we better than the *gadje* who spit on us just because we’re Romani? We, of all people, should know what it means to be judged for who we are in someone else’s eyes. If what this girl says is true, then she and her pack aren’t the real monsters here. We are.” There was a muttering behind her, and the older woman, my grandmother came to me and handed me a shirt.

“Go on,” she said. “The longer you’re here, the more likely they are to stop thinking about what I’ve said. And

you, girl," she turned to Mom. "I am so proud of you." She put her hands on either side of Mom's face and kissed her forehead. Mom hugged her then grabbed Dee's hand and tugged her toward the van. They only got a few steps away before Dee pulled away and ran up to my grandfather.

"You know what?" she said, looking up at him.
""You...you're a dick."

"Dee!" Mom said, coming back for her.

"It's too bad," she pressed on. "I really wanted a grandpa." She turned and let Mom take her hand to lead her away.

"You know what?" I said to him. "So did I." Shade came over to me and put her arm around me.

"Meet me at Dr. Corwin's place?" she asked.

"So, Dante's is out, huh?" I asked.

"Definitely," Kain said from the edge of the trees. He stepped forward and offered Shade a smile. "You did well tonight, Shade, protecting one of your pack. Meet me at the lodge, both of you." He turned and headed back into the woods, completely impervious to the glare I aimed at his back.

"I'll see you there," Shade said, leaning in to kiss me briefly.

The Mulani camp was only a few miles down Highway 71 from the entrance to the camp, so we ended up making it there in less than twenty minutes. I pulled in behind Shade's bike as she was setting her helmet on the seat. She favored me with a smile when I got out, then turned and headed for the amphitheater off to the side of the lodge. Old memories loomed in my head when I followed her toward it. Fighting Dominic King. Killing Dominic King.

An explosion hammered my ears, and I flinched as my left hand told me it had been kicked hard.

I shook my head to clear it and went to the edge of the amphitheater seats. Kain waited down below, looking at us from the same place Dominic King had stood when we started our fight. Shade and I took the steps side by side, coming to a stop a few feet from him.

“Shade, you did well tonight, for a beginner,” Kain said. “Even though you exposed too much information in the process, you still managed to show the Gypsies that you were not to be crossed.” He turned to me and frowned. “However, Chance, if you had spent less time fighting my guidance this afternoon, you would never have been captured, and none of this would have been necessary. None of this *should* have been necessary. Even a gamma should have been able to handle that situation on his own. You can’t go whining to the pack everytime you create a problem for yourself.”

“Roma,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“Not Gypsies,” Shade said. “That’s an insult. They’re the Roma, or Romani.”

“Do not correct me, either of you,” Kain said. Shade and I traded glances. I heard and smelled the other pack members approaching, and raised an eyebrow at Shade. She shook her head slightly. “Chance, the balance of debt you owe the pack is getting larger, and you’ve shown no sign of paying us back. The pack turned the tide of that situation, and you owe us your loyalty for it.”

“Jacob, Chance doesn’t owe us for that,” Shade said. “The pack looks out for each other. We don’t keep score. Besides that, if you are keeping score, Chance has helped us out plenty in the past.”

“And that’s why you’re not as strong as you should be as a leader,” Kain said. “Every member needs to be ready to pull his own weight and know his place in the pack. Chance needs to remember that he’s at the bottom of the ladder now, and act accordingly. What he did in the past doesn’t count.”

“Shade’s right, the pack is a family, not a company. I was a part of this pack before I was turned, and I’ll be a part of it until I die.”

“Boy, that’s twice you’ve spoken out of turn, and Shade, that’s twice that you’ve let him. Your pack lacks discipline, and that starts at the top. It’s time someone took you in hand.” He started to move forward, his arm drawn back, his hand curled into a fist. I had all the time in the world, but I couldn’t move fast enough. My legs bunched under me and propelled me to Shade’s side, and we brought our hands up together to catch Kain’s arm. The force of the blow shoved us backward, but it never landed.

The tableau held for a moment, the two of us straining against Kain, his fist an inch from Shade’s face. Kain pushed harder, but as strong as he was, he was no match for both of us. He snarled and backed up.

“You should have just accepted your punishment,” he said, then his eyes went gold and I felt something hit me. Shade and I both staggered back, our reactions not our own. Instead, my wolf seemed to shrink in on itself, and I felt my strength drain from me. We both fell to our knees, whimpering. Kain walked up to us, and punched Shade. I heard the snap of bone breaking, saw blood fly as she spun and fell. I wanted to go to her, to throw myself at Kain, to hit him with a spell hard enough to knock him into the next county, but all I could do was whimper and wait for his fist to fall. My vision went white for a moment, and when I could see again, left side of my face was ablaze with pain, and I

couldn't see out of my left eye. What I could see was a sideways world. Turning my head was a monumental effort, but when I did, I could see Kain helping Shade to her feet. He put his hand to her cheek in a gentle touch, but she flinched away.

"I didn't want to do that, Shade, but you forced my hand," he said. "As the senior alpha here, I could not allow any act of insubordination to go unanswered. Not even from you. Especially not from you. I've told you time and time again that we two must present a unified presence. That means you do not disagree with me in view of the pack, or even give the appearance of doing so. In private, I will allow discussion, but I will brook no dissent before the pack."

"No, Jacob," Shade said. "I am the one who will allow discussion in private. This is my pack, and Chance is still my boyfriend and still my *gothi*. He's still right where he's been all along, at my side."

"Your pack?" Jacob laughed. He took a step closer to her and put his hand up to point at her. I felt the power of his will again, and even though it wasn't directed at me, I felt it hit Shade from a distance. "You think this is your pack? Little bitch, you may lead this pack, but you only do so because Sinbad lets you. This is his territory, and no pack exists without his say so. And given the way things stand, I am the ranking alpha here, so you lead at *my* pleasure. You don't deserve the help of a real alpha, and if I didn't have orders to save your worthless ass, I'd leave you to fail on your own." Tears streamed down Shade's face as he turned his back on her and came to me. He picked me up by one arm and pulled me close to his face. "And you," he snarled. "You don't deserve my guidance, either. Not with that attitude. Now get the hell out of here, before I do something permanent." He tossed me into the air, and I hit the concrete ledge that served as one of the seats near the top of the amphitheater. I felt something give in my right arm

and my right thigh, and it was all I could do to crawl the rest of the way out. I wanted to stay and fight, but my wolf was beaten, and I knew I wouldn't be able to fight him. At the top, I pulled myself to my feet and turned to look back at Shade. When I whispered her name, she looked up at me.

"Go, Chance," she whispered. "You're just pissing him off with everything you do. I can handle him for now." Galen came to my side and put my arm around his shoulder.

"Come on, little brother," he said. "I'll get you to your car. You'll be fine by then." He supported me for the walk across the parking lot, never letting me put all my weight on my right leg. By the time we got there, I was almost completely healed, just like he'd said. At least, physically.

"I'm sorry," I told him, though I really wanted to tell that to Shade. "I'm sorry I'm so weak."

"Don't," Galen said. "You're still Ascending, little brother. You won't come into your full power until your first full moon. If you think you're a badass now, just wait until then." He leaned in, gave me a quick hug and stepped back. "Go get some rest, man." I got in the car and sat there while my body finished healing, my heart aching as much as my body. I'd hoped Shade would say she loved me, but all she'd had for me was the brutal truth.

"I love you," I said aloud. I might not have been a mage anymore, but speaking a thing out loud still meant something to me, and I hoped that it still meant something to the Universe. Even more, I hoped that it still meant something to Shade. Tears trying to escape from my eyes, I started the car and sent gravel flying on my way out of the parking lot.

As bad as I wanted to take the long way home or just drive for a few hours, I couldn't afford the gas money, so I settled for speed instead. The light was still on in the front room when I pulled into the driveway, and the smell of

Mom's favorite chai tea hit me as soon as I got out of the car. I walked through the empty front room and found Mom in the kitchen. Bills were laid out in front of her, and I could smell the sharp tang of stress from her. *Cortisol*, my brain dredged up. The human body's hormonal response to stress, and Mom's blood was loaded with it just then. *Thank you junior year Health and Wellness Class.*

"Hey, Mom," I said as I came into the kitchen. She looked up at me and smiled, then came around the table and hugged me tight.

"Oh, Chance, I'm so sorry," she said into my shoulder.

I hugged her back as tight as I dared, felt every strand of her hair under my hands, smelled her scent on a level I'd never been able to before. I rubbed my cheek against her hair, wanting to breathe in the scent, the comfort of her presence. As long as Mom was around, somehow, everything was okay.

"It's okay, Mom," I said. "None of this is your fault."

She pulled back and looked at me, her dark eyes searching mine. "It is," she said, her hands tight on my arms. "I called my father the night of the attack. I asked him to come here."

"Why?" I asked. Given what little I knew about the Mulani Roma, it didn't make sense that Mom would want them in town. My heart beat faster in my chest as I ran through every worst case scenario.

"I thought...I hoped that they might have a cure. I was afraid for you, sweetie. I didn't know what it might do to you, and Dee was so *sure* that you wouldn't stay a werewolf, I just..." She stopped and turned away with an exasperated sound.

"What, Mom?" I asked. "What aren't you telling me?"

“When I was a girl, there were stories about someone who had been bitten, but who didn’t end up turning. Rumors that the elders knew how to lift the curse. But, it turns out that’s all they were. Rumors, myths. Children hearing what they wanted to hear, or making it up. I just wanted to hold on to some hope that you...”

“Wouldn’t turn into a werewolf?” I asked. “Is that so bad, though?”

“I used to think so,” Mom said. “But I was raised among the Ghost Clan. The werewolves are one of their constant enemies. They...they do what you do, Chance. They fight the evils of the world. Werewolves, vampires, rakshasa, and a hundred more. I was raised on the stories of my people protecting mankind. But I never got to see the reality of it. It was just... our mythology. I didn’t think it was real.”

“But now you do?”

Mom gave out a short laugh and smiled at me. “I have for a while. And I hoped...I prayed that my father could help me cure you.”

“Mom, I don’t need to be cured,” I said. “I just need to learn how to deal with this. Shade and I can finally be together without worrying about her losing control! We finally live in the same world together.” I turned and walked to the entry to the kitchen, then turned around to face her. “Please, Mom, this is who I am now. I need you to be okay with that.”

“I am, Chance,” she said, her eyes damp with unshed tears. “I just...No, I’m okay with it. I love you, and that isn’t going to change, you know that, right? Nothing will ever change that, no matter what happens.” She came to me and put one hand to my chest, her fingertips tracing the ridge of a scar under my shirt without having to search for it. “Nothing can change that.”

The first time she had touched those scars had been the night she'd first found out about my past. My mother had seen my scars, not just the ones on my skin, but the ones I carried inside, and she still loved me. A two and a half years later, and I still had a hard time believing that.

"Even if I'm broken?" I asked, recalling what I'd said to her that night.

"You're not broken, Chance," she said. "You've been wounded, but wounds heal. Yours are healing already."

"What were you going to say?" I asked Mom. "You said 'I just,' and then you stopped."

"I just thought you and Shade were already happy," she said with a smile. "Even if you weren't a werewolf."

"We were," I said. Looking back at things, I had to admit Mom was right. It took some of the strength out of that argument. A small creeping feeling slithered across my heart. Things had been a little off since the attack. And without my magick...

Just the thought of that almost broke my will. I'd been able to avoid looking at that in particular ever since the attack. With my heart beating hard in my chest, I could tell I still wasn't ready to go there.

"We were," I repeated, though it sounded so much different in my head now. "I should probably go to bed. I'm wiped out." Mom came to me and hugged me again.

"Shouldn't you be in bed, too?" I asked her.

"I should, but I still need to figure out how to keep the lights on."

"Maybe I could help with that."

Mom shook her head. "No, honey, we'll be fine. There's nothing you can do that wouldn't get in the way of

something else more important. And I'm not going to let that happen. Go to bed, and let me worry about this, okay?"

I hugged her again and said goodnight, then went upstairs to my room, changed into a pair of shorts, and crawled out the window to wait for Alpha to try and call me back to him. Minutes turned into an hour, and I ended up grabbing my dark phone and texting Shade to see how things had gone. That just seemed to make things worse as more minutes stretched out without an answer from her.. My mind started throwing images at me that I didn't want to see. Shade in Kain's arms. Them talking about how weak and pathetic I was. Shade rolling her eyes every time my name was mentioned. Her running with Kain in wolf form, when I couldn't even turn on my own yet.

I shook my head to clear it and folded my legs into a lotus position, much easier now with my new abilities. With my back straight, I reached down from my root chakra, seeking the Earth and its reassuring solidity. Energy coursed up through the tendril of energy and through my spine, and I saw Shade laying back, looking up at Kain with adoring eyes. My eyes snapped open. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 7

~ Dirty hands earn the brightest coin. ~

German proverb

I woke up a little after noon, my stomach certain that I had actually slept for days instead of hours. Mom and Dee were already gone when I went downstairs, and there were leftovers in the fridge for about three minutes. Between bites, I texted Shade, since I hadn't heard from her since last night.

>>Shade: Shade is busy. She'll contact you if she has time.>>

<<Me: Who is this?<<

>>Shade: Jacob. Stop bothering us.>>

I set the phone down with a hollow feeling in my stomach. Why did he have her phone? Why was he answering her texts? Why did she *let* him? Another torrent of images swarmed through my head, none of them pleasant. The room felt too small, and I could barely breathe. I needed to be somewhere else.

A few minutes later, I was backing out of the driveway, tires screeching. When the Mustang hit asphalt, I cut the wheels hard, hit the clutch and slammed the stick into first gear. The front tires spun a few times before they got traction, then I was pressed back into the seat from the sudden acceleration. I kept it under the speed limit as little as possible, and made it to Dr. C's place without getting a ticket. When I pulled up beside the house, I saw that his Range Rover was gone, but Kim's sporty little white Viper was parked in its place. The place felt empty when I went in through the kitchen entrance, and the library was just as vacant as the house felt. I pulled my phone out and dialed his number. After a few seconds, I got a recording telling me my phone was only able to make emergency calls. Cursing, I pulled out my dark phone and dialed his number. Moments later, I heard his voice.

“Hey, Chance,” he said. I could hear the smile in his voice, and heard Kim’s musical laughter in the background.

“Where are you? Is Dee with you?”

“Oh, sorry, I tried calling your mother but I couldn’t reach her. We’re in New York, visiting the MOMA.”

“What? When did you decide to do that?”

“This morning. Amanda had never been and Dee just wanted to see New York, so we decided to make a day of it. Why?”

“I’m at your...no, never mind,” I said. Again, the reminder that my magic was gone hit me hard, made my stomach feel like it had dropped to my feet. Of course he had better things to do. I wasn’t his apprentice anymore. “I just dropped by on my way to Lucas’s. Just wanted to make sure...old habits.”

“Chance, is everything okay?” I could hear the change in his voice, the concern.

“Just didn’t know,” I said. “The way things are, I got worried, but it’s no big.”

“Okay,” he said, clearly not completely convinced. “But if you do need to talk or...whatever, you’re still part of my family. I’m only a phone call away.”

“Thanks, sir,” I said. My voice caught in my throat, and I had to force the next words out. “That means a lot.” I ended the call and shuffled toward the door, looking around at the kitchen, replaying pleasant memories with each reluctant step. Sure, I’d probably come back here, but never as his apprentice. The sense of finality in every movement, every sight, all of it felt like I was saying goodbye. The click of the door closing was loud in my ears, and I could have sworn my soul let out a mournful little sound. I was reminded of the shield doors closing in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Memories of watching Star Wars the weekend after I'd killed Dominic King brought Lucas to mind, and I headed for my car intent on spending the rest of the day with him. Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling into the parking lot across the street from Mitternacht's Books.

After home and Dr. Corwin's sanctum, Mitternacht's was the most calming place I knew. Walking in the front door was like crossing a threshold into another realm. Hundreds of realms, his grandfather Hans would say. The front part of the shop was mostly bookshelves. Six foot bookcases lined the outer wall, and shorter four foot tall shelves were set throughout the rest of the floor in a thick L shape that left a large reading area half way back and toward the middle. The counter took up a big chunk of the back corner on the right as you walked in, bordering the stockroom that took up the rest. Collectible card games, dice, miniatures and other game paraphernalia took up most of the front facing glass case, Lucas's original contribution to the store. A few steps in, though, and his newest additions were visible. Stones, herbs, jewelry and tarot cards dominated the left side of the L shaped counter. The back half of the store was raised about three feet, and housed The Parlor, an honest to goodness tea and coffee shop. Grandpa Hans bragged about teaching the big chain bookstores a thing about hospitality back in the 90s, saying that he had introduced The Parlor long before Starbucks coffee shops showed up in corporate bookstores.

To the left, a spiral staircase wound its way down from the ceiling, and served as a sort of visual anchor for the upper story. It was off limits to customers, as was the regular stairway in the back. The upper level, while not open to the public, was open from floor to ceiling in the front half, with a broad walkway that ran along the sides and front of the shop. Wrought iron railings guarded the back half. The middle was empty, with empty bookshelves gathering dust

with great dignity. The left side of the upper level was where I usually found Lucas most days. Once upon a time, it had been a glassed in office, but Hans had given Lucas free reign with renovating it. Gone were the glass walls, leaving only the lower half of the barrier in place. He'd kept the dark wood paneling and the rest of the antique decor.

If the store itself was interesting to look at, most of its clientele were equal to their surroundings. New Essex bred its own brand of Goth, and Mitternacht's Books was one of their preferred nesting grounds. Dark of plumage, pale of skin and grim of visage, New Essex Goths were different because most of them weren't fans of vampires. Not that they didn't like them, or have a penchant for the morbid and macabre. The difference wasn't even in degree.

It was in certainty.

Most Goths, if they had a thing for vampires, tended toward vamps 'in general' with a few fictional versions they favored. Many of the New Essex Goths were fans of particular vampires who they knew were real. Some were blood groupies, some were blood junkies, others just knew the truth. A few had even ended up becoming said vampires. I walked past a group who were comparing bite marks. The rich, damp scent of grave mold was strong on some of them, and on one girl, it was mixed with sweat and sex. She was also the only one not actively trying to impress everyone with her bite. I smiled at the quiet confidence she exuded and leaned against the glass counter. Hans came to stand across from me, his smile warm. White hair and a neatly trimmed beard of the same color framed his face.

"Looking for Lucas, no?" he said, his German accent clipping his consonants.

"Yeah," I said.

"He is upstairs, avoiding all the real work. Just like a manager."

“I thought you were the manager,” I said.

“I was, but I retired,” he said, his eyes glittering with humor. “Who do you think showed him how to do the avoiding? Now I’m just the owner.”

“Well, I’ll tell him his boss is proud of him,” I said, pushing away from the counter. The smell of coffees and teas almost overwhelmed my nose as I trotted up the stairs, then dust finished the job, making me sneeze several times while I made my way to the office. Lucas sat at a corner desk with Monica sitting behind him. In a Doctor Who t-shirt and jeans, he certainly didn’t look much like a manager. Of course, Monica looked sexy as hell. She wore a black satin corset over a red satin blouse, and her nails were painted black on one side and red on the other. Black patent ankle boots were tucked under her chair, making her legs look amazing. She had her right arm around Lucas, with her head resting on his shoulder. Her left hand idly moved up and down his left arm, and I could hear her whispering to him.

“Baby, if you run from sundown to sunup, they’ll be here,” I heard.

“That’s all cool and shit,” Lucas said back. “But will we still make enough to keep the doors open?”

“They’ll make sure of it, darling.”

They saw me by that point, and Lucas sat up straight in the chair, but not before Monica nipped at his earlobe and purred at him.

“Chance!” he said, his face breaking into a broad smile. “What’s up?”

“Am I interrupting something?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Monica said with a smile like a cat with a bowl of cream. “Why? Did you want to?”

“No, not really,” I said, unsure of how to take that.

“Down girl,” Lucas laughed and kissed her. She nipped at his lip but he pulled back in time to avoid her teeth.

“You two are going to give me a sugar rush,” I said.

“What brings you by?” Lucas asked.

“Just needed to get out of the house for a while. That asshole Kain has Shade’s phone, and he’s replying to my texts to her.” I pushed past the gap in the half wall and grabbed one of the wooden office chairs and turned it to face them. Before I could sit down, though, Monica had me caught up in a warm, soft embrace. I hugged her back, noting how soft she was in all the most wonderful places. Her hug was nice, though, and I felt some of that unease and doubt fade away.

“Chance, I’m so sorry you’re going through this,” she murmured before she let go. “And I’ll behave, I promise.” She said the last with a smile that took left me wondering if she was serious about that, and if I *wanted* her to behave herself.

“Enough about my problems, though,” I said. “I came here to avoid them. What’s up today?”

“Oh, it’s my favorite day,” Lucas said, his words dripping sarcasm. “Book delivery day. Not only do I have to unload and stock the shelves, I still need to update our website for electronic ordering. It’s going to take me two or three days to get all of this done.”

“Why so long?” I asked.

“It’s a big order. Some of our biggest suppliers released a bunch of new books, so we have displays to set up, and a ton of new stock to put out. Meanwhile, we’re losing money on digital downloads, but I figured out a way to make at least a little bit on that side of things, if I can get it set up.”

“So, what if I took care of the heavy lifting, so you can brain on the computer side of things.”

“Dude...’so I can brain...’ Still, it would help out a lot. Tell Gramps you’re the new hired help. He can supervise. Oh, and Chance? Don’t think you’re getting out of this without being paid.”

“That ain’t why I’m doing it,” I told him before I turned and headed for the stairs again.

Monica ended up manning the counter, and I learned that books are freaking heavy. Under Hans’ supervision, I was unloading books and stocking them. When I picked up the first box and found that I had to work at it, even with my greater strength, I let out a surprised sound, and Hans chuckled.

“Heavy, no?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said.

“Paper is pulped and pressed wood,” he said, hefting a book. “Imagine a tree trunk that big, and you’ve about half of it. So, *ja*, they are heavy. But oh, the places they take us. Here, put it over there,” he pointed toward a spot near the door.

The next few hours were monotonous, but hardly tiring. Where they usually had to move one or two boxes at a time, transferring them from place to place on a handcart, I was able to pick up three and four at a time and just carry them around. Once I had the older books unloaded, I started on the newer inventory, and helped Hans set up the new displays and set the books out. It was late afternoon when I finally trudged back up to the office. Lucas was rubbing the bridge of his nose and squinting when I walked into the walled off area.

“I figure you won’t turn down a Big Guy’s cheeseburger and fries?” he asked. I heard footsteps on the stairs behind me, and smelled the powerful musk that was Monica’s signature, and Hans’s aftershave.

“Not if you’re buying,” I said. “Especially if you threaten me with a double-cheeseburger.”

“I’ll even throw in chili-cheese fries. You did more work today than we could do in a week.”

“He’s right,” Hans said. “We owe you more than just a meal for what you got done today.” He shook my hand, and I felt something press against my palm. “You really did do a weeks worth of work today. And any time you want to come do it again, you are more than welcome.” He smiled and turned to walk back to the stairs, leaving me to stare down at the four bills he left in my hand. Lucas just smiled and pulled his phone out, and Monica kissed my cheek.

“You looked so strong, carrying all those boxes around like they were nothing,” she smiled. While I blushed, she went to sit beside Lucas and ran her hand down his arm. It was one thing to hear his heartbeat speed up, but the rush of pheromones he put out made for an interesting mix when it mixed with the flood Monica was producing. If anyone ever told me Monica wasn’t just as far gone over Lucas as he was for her, I would be the first to tell them how wrong they were. As much as she could do and say things to make my blood heat up, no one got her going like Lucas did.

I felt as much as heard the sprite fly up over the rail, and my ears told me this was someone I knew. With a tiny pop I was sure only I could hear, Ren turned visible near the center of the open area.

“Hey, everyone!” he said, sounding almost like his usual cheerful self. But the purple edge to his wings spoke of a slight unease, as well as the slight peppery smell he was putting off.

“Hey, Ren, long time, no see,” I said. “How’s it going?”

Ren’s smile got bigger, and two more sprites popped into view, their wings tinged a light silver. Both swooped up

to me, wrapped their arms around my neck for a moment, then giggled and flew to the able and dropped to a knee, their heads bowed, wings fluttering.

“What was that about?” I asked Ren.

“Sorry,” one of them, a female sprite with light blue hair, said. Her head popped up, then dropped back down “We were just so excited to meet you.”

“Whyyy?” I asked, drawing the word out. Lucas was leaning forward, his brow set in a curious expression.

“I’ve got to hear this,” he said.

“Because you freed them,” Ren said. His tone said it should have been obvious, but it was still a big mystery to me.

“How?” I asked.

“When you freed me, you freed *all* the sprites. You’re the Liberator.”

“What?”

Lucas snorted, and I turned to point at him. “No, dude, I can't help it,” he laughed. “Seeing you reduced to monosyllables is hilarious.”

“Glad you’re enjoying yourself,” I told him, then turned to Ren. “I thought I was only able to free you that night.”

“It was the way the contract was written,” Ren said with a shrug. “It was pretty specific on that ‘no sprite shall be free’ part, so when you freed me, because it was an absolute, if I was free, all of us had to be free.”

“You mean,” I said, drawing the words out so I could understand exactly what I’d done, “I did the sprite version of the Emancipation Proclamation?”

“By accident?” Lucas added.

“You mean, you didn’t mean to free us?” the male sprite said.

“I didn’t know I *could*,” I said. “The way things were set up, I was only supposed to be able to affect one person. So I chose Ren. I’m not sorry they worked out this way, and I wish I could say that I did it because I knew things would shake out this way, but I didn’t. And could you two stand up or something? You don’t have to kneel or anything. Not any more.” The two shot into the air, beaming at each other.

“I’m Sparo,” the female sprite said.

“Finch,” the other introduced himself.

“Good to meet you both,” I said. “The thing I don’t get is how I could free all the sprites if I didn’t sign the original agreement.”

“When you took over my contract last year, you became part of the whole agreement.”

“He didn’t just start World War II all over again, did he?” Lucas asked.

“No, there were like a dozen treaties signed over that,” I said, remembering my lessons under Dulka. “That way the demons couldn’t weasel out of everything at once.”

“So, Sparo and Finch wanted to meet you and, well...” Ren trailed off.

“We need help,” Finch said, his wings tinting to red around the edges. “And since you started all of this, Ren said you’re the person we should start with.”

“You’re the only human I’ve met who seemed to give a damn about us,” Ren said, his wings going a pale pink.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I sat down. Sparo landed on my knee and looked up at me. She was slender and long limbed, her eyes a pale amber. Up close I could see that the strip of cloth she wore to cover her top was dirty and

threadbare, and the skirt she wore was a dirty bandana that she'd tied off around her hips.

"Since we're no longer slaves, our owners have turned us out, and we don't have any places yet that are ours. We make homes for ourselves, and we can't earn any trade silver because no one will trade with us or hire us."

"I'll do what I can," I said. Again, the words came slow, because I had no idea how to fix this. I didn't want to let Ren down, but I wasn't sure how to get any of what they needed. "I just don't know where to begin."

"Right here," Lucas said. "I'll hire them." When I focused, I could hear both his and Monica's pulses going faster.

"Are you sure?" Finch asked, his voice half hopeful and half sarcastic. "Hiring sprites doesn't seem to be very smart right now. And we can't let your customers see us."

"There's plenty of space in the building for you to make a spot to call home, and we can work something out as far as pay. But I don't need workers for the cowan side of things. I need scouts, messengers...security."

"What are you talking about?" I said. My eyebrows felt like they were trying to migrate somewhere south of my nose, I was frowning so hard.

"Something I'm working on," Lucas said, putting his arm around Monica and squeezing her a little closer. "Let's just say we need all the help we can get." The two sprites looked to me, and I nodded. If I couldn't trust my best friend, who could I trust?

"What's your name, sir?" Sparo asked as she floated down to hover in front of him.

"Midnight," Lucas answered. I'd heard him using that name before, usually on my side of the Veil.

“So this is mage business.”

“You could say that. Sparo, Finch, get your stuff and bring it here. This is home for you now, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Right away, Mr. Midnight!” they chirped in unison and flew off.

“Now it’s *Mister* Midnight,” I chuckled. “Good to see all this power and money hasn’t changed you.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Lucas asked, sounding a little worried. I shook my head. “I’m going to have to come up with a first name.” Ren drifted in front of me, his wings almost gold with pride.

“Thank you, Mister Fortunato,” he said, his voice wavering.

“Ren, it’s always Chance to you, buddy.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I knew you’d find something. It’s hard for us right now. Ever since the Rending, people have been fighting to keep things like they were. The merchants of the Underground got together and forced an ordinance that keeps us out of any skilled profession, we’re too poor to buy any property or afford the new licenses we need to open our own businesses.”

“New licenses? How do the existing businesses afford them?”

“They’re exempt; grandfathered in as pre-existing..” He sighed and landed on my knee. “Some of us have indentured ourselves. Others are so far in debt it’s impossible to get out. It feels like you’re the only one who even looked out for us. And now you, Mr. Midnight.”

“They have you,” I said.

“I’m just another sprite,” he said, his narrow little shoulders slumping.

“You’re way more than that,” I said. I went over to my backpack and pulled my paintball gun, *boline*, and wand out of it, taking my mask from the side pocket after I’d laid the rest on the table. “Lucas, Monica, get over here.” The two of them got up and came over, never breaking contact with each other.

“Need a witness?” Lucas asked.

“No. I need you two. Now hush, I’m trying to be solemn here.” I cleared my throat and put the mask on, then looked at the three people gathered in front of me, working out what I wanted to say. “Dusk has fallen. The Way is dark. But the Way is safe. The Shadow Regiment protects all who travel.”

“The Way is safe,” Ren intoned.

“I see before me three who are worthy, who love Freedom, three whom I call brother or sister, for I owe you all my very life, several times over. I vouch for your character by pistol, sword and wand. And I declare that any member of the Shadow Regiment shall also call you brother or sister. Within this circle, we are the Shadow Regiment. We are the enemy of tyranny and the defender of those in need. With your oath, you accept the mantle of the Regiment, to safeguard the ideals of freedom and brotherhood among People of good will. We fight not for glory but for liberty. Brother to one...”

“Brother to all,” Lucas and Ren said almost in unison.

“Sister to all,” Monica said in time with Lucas. The same ethereal wind I’d felt the first time I’d spoken that oath blew through us, and Lucas shivered.

“So, we’re part of the Shadow Regiment?” Lucas asked.

“Yeah. Consider it my legacy, since I’m not a mage any more.”

“I think the rules just changed,” Monica said, pointing to Ren then back to herself. “I don’t think it’s mages only any more.”

“It was kind of a school thing, but they didn’t take the oath seriously. We do. So I’m rebuilding it.”

“Sooo,” Lucas said, looking at me with a speculative expression, “how many people are in this Shadow Regiment?”

“Counting you three? Four.”

“Oh, that’s encouraging. Can we recruit?”

“Yes, but only someone worthy, preferably someone you’d trust with your life.”

“We need to induct Wanda,” he said. “She’s saved the day a few times herself.”

“As soon as we see her again,” I agreed. “But I gotta get home. And...thanks, man.” I patted my pocket, and Lucas smiled.

“Dude, I told you before, you weren’t getting away without getting paid. And you really did do a weeks worth of work today.” He clasped my hand and pulled me to him to pat me on the back. “Thanks again, man.”

The drive home was a lot better than the drive out, and when I pulled into the driveway, Mom’s van was already there. When I opened the front door, I heard an exasperated sigh from the kitchen, and only smelled Mom. She was at the kitchen table again, looking at pretty much the same set of bills.

“Do you know where your sister is?” Mom asked as soon as she saw me. “My phone isn’t working.”

“She’s in New York with Dr. C and Kim,” I said while I pulled out a chair. “Not enough money left at the end of the month?” I asked.

“Too much month left at the end of the money,” she said.

“Will this help?” I pulled the bills Lucas’s grandfather had given me and set them down in front of her. Her eyes went a little wide and I heard her pulse pick up a little when she saw it. “I did some work for Lucas and his grandfather today.”

“This is five hundred dollars,” she said. She looked up with doubt in her eyes.

“I did a *lot* of work,” I said. “It’s totally legit, I promise.” She looked down at the bills, reached for one, then closed her eyes and sighed. Tears rolled down her cheeks. and I caught a whiff of the sharp tang of stress from her.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” I asked, my own heart pounding in my ears. “It’s legit I promise.”

“It isn’t that,” she sniffled. “It’s just...this is enough to either make the payment on the van, or the phone payment. But my phone got shut off, so I can’t make the van payment until I make the phone payment.”

“And if you don’t make the van payment, you don’t have a way to get to work.”

She nodded. “You still need to deposit this, right?” I asked. “Then why don’t we deposit this on the way when we go pick up Dee and see if Dr. C will let us use his phone?”

“Chance, we shouldn’t impose on him,” she started, but I held a hand up.

“Mom, we can’t afford what we want, right now. We can only handle what we need. And what we need is to borrow a phone. I’ll even do the asking if you need me to.”

“No, honey, I’ll do this,” she said. “You’re right, I can’t afford too much pride. But there’s no need for you to sacrifice yours, too.” She stood up and put a hand on my

shoulder. "You've sacrificed enough for this family, and you've given more than your fair share. I'll go get your sister and take care of things." She went to the living room and got her stuff, and before long, I heard the van start up and back out of the driveway. As soon as she was on her way, I called Dr. Corwin's phone again.

"My mom's headed over to pick Dee up," I said as soon as he picked up.

"You should come too, Chance," he said. "We got a couple of pizzas before we left New York."

"Gods, I'd love to," I said, my mouth watering at the thought. "But she needs a little...me time, I guess. Or her time, or whatever. Can you keep her there for a while? Help her get her mind off things for a while?"

"Sure, Chance," he said. "Are you sure you won't come?"

"Not tonight," I said. "Helping Mom out is the biggest thing you can do to help me out right now, sir."

"Then consider it done." I thanked him, then ended the call and brought up the text screen.

<<Me: Shade??<<

>>Shade: Not a good time.Pls dont txt til I txt bac k.>>

Her text had come back too fast, and the bad spelling wasn't like her. I dumped the phone in my backpack and went upstairs to change into a pair of ugly blue sweat pants I didn't mind losing if I turned. Then I went out and sat on the back porch, hoping Alpha would call tonight.

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long. Less than an hour later, I felt the call, and a few minutes later, I was leaping over the back fence in wolf form. I let my anger and frustration flow through me, and found some peace in the run itself, the feel of the wind in my fur, the smells of the city, the feel of the pavement and turf under my feet.

I hit the park and broke into an all out sprint over the grass, aiming for the trees on the far side. But halfway across, I saw something in the gazebo near the park's center, and I felt Alpha's call fade from my thoughts. Just looking in that direction made me feel at peace, and I trotted toward it. The darkness had a different feel, thicker, warmer...inviting. When I was about twenty feet away, a woman emerged from the shadows, and I found myself whimpering while my tail wagged. Dark, beautiful and frightening, with jet black hair and eyes even darker, she didn't just walk down the steps, she *descended*, floating down them like some dark angel gracing the earth with her footprint for a moment. She walked toward me with fluid grace, darkness falling from her like mist. When she was only a foot or two away from me, she knelt before me and ran her hand down the side of my face.

"I see you, Chance Fortunato," she whispered, her voice the sound of a thousand people. Hearing her say my name made my heart leap in my chest, as if hearing it for the first time from my mother's lips. Who was this woman? I'd met the Goddess, but this woman... she was something different, something...darker. Terrible in her beauty, exquisitely fearful, I knew I was hers, whoever she was.

"I am all around you Chance," she said. "I am...all of this," she swept her arm wide. "Soon, you will understand." She turned and moved away, and suddenly, the night wasn't as dark or as inviting. It was time to move again, time to answer Alpha's call. I turned and broke into a run again, the dark woman's presence like a fading memory. I locked it away in a place where even I would have a hard time getting to it, and focused again on the moment, on the run.

Alpha was waiting for me in his hybrid form again, gray fur gleaming in the soft light. "I sensed you waiting for my call," he said, sounding satisfied. "You need my guidance,

and you know it. His hand came up, and my body contorted into its human form.

“Asshole,” I said when I could speak again, when my bones stopped reshaping themselves and my flesh didn’t feel like melted wax.

“I am your alpha,” he roared, and planted a kick in my ribs. I bounced off the wall and landed on my face. “You will speak when spoken to, and you will address me with the respect I deserve!”

“No better than Kain,” I moaned. My ribs were on fire, and it hurt to breathe.

He squatted in front of me. “Kain is no fool. He hasn’t taught you because he’s spending all his time trying to train Shade to be his bitch.”

“You haven’t... showed me... shit,” I managed to get out. “I could learn more from...Sinbad.” Another kick bounced me off the wall and back into his arms. He caught me, pivoted and threw me across the room to bounce off the far wall.

“I told you never to say that traitor’s name in my presence,” he yelled. He crossed the round chamber in a few strides, then he had me by the arms, shaking me with each word before he tossed me away from him. I hit the ground like a ragdoll, unable to move my legs or feel anything from the hips down. Something in my spine moved, then pain reignited in my back and legs like a spike down both limbs.

“You obviously haven’t met me,” I said, getting up with careful, small movements. “Beating the crap out of me isn’t the way to get me to respect you.”

“Fear is the beginning of respect,” Alpha said, closing the distance between us.

“That’s how demons think,” I said. “And you know what happened to the last demon who tried to beat me into submission? I have one of his horns on my wall.” Without a word, he threw his will at me, and I found myself on my hands and knees, whimpering and groveling, overwhelmed by the sheer power of him.

“Acting like an alpha doesn’t make you one,” he said. “You’re just a beta, no matter how loudly you try to bark. You know the price of defiance, now learn the rewards of obedience.” He put his hand out and closed his eyes. Seconds later, my body started to twist and change again. Talons grew from my fingertips and my skin turned itself inside out to reveal thick, black fur. My face elongated into a snout and my teeth grew into fangs. My legs bent backwards as my feet elongated, so I ended up walking on my toes. One advantage to my hybrid form, it made me about a foot taller.

“Not much of a reward,” I said.

“This is only the beginning.” He turned and jogged down one of the passageways, and I found my feet moving without my direction. We ran for what felt like miles under the city, through massive sewer pipes, up into train tunnels, through steam tunnels and through abandoned brick passages whose purpose was long forgotten. Finally, we came up through a manhole in an alley. The smells of stale beer, urine, sweat and sex assaulted my nose as we emerged from the underside of Night City. I could hear the sound system of a bar on one side of the alley, and I could smell the produce, meat and alcohol of an all night grocery on the other side. Alpha leaped into the air and grabbed the side of a fire escape on the building the store was in. I tried to imitate him, and ended up flailing wildly to keep myself from bouncing off the building. My hand caught the edge of the metal frame and I pulled myself up without too much

noise. Alpha shook his head when I crawled up onto the rooftop.

“Hopeless,” he growled, before he ran for the edge and leaped into the air. He soared up then dropped out of sight. I went to the edge to see him standing on a rooftop across the street, looking back at me and shaking his head again. My goal set, I backed up and took a run for the edge, then jumped. For a few seconds, I was flying, then the roof was coming up at me. I couldn’t see Alpha as I descended, so I used one of the tricks Kim taught me when I landed. Instead of letting my legs take the impact and stopping in place, I turned it into forward momentum and sprang for the far edge of the roof. I hit the precipice with my hands and propelled myself to the next rooftop using the extra momentum from a push with my arms and a kick off with my feet.

When I hit the next roof, I rolled and pushed off to my right. My efforts were rewarded with a thump in the spot where I’d just been. Alpha’s growl of frustration was music to my ears, though I knew I was going to pay for my success at some point.

“Where to now?” I asked, turning to face him.

“There,” he pointed to the edge of the roof. I followed him to the side and looked down into the poorly lit parking lot below. A black Suburban was flanked by a pair of sedans in the same color. A man in a dark colored suit stood at the back of the truck. Behind him was what looked like two guys stuffed into one pale gray suit, complete with prominent bulge under the left arm. Four more men flanked them, and another pair stood between the two cars and the truck, facing the opposite direction. The security team wore black shirts and jeans, and all of them were openly armed with little submachine guns that I recognized as something from

the H&K MP-5 family. Odds were good that they'd bought them from my father or one of his associates.

"It's an exchange," I said, my voice deeper and rumbling. "There's the buyer," I pointed to an approaching van. It was white, with magnetic signs on the side for a bogus plumbing company. I recognized the name on the sign as one of my father's old fences, KeShawn "White Glove" White, a hyper little dude who specialized in white collar items. Coins, bullion, bearer bonds, high end jewelry and other things that didn't include getting his hands dirty. He turned the van so the back end was facing his potential customers and put it in reverse, pulling up until he was a few yards away. When he stopped, he waited a few seconds, then opened the door and got out, his movements steady and slow. KeShawn was good at what he did, and used to dealing with 'twitchy' clients. He wore a pair of white leather gloves, his namesake, and he kept his hands away from his body, easily visible and non-threatening. I could hear him speak from the rooftop, almost as clearly as if I was next to him. His voice was a little higher pitched, and he greeted the man across from him with a smile, waiting for the other guy to offer his hand. When he did, KeShawn put his out and let the other guy control the handshake.

"So, Mr. Green," he said, "Let's do business."

"Idiot," Alpha said. "Using names."

"He calls all of his clients Mr. Green," I said. That earned me a frown and a half snarl.

"You know this scumbag?"

"My father did business with him while I worked for Dulka."

"I shouldn't be surprised," he said. "Tonight, you will turn your back on that past. Now that both of them are here,

we strike, and we take from them what they took from others.”

“We’re robbing them,” I said in a monotone. “White Glove just confirmed that he has the money, and Mr. Green’s about to bring out his product. If we’re going to fuck up someone’s day, now’s the time. What’s the plan?”

“We take out the security and the bosses, move the money into the truck and haul it all out.”

“Good plan, but we take the van, not the truck.” I put a hand up and caught Alpha’s fist as it came at me. “Listen, asshole,” I growled before he could whammy me with his will. “The truck is probably Lo-Jacked, but I know White Glove doesn’t put a tracker on his ride. He’s professional grade, he doesn’t advertise where he goes.” The pressure against my arms let up, and Alpha looked down at the exchange about to take place.

“Then we wait until they have the product loaded before we strike. But no killing. Robbing thugs and lowlifes won’t get reported, but kill one of them, and the police have to get involved.”

“Last thing I ever expected to come out of your mouth,” I said. We waited, and I listened.

“Damn it’s like a B’n’B here,” KeShawn said from the back of the Subarban. “Bullion and bearer bonds.”

“Market value,” ‘Mr. Green’ said, his voice tight with tension.

“The deal doesn’t change in the middle,” KeShawn said, suddenly dropping the street from his voice and bringing out his MBA and law degree. “If you think you’re going to get more than I offered, pack your shit up and go. I offered you a fair price and you accepted. And don’t even think about having your goons shoot my ass. Anything happens to me, and you’re gonna be some Aryan Brother’s bitch for the rest

of your fuckin' life." Mr. Green scowled, then nodded, and KeSawn went back to his van and grabbed a golf bag.

"You don't mind if I check, do you?" Mr. Green asked. KeShawn scoffed and gestured for him to go on and do it. After a few seconds of peering down into the bag, Green nodded to his men, and they started hauling boxes over to the van.

"Wish I could say it's been a pleasure doing business to you," KeShawn said. Whatever else he had in mind was lost when Alpha and I landed on the nearer sedan. The hood crumpled under my feet and glass exploded as Alpha cratered the roof. Before the guy closest to me could get his little gun pointed at me, I was on him, and introducing his jaw to my furry fist. He went down like a rock, and I vaulted over the Suburban's hood with one hand. Bullets zipped past me while I did a one handed handstand for a split second, then my feet were planted in his chest, and I was riding him to the ground like a surfboard.

A line of fire walked up my torso as the two guys at the back of the other sedan found their range on me. With a roar of rage, I shook my head and walked up on them while they changed magazines. The first one got his gun reloaded and pulled the bolt back, but that was as far as I let him get. I grabbed his arm and yanked hard. There was a pop as his arm came out of the socket, then a crunch when he flew through the truck's big back window. I smelled blood and turned on his friend, who had his gun up and pointed in my direction.

Time slowed. I watched his finger start to compress on the trigger, but I was already moving to one side. The gun roared, hammering my ears with both sound and pressure. Tired of the firearm, I hit him in the chest with a flat palm. Hard. The gun flew up and the guy flew back. When the SMG came back down, I caught it and found myself face to

face with ‘Mr. Green.’ He had his personal Sasquatch with him, and the dude was pointing a damn howitzer at me. The client turned and ran for the driver’s side door, so I tossed the SMG at his legs, then bounded toward Sasquatch. His gun boomed, then a freight train of a bullet caught me in the shoulder and knocked me to the ground. Bigfoot in a suit walked over to me with a smile on his face that promised that nothing was going to end well for me. When I stood up, though, his grin lost a little bit of its power.

It lost a lot more when I grabbed the hand holding the miniature cannon and *squeezed*. Bones snapped under my hand, and I pulled my lips back from my teeth in a lupine grin. With his hand in my grip, it was nothing to reach out and break his arm. He screamed and fell to his knees, clutching his ruined right arm to his body when I let go. He let the pistol go, and I took it by the barrel. The sound of the drivers side door opening caught my attention, and I let fly with the revolver in my hand, knocking Mr. Green unconscious with the butt against his head. Then I turned back to Sasquatch, Jr. Of all the men here, he was the one who seemed to enjoy this the most. If there was anyone the police wouldn’t care was dead, he was the one. I could rip his throat out, and he’d never be missed. I could taste the blood, rend his flesh and unleash my full strength on him. I drew back my arm, and felt a band of steel wrap around my wrist.

“No,” Alpha said. I turned and snarled at him, but he hit me again with his will, and I found myself standing still, the bloodlust drained from me. “We have what we want.”

I shook my head, suddenly a little disoriented, and followed him back toward the van. KeShawn was laid out behind it, his eye swollen shut, and a compact pistol bent into a U shape beside him. I reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, then grabbed his keys from the clip on his belt.

“Now we have what we want,” I said. The golf bag was in the back, and I closed the rear doors of the van, then stripped the magnetic signs off.

“You drive,” Alpha said.

“I need my human form to do that,” I said.

“Draw the wolf in,” Alpha replied. “I only let him out a little way. You must pull him back all the way. Find him in you and control him.”

My eyes closed and I searched my thoughts, and suddenly, once I was looking for him, my wolf was right there. Just as Alpha had described him, he was halfway free, almost as if I was watching him emerge from my body. I was sure Lucas would have a movie reference. The thought of Lucas and Monica, of Wanda, Mom and Dee, brought my focus into even greater clarity. Suddenly, the wolf was docile, but not tame. With a deep breath, I reached for him, and when I exhaled, I imagined him retreating back into me. The next moment, it was like catching smoke as my wolf faded into my thoughts, and I was human again.

“It only hurts when it’s forced,” Alpha said.

“Asshole,” I muttered.

“Dumbass,” he retorted. I went and stripped one of the black clad guards for something to wear, but left him his underwear. I’d go commando before I’d share tighty whiteys. Fifteen minutes later, we were unloading the van into a stolen truck and heading in a different direction. I shook my head when I realized we weren’t turning far out of our way, that we were going pretty much straight toward our destination. I chose out of the way streets to avoid being seen.

“You nearly killed that man back there,” Alpha said as we took empty side roads. “This is why you need my guidance. And you still haven't mastered even a single

aspect of your form. This is why alphas lead lesser wolves. If I hadn't stopped you, you would have ruined the whole operation." I growled at him, but I couldn't argue with what he said. I tried to find a good response all the way back, but I never came up with one.

We pulled into an old factory that made something big and heavy back in the day. I smelled familiar scents as we got out of the stolen truck, and lights came on around us.

"Behold," Alpha said, "The bounty of the pack!" He dumped one of the boxes, dropping gold bars onto the bed of the truck. The other six guys came forward, their eyes bright with the shine of gold. Alpha grabbed six of the bars and handed one to each of them.

"Whoa," one of them said, hefting his. "That's a kilo bar! That's gotta be worth twenty grand!"

"Try forty," another one said.

"Spot price today was just under eighteen hundred," a third guy chimed in, looking at his phone. "So it's closer to thirty seven thousand."

"What's our share?" the first guy asked.

"You're holding it," Alpha said from the bed of the truck. He was setting bars into two piles, one considerably larger than the other.

"There's a lot more there," one of the chubby guys said. "Shouldn't there be equal shares or something?" Alpha stood and came to the edge of the truck bed, looking down at the half circle gathered around it.

"You think I'm not being fair?" he asked. "How many of you dodged bullets tonight?" I raised my hand. "How many got shot? How many fought for this? How many of you put yourselves in any danger?" My hand stayed up through all of it, and it wasn't joined by any others. "Only Chance and myself. None of you. We did the real work. All you did was

show up and demand meat from our kill. Be grateful for what I gave you, and pray I don't decide you're not worthy of even that."

"Why is *he* worthy of even being chosen?" the big kid with the ponytail and the knee-high leather boots asked. "I know who he is, that's Chance Fortunato. He's a goddamned white knight. Why is a candy assed SJW like him your beta instead of one of us?"

"White knight," Alpha said slowly. He walked to the end of the bed and hopped down. "Social Justice Warrior. Troll. Cucks, libtards, trolls, Nazis, fascists, antifa. Internet terms, used by keyboard commandos to describe other men who oppose them...all words used in bloodless debates by idiots who align themselves along a *human* spectrum. Conservative, liberal, centrist. All of them *human* terms. Mortal limitations. I'm not some champion for your little cause. I'm not some men's rights champion or feminist shill. I am not part of human politics or petty squabbles over philosophies. I am beyond those things." He reached out and grabbed the long haired doubter by the neck and lifted him into the air. "Do you think you're more of a man than he is?" He tossed the offending supplicant to the floor and stood glaring at him.

"Goddamn straight I am," he said, trying to get back to his feet. Alpha strode up to him and slapped him, knocking him back down.

"How many men have you killed?" he demanded, punctuating the question with another slap. "How many bones have you broken?" Another slap. "How many times have you bled in battle?" Slap. "How many times have you fought for your very life? How many scars do you bear?" Two more slaps. "Zero. You've never faced true hardship, true fear."

"But..." the wannabe warrior stammered.

“But nothing. Whatever trauma you think you’ve suffered is nothing compared to what he’s faced, what he’s done. You stand in the presence of a blooded warrior. He’s killed more than once. He’s bled often...and he has won. None of you can say the same. If you’re going to become worthy to bear the wolf, you have to be ready for all that comes with it. Pain, fear, death. The hunt. The kill, the feast. These are the burden of the wolf you hope to bear.” He turned and addressed the rest of the group before he turned back to the wannabe. “And when you question Chance’s worthiness to be my beta, you question *me!*” He slapped the guy harder, nearly knocking him out. “And you do not question your alpha.”

I came up beside him, looking down at the wanna-be. Hearing Alpha describe me the way he did rang true with something inside me. I’d earned my stripes, both when I served Dulka and afterward. I was a damn warrior among boys, far more powerful than this collection of testosterone addled dude-bros. They had only been able to kick me when I was already beaten. It was time to remind them of what I really was.

“Anyone else want to question my place in the pack?” I asked, turning my attention to the other five guys. I squatted down next to the wanna-be. “How about you? Are you man enough to make me prove my strength?” He glared at me, and I smiled back. My fist caught him in the breadbasket, and he doubled over, retching.

“What the hell, man?” one of the kids wearing a supervillain shirt demanded.

“No mercy,” I said, standing to face him. “Remember that lesson?” I backhanded him, sending him sprawling, then turned to another guy. “An alpha isn’t ruled by the weakness of others. Just like I’m not ruled by your weakness.” I lunged to one side and slapped another one, a

skinny dude dressed in black. He fell, my handprint red on his cheek. The biggest of the bunch came at me, and I dropped and spun with one leg out, sweeping his feet. The fourth one moved forward, trying to kick me while I was off my feet. I put one hand over the other and caught the kick, pushing back hard enough to send him staggering back. Before he could catch his balance, I was on my feet and planting an open palm against his breastbone, knocking him to the floor hard enough that he skidded a few feet. The fifth guy came at me in a football rush, and I caught him in a hip toss. Instead of using his momentum to keep him moving forward, though, I directed it downward. The air went out of him and he lay there, gasping.

My hearing caught the lead wanna-be coming up behind me. I stepped to one side and his overhand hammer blow met nothing but air. While he tried to regain his balance, I dropped into one of the fighting stances Kim's memories had taught me. A combination of styles, it was a weird mix of drunken weaving, mantis like hand positioning, but serpent style looseness of arm, with the hands held in what Kim dubbed a feather-fist. Hands half open, ready to close into a hard fist, open into a knife hand or curl into a knuckles-first strike. It was extremely ineffective unless you had *kitsune*-like reflexes and speed, and better than human strength. Which I did.

"You fail to grasp the art of Beat Dude Lo. Approach me that you might see," I said, imitating one of Dr. Corwin's favorite comedy routines.

Dude-bro number one came skipping at me with a haymaker loaded up, his fist cocked back behind his ear, bouncing with each step. I held my ground until he tried to unleash it. His right hand seemed to move in slow motion, and I had all the time in the world to weave just outside of it, push his arm to one side with my left hand while I

reached out with my right, slid my hand under his punch... and flicked my finger across the tip of his nose.

“Observe, losers, that you might learn.” He turned to face me, then came at me again, more cautious this time. “Boot to the head,” I said. The spin kick brought my foot around behind me, over his right shoulder so that the flat of my foot slapped across his cheek. I stopped the blow just at the point of impact instead of following through, so I didn’t take his head clean off his shoulders. It was still enough to knock him to the floor, but not quite enough to knock him out.

“Few students experience so much of the art so soon,” I said to him while he struggled to his feet. I slid to one side as another dude tried to attack from behind.

“You missed,” I said, straightening and pointing at him. “Boot to the head.” To his credit, he tried to dodge the kick, but instead of a roundhouse style shot, I just leaned back and brought my foot up, waited until he stopped moving and laid the side of my foot against his ear. “Does anyone else wish to be honored with this wisdom?”

The remaining four came at me, and I found myself remembering one of Dr. C’s lessons: Never fight the crowd. Fight the people in it. I bounced right, putting the other three behind the guy on the end, forcing them to change direction while I dealt with him.

“Boot to the head,” I said, planting my foot against the back of his skull. While he staggered forward, I went wide around him and closed with the guy right behind him, grabbing his shirt and pulling it over his head, then grabbing his belt as an anchor while I dropped my body low and sent my foot high to slap against the face of the guy behind him.

“Boot to the head,” I said again. The fourth guy started toward me, so I grabbed elastic and gave dude number two a monster wedgie while I shoved him into the path of

number four. They stumbled a little, until I took a long step and shoved Captain Wedgie aside.

“You, too, shall be honored,” I said, trying to sound serene.

“Shit,” he managed before I raised my right knee.

“Boot to the head.” My foot landed just above his temple, and he hit the floor. “Now, we will review. An alpha shows no mercy.” I kicked one of the moaning group. “An alpha does not ask. He demands, and he takes.” Another dude, another kick to the ribs. “The strong rule.” Kick. “An alpha is not ruled by the weakness of others.” Kick. “Do not question Alpha.” Kick. “And finally, don’t fuck with me. Now, are we feeling wiser?” Heads bobbed up and down amid the moans. “Good.” I walked over to Alpha, feeling some small satisfaction at turning the tables this time. He gave me a slow nod.

“I think you’ve learned enough tonight,” he said. “Go home. We’ll see who has the balls to come back next time.” The six supplicants got to their feet and staggered to the door, all of them casting hateful looks at me.

“That went well,” I said once the last of them was gone.

“They respect you now,” Alpha said. “Or they fear you, which will work just as well. Either way, they will obey you. And that is key.”

“So, what you showed me, with my wolf. Will that work the other way, with the other forms?”

“Yes, if you’re strong enough. And if you can focus.”

“I was an apprentice to a demon. You learn how to focus real damn quick.” I pointed at the shares in the truck bed. “So, how are we going to get this to where I can do something with it?”

“Go home. I’ll leave instructions for you on where to go in the morning.” He turned and walked to the stolen truck, then looked back at me. “Well, get going.” Before I could even voice a protest, I had changed, and was writhing on the floor in pain. Once it stopped, I got to my feet and took off, glad I’d kept my mouth shut. I might have wanted to argue with him, but I knew it was pointless.

Chapter 8

~ Brother to One, Brother to All ~

Motto of the Shadow Regiment

Sunlight streamed through my bedroom window when I woke up. My body hurt, but not as bad as it had after the first beating. I rolled the shoulder that had been hit and found it moved well enough, but the ache was still there, just above the point where I could ignore it. I showered and got dressed, then went downstairs. Mom and Dee were already gone for the day, Mom no doubt working another shift either at Spirit Garden or at the nursery she'd gotten on at. I figured Dee was at Dr. C's place or at Wanda's. And as much as I wanted to go to Lucas's or even hang out at Dr. Corwin's place, I had something else I needed to be doing. After rummaging through the fridge for something to call breakfast, I checked my phone. Still nothing from Shade. Even Junkyard had taken to going with Dee or hanging out with Ren.

I went out the back door and sat on the steps of the small concrete back porch. I'd thought becoming a werewolf would bring Shade and me closer. But now it seemed like she was further away than ever. The only bright spot in my life seemed to be the time I took from my friends' lives, and the time I spent with the werewolf who had attacked me and caused all of these problems.

I growled and shook my head. I had all these new gifts and abilities. Strength, speed, endurance, senses jacked up past a hundred. And all I could do was sit on my back porch and feel sorry for myself. Taking a deep breath in through my nose, I closed my eyes and concentrated on the thousand new smells that inundated the air. Pollen from Mom's garden in a hundred varieties, sprite, dog and the thousand places he'd pee'd, the scent of herbs, dirt, om, Dee and....Alpha. My eyes snapped open.

Alpha had been here. Coming to my feet, I tested the air again, looking for his specific scent. It wasn't in the

backyard. The wind shifted for a second, and I lost it, then it shifted again, and I caught it again, stronger this time. I jumped off the porch and vaulted over the fence with one hand, coming down between our house and the neighbors, by the garage. Following the scent brought me to the Mustang, and a note that lay in the driver's seat. It was in my hands in a split second, and I read a series of typed directions to where my share of last night's haul was hidden.

Moments later, I was behind the wheel, the front door was locked, and the Mustang's tires were skidding across the asphalt as I backed out of the driveway. No matter what I tried, I couldn't get to my destination fast enough. The speed limit wasn't an issue, it was all of the other drivers who didn't have the good sense to ignore it like I wanted them to. Finally, I pulled into the parking garage Alpha's instruction led me to and sought out the parking space on the third level where he'd left my share of the take. Moment's later, I was turning into the empty space beside an Oldsmobile that lived up to the "old" part. If it didn't predate Dr. Corwin, it was probably around when he was a kid.

I got out of the Mustang and followed the note's directions to the front fender, reaching underneath it to find the magnetic key box. My fingers found the little metallic rectangle after a few seconds of searching, and I pulled it free. Even before I saw it, I felt the dents and dings on the surface. The battered box slid open, and I turned it over to dump the key into my palm. The trunk popped open to reveal one of the aluminum cases we'd grabbed the night before. Ever cautious, I popped the catch and opened it. Sure enough, there were several gold bars and stacks of bearer bonds. Satisfied, I closed the case and moved it to my car. Once the Olds was closed up and locked again, I headed for the Bazaar.

Melton Copperbottom's Bazaar of Antiquities and Curio Emporium was originally a traveling market, but once the eccentric little gnome got to New Essex in 1867, he found that the money was too good to ever leave. He put down roots and dug in like a tick on a dog, becoming an institution in his own right. Eventually, people got tired of saying the whole name, and had shortened it to 'The Bazaar,' much to Copperbottom's dismay.

The entrance was through an old subway station from the early 1900s. The signs said closed, and as I got closer to it, I felt the illusion spells try to influence my perceptions. From a distance, it looked like any other deserted place, the doors chained shut, windows boarded over. The plywood coverings were papered with "Missing" posters, and there was never a shortage of signs on surrounding poles and walls advertising yet another person who had disappeared in the area. It kept the casual passer-by from being too interested in sticking around, and made the homeless population tend to stick closer to the camp the Mercantile Guild maintained a few blocks over. Usually, I had to concentrate to break the illusion, but I guess being a Were' made it easier to see through those kinds of glamouries. I could sense the image I was supposed to see, but the real thing was clear to me.

"Ego sum inter illustrator," I said when I approached the door. Movement in the shadows gave the impression of a large shape nodding at me, and I walked past whatever was guarding the front door today. Even with the passive measures in place, Copperbottom didn't take chances. No illusion or aversion ward was as effective as an ogre or a troll standing at the door to rip the arms off of anyone who didn't belong. Not all of the missing person posters were fake.

Where the Hive and the Underground were like towns, the Bazaar was exactly what it called itself. The train station

stretched over quarter of a mile, and stretched almost a hundred yards on both sides of the track, not that you could easily tell. It was packed with stalls and kiosks, with a million colors and a billion smells. I sneezed the second I hit the bottom landing, overcome by the smells of hundreds of beings, too many spices and herbs to count, hundreds of metals, paper, grease, smoke, wood...the link between my brain and my nose shut down like a server under a DDoS attack. The noise hammered at my ears, hundreds of voices, and almost as many languages. I couldn't tell one from another, but my new hearing did pick something up almost immediately: the tone. There was anger in a lot of the voices I was hearing, and when I got used to it, I could smell the adrenaline in the air.

Most times, I wouldn't have worried much about security in the Bazaar as much as I might have in the Hive or even the Underground. Copperbottom was serious about protecting his interests, and those of everyone who did business in the Bazaar as a result. He'd hired minotaurs to handle his day to day security, consulted with a dragon for the rest. But today... something felt off. I set the case down and pulled my backpack from my shoulders. With my foot on the case, I slid the holster for my paintball gun out and slung it around my hips. Once it was buckled around my leg, I picked the case back up and started toward the eastern edge of the Bazaar, where all the more secure shops were located. Overhead, I saw sprites zipping back and forth, all of their wings flashing angry red. Down each row, merchants were in the aisles, talking to each other more than trying to sell, and my ears started picking up the same words over and over again. Sprites, uppity, place and forget.

When I reached the edge of the market, I turned left and headed for the pawnbrokers until I found the Sign of the Jade Mountain. Unlike most of the merchants, Ieyasu wasn't joining in all the drama. The tengu proprietor was sitting

behind his counter, studiously working on something. His head came up, revealing hawk-like features. A hooked nose, eyes set close together and hair slicked back all conspired to make his face look more birdlike. The avian eyes and feathers from the midline of his head back just made it obvious.

“Good morning, Chance,” he said, his voice trilling over the R and whistling across the S.

“Ieyasu-san,” I bowed at the door to his shop, then turned to one side and took my shoes off. “Your shop is a tranquil oasis in a storm.”

“This one does his humble best. What does his good friend and honored client seek today?”

“I have something to I want to...sell.” I laid the case on the counter and opened it. “A fine case of aluminum.” Ieyasu made a show of running his hands along the outside of the case, but his eye was never far from the goods.

“His friend offers a very nice...case. As such things go, he finds it worth...perhaps one fifth market value?” His voice rose and fell as he spoke, almost a song, and his head bobbed and moved left and right.

“I’m sorry, surely I misheard your generous offer of fifty percent?”

“Indeed he did,” Ieyasu chirped. “But perhaps, because this one is feeling charitable, and because he likes Chance,” he paused and tilted his head to one side, “he might have meant to offer one fourth.”

“Forty percent is a most reasonable offer, honorable Ieyasu,” I said. “Though, for form’s sake, I would of course speak of his shrewd bargaining and claim I got the worse end of the bargain. And of course, I would allow for his nominal fee of five percent.”

“Does he promise to tell of this one’s bargaining?” Ieyasu asked. He slid a sheet of paper with a very large sum written on it, just shy of six figures.

“I will curse his name for swindling me out of my hard earned goods,” I smiled, taking the receipt.

“It is a rather fine case,” he said, closing it and setting it behind the counter. “It will make a fine addition to this one’s collection. This one thanks Chance for his-”

“Did you just say Chance?” a high pitched voice interjected. “As in Chance Fortunato?” A white haired sprite dropped down between us, his wings going from red to gold.

“Indeed this one did,” Ieyasu said. “Before being interrupted by a...by a sprite. Why does he ask if this one spoke the name of his friend Chance?”

The sprite spun in midair, eyes wide. “You’re him!” I heard him squeak. He zipped forward and put his hand to my shoulder, then floated back with his fingertips on his lips. “He’s here!” I cringed as his voice hit a note I never thought I could hear and set my ears to ringing. Before I could ask him what was going on, he zipped out the door, and I heard that same high pitched sound.

“Perhaps he would consider stepping outside, before this one’s humble shop becomes too crowded,” Ieyasu said. He added a click at the end, a tengu’s version of a smile. I nodded, and by the time I stepped out the door, a growing crowd of sprites was headed my way. They were speaking to each other using the same high pitched tone that scraped at the edge of my hearing, and I realized that they were speaking in a range above human hearing. Dozens flew my way, all of their wings practically glowing. Finally, they parted, letting an older sprite with all white hair float forward. I held out my hand to let him land on it.

“You are Chance Fortunato,” he said, more a statement than a question. “You are the Liberator, and now you have spoken for some of ours.” He looked up at me, his pale green eyes wide. Like so many sprites, his clothes were simple and obviously handmade, in his case, a pair of handmade pants and a single piece of red fabric that was draped around his neck and crossed in front to tie after being wrapped around his hips.

“You mean Sparo and Finch? Yeah, I helped them get a place to live and a job.” A murmur went through the air.

“Will you help us?” the elder sprite said. Before I could answer, I heard the tread of a heavy foot, or more like a cloven hoof. Eight feet of horned, broad shouldered minotaur rounded a corner and turned his baleful bovine glare on me. He wore a pair of pants with a mace stuck through his chain belt, and little else to cover his furry hide.

It raised one hug hand and pointed at me. “Yer comin’ wif us,” it said. “Us” turned out to be two more minotaurs, one a lighter furred male and the other a female, lean by comparison but still big enough to be three of me with a little left over. Like her two compatriots, she covered her lower half, but with a band of cloth around her chest. The thick cudgel she carried didn’t invite a long look at her, though.

“Looks like I am,” I said. I let the lead minotaur grab the back of my shirt and went along with him. He led me through the marketplace, and up a set of stairs to a long section that overlooked the whole Bazaar. Once upon a time, it might have been a whole suite of offices, but now, it was a lavish home and office for the Bazaar’s founder and owner. Thick cushions and piles of pillows were everywhere, all covered in a thick, shiny satin in every color of the rainbow, and more than a few colors that didn’t exist in Nature.

Melton himself was clearly a gnome who had never been accused of having good fashion sense, and had decided to lean into that. His shirt was a paisley pattern that seemed to be made up mostly of pink, gold and dark red, while his silk pants were a series of gods awful stripes in yellow, green, brown and white. At either end of the ensemble, he went with cooler colors, if only by degree, with a pair of electric blue slippers and some kind of fur cap. With so much bad taste going into his outfit, the single ruby ring he wore on his right hand stood out by its simplicity and its lack of company.

Like most gnomes I'd met, he went for facial hair, a thin blonde mustache that drooped down the sides of his mouth to dangle from his chin like a beard in its own right. His eyes were set in a permanent squint, and the sides of his mouth were pulled up in an equally indelible scowl.

"What's wrong with you people?" he demanded in a high, nasal voice as soon as the minotaur pushed me forward. "Look at you, causing problems, disrupting trade. And for what? Freedom?" He shook his head and got to his feet. "Don't like the idea of that."

"What's wrong with freedom?" I demanded.

"The free part," Copperbottom snarled. "Bad for business."

"Get your hands off me!" I heard from behind me. I turned to see another pair of minotaurs escorting a well-dressed human into the room. As soon as he saw Melton, he strode forward. "I am the chairman of the Mercantile Guild. I will *not* be manhandled by your half-animal thugs!"

"Oh, be quiet, Harland," the fashion-deficient gnome said. "You have no problem with my 'half-animal thugs' when they're manhandling people for you."

"Why am I here, Copperbottom?" Harland demanded.

“Because you’re the head of the guild that’s doing all of the bitching. Squeaky wheel,” Copperbottom extended a hand toward Harland. “Grease,” he gestured toward the minotaurs with the other.

“Then what’s *he* doing here?” the merchant pointed at me.

“Word is, he’s the sprites’ big hero,” Copperbottom said with a broad grin. “They call him the Liberator.”

“You’re the one who freed the sprites? You’re the one who caused all these problems for us?”

“What problems did I cause?” I asked. “Aside from inconveniencing you.”

“Inconvenienc-” he sputtered. “You’ve screwed us out of hundreds of thousands of trade credits worth of investments, cut our light labor force in half and sent our costs skyrocketing, and you think you just *inconvenienced* us? You’ve threatened our whole way of life!”

“Because sprites being slaves for a century was no big deal to them,” I said.

“So what? They’re just fae, and lesser fae at that. They’re not even people. Just a little more than animals. Besides, they had it good. They got free food, a place to stay and someone to take care of them. We were doing them a favor.” Harland missed the rumble that went through the sprites gathered behind me. Copperbottom wasn’t looking happy, either.

“But they aren’t slaves now,” I said. “And there’s nothing you can do about that.”

“The way we see it, they, and you, owe us. No one asked us before you took our property from us, and crippled our business.”

“You don’t know your history, do you, dumbass?”

“What did you just say to me?” Harland asked, his tone dropping to a tone most people would mistake for dangerous.

“I just insulted your intelligence,” I said. “No one asked the sprites if they wanted to be slaves. The Unseeligh Court threw them to the wolves as compensation after Second Demon War. The sprites didn’t fight against the Allied Magickal Forces. Their only mistake was in trusting the Unseeligh to protect them in Europe.”

“Typical high school revisionist history,” Roland said, waving a hand at me. “You’re still an apprentice, and a demon’s slave at that. Of course you’re going to buy into that kind of warm and fuzzy crap.”

I reached out and grabbed him, then pulled him to me. “I learned that,” I snarled at him, “from the demon.” I felt the wolf start to emerge, the desire to tear his face off almost palpable.

“What’s wrong with you, Fortunato!” Copperbottom snapped at me. “You are out of line!” I shoved Roland away and took a slow breath, trying to marshal my willpower and harness my wolf. He stumbled and fell on his ass, which felt kind of good to watch.

“We still expect to be compensated for our losses,” Harland said when he got to his feet.

“Here’s an idea,” I said. “Why don’t you hold your breath while you wait for that to happen?”

“The Mercantile Guild demands an immediate return to bondage for the sprites, Copperbottom,” Harland said. “We will not employ them or sell to them, and we will see to it that anyone who does is punished until our demands are met. And if you don’t actively work to meet our demands, we will bankrupt you, Copperbottom.”

I turned away, unable to think clearly while I saw Harland's face. While Melton fumed behind me, I tried to remember everything Dr. C and Kim had taught me about strategy and tactics to turn this around. Everything I knew about the Mercantile Guild said they could do everything that Harland had just threatened. They had the money and the power, and their relationship with the Conclave was solid. My eye fell on one of the decorations near the door, a stone slab with a bronze plaque set in it. The words registered in a bolt of inspiration, and I turned to move toward it.

"Don't you turn your back on me, you demon loving piece of shit," Harland said, breaking into my thoughts. He grabbed me by the shoulder, and reflexes that still weren't completely mine kicked in. My right arm slipped under his left, snaked around behind his shoulder until my hand was at the back of his head and grabbing a handful of greasy hair. While my right hand was reaching for his hair, my left had come up and grabbed his left arm by the wrist.

He cried out when I pulled back on his head and marched him to the big stone block. "Are you familiar with this?" I asked. "Do you know what it says?"

"Let go!" Harland demanded. "Copperbottom, do something!"

"The boy is clearly defending himself," the gnome said, his tone casual. "You did lay hands on him first."

I brought Harland's face down onto the stone a little harder than I needed to. "Can you read it now? No? Let me get you a little closer." I pressed down and shoved his face across the stone. "Line one says 'We reserve the right to refuse service to demons, devils and their worshippers.' Oh, and look there, what does that part say?" I raised his head an inch and brought it back down on the stone. "It reads

'The Mercantile Guild.' So, let me ask you a question. How do you think I freed the sprites?"

"I don't know, and I don't give a-OW!" he cried out as I thumped his head on the table again.

"I freed them during the Rending. You've heard of that, right? Of course you have. You know how it works."

"It's a demonic ritual, that's all I need to know."

"Yeah, but this one...this one's special. See, the Rending lets you undo any demonic accord. So I ended up freeing the sprites during the Rending. Guess what that makes sprite slavery? You guessed it. A demonic contract. So, here's the deal. You back the fuck off of the sprites, or I start telling people how the Mercantile Guild is actively enforcing a demonic contract, and has for the last seven decades. And that you *know* it's Infernal. That will effectively end any support you ever had with the Conclave, and drive business far far away from any Guild merchant. I will destroy you, and the Conclave will help me."

Harland paled and his eyes turned toward me. "But we didn't know!"

"You do now," Copperbottom said, peering over the edge of the stone. "And I'll make sure that gets spread around. You should let him up now," he nodded at me. I let Harland go and stepped back, my hands reluctant to relax. I wanted to smash his head back down until it was soft and squishy, and rip his arms off. Maybe not in that order. Instead, I turned away from him and gritted my teeth, fighting the wolf back down.

"This isn't over," Harland spat. "We'll fight this, and we'll make sure the Conclave sees this our way."

"If you try, I'll make sure your grandfather's name on the original contract gets dragged into the light," Copperbottom said. "For now, I'll let you get away with

claiming the Guild 'didn't know' that it was an Infernal agreement. But I was there when those accords were signed. And I refused to sign them. Your granddaddy wasn't so scrupulous. You're dismissed." Judging from the sounds behind me, the minotaurs weren't very gentle in escorting Harland out, and looking out the window onto the Bazaar, I watched him walk away. Before he was lost to sight, he turned and looked back, then pointed right at me. I replied to his index finger with a different digit, and he scowled at me before turning to disappear into the crowd.

"You made a powerful enemy today," Copperbottom said, coming up beside me and climbing onto a chair.

"Did I make a friend, too?" I asked.

"I try not to take sides where business is concerned," Copperbottom said. "It gets messy. But Harland threatened me, and you gave me leverage on him. That'll earn you a little bit of goodwill for a while."

"But not forever," I said.

"Nothing lasts forever. Not contracts and especially not gratitude."

"I'll remember that," I said, turning to walk toward the door.

"Then remember this too, Fortunato," Copperbottom said. I stopped and turned back to him. "You came in here with an army at your back. That will earn you more leeway than anything else you can bring to the table. Don't underestimate the sprites. Your master probably didn't tell you that the sprites didn't ask the Unseeligh Court for protection. The Court offered the deal to the sprites to keep them from siding with the Conclave. You can have that little bit of wisdom for free."

"I promise, I won't tell anyone about the free part," I said with a lopsided smile.

“That would buy you a little more good will,” Copperbottom replied.

There was a crowd of sprites waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. The elder sprite landed on my hand again, spread his hands and bowed his head, the sprite version of a bow.

“We owe you another debt, Liberator,” he said. “What happened to day may not change things much, but it is a start. I am Elder Hok, and I pledge my clan to you in gratitude, and to your clan.”

I inclined my head to Hok and brought my left arm out to the side, the best sprite bow I could make with him on my right hand. “Elder Hok, my clan will always help the sprites. Ren has saved my life and helped save a lot of other lives. I owe your people, too. Look, if you need a place to be, talk to Wizard Corwin, and some of the other members of the Conclave. I’ll make sure everyone in my circle knows to look out for you.”

“And we will look out for you,” Hok said. “The Honorable Copperbottom was speaking truth when he said we were once a force to be reckoned with. And we will be again, thanks to you.”

“That part is up to you guys,” I said. “But I don’t doubt it.”

“Go in peace, sprite friend,” Hok said, lifting into the air. “May the spirit of the wildlands watch over you and yours.”

“May the winds always lift you up,” I replied.

Chapter 9

~ Never try to get between two people who are deeply in love. They will crush you. ~

Advice to a young succubus

My wolf wasn't a patient creature. I'd been at the kitchen table for two hours, and every attempt I had made to pay off some of our bills had been met with frustration. Most had already been paid, which didn't make sense. There was no way Mom had come up with all the money necessary just from working at a part-time job and her job at Spirit Garden, and I knew she wouldn't just accept charity from someone else. I stood up from the table and clenched my fists to keep from flipping it. Besides, if she had somehow come up with the money, she would have stopped taking the extra shifts at work so she could have more time with Dee and me. Instincts honed from years of working around my father's side of things were practically screaming that something wasn't right.

I took a couple of steps away from the table then turned back, trying to figure out what was bothering me. There was a piece of paper stuck under the chair leg, so I bent down to pick it up, thinking to throw it away. But when I turned it over, I almost hit the floor. It was a deposit slip for five grand. I had given Mom five hundred. A cold chill went down my spine. Everything I was seeing pointed to a cash loan. Something that at least two letters on the table told me Mom had been turned down for a few weeks before. That meant one thing: loan shark. Mom had gotten a loan off the books. The money I had given her had probably gone toward a first payment.

My magick was a lot weaker, but I still had a tiny bit left, hopefully enough for a simple divination. Moments later, I was in my room and pulling my amethyst pendant from my backpack. With it dangling from my right hand, I closed my eyes and focused.

"Show me yes," I said, and it started spinning in a circle. "Show me no," and it swung forward and back. "Show me

unknown.” It swung left and right. “Okay, I need to find the loan shark. The source of the five thousand dollars Mom deposited. Show me the way.” Immediately, the pendant started swinging at an angle, and I moved that way. The arcs got longer, and suddenly, I found myself at Mom’s bedroom door. I took a deep breath, suddenly nervous at entering Mom’s space, but this was too important. If I was right, this overrode normal manners. I reached out and turned the doorknob. Her bed was pushed up against the wall to my right, and she had two tables set up in an L in the corner on the far wall. A heavy chest was set at the foot of her bed, and her dresser and mirror were set up on the wall to my left, with her closet on the left hand wall. I followed the pendant to the tables, where her sewing machine and other crafting tools were set up, and found a piece of paper sticking out from under the edge of a box.

I tucked the amethyst away and pulled the page out. On it was a number and a date only a few days from now. Below that was an address and a name. It was time to pay this guy a visit. Smiling, I tucked the paper back under the edge of the box and headed for the door.

The address turned out to be an old payday loan office with the signs taken down. White letters on the glass door read “By Appointment Only”, and no one inside seemed to be there to actually work. The door was locked, so I did the polite thing and tapped on the glass. One of the guys lounging in the lobby, a brick wall of a guy in slacks and a pastel polo shirt, came up to the door and pointed at the sign.

“You got an appointment?” he asked through the glass, his accent vaguely Slavic. I could see tattoos peeking up from under his top.

“Do I need one to pay you?” I asked in return, not bothering to correct his grammar.

“I don’t know you. So, yes.”

“Seriously?” I said, holding up one of the stacks of bills. “I’m here to give you money, and you want me to call first?” He flipped me off and turned to go back and sit down. I felt a surge of rage that left me shaking, and the laughter from the other men in the room just opened the door for my wolf to try to come out. I took a few quick breaths while I fought it down, then reached for the door handle.

The metal frame warped a little, then the glass shattered and the door popped free of the frame, hinges and all. It hung up a little on the hydraulic thing at the top, but a quick twist and a yank backward freed the whole thing. I tossed the mangled door aside and stepped into the lobby. Two beefy guys with dark hair and track suits came at me. The one on my right threw the first punch, and I caught his tattooed fist in the palm of my hand. His buddy followed his example a half a beat behind him, and I caught that punch in the other palm. Then I squeezed hard enough I could hear knuckles popping while I brought my arms out and down, forcing the two goons toward the floor. The guy in slacks came at me from the left, and I let his friends go to dodge the kick he aimed at my head.

Then he swung the bat.

Ninja assassin level martial arts, superhuman strength, speed and reflexes made for a potent combo. As the bat whistled toward me, I leaned back, then reached for it as it passed, catching it and stopping it with grip strength alone. With a yank, I pulled it from the thug’s grip, the flipped it end over end before throwing it at the wall. The blunt end stuck in the cinderblock. The room went silent, and I turned to the one guy who hadn’t moved, a skinny looking man in a white, button down shirt and a black tie on the other side of thick glass. A steel door separated his part of the office

from the lobby, and I ripped it off its hinges before walking over to his desk.

“Bats don’t normally do that,” I said in a calm voice. “Now, we can talk, or I can show you a few other things bats shouldn’t do.”

“Let’s talk,” the man said, his accent much thicker. “Let us start with names. I am Nicolai Velenkov. But I’m sure you already know that, if you come...knocking...on my door looking to pay me. What I am interested to know is who are *you?*”

“I’m Chance Fortunato,” I said. “I’m here to pay Mara Murathy’s loan.” I pulled five grand out of my backpack and laid it on his desk, then pulled out half that and set it next to the first stack of bills.

“This is not enough,” Velenkov said. “There is early payment penalty, because I lose all the interest she would pay me. And fee for dealing with you. That is another ten thousand. Plus five thousand for...insurance.” I looked at him for a moment, trying hard not to give in to the urge to rip his throat out. Finally, I pulled the cash from the bag and set it on the desk. “And another two thousand for your attitude.”

“Fine,” I said, pulling the two grand from the backpack. “Now, we’re through.” I turned and started for the door.

“You are through,” he said when I was a few steps away. “But I like doing business with your mother. And I am worried for her. She is surrounded by dangerous people. She needs... protection. Protection I will happily provide. For a price.”

“I’ll pass,” I said.

“That isn’t wise, and I wasn’t making suggestion,” Velenkov said. “You come in here and damage my place of business, you hurt my employees and you interfere with my

livelihood. You should worry more about your mother's safety.

"My mother's safety is very important to me," I said, turning and walking back toward him. "And it's important to you, too. Because if anything happens to her, or my sister, or anyone I even like a little, I'm going to come find you and express my...disappointment." I reached down and took a baseball off his desk and held it up. "There's no place you can run to that I won't find you, and nothing you can do to stop me."

"If anything happens to your mother, you'll have to kill more than just me, little tiger. Now go, before you make a threat you can't back up." He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. I reached forward and slammed the baseball down on the desk, leaving a hole in the wood.

"I don't mind starting with you," I said. "And I'll be happy to show you what you shouldn't be able to do with a baseball." I turned and walked out the door, secretly fuming. As much as I could smell his fear, I couldn't smell enough of it. They were Russian, and based on the tattoos, they were Bratva. Killing Velenkov would be just the start of a long war, and the Bratva played harder ball than my father did. I couldn't fight an army on my own. As much as I hated to do it, I needed some outside help. It was going to be a long couple of days. I fired off a quick text to Mike Cassavetes, then wiped my hands and headed for the Mustang.

With nothing else on my plate to distract me, I found myself drawn to one place. I got in the Mustang and headed for Shade's house. I couldn't trust her phone, but I could trust that she'd be home at some point, if only to keep her parents happy. Eventually, I ended up ringing her doorbell. When no one answered, I headed back to the car and drove to the next block, then parked and headed back. There were lots of trees in Shade's neighborhood, old ones with their

lowest limbs twenty or thirty feet off the ground. I went to the base of one and looked up. The lowest limb was well out of reach, but with my new strength, it was an easy jump to grab the bottom limb. I pulled myself up and found a comfortable place to perch.

The sound of a car's tires hitting the driveway woke me from a light doze, and my head came up. I turned to look toward Shade's house and fought to keep quiet. Shade's silver Mustang pulled into the driveway, but it wasn't Shade driving. She was in the passenger seat. The car pulled to a stop, and the windows rolled down.

"Valmont is really a step up over public school," Kain's voice reached my ears. "It's a way to make a clean break with Chance, and start mixing with a more...acceptable crowd."

"I'm not breaking up with Chance," Shade said, her voice soft.

"Do you think you love him?" Kain asked. "Is that it? You're too young to know what you want. That boy isn't in your league, and he never will be. For all of his failings, Dominic King was a very powerful alpha, who came from a line of powerful Weres', which means you come from that same line. Fortunato, on the other hand... he's a gamma, Alexis. At best. He's a Gypsy and a wizard. Weakness is in his blood. The best he can hope for is to become a beta in a very weak pack. You're too strong and too good for him. Just look at the chaos of your relationship. He should never have allowed you to even talk to the beta Sinbad sent to court you. If that boy was the kind of real man you needed, he wouldn't have allowed you to get away with any of your antics."

"Antics?" Shade said, her voice rising. "Look, I might have made some mistakes, but I'm not some histrionic bimbo. I don't do 'antics,' you chauvin-"

Kain reached out and grabbed her, pulled her to him, then mashed his mouth to hers. She struggled for a moment, and I started to move toward them, then stopped when she went limp in his arms. He pulled back after a moment and looked down at her. Her breath was coming in ragged gasps, and she looked up at him with wide eyes.

“That is how a woman naturally reacts when a strong man takes charge,” he said with a smug grin. “If Chance was man enough for you, you would never have had that reaction. Now maybe you’ll finally grasp the truth, that what you feel for him isn’t love, it’s just infatuation.”

“He let me say no,” Shade said, ducking her head. Her voice was so soft it was almost carried away on the breeze.

“If he was truly worthy of you,” Kain said, moving toward her again, “he wouldn’t have even asked, and you wouldn’t have resisted.”

Shade let out a sob and pushed him away, then turned and ran inside. Kain just stood there and laughed softly. Moments later, he was dodging the front bumper of Shade’s Mustang as she barreled out of the driveway. I hit the ground at the base of the tree and sprinted for my car, my own thoughts racing as fast as I was running. I didn’t want to think she liked what he’d done, but I also wondered why she hadn’t fought back. Did she actually like what he’d done? Again and again, worst case scenarios ran through my head, and I found myself driving toward the one person who knew both of us well enough to offer me some insight. I parked near the main iron gate of the Hive and headed in.

A trio of sprites zeroed in on me before I was ten steps in, and hovered nearby as I made my way to the Red Gate, and Synreah’s House Of A Thousand Delights. The red skinned Hob at the door nodded at me as I approached.

“She’s expecting you,” he said with a nod toward the stairs behind him.

“Thanks, Roke,” I said. I’d learned months ago that it was a bad idea to try to second guess Synreah. If she was expecting me, so be it. She’d explain if she felt like it. I took the stairs two at a time and went to her office door, then knocked just to be sure. It was a whorehouse, after all. Odds were better there than most places of me interrupting someone having a good time.

“Come in, Chance,” Synreah said, her voice muffled slightly by the door. She sat behind her desk, mostly wearing a black robe over a black teddy, dangerous curves covered but still visible. I closed the door behind me and turned to her, but she spoke first.

“She’s been here for almost half an hour, crying her eyes out on my shoulder,” she said. “And let me tell you, the tears of a girl in love burn.”

“She’s still in love with me?” I asked.

“After all you two have been through together, and after everything you’ve fought and killed your way through together, and you still think she could love anyone else?”

“Kain... a lot of what he said made sense, and when he kissed her...she didn’t fight it, and I wasn’t sure what that meant.”

“Going passive is how she survived years of being molested by her old alpha,” Synreah said as she stood up from her desk. “It’s how she coped, and it’s all she knew to do.” She came around to stand in front of me, then brought her hand across my cheek in a resounding slap. “That’s for doubting her.”

“Yeah, I deserved that,” I put one hand to my cheek.

“Damn straight you did. As much as this little alpha-male-manchild wants to believe his own bullshit, most women don’t just fall in love with every guy who clubs them over the head or reaches out and gropes them. That is not

manly, it's creepy. A man who has control of himself and isn't a total thug? That's a little hotter. Now, the woman who loves you needs you to go in there and do what no one else can for her: make her feel safe and loved."

"I'm not sure I'm strong enough," I said, looking toward the door.

"You are," she said, laying a hand against my cheek. "Gentleness requires strength. Only weak men always need to show everyone else how strong they are. Just go in there and be the good man you've been all along, Chance."

I went to the door and hesitated with my hand on the knob, then pushed ahead. The door swung open to reveal Shade sitting at the end of the bed with her head in her hands. The red satin sheets made my brain want other things, but one look at Shade's eyes when she looked up and then away, and I knew all of that would have to wait. She needed something else just now. I went to the side of the bed and put my feet up on the mattress, resting my back against the headboard.

"I love you," I said after a few moments. That seemed like the single most important thing I wanted her to know, and it unlocked a hundred other things I wanted to say. "I'm not going anywhere, and I won't just stop loving you. Ever. And no matter what, I'm here for you. You don't have to be strong all the time with me...it isn't a bad thing if you're weak sometimes. I mean, yeah, we're both kinda fucked up, but I figure we can be fucked up together, you know?"

"I...I let Kain kiss me," she said after a moment. "It was like I was back in King's bed all those nights. I couldn't do anything, I just...I just froze. Some alpha bitch I turned out to be. Some girlfriend." She stopped for a moment, but I could see the tension in her body, hear the pounding of her heart. "I'm sorry."

“You didn’t let him kiss you,” I said. “He forced himself on you. And you did the only thing you could.”

“You weren’t there, Chance, you didn’t see-”

“I was,” I said. “I did. And you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I feel like I did,” she said. She turned and came toward me on her hands and knees, head down. The wolf in me recognized it as a submissive belly crawl. But my human heart broke at seeing her like that. She wrapped her arms around my leg and laid her head on my thigh. For a while, all I did was stroke her hair while she cried against my leg. Finally, I pulled her up to my shoulder, meeting her halfway as I slid down.

“My shoulder’s getting jealous,” I explained, and she giggled, then started crying again, giggling at the same time.

“We are so fucked up,” she said.

“Well, you’re stuck with me,” I told her. “Wolves mate for life, right?” She rolled over to look up at me, then straddled my legs.

“My wolf chose you a long time ago,” she said. “Even before yours came to you, she...and I...chose you.”

“I chose you before I was turned. My wolf chose you, too.”

“We got to choose each other twice,” she leaned down and whispered in my ear. Her hands slid up under the hem of my shirt and pulled it up over my head then she laid her head on my chest, her hair draped over my arms. “Mine,” she said.

“Always.” I brought my hands up to hold her close. After a few more moments, I could smell her desire, and I was sure she could smell mine. She rose up and pulled her shirt

up over her head, then reached behind her back and undid the clasp of her pink bra. Her breasts were perfect, her nipples perfect little pink points that I couldn't help but cup in my hands. She arched her back into my caress, then leaned down to kiss me, her hands reaching between us for the button to my jeans.

“I want this,” she said, her voice rough with desire. “I want you.” She planted her lips over mine, so all I could do was show her how much I wanted her, too.

Chapter 10

~ Never fight a wizard at home. ~

Proverb

“I think it’s cute that you two spend so much cuddle time,” Synreah said when we came out a couple of hours later. “Too few couples do. Remember how this feels when things get rough.” She had poured her ample curves into a black dress with a corset top and black gloves, onyx jewelry and black boa. She glided toward us with a broad smile on her face. When she got close, she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath through her nose. “Mmm, you smell delicious. One thing I want both of you to remember. You might both have a wolf in you, you’re both still human. Don’t let anyone make you give that up. Now go,” she gestured toward the door. “You have things to do.”

With a trio of sprites flying overhead and our combined reputations in the Hive, the walk out was uneventful. The crowd that seemed to always be there gave us just enough room to walk unimpeded to the iron gate, the smells and sounds of the bustling market pressing in on us all the way.

Once we hit the street, Shade’s cell-phone went off. She answered it without putting it to her ear, since we could both hear it even without putting it on speaker.

“We have movement near the Romani camp,” we heard Galen say. “I smell wolves.”

“We’re on our way!” Shade said. We broke into a run, each heading in a separate direction. I slid behind the wheel of the Mustang a moment later and gunned the engine before I shifted into reverse and backed out of the parking space fast. Tires squealed on the concrete as I hit the gas, and the Mustang bounced out of the parking lot. Shade flew out behind me, her Mustang skidding to take the curve harder than she ought to. We didn’t just break the speed limit, we shattered it and took no prisoners. Fortunately, no one with a badge was on the highway.

We took the turn into the parking lot at speed, just as the first wolf burst out of the woods and ran for the camp. I heard a woman scream and saw her dart from a picnic table outside the circle of campers and trailers. It looked like the wolf was going to catch her before she reached the shelter of the camp, so I hit the gas when Shade veered off toward the bigger group of wolves that had emerged from the woods, and plowed into the pursuing Were' a few yards away from the woman. It went flying and bounced off a cinderblock wall, the spell enhanced bumper of my Mustang directing the Weres' own momentum back into him and sparing my front end from so much as scratched paint.

Before it could get up, I was out of the car and on my way over to it, but I suddenly had another problem. Another Were' landed in front of me, teeth bared, claws slashing the air in front of me. I kicked out and caught him in the gut, then kicked him in the face when he doubled over. I spun a roundhouse into its side and knocked it away from the Roma camp. But when I looked to where the first wolf had landed, there was only a vaguely wolf-shaped dent there. My first instinct was to look toward the camp, but there was a line of men and women with guns standing there. If the wolf had gotten past them, there would have been more chaos and less grim determination. I turned back to the woods.

A line of Weres' stood halfway between the woods and the edge of the camp, all in hybrid form, clothes hanging from their shoulders. A half dozen wolves were approaching from the woods, heads low, ears back, teeth white against the darkness. Shade's black form leaped across the space between them and hurled one of them back toward the trees. The rest of the attacking wolves surged forward, met by Galen and the others. Instead of engaging, though, they veered to the side, trying to go around the defenders. Three got caught by the pack, but two made it past. I let the wolf out a little, and felt the fur erupt along my arms and chest

as my face elongated. The two breakouts raced toward me, and I let out a roar of challenge.

When they split, they went in unexpected directions. One, a big gray wolf, leapt forward, low to the ground. The other, a sleek, red-furred wolf, leapt high. The problem with jumping, though, is that once you leave the ground, you're pretty much committed to your trajectory. When the black wolf hit me, I went with his momentum, rolled onto my back and put my feet on his chest, then kicked. Hard. The black wolf sailed into the path of the red one, and they came down in a tangle of fur and limbs.

Right on top of me.

I rolled to the side, cursing when I came to my feet, and grateful I wasn't part of the meaty sounding thump that came from my left. However, these were still Weres'. A fall from thirty or forty feet was just going to hurt some. It wasn't going to stop them. That was my job. While they were scrambling to untangle themselves, I ran up and grabbed the one on top. While he was snapping at my arms, I spun in place and let go of him, sending him sailing back toward the forest. His buddy was on his feet, watching his friend fly over his head for a moment before turning to face me. By the time he did turn to face my way, I had already covered half the distance between us, and I'd jumped into the air. He tried to brace himself, but momentum and leverage were on my side. I kicked out with superhuman strength and every bit of Kim's borrowed skill, and my target left on a flat trajectory. He only hit the ground a few yards from the edge of the trees, but he didn't stop there. It was a second or two before the snapping and snarling stopped.

"Physics, asshole," I said, kicking up to my feet.

Gunshots split the air behind me, and I turned to the camp. Another wolf raced past me, and I followed suit,

recognizing Galen's scent. He leaped onto one of the RVs, then dove off. I was right behind him, using my hand to push off the same vehicle and land beside him. The wolf he'd attacked had caught him across the chest with a backhanded slash, and he tried to hit me with the other hand. I ducked under his attack and unloaded a low sidekick that caught the attacker in the chest and threw him into the air. When he landed, more gunshots peppered the night. The wolf convulsed and went still.

"Gonna make it?" I asked Galen, kneeling beside him. I could see a lot more of his insides than was healthy without a scope or an X-ray machine.

"Eventually," he coughed, spitting blood. "If we don't get shot out of gratitude for saving this guy's ass." He looked toward a Romani man laying near us, his shoulder bleeding from a bite that went from his pecs to his scapula. Several gun barrels swung our way, and I heard a couple of hammers being drawn back.

Suddenly, the sounds of combat faded, and we heard the sound of vehicles approaching. Motorcycles and cars were coming, and I smelled lots of wolf. The attacking wolves were drawing back into the woods to the north, and the two we'd held off in the camp were nowhere to be seen. Galen and I backed away, and the Roma lowered their weapons at a gesture from my grandfather.

"I don't think they are here for us," he said. "See to Vano."

"Come on," I growled to Galen, and I put an arm under his shoulder and helped him get moving. We limped to the rest of the pack, Galen holding his slowly healing belly together. Kain was getting out of his Cadillac, posing like an action hero with his chiseled jaw set and blond hair blowing in the breeze.

"Nice of you to finally show up," Shade said.

“I could say the same of you,” Kain answered. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of you since you ran off this afternoon. Someone attacked Sinbad earlier. He’s in bad shape. If I hadn’t been there to help out, he’d be dead by now. And if I hadn’t showed up, there’s no telling how many you would have lost defending these...Gypsies.”

“Romani,” Shade and I said in unison.

“What did I tell you about correcting me?” Kain said.

“We listened as well as you did when we told you the right term for my people,” I said.

“Your people are about to come try to kill you,” Kain said, looking over my shoulder.

The angry mob of villagers had upgraded from pitchforks and torches to shotguns and flashlights but it sounded like they were still reading from the same script. We turned to face them, and they stopped a few yards away. My grandfather stood by another man who carried a pistol.

“Patrin, don’t do this,” my grandfather said. “We don’t know if they are the ones who killed our people.”

“They are still monsters, still *telkeripe*. It does not matter if they are guilty of this. They must still die!” I stepped forward, leaving Shade to hiss in surprise behind me.

“None of Shade’s pack hurt your people,” I said, raising my voice to be heard. All eyes turned to me, and I heard Kain growl Shade’s name behind me. “They are my friends, and Shade would not allow it.”

“Stand down, boy,” Kain barked.

“I can’t let Shade risk herself, and you’re sure as fuck not going to do it, Kain,” I spat. “I’m the logical choice here.” I pulled my wolf back, and felt myself reverting back

to fully human. A gasp went up from the Roma, and my grandfather took a few steps toward me.

“Chance, on your life, do you speak for these Weres’?” he asked.

I felt Kain’s will crash over my defenses for a moment. “I do,” I said. “On my life, I do. They are good people.”

“Chance, no, don’t do this,” Shade whispered.

“I have to,” I said. “Or a lot of people are going to die.”

“The word of a Were’ is worth nothing!” Patrin said, raising his shotgun.

“But their actions speak louder than your hate,” my grandfather said. “One of theirs shed his blood to defend your son. And this boy is willing to put his life on the line for his clan. Your son did the same. We must accept his word. Take Varo back to the camp. And you, Lady Shade...bring your wounded, too. His wounds are not healing fast enough. He will die without proper treatment.”

“Treatment he’ll get from real doctors, not Gypsy folk healers,” Kain said. He moved to stop Galen from moving forward, but Shade put her hand on his arm.

“You’re not helping,” she said, the words coming fast and high pitched.

“We don’t need help,” Kain said.

“He won’t survive the trip,” my grandfather said, stepping forward to help support Galen.

“Don’t,” Shade growled when Kain opened his mouth again. He looked at her and frowned, then turned away.

“Go,” he said. “Grovel to the Gypsies. I’ll deal with you later.” He stalked toward his car, passing a familiar figure in a leather vest coming our way.

“For an alpha, he pouts an awful lot,” Killian Moon said.

“Is it true?” Shade asked. “About Sinbad?”

“He’s in bad shape,” Killian said. “But he’s survived worse. Truth is, if Kain hadn’t arrived when he did, it could have been a lot worse. We were only seconds behind him, I guess, and we were almost too late. Still, you’ve managed to do something Sinbad has been trying to do for decades, make peace with Roma.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘peace’ exactly,” I said, looking toward the still armed group of Roma men and women who were covering the pack. “More like a truce with tense negotiations.”

“Well, no matter what, it’s a step in the right direction, as far as Sinbad would be concerned.” He took a step closer and lowered his voice. “But, heads up you two. With Sinbad down for the moment, Kain is the ranking alpha. And if I know him, he’s going to milk that for everything it’s worth. So I need to get back to Branson before he does.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Shade said with a smile that made me think of cats and canaries. “I need to make sure Jester is taken care of. Come on, Warlock,” she said to me, turning to go.

“Warlock?” I asked when I caught up to her.

“Not my choice,” she said. “Jester came up with it, and the rest of the pack went with it. Though I did vote for it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Hey, it’s better than Sweetie Pie or any of the other names I call you.” She grinned at me, and I had no smartass answer for her. We were among the Roma, anyway. They were helping Galen onto a table that had been draped with sheets. He laid back, his face ashen, his shirt and pants dark with his own blood. A woman with gray streaks in her hair came to the table with a younger man behind her.

“Yoska, get a line in him, Ringer’s Lactate,” the woman said as she put on a pair of gloves.

“What are you doing to him?” Shade demanded as the woman began pushing the exposed organs back into the wounds. The younger man pulled a glass bottle from the bag, then a needle and a coil of clear tubing.

“He’s lost too much blood to heal himself,” the woman said. “And these lacerations were inflicted by another theriomorph. He’ll die before his body can heal them if I don’t help it along.” She worked at arranging things in his belly while her assistant attached the tubing to the needle and jabbed it into Galen’s arm, then attached the other end to the bottle and handed it to a Roma boy standing nearby.

“Hold this up in the air,” Yoska said, then turned to the woman. “Line’s in, Jeta.”

“Good,” Jeta said. “Hand me the stapler, then go back to Varo and see if your sister got the bleeding stopped.” Yoska nodded and handed her a long, rectangular instrument. Taking it in hand, she began working her way up the long gashes in his chest, pinching skin together and squeezing the handle. Each application left a metal staple in Galen’s skin, holding the edges of the cut together. Shade moved forward, but I put my arm in front of her. “His body will take care of the internal injuries faster if he can heal the damage to his skin first,” Jeta said, not looking up. “Staples cause less damage.”

“How do you know so much about how we heal?” Shade asked,

“It’s better for all of us if I don’t tell you that,” Jeta said. “Your friend should be okay in a day or two. Werewolf claw and bite injuries don’t heal the same as normal wounds, but the internal injuries heal faster if the skin is intact. Now, I must see to Patrin’s son. But,” she paused and looked to Shade and me for a moment, her gaze dropping for a

second. "I never thought to see a Were' fighting to save one of our own. These are strange days. Strange, indeed."

My grandfather came over to us, his brow creased and his lips pressed together. "As grateful as I am," he said, looking between us, not meeting either of our eyes, "you should go. One night is not enough to change the hearts of the Mulani. There is still little love for your kind here. And, there are things that are not for the eyes of..." He paused, looking a little uncomfortable.

"*Gadje?*" I supplied.

"Outsiders," he said.

"If one of yours has been bitten, we can help him if he..." Now it was Shade's turn to look uneasy.

"He will not turn," grandfather said. There was a finality to his voice, and both Shade and I caught it.

"You're going to just kill him?" Shade asked, her voice rising.

"Not if we can help it," the olde man admitted. "He is Mulani. It is not the same for us."

"Mom was right," I said.

"Please, go," he said before I could continue. "These are not things you should know."

"Come on," she said. "Grab Jester and bring him back to the lodge with you." She turned and started away, then came back, her face turning red. "Please."

"Sure thing," I said. "I'll meet you there."

She leaned in and kissed me. "Thank you. I love you, baby."

"Love you," I said with a smile. Things were getting a little better. I scooped up Galen and carried him to the passenger side of my car. He'd stopped bleeding, but I took

the sheets from the table just to be sure. I didn't want to have to explain why there was blood on my seats. Shade led the way back to the camp, and the rest of the pack stayed close on my nose and tail until we turned down the road to the lodge. When I stopped, Shade opened the passenger door and took Galen out, carrying him inside.

She'd just laid him down on the bed in the room off the main hall when we heard the Cadillac pull up. Shade nodded toward the doors, and the rest of the pack cleared out of the room before Kain opened the door. He pushed it open hard enough to make it slam against the wall and stormed in.

"What in the Hell were you thinking?" he yelled.

"When?" Shade asked before I could say anything. "When I defended the Romani, when I let them save Jester's life, or when I didn't kiss your ass hard enough?" I smiled and leaned back against the wall, content to watch Shade butt heads with him.

"And when you let a low ranking member of your pack *defy* you in front of the rest of the pack!" he bellowed.

"Chance is still my *gothi*, and I still trust his judgment," Shade said. "Pack ranking didn't suddenly make him stupid or something."

"He has no business advising a higher ranking member," Kain said, his voice still loud. "The Clans don't have advisers, and you shouldn't be listening to anyone but me."

"News flash, Kain," Shade said. "We're not in Boston, my pack is not a Clan pack, and I run it the way I see fit. I don't answer to you." Kain came forward and loomed over her.

"You run this pack at Sinbad's discretion, and now that he's out of the...out of action, I'm the ranking alpha in the

area, which means you answer to me now. You need to teach this gamma wolf a lesson in respecting his betters.”

“He was right, Kain,” Shade said. “He saved Jester’s life, and who knows how many others? So no, I’m not going to punish him for doing the right thing.”

“The *right* thing is respecting his alpha and keeping his damn mouth shut unless he’s told to speak.”

“Not in my pack,” Shade said, her hands on her hips. “I don’t give a damn how they do it in Boston, I need someone around me who isn’t going to kiss my ass if they don’t agree with me. That’s what my *gothi* does.”

“If you won’t maintain any discipline in this pack, then I will.” He turned and backhanded me so fast all I saw was a blur.

I was aware of the last part of the skid across the parking lot, then Kain was walking through the doors toward me. Shade jumped out the ragged frame of the window he’d knocked me through and ran in front of him.

“Damn it Kain, leave him alone!” she yelled at him.

“Then learn to run your pack the right way, so I don’t have to keep your dogs in line.” He stopped a few feet from me and looked down at me while I struggled to get to my feet. “You give her advice if she asks for it,” he said.

“Otherwise, shut the hell up. You are nothing but a bottom-ranked gamma wolf. Don’t forget it in my presence again. Am I understood?” His will smashed into mine, and I nodded. My phone rang in my pocket, and he dismissed me with a casual flip of his hand.

“What?” I asked, not even looking at the ID on the phone. My eyes never left Kain while he got in his car and drove off.

“Hey to you, too,” Lucas’s voice came over the earpiece. “Surly much?”

“What is it?”

“We got the results back, and Wanda’s got a pretty decent idea of what happened when Tyler was killed. We’re at Dr. C’s place right now.”

“I’ll tell Shade,” I said, then hung up. The last part was for Lucas’s benefit. Shade was already headed my way. “You heard?”

She nodded and straddled her bike. “See you there, baby,” she said. The bike buzzed to life, and she was leaning forward to keep the Ninja’s front tire on the ground. I got behind the wheel and pulled out a couple of minutes behind her, my eyes going to the passenger seat where Junkyard usually sat. My heart had a little pang as I realized I missed him, then my eyes went back to the road, and I was slamming on the brakes. The car skidded to a stop, the front end sliding to the right, narrowly missing Kain.

“Damn it!” I yelled. “What the hell, man?” I opened the door to confront Kain, and his fist hit me in the chest. I went flying backward...again. This shit was getting old.

“You never raise your voice to me!” he yelled. His fist came at me again, but this time I was ready and blocked the punch. “And you *never*,” he kicked me, “dare raise your hand against me.”

“Even when you’re trying to hit me?” I asked, my voice rough as I felt something broken shift in my chest.

“Especially not then,” he said. “It’s my right.”

“Even when you’re wrong?” I popped off, unable to resist the play on his words.

“I’m never wrong.” He threw a haymaker that I dodged under, then a kick I managed to jump away from. Both moves left him wide open, but I only realized the attack was there after the opening was gone.

“Until you open your mouth.”

“Be still, damn it!” The words hit my brain hard, and I stopped moving. His fist came toward my face, and I only thought of dodging after it was too late. I saw white and then stars clouded my vision for a moment, then my ribs took a shot from his boot. I flew through the brush until I hit a tree, and I felt my body bend the wrong way before I bounced off the trunk and landed on my already broken ribs. The wind rushed out of my lungs like it was late for dinner with a beautiful woman, and he was on my again, his fist pounding into my face a dozen times.

“Shade shouldn’t be taking advice from you, and if you know what’s good for her, you shouldn’t be offering it. You’re just a gamma wolf, not even worth her attention. You shouldn’t even be talking to her, much less sleeping with her!” He hit me again, holding me up by the collar of my shirt.

“She chose me,” I moaned through split and bloodied lips.

“She doesn’t know what she needs,” he slapped me hard enough that I saw new constellations in my vision. “She doesn’t need some pathetic, sniveling weakling like you. She needs an alpha. She should be with me, damn it... someone *like* me, a real alpha.” He dropped me, and I struggled to my knees.

“You?” I asked. “Isn’t she a little underaged for you?”

“Now that’s weak,” he laughed. “I said someone like me, not that she should be with me. You’re making shit up, kid.”

“I know what I heard,” I said, the words coming out as a growl.

“And I know what I said. Making shit up isn’t going to change the truth. This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

You're not only weak, you're a liar." He drew back his fist again, and I did the only thing I could think of:

I changed. Fast. The world went pale and bright, my jaw stretched forward and my arms and legs drew up close and went furry. Kain's fist knocked a huge chunk of the tree trunk behind me, and my four-legged form was tearing up the turf with each step. Kain roared behind me, then I heard him take off in pursuit, snarling only a few feet behind me, still running on two legs instead of four. Trees whipped past like scenery in an anime action segment, but it never felt like I was in danger of running into things. My pace went from a leg-churning panic sprint to a longer stepped run, and my feet seemed to know the way to where I was going, even if my brain didn't.

Then I heard it. The sound of my name, only it wasn't my name. Or was it? Maybe I had never heard it spoken so perfectly. All I knew for sure was that I was being called. I turned toward that call, and it became a song. The wolf in me understood the notes, the rhythm, the lyrics. And in that song was my path. My stride became even longer, and I heard Kain cursing behind me. I wove my way between trees, down a gully and up the other side, my feet finding the easy path, certain Kain couldn't take the same route without changing. Brushed snapped behind me as he crashed through it, using brute strength to try to keep up with me. I slipped between the trees he muscled aside behind me, then found myself with the scent of water ahead. A stream...I knew this path, knew the stream meandered five times across my path to safety. I ran across the log that spanned the first twist, and heard it slide down the bank behind me, dislodged by my passing. I clambered down the next bank and followed the streambed, my paws finding the submerged rocks and shallow spot for about fifty yards, then broke right, headed southwest, where I knew there was another point where this stream branched off. I

ran down the embankment, across on the three rocks that rested along the middle. Then up the rotted tree limb that broke beneath my weight, dumping the thick trunk into the creek when I jumped off of it to land on the far bank. Kain would have to run down and back up or leap across the watery route. The crashing and cursing was gradually getting further and further behind me, and I could sense the place I was going.

With every step, it came to me that I knew these woods, as long as that song was still in my head. As long as that voice was singing the path to me, I not only knew the land, but the easiest path to take. My lungs were burning, my tongue was dry and my legs felt like lead. But Kain had worked harder, and I could hear the effort in his breathing, hear how his footfalls were getting a little slower. I veered right, slipping into and through a stand of pine saplings, the needles catching on my fur but not slowing me down, then under the low branches of a pine tree. I was almost there.

I saw her when I broke from the stand of pines, into an open field. Twin cairns of rocks stood on either side of me, and the dark woman was visible in the shade of an oak tree on the other side. It was the woman from the park, and I knew, without knowing how, that it had been her voice, her call that I'd been following here. With a final effort, I broke into one last, desperate sprint across the meadow, toward the scent of humans. Halfway across the clover covered turf, I saw a trio of humans emerge from the other side and my pace faltered for a moment, until I saw the face of the largest one in the middle.

Roland Dandry looked like an oversized hobbit. Plump, his curly, brown hair a little unruly, his round, pleasant face never far from a smile. Sweat beaded his high forehead and darkened the armpits and neck of his light green shirt. Beside him were two other familiar figures. Lucinda and Riker, former clients of mine, and now former victims of

Dulka's. As I got closer, Dandry pulled a thick, uncarved wand from his pocket and pointed it my way. Lucinda reached for an amulet that hung around her neck, and Riker brought his hands up, glowing rings on his fists. Their eyes were on me, then went to Kain when he burst from the trees behind me. In my head, I pushed back at the wolf, and over three steps, went back to human, pushing up with my hands and staggering forward until I collapsed at Dandry's feet.

"Help me," I gasped, looking up at him, my arms and legs heavy, breath coming in gasps.

"With pleasure," Dandry said, his normally pleasant expression settling into a determined frown as he turned his attention to Kain. "That will be quite far enough, sir."

"This is no business of yours, mage," Kain said. "The boy is part of my pack. He answers to me."

"Your authority ended two hundred yards behind you," Dandry said, and the tip of his wand started to glow. "You're standing in my hearthstead. And, Chance is a friend. So I would turn around and leave if I were you."

"You're not me," Kain said, and took another step forward.

"That's a good thing." Dandry's frown deepened a little, and he moved his wand a little, like he was tapping something with it. The air got thick, then I heard the thump of something hitting flesh. Kain flew back toward the far side of the field, and Dandry got a prim little smile on his face.

"Being you isn't very much fun right now," the plump little mage said. "Riker, help Chance up. Lucy, a shield, please." Lucinda stepped up, her hair grown out into its natural brown, one side of her head shaved, her eyes rimmed with dark makeup. She'd traded her fetish-Barbie wardrobe for jeans and a t-shirt, and she made it look fierce by slashing the bottom half and the sleeves.

“Now we’re talking,” she said, her voice a little deeper than I remembered, a little more sultry for it. Riker pulled me to my feet and draped an arm around his shoulder, hoisting me up like I weighed next to nothing. He’d always been strong, but his tendency had been for physical augmentations. But the callouses on his hands and the bulk he carried said this was all the product of good old fashioned hard work. Kain’s roar reached us, and Lucinda stepped in front of Dandry, hands up and moving in an intricate pattern. I watched Kain charge toward us, still in human form. Lucinda grinned as she brought her hands together, index and middle fingers on each hand held upright, thumbs touching, palms forward. With a mischievous chuckle, she raised her hands a little and tilted them forward. Seconds later, Kain hit an invisible barrier face first. His legs kept moving forward, though, so his feet went out from under him and he landed on his shoulders. Then Lucinda laid her hands flat and brought them down. Dust rose around his body, and I heard the *whump* of something big hitting the ground on top of Kain.

“That, sir, was a rudimentary shield spell,” Dandry said as he walked forward a few steps. He laid a hand on Lucinda’s shoulder and smiled at her as he passed. Her face lit up at the silent gesture, then she turned her full attention back to Kain. “Cast by a first year apprentice with a bad attitude and a penchant for illusion. I’d bet it feels more like she dropped an elephant on your chest, though. When a mage says that you’re standing on his or her hearthstead, it means something. We’re going to let you up, and give you another opportunity to leave under your own power. And this time, you really should walk away.” He gestured to Lucinda, and she relaxed her hands. Grass and flowers straightened when the force pushing them down disappeared, and Kain sat up.

“We're not done, Fortunato,” the alpha hissed, and I felt a chill of fear in the pit of my stomach. “And you,” he pointed to Dandry, “The Conclave will hear about your insolence.”

“Oh, please do contact the Conclave,” Dandry said, his face breaking into a smile. “I’m sure they’ll file your complaint right next to mine. You’re still standing on my hearthstead, sir. After I asked you to leave twice. Once more, and I’ll be justified in using lethal force. So, please, leave.”

Kain turned and started walking toward the line of stone cairns that marked the edge of Dandry’s hearthstead, taking his time. “Come on,” he muttered under his breath. “Try something, you fat little fuck.”

“He’s trying to test you,” I said. “He wants you to attack him.”

“He’s moving in the right direction,” Dandry said. “If he’s content to keep his tail tucked between his legs for that long, I don’t care how much time he takes to slink off.” Kain picked up his pace after that.

“Thank you, Mr. Dandry,” I said.

“You’re welcome, Chance,” he said. “Let’s get you inside and call Trevor. He must be worried sick about you.”

“Don’t worry,” Riker said, pulling me up so that he supported most of my weight. “I’ve got you.” He half carried me into Dandry’s house, a two story place that was made of something like terra cotta or adobe. The inside of the little house was cool, with a big kitchen off to the right as we came in. Riker took me to the left, past the big dining table and into the sunken living area. He set me down on the curved bench that ran around the edge of the sunken area, then stepped back to let Dandry come take a look at me.

“Well, you certainly do look the worse for wear,” the mage said. “And for a werewolf, I guess that’s saying something.”

“Just need to eat,” I mumbled, though it sounded more like “Juss nee’ eat.”

“Food I can help with,” Dandry said, the smile returning to his round face. “I keep these two pretty well fed, though you’d think I starved them the way they act at dinner time.” Riker moved for the kitchen, and Lucinda came back out with a dark blue blanket and a pair of gray sweatpants.

“Here, put these on,” she said, her mouth quirking up on one side. “You know how I am with temptation.” Still, she didn’t turn away when I stood up to put the sweats on. In a couple of minutes, I was only half naked, the blanket around my shoulders. In spite of the heat of the day, I was feeling a chill on my skin.

“This should help take the edge off,” Riker handed me a mixing bowl full of hot stew and a large spoon. He set a plate with a couple of small loaves of bread on it beside me, then put a big mug of something cool on the low table in front of me. “Drink more water, too.” I barely remembered to use the spoon, shoveling the thick concoction into my mouth almost as fast as I could swallow. The room took on a sharper edge and the colors faded when my wolf emerged, hungry as I was for meat. I gulped the first few bites down, barely chewing any of it.

“Should we call anyone else?” Lucinda asked. My head came up from the edge of the bowl, and I felt stew trickle down the side of my jaw. I shoved back at the wolf, pushing it down into my psyche so I could think more clearly, and talk without snapping at someone. My mind raced, trying first to remember Shade’s number, then giving up because it was on my phone. I hadn’t actually dialed it for months. Calling Mom was a bad idea while she was at work. Only Dr.

C's name came to mind, and even he wasn't the best person to call any more. But, he had told me to. Plus, everyone else was going to be there.

"Just Dr. Corwin," I said. "He'll know what to do."

"Look under Wizard of New Essex," Dandry said. "That will ring to his house phone." I looked to my right to see Lucinda thumbing her way through a thin yellow notebook, then stopping and spinning the rotary dialer on the phone mounted to the wall. My eyes started to drift back across the room, and I slowly slid to one side, knowing I was drifting off and not giving a single damn about it.

Chapter 11

~ Q: Who would win in a fight between a Predator and Kevin from Home Alone?

A: How long does Kevin have to prepare? ~

Internet meme

Dr. Corwin's voice brought me back to wakefulness. I sat up and cast the blanket aside, disoriented. Dandry's house. The woods. Running from Kain. Memory helped, but I was still confused. A light breeze blew in through the window, and I felt the sweat on my face and chest chill against my skin. I was pretty much soaked. It was dark outside, but somehow, I knew it hadn't been that long since the sun went down. The air, my brain told me, was still too warm.

"How is he?" I heard Dr. C ask. To my right, I could see Dr. Corwin, Kim and Dandry talking in the kitchen.

"Physically, he's fine," Dandry said softly. "His magick is all but gone, Trevor. I can't imagine what it must be like for him. Or you. Will you still be able to...?"

"He's still family," Dr. C said. "And I'm still going to train him. Maybe not the way I used to, but there is still a lot for him to learn."

"It's not going to be easy."

"Very little worth doing is," Kim said. "And nothing about our path is easy. His skills in magick may be diminishing, but his physical abilities are growing. With his new strength and abilities, he could become a most formidable warrior."

"Eavesdropping isn't polite," I heard Amanda say from nearby. She sat on the couch opposite me, so still and quiet that she hadn't registered on my newfound senses. She'd spoken so softly, I doubted anyone but me had heard her.

"Neither is sneaking up on people," I muttered. She shrugged, the movement barely visible against the couch she was busy blending into.

"It's a gift," she said, her voice still pitched low. "You can lift cars and shrug off bullets, I'm..."

"Sneaky?"

“Unobtrusive. The opposite of you.” She leaned forward, her face visible in the dim light. “He won’t stop teaching you. He loves you like you were his own son.”

“And you’re telling me this why?”

“Because I am self-aware enough to know that it made me jealous.” She looked to the kitchen, then her focus came back to me. “Imagine finding the father you thought had left you in one moment, and in the next, finding that you had been replaced with a delinquent he’d brought in off the streets and adopted. To watch your mother give this same delinquent in a matter of minutes skills you’ve worked your entire life to master. No, I know it isn’t a fair comparison, but it is what my heart told me. But...we have a lot in common. You have a warrior’s heart, even if you have almost none of the skills.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said.

“You’ve endured worse things than I have. I can see them in your eyes.” She leaned forward a little more. “You’re still broken, Chance. No one else will tell you this, but I see it. You are self-destructive, and you have a deathwish. But...I see in you a brother.”

“Aw, are we having a moment?” I asked.

“An annoying, bratty brother with no discipline and no honor, but a brother all the same.”

“Yep, it’s a moment,” I said. She got to her feet and walked around the edge of the circular couches.

“We are *not* having a moment,” she smiled at me. “You are being delusional. And a boy.”

Another scent hit my senses, and I saw Shade walk through the door. She was across the room and in front of me in a heartbeat, her hand on my face, eyes green as her wolf fought to emerge.

"You okay, baby?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"This was Kain," she snarled, and her eyes went to pure amber. "I can smell that son-of-a-bitch all over you."

"Yeah, it was," I said. "And he'll probably have some story ready."

"I'm about done listening to that bastard talk." She stood up and turned to Dandry. "Mr. Dandry, sir," she said.

"Roland," Dandry said. "You can call me Roland."

"Roland, then," Shade said, and her smile emerged. "Thank you so much for helping Chance. As far as I'm concerned, you're a friend to my whole pack, and if you ever need anything that we can give you, just ask." She went to him and hugged him, and Dandry's face was slack when she pulled away.

"I, uh, I mean I...well, it was just....well, what anyone would do...well, not anyone, because I am a mage, after all, and Lucy and Riker were there, too, so I can hardly take...well, maybe some of the credit." Dandry's face was a bright red as he babbled, and Lucinda laughed.

"I think you broke him," she said to Shade. "I scryed Chance's path back north, until he hit an area with some pretty serious wards. I can only guess that was where your pack is based." Shade glanced at me and nodded in my direction.

"Yeah, that's us. My *gothi* does some good spell work."

"Well, he did," I said. "By the way, I lost the phone you gave me. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Shade said, coming up to me and slipping her right arm around me while running her left hand down my chest. "It's insured."

"Won't your parents be pissed?"

“They didn’t buy it for me.”

“You two should come back to the Sanctum,” Dr. C said. “There’s still a lot we have to go over, and I’m sure you and Shade have plenty to discuss on the way back.” He gave Shade a glance and a nod, and I sensed that there was some disagreement between them on what needed to be told.

“Before you go, Trevor,” Dandry said, looking a little uncomfortable. “Chance, there’s something you need to know. When I was tending to you, we noticed something on your aura. It was subtle, and I nearly missed it, but Lucy has a knack for these things and she noticed something felt... odd about your aura. I’ve undone it, but the groundwork has been laid, so unless you make an effort to defend yourself, it could be done again. Something...some *one* was sapping your will. I’ve seen your mental defenses, and this bored a hole through them like they weren’t even there. In fact, I never found any point where your defenses were even active against it.”

“Someone’s been in my head?” I asked, my voice dropping to a growl. The room went bright and washed out again.

“Definitely,” Dandry said. “It’s unlikely you would have even noticed the influence, or even the attempt. Your defenses *appear* to still be intact. This was an extremely subtle working. To reiterate, I only noticed it because we were working on you.”

“It’s his wolf,” Shade said, then turned to me. “That’s why your usual defenses are still solid. Your control is being sapped through your connection to your wolf. You haven’t had enough time to develop any defenses around it. And your alpha, whoever it is, probably did you what King did to us.”

“Damn,” I said, reviewing the last few days in my head. “But I couldn’t bring myself to fight either Kain or Alpha,” I said. “And I’m sure they’re not the same person. Even if I haven’t seen them in the same place at the same time.”

“But we’ve both seen them in different places at the same time,” Shade supplied. “An alpha can command another Weres’ wolf, if they’re strong enough. Kain is probably just doing that. Dominic didn’t want us around other Weres. I’d bet we would have been easy to control because of the way he controlled us.”

“Wait,” I said. “I mentioned Alpha. I can talk about him! Holy crap!”

“Tell me in the car, baby. Dr. C is right. We have a lot to talk about on the way.”

“Roland,” I said, coming up to Dandry and taking his hand to shake it. “Thanks. I owe you big time. More than you know.”

“Well, I try,” he said, but he was definitely proud of himself. With good cause, I figured. Roland Dandry might have been a humble little hedge mage, but when it was important, he’d stepped up and put a hurt on a bad dude. That was the kind of badass that counted.

Shade led the way to her silver Mustang, and I had to check myself from getting in on the drivers side. She followed Dr. Corwin’s Land Rover down the dirt road toward the highway, and her hand slid over mine.

“So, what’s the latest?” I asked when she turned onto the asphalt.

“I stopped by the Mulani camp,” she started after a moment. “Whatever they did to Varo, it didn’t exactly take. He died a few hours ago. Your grandfather was fairly decent, in his own way, I guess. He also told me that they’d followed the trails of the wolves who attacked them. All of them

converged on one trail, and then it was like they disappeared. In the end, they could only find one set of tracks, and even those disappeared.”

“So, they leave tracks when you don’t look at them,” I said. “They’re not phantasms.”

“But they’re not normal wolves, either.”

“Yeah, just ask Varo,” I said.

“They were definitely Weres, though. I could smell it, both on them, and on Varo.”

“This shit gets weirder and weirder.”

“Yeah,” she said, then fell silent. “There’s something else,” she said a minute later. “Compared to everything else, it might seem small, but it’s going to be a pain in the ass. You’re not going to like it.”

“There’s a long list of shit I don’t like lately,” I said. “What is it?”

“My parents are enrolling me in Valmont Prep this fall,” she said. “They told me to break up with you and start seeing boys in my ‘social strata,’ they call it.”

“They want you to start dating rich guys,” I said, my voice a little bitter. “Or anyone not me.”

“My mother enrolled me in classes that are basically Bitch 101. Home Economics, Choir, Culinary Arts, Fashion Design...she’s trying to turn me into a damn Stepford Wife.”

“So, are you...breaking up with me?” I looked over at her, uncomfortable with how long it was taking her to answer.

“Hell no!” she said, her expression as shocked as her tone. “I’m in love with you, Chance! And I’m sure as Hell not going to date some rich little prick who doesn’t think I should take tennis because I kick his ass at it.”

“That’s very specific,” I said.

“True story. My parents already have some smug little prick picked out, and they’ve been trying to get us together since you went to Boston.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, relieved and a little ashamed of myself for doubting her. “He doesn’t want you to play tennis?”

“No, he doesn’t! He actually said we couldn’t play against each other because it would ‘look bad’ for me to beat him. Or that when we did play, that I couldn’t beat him.”

“Your folks must love this guy,” I muttered.

“I think they’re ready to put him in the will,” she said. “Or plan the wedding. I fucking hate this, baby. I don’t feel like I have any say in my own life. It’s my damn senior year. You’d think they would be ready to treat me like an adult.”

“It’s weird,” I said. “We’re both powerful enough to handle anything the normal world throws at us, but your parents don’t know that. Even before I was turned, I was a mage. I could handle most things. Now...”

“Now, you can do all that and you’re still buff as Hell.”

“Still?” I said, pulling up my shirt sleeve over my shoulder and sticking my arm out. I flexed, and cords of muscle stood out all along its length. “Babe, I am ripped!”

“You already were,” she said, letting a little heat into her voice. “And I should know. I’ve seen all of it.”

“Well, in case you forgot any of it,” I said. The rest was cut off with the sound of her phone playing a tune I recognized more from Dr. C’s memories, Mama Mia by Abba.

“It’s like she knows when we’re together or something,” Shade said, pulling the phone out. She gave me a

meaningful look, and I put a finger to my lips, then gave her a thumbs up.

“Hey, Mom,” she said with forced cheer when she pushed the button.

“Alexis, where are you?” her mother said. “Your father and I are worried sick about you. And you owe Doug an apology for standing him up for your date tonight.”

“I don’t have a date with him tonight,” she said, her voice getting low and slow, a sign I’d seen often enough to know her temper was rising. “Or any other night.”

“He asked us if he could take you to the opening gala for the new exhibit at the Vanderberg Museum tonight,” he mother said, sounding exasperated. “His father knows the director of the museum board. We tried calling you and sending you messages. You were supposed to be home hours ago.”

“He asked *you* if he could take me?” she said, edging toward a growl.

“Of course, he did. And we told him you’d be thrilled to go.”

“Well, I’m not thrilled, mother,” she said. “And I’m not going.”

“Don’t you dare use that tone with me, young lady,” her mother snapped.

“Let me talk to her,” another voice said in the background. I stared at the phone, trying to place where I’d heard it before. “Look, bunny, let’s talk this over, okay? You need to be reasonable about this.”

“Reasonable?” she said in a saccharine tone. “You want me to be reasonable? Are you going to explain everything for me and tell me not to worry my pretty little head about anything?”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about anything with me around,” he said, completely missing the false ring to her words. “I’ll take care of everything, babe.”

“I won’t?” her voice rose to almost hypersonic levels. “Oh, Doug, let me tell you how much I really don’t give a fuck.” She closed the line, powered the phone off and tossed it in the back seat.

“I know that guy,” I said, my memory finally showing back up for work.

“Doug Fairing? What, was he one of your old clients?”

“No, he’s one of Alpha’s supplicants.” I stopped, remembering that I could talk about Alpha. “Alpha is the one who turned me. He has this group of wanna-bes who are trying to earn their place in his little pack. Holy crap...there’s so much you need to know!”

“Tell me, baby,” Shade said, taking a turn that led off our route. I unloaded everything I could remember, and Shade....Shade just listened while I told her the whole story. No judgment, no pity, she was just there. When I finished, she reached out and took my hand, pulling off to the side of the road.

“That sucked, baby,” she said, her words measured and slow. “I hate that you had to go through all of that.” She lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it gently. “And none of that is on you. You know that right?”

“Know, it? Yeah. Believe it? That ain’t so easy.” I looked down, cheeks still hot from telling her how badly Alpha had beaten me.

“I get that,” she smiled. “You tell me the same thing all the time. And I’ll tell you that every minute of every day if you need me to. There’s a thousand things I wish someone had told me after I was turned...a thousand things I wish someone had told me after every time Dominic took me to

his bed; I want to make sure you don't go through what I did."

"Sounds like we're almost right back there again," I said.

"It does, doesn't it?" she frowned. "Kain sounds a little like King, sometimes."

"Except he's more into himself. I think it's moved past infatuation, and he's ready to take his relationship with himself to the next level." We laughed for a couple of moments at that.

"He does seem pretty pompous from a distance, doesn't he?" she asked, putting the car in gear.

"It's only up close that he's all that." I paused. "I wondered if Kain had been putting the whammy on us, too, just like Alpha was on me?"

"It can be like that, but I should be able to resist him. He talks a big game, but I was able to throw King off, and he used dark magick to boost his power. And I haven't seen the mental attack that can get through your defenses when you're ready for it."

"So how is Alpha making me his furry sock puppet?"

"It's like Dandry said. He used your connection to your wolf to get in. You haven't made peace with your wolf yet, haven't made him an ally. It's easier after your first full moon, when you come into your full power. Once you do..." she cast a look my way. "Once you do, you'll become even stronger. You could end up an alpha, if you work at it." Something in her voice made it sound like she was looking forward to that.

"That's not something you're born with?" I asked.

Shade shook her head and laughed softly. "I used to think that, but it's mostly willpower and focus. Sinbad has

been teaching me about it. I guess he's found a way to develop the bond so you don't have to be born an alpha."

"That's not how Kain or Alpha put it," I muttered. "They think it's all bloodline or some shit like that."

"Shit is right," Shade agreed, turning onto Dr. C's street. "I thought that was true, too, but Sinbad does things a lot different than the Clans do. Talking to Kain showed me exactly *how* different."

"This here's Night City," I drawled, borrowing from Dr. C's accent. "We got our own way o' doin' thangs." Shade laughed, a pure, beautiful sound to my ears, and I let myself smile. For a few seconds, life was kind of perfect.

We pulled to a stop in front of the Sanctum, and saw a line of cars parked in front. Lucas's Barracuda, Wanda's VW, Kim's Viper, even Mom's van was here. When we got out, Ren flew down to hover in front of me.

"Hey, Chance!" the green haired sprite said, his violet eyes wide and his wings glowing. "Guess what?"

"You found Jimmy Hoffa?" I asked.

"No, silly," he laughed. "Wizard Corwin hired us!"

"Us?" I asked.

"Oh, right. I started a new household. House Fortunato. We named it after you, because you freed us. And now, we hold your home, the House Midnight and the Sanctum!"

"You hold them? As in they're yours?"

"No, no, no. Not like humans hold things. Well, most humans, anyway. No, they're the places we live and protect, but they're not *ours* ours. They're like...we're neighbors and stewards."

"Ah, that's cool," I said.

“I was wondering when you were going to respond with something other than a question,” Shade said.

“Took me a minute to catch up,” I said, then turned back to Ren. “Have you talked to Mage Dandry? He lives on the north side of the lake. He’s really nice.”

“Not yet!” In a flash of gold, he was soaring up toward the roof, leaving Shade and me to stare at his wake before we grabbed each other’s hand and headed for the iron fence that surrounded the property. I went to deactivate the ward on the side gate, and had to try twice before it shut down. Lucas came toward us as we entered, nodding back toward the house as he passed us to reactivate the ward. Somehow, that bothered me more than most things would. If I couldn’t redo a simple ward, I was just another guest here, as opposed to one of the people who actually belonged in this place.

I could hear conversation in the library, but it stopped as soon as we walked in the door.

“I can hear things from like a mile off now,” I said. “Don’t stop talking on my account.”

“Sorry, Chance,” Wanda said, her eyes darting toward Amanda, then back to me. “We just weren't sure what was going on.”

“Neither am I,” I said. “But I was hoping someone could tell me.”

“Then your timing is perfect,” Lucas said from the couch. Monica sat on the floor on front of him, her black spandex leggings swallowed up by a pair of knee high boots. “Wanda was just about to reveal who the...um...sorry, bad joke,” he said, his cheeks going red.

“Murder mystery jokes *are* a little too on point,” Amanda said, her tone nearly leaving burn marks on the floor from the acid dripping from them.

“Now I *want* to hear Wanda tell us how we’re wondering why she called us all here together,” I said. I gave Amanda a dark look, and she matched it.

“I guess you’re wondering why I’ve called you all here together,” Wanda said. “That being said, I can safely say that the killer...is not in this room with us.”

“So, we know who it isn’t,” Dr. Corwin said, “though I’d like to know how you reached that conclusion.”

“One, we know the killer had claws, something no one here except Shade had at the time.”

“Are you sure?” Kim said with a smile. For a moment, here pupils went to vertical slits, then changed back again.

“Yes,” Wanda said, “because kitsune don’t actually have a hybrid form they can maintain.”

“You’ve done your homework,” Kim said with a smile. Amanda’s forehead furrowed slightly, but I could hear her heartbeat speed up a little.

“Also,” Wanda went on, “We know where Shade was at the time.”

“How?” Shade asked.

“Checked the GPS on your phone the other day,” Wanda said. “You were nowhere near the lodge when Tyler was attacked. Besides, none of the fur or claw samples matched yours.”

“I’m never lending you my phone again,” Shade said with a smile.

“We also know something else,” Lucas said. “Based on the hair and claw samples, Tyler never turned.”

“What?” Shade’s voice climbed an octave. “How? Why wouldn’t he have turned?”

“I can’t tell you why just from physical evidence. All I can tell you is that all of the samples that we got that suggested anything furry came from the same source, and based on what we found at the scene, that was not Tyler.”

“He would have fought back,” Shade’s voice trembled. “He wouldn’t have just...let someone kill him.”

“He fought back,” Wanda said. “He had defensive wounds, and it looks like he fought hard. He just didn’t change.”

“Only an alpha could do that,” Shade said.

“Alpha could do that,” I added.

“Shade just said that, dude,” Lucas said.

“He’s talking about someone else, Lucas. The alpha who turned him. That’s the only name he knows him by. We think he uses magick that’s a lot like King used to use.” Shade put her hand over mine and squeezed lightly. “That’s all you need to know for now.”

“But we-” Lucas started to say.

“That’s *all*, Lucas,” Shade said, her tone sharp enough to draw blood.

“Why?” Mom asked, and even Shade kept her silence.

“Because I don’t want to go over it again,” I said. “I told Shade everything.”

“Okay,” Dr. C said after a moment. “So we have an idea of who. Now we need a where. And if Alpha is as powerful as King was...” he let the sentence fade into silence.

“But didn’t Chance beat King?” Amanda asked.

“In a formalized duel, under very controlled circumstances,” Dr. Corwin said. “King was tightly constrained, and Chance went in with hours of preparation, a way to steal half his wolf, and the aid of a pack bond. I

doubt we're going to get the same consideration from Alpha."

"So, what's the plan from here?" I asked.

"We need something from Alpha," Wanda said. "Fur, spit, blood, anything. If we have that, we can either prove it was him or eliminate him as a suspect."

"Aren't we pretty sure he's the killer?" Lucas asked.

"Pretty sure," Wanda repeated. "But not one hundred percent sure. And from what I've learned about Conclave law, reasonable doubt is still a consideration, even if the rest is pretty barbaric. We have to be able to prove Alpha is the one who killed Tyler, even if we use divination to do it. So Chance, could you get some hair or something from him the next time you see him?"

"Yeah," I said. "And since I know how he got in my head, maybe I can block him now."

"We're about to have visitors," Dr. Corwin said. Everyone turned to look at him. "It's a new thing," he explained. "Just started a couple of weeks ago. Chance, Kim, Amanda, on me. Shade, Lucas...Hell, who do I think I'm giving orders to?" Kim and Amanda were already gone, and Lucas was heading for the front of the house. Shade and I were already halfway to the door. I had to hand it to Dr. C, he was learning.

Shade and I led the way out the front door with Dr. Corwin right behind us. Lucas and Wanda followed, going left and right. Seconds later, a motorcycle pulled up to the front of the house. The rider pulled his helmet off, and we saw Killian Moon's worried face. He got off and approached, stopping at the front gate. Dr. C gestured for him to come into the yard, deactivating the ward with the same movement.

“We were wrong about Kain,” Moon said when he made it to us. “He was here to take over from Sinbad all along. He just killed Sinbad’s beta, and declared the Springfield and Branson packs under his control. He’s on his way now to stake his claim on New Essex.”

“What about Sinbad?” Shade asked.

“He’s safe, for now. I made sure he was well hidden, and dispersed our more vulnerable pack members. Look, Shade, whatever happens, you have got to survive and you have to stay independent. Sinbad wanted you to have this,” he unslung a backpack and handed it to her. She grabbed it and opened it, peering inside for a moment.

“It’s all books,” she said, looking up at him.

“Then find a hole with a place to read,” Killian said. “And crawl into it until you figure out what Sinbad needs you to.” Beside me, Dr. Corwin tilted his head, his eyes focused on a distant point.

“You should go,” he said, the words slow. “He’s coming. From the north. Take this road south, then turn west on Elm.”

“Are you sure?” Moon asked, turning to look north himself.

“Yes,” Dr. C said. “Anything that happens within three miles of this house, I know about if I focus. Now go.” Moon made for his bike, and was pulling away from the curb in a matter of seconds.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” I said.

“Until last night, I couldn’t. But...things are changing. This isn’t the only neat new trick I can do. You two should probably go, too. Shade, you need to get the pack-”

“I know what I need to do, Dr. Corwin,” Shade cut him off. She turned to face him, her jaw set, her expression

fierce. "Running from Jacob Kain isn't on that list. If I do that, then he can claim that I'm not worthy to lead my pack. And I would rather die than let him have control over my packmates."

"You may just get your wish," Dr. C said. "But if it's all the same to you, I'll do my best to help keep that from happening."

"I don't mind the help at all," she said, smiling. "There's a lot of things I'd rather do than die, too."

Kain's gold Caddy came around the corner and cruised to a stop in front of the house. Kain got out and glared over the top of the car at us. "Shade, get in the car," he said, the words loud and clipped.

"No," Shade said.

"I said get in this car, girl, and I mean *now!*" He yelled this time, and dogs started barking up and down the street.

"And I said no." Her voice was soft, but there was steel in those words. Kain walked around the car and into the yard.

"I wasn't asking, girl. I'm your alpha now. You obey me."

"Or what?" Shade demanded.

"There is no option." His will came at us, and hit both of us like a wave, but, like water, it broke around us this time.

"There is when they're standing here," Dr. C said. "Or did you forget what it means to stand inside a wizard's hearthstead?"

"If she is too weak to stand on her own," Kain started to say, then shut up as Shade leaped forward and landed in front of him.

"You were saying?" Shade growled.

“Get in the damn car,” Kain said. “You’re coming with me, or you’re giving up control of your pack to me.”

“You have to challenge me,” Shade said. “And win.”

“You want a challenge, bitch?” he bellowed, his hand coming back. He froze when he heard the sound of Lucas racking a round into the chamber of his compact shotgun right behind him. When his head turned toward us, he was facing down Dr. Corwin’s pistol, the hand crossbows in Kim’s and Amanda’s hands, and me ready to leap at him. Even Wanda had a little pistol out and leveled at him.

“I smell a lot of silver,” Kain laughed. “It smells like futility.”

“It’ll smell like death when we put enough silver rounds into you,” Dr. Corwin said.

“Your information is out of date, *mage*,” Kain said. “I’m too powerful, my bloodline is too pure to die from silver bullets alone.”

“I bet they still hurt like Hell,” Lucas said. “I’m willing to test that theory.”

“Everyone, chill,” Shade said, holding her hands out and making a gesture to lower weapons. “Come on, Kain. Do it. *Try* to beat me down.”

“It’s easy to make a challenge when you come from a position of strength. You act tough here, but the dice are loaded. So, here is how it’s going to be. You break up with the boy and become my bitch, and I’ll let you be the alpha female for the Ozarks packs, and for the Clans. Give me your pack, and I’ll even let Chance survive. Or, face me, lose, and watch me kill him, and still end up my bitch.”

Shade looked my way, then back to Kain. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

“You were my goal the minute I saw you, Shade. The rest of this? No, I didn’t do any of this. You and Sinbad just screwed things up so bad I had to step in. You have twenty four hours to come to your senses.” He turned to Lucas and put his hand in the middle of his chest. “Try to threaten me again, little rat, and I’ll tear your throat out.” He shoved Lucas away, sending him flying into the fence on the other side of the yard.

I ran to Lucas’s side as Kain burned rubber pulling away from the curb. “You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Lucas said, focusing on something that wasn’t me. “I’m good. I think I’m just gonna lie down here for a while, though.” His eyelids fluttered, but didn’t stay closed. I listened for his heartbeat, and felt my chest go tight at the steady pulse and breathing I heard.

“Do we need to call an ambulance?” Wanda asked.

“No,” Kim said. “We have curatives.”

I looked down the street and rose to my full height. “I’m going to find him and kill him,” I growled.

“No, Chance,” Shade said. “You aren’t going to do anything, especially not on your own.”

“I can beat him in a fight,” I said. “I’m a better martial artist than he is a straight up fighter.”

“He’s not going to fight you like that,” she said. “He’ll turn and he’ll hammer at your will, he’ll get in your head and he *will* kill you. He’s an alpha, and for all your courage and strength of will, for all that you have the potential to be an alpha, you don’t have the experience. You’re not an alpha. Not yet.”

“What the fuck difference does that make? He hurt my friend, he attacked me, and gods alone know what he wants to do to you.”

“No, Chance,” she said again, pushing me back and leading me around to the side of the house. “Look, I know what he’s done, and believe me, I know what he *wants* to do. It’s nothing I haven’t been through before. But this is no time for you to go trying to get yourself killed.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, and that’s the scary part, baby.” She looked at me with her so very human eyes, and I realized that she had separated herself from her wolf. “You’ve been so dead set on helping everyone around you that you’ve managed to keep yourself almost as fucked up as you were when you first got away. You’ve put so much effort into helping me heal that you let your own head get even more messed up than it was to start with.”

“What?” I said. “What are you talking about? I’m fine.”

“Baby, you still sleep on the floor. You can’t make it through the night without nightmares unless your sister rides herd on your dreams, and you blame yourself for every bad thing that happens to people around you. But you know the worst part, Chance? You know what kills me every damn time some mystic threat or magickally enhanced asshole comes along? It’s knowing that you’re going to go running at whatever it is headlong, ready to let it or them to kill you as long as you win.”

“Well, they usually want to kill me no matter what I do,” I said with a smile.

“You’re self-destructive, bordering on suicidal, Chance,” she said. “But instead of doing it yourself, you’ve been trying to get someone else to do it for you.” The words didn’t hit me so much as they sucked the life out of me.

“Compared to Kain, I must really seem pathetic,” I said, turning my back on her. She grabbed my shoulder and turned me back to face her.

“Kain is the pathetic one, Chance,” she said.
“You’re...you told me once I wasn’t broken, I was just wounded. You’re wounded, too. And I’ve been right there where you are. Before you came along, there were days when I thought about...no, it was worse than that. It was almost a fantasy to me, if it wasn’t so fucking scary. I hurt so bad, I hated myself for what I let Dominic do to me, because yeah, that was how I saw it. There were days when all I could do was get up and keep going through the motions. I actually tried to once, and if Dominic hadn’t put a compulsion on me not to hurt myself, I probably wouldn’t have made it through my freshmen year. And then...” her eyes welled up and tears ran down her cheeks. But she was smiling, and I didn’t know what to do with that. Her voice broke when she spoke again, but she kept pushing forward. “Then this guy comes along, and he tells me no, you don’t have to put out. He comes along and he tells me that I’m worth something more than what’s between my legs. That I’m not just a pair of tits and a piece of ass. He tells me..no, he *showed* me that I. Am. Someone. Not Brad’s girlfriend, not Dominic’s whore. And he did it with just one word. No, Chance. You said no.” She was crying all the way through it, her voice wavering with every word.

“Shade, I...”

“Now it’s my turn,” she sobbed, rubbing her eyes. “It’s my turn to tell you no. No, it isn’t your fault. And no, you don’t have to do any of this alone. You’re not alone. And when you feel like it’s all too much, like you can’t go another step...” Her lower lip trembled, and she stopped for a moment. “Then I will be there to pick you up and carry you. And so will Dr. C, and Lucas and Wanda, and your Mom and Dee. Damn it, Chance, we will all carry you as far as you’ll let us. Don’t try to do this all on your own. And don’t try to check out on us. No, you don’t have to go running at Kain and let him kill you.”

“What if I still decide to check out?” I asked, the question catching me off guard. It was an admission I didn’t realize I was ready to make, but it was out there. But I knew she was right. I’d walked into every big fight ready to die, fully prepared to go out in a blaze of glory, as if that was a way to get out of the eternal punishment I knew I faced, or maybe make it a little less painful. The truth was hard, that I’d been *trying* to get myself killed. It made it easier if someone else did it, made it less my fault. I wasn’t the weak one, that way. It made a weird sense in my own head, and the little goblin in my brain that lived in those moments was still pretty sure I was on the right path. My conversation with Dr. C a few days before replayed in my head, and I realized how disappointed I was to hear what he’d told me. It meant I had a reason to keep surviving. I looked at Shade’s eyes, and noticed that there was none of the disdain or anger the nasty little head weasel was looking for. Instead, she smiled, and she nodded.

“Then I’ll hold your hand at the end, so you aren’t alone.” She reached out and grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “But I want you to stay for as long as I can have you.”

“I’ll try to stick around for a while,” I said. “But no promises.”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“So,” I said, my heart hurting, my body feeling like I’d just run a mile. “What do we do about Kain?”

“*We* don’t do anything about him. *You* read those books Sinbad sent, figure out what he was trying to tell us. *I* am going to go face him.”

“He’ll kill you,” I said.

“No, he won’t. He’ll probably beat me, and he’ll definitely screw me. But he won’t kill me.”

“You can’t be okay with this.” My jaw was having trouble staying off the floor, but Shade just gave me a look that effectively questioned my intelligence and my sanity at the same time.

“No, but I’m more okay with that than you or any of the rest of my pack getting killed. I’m okay with relying on you to find a solution, baby. Kain’s nothing new. This is my pack we’re talking about, baby. If it’s between me getting raped or all of you getting dead...you’re going to live. That’s what the alpha does, she protects her pack.”

“Now which one of us is getting cocky?” I asked.

She leaned in and kissed me. “Not me. Wrong plumbing. You read, think, and find the answer. That’s what the *gothi* does.”

“Your *gothi* was a mage. What am I now?”

“That is not my call, baby. You have to answer that. For now, I need that brain of yours working on this problem.”

“What are you going to go do?” I asked.

“I’m going to go home and bust Doug Fairing’s balls.”

“And if Alpha calls me tonight?”

“Then you answer him, and deal with him.”

“He’s still stronger than I am. I’m not sure I can face him.”

She reached out and put her hand on my shoulder, letting it slide down my chest to rest over my heart. “He can only control the wolf, baby. He can’t control the man. That’s what I understood the night you first faced Dominic. That he only had dominion over my wolf, not over me. Not if I didn’t let him. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you and your wolf are the same. The sooner you understand that, the sooner you can make peace with things.” She looked down,

her lips turned down, gray eyes distant. "The sooner you can figure out who...*what* you really are."

"But-" I started.

"Baby...deal with it. I trust you. You got this." She turned and jogged back around the corner of the house. I followed a little more sedately, still wondering if she was really that confident in me, or just as delusional as I could be.

"So, is it just me, or were her eyes red?" Wanda asked me. The rumble of Shade's Mustang faded into the distance, and I turned red eyes to her.

"Yeah." I picked up the bag Killian had left, then headed for the house.

Three hours later, I jerked awake. It took me a minute to figure out where I was. A warm weight was pressed up against my side, and another furry warmth covered my feet. Even in the soft light that shone in through the window, there was no missing Dee's mass of dark curls where she had wrapped both arms around my right arm. At my feet, I could hear Junkyard take a deep breath, then let it out in a low moan. Two of the books lay on the couch beside me, but the real treasure hadn't been the books. It had been the slim notebook tucked in beneath them. It was a journal, with entries dating back to the Fifties. I opened it to the page that my finger had been stuck between and reread the last entry, dated a few years back.

"Bingo," I said under my breath. Junkyard got to his feet and Dee stirred long enough for me to pull my arm free. In the back of my head, I could feel the stirring of my wolf, feel it being called by someone...something that wasn't me. "Keep an eye on her buddy," I said once I was back on my feet. Junkyard jumped up onto the couch and laid down next to Dee, looking up at me with his big brown eyes. Dee wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his fur.

“Good boy,” she murmured.

I tucked the books and the journal back into the bag and headed up the stairs to the work area in the attic. Dr. C and Lucas had their heads together over something on one of the work tables, and Wanda looked up from a spiral notebook she was writing in.

“What’s up Chance?” she asked.

“Need you guys to hang on to these,” I said, hefting the bag for a moment before I set it on the floor. “The new boss is calling.”

“Then you need to be out of here,” Wanda said, suddenly on her feet and halfway across the room. She planted one hand in the middle of my chest and pushed me back toward the door. Her other hand had the bag before we ended up in the stairwell.

“Wanda, what the hell?” I said.

“You know the phrase ‘The Devil is in the details’?” she asked. “Well, it’s true. The less you know, the less you can spill by accident. If this Alpha dude is calling, then you need to act like you’re a good wolf and answer him.”

“I am,” I growled at her. “Just...hang on to this and keep an eye on Dee.”

“We’ll keep her safe,” she told me, one hand on my back between my shoulder blades. “Now go.”

Chapter 12

~ *No matter how far you go, you never really leave
Night City.* ~

Jonah Jensen, Memoirs of The Raven

I ran, my wolf taking its joy in the run. Streets blurred past, and I turned down alleyways to avoid being seen, leaped over fences and sprinted through fields on my way to answer Alpha's call. Along the way, I let myself feel what the wolf felt, and almost lost myself in the fierce joy in the moment. Knowledge of what was to come was there, but set aside. *This* moment was perfect, and it was worth my full attention and focus. Sure, shit was about to start going bad, but right then, right there...that was all that mattered for the next few minutes.

Riding the primal joy, I felt something else. The pull was there, as impossible to refuse as hunger or breathing, but it felt less than primal, too. As if my body was telling me I was hungry, but the closer I looked at it, I was really thirsty. My wolf knew that something wasn't quite right but the pull was too deep, too instinctive to resist. It knew, but it didn't worry, confident it...no, *he* could find a way to break free. After a few seconds, I realized my wolf was right, and relaxed a little. There really was nothing I could do about anything right then, and it was a pretty night.

Soon, way too soon, I was jumping into the round concrete tube that led to the junction chamber, then I was writhing on the ground in front of Alpha. "I know how to change on my own," I moaned.

He kicked me and sent me flying back. "This is more fun. Who showed you?"

"The alpha of my pack."

“Kain didn’t show you that,” he snarled. He leaped to me and kicked me again. “You do not lie to your alpha.” He came at me and drew his leg back for another kick, but this time I caught it against crossed forearms.

“I didn’t lie,” I said, looking up at him with a grim smile. “And he isn’t the alpha of the pack.”

“He is now,” Alpha smiled, showing teeth. “So, it was the girl. She’s a little uppity, isn’t she? I’m going to have to fix that.” I heard footsteps approaching, and let the wolf out a little, enough to change to my hybrid form.

“I’ve got another woman who needs to be put in her place,” I heard a familiar voice say. Doug Fairing stepped into the chamber, his nose looking a little crooked and both eyes sporting shiners. I took in the way he moved, glanced at his hands and looked at his shoes for a moment, having to suppress my initial reaction for a moment at what I saw. The urge to do more damage to his face made my fists clench.

“Dude, what happened to you?” the chubby guy with the superhero shirt asked.

“More like *who*,” I said.

“Dumb bitch needs to be put in her place,” Fairing said.

“And people think women don’t beat up men,” the Trenchcoat Mafia wannabe said. “Dude’s the real victim here.”

“No he isn’t,” I said. “You earned that.”

“Aw, look at you trying to be all noble and shit. News flash, white knights never get the girl. She cold-cocked me because I let her have it for standing me up, and the little princess didn’t like being called out for being a stuck up little slut.”

“News flash, dumbass,” I snarled, pulling the wolf back and stalking toward him while I slowly turned back to human. “I’ve been dating the girl you’re trash talking for the past two years. So yeah, I did ‘get the girl’ and two, she has never once tried to hit me. And believe me, we’ve had some serious arguments. So if she cold-cocked you, then you went to lay hands on her first. Not to mention, I’ve been on the receiving end of a lot of beatings.” I reached out and grabbed his right hand, pulling it up to eye level. The knuckles were red and swollen. “From the look of your face, she only hit you once, but from the look of this hand...you hit her a couple of times, at least. So tell me I’m a white knight again, asshole. Lie to me again, so I have a good excuse to beat the crap out of you.”

“He hit your girlfriend,” Superhero Dude said. “Isn’t that reason enough?”

“She hit back,” I said, dropping Doug’s hand. “Girl can take care of herself. She doesn’t need me to come running to her rescue. And from the looks of things, she only had to punch him once.” That got some laughter.

“So, when are you going to let us Ascend?” Trenchcoat asked Alpha. Doug glared at him, but seemed content to let things go for the moment.

“When you learn how to be real alphas, not gamma wannabes,” Alpha said. “Challenging my beta was almost alpha, but hitting a woman and not owning up to it...that was pure gamma wolf bullshit. If you’re going to put a woman in her place, own it. But if you’re not strong enough to make sure she learns her lesson, you might as well not even make a fist. But,” he turned to me, “if you aren’t going to defend what’s yours...”

He came at me again, and this time, I was waiting for it. His backhand sailed over my over my head as I ducked

under it, and I danced back away from him. The other guys scrambled back away from us.

“Defend her? From what? Him?” I laughed and pointed my thumb at Doug. “That’s like defending a tiger from a chihuahua. She’s so far out of his league, she’s not even playing the same damn game!” Alpha snarled, then laughed again.

“You may have a point,” he said. “But he doesn’t know the truth about her. And appearances are important.”

“So that’s why you killed Tyler,” I said. “To make it look like Shade couldn’t protect her pack. To make it so she *had* to call in an outside observer. That would keep Sinbad from looking too closely at what was going on.”

“And it would keep him off his game for when I challenged him. The Romani were an added bonus. He kept his eyes on them, and he didn’t even see me coming.”

“That only leaves one question,” I said, circling him. “How did you know what Kain did or didn’t teach me? And how did you know he had taken over as alpha from Sinbad. That’s two questions, really.”

“And you don’t really know the answer, do you?” Alpha said, his lips pulling back from his teeth.

“I do now.”

“Remind me not to bet small if we ever play poker,” he said. “You’re a terrible liar. And no, you’re wrong. About everything.” Slowly, Alpha transformed, fur falling away, his face growing more human, arms and legs drawing in and changing shape. A familiar blond haired, blue-eyed jock stood before me, heavily muscled, eyes burning bright with rage. He was naked except for a belt of purplish leather with a strip of black fur dangling from it.

“Brad Duncan,” I said.

“I... I killed Tyler because he turned on me,” Brad growled, his voice thick with emotion. “After Shade left, he was supposed to have my back, but he kissed her ass instead, and joined her little herd after you killed King. And the rest of the pack followed his lead.”

“Do you think Shade’s going to go back to you or something?” I asked, reeling from the revelation. “Because I have news for you. Kain has plans of his own for her. And I don’t think they include letting you two date.”

“I...I’m done with Shade,” he said, the words coming slow.

“Okay, now I have another question. How did you hide your scent? Shade couldn’t recognize it, and I didn’t either.”

“When did you ever catch my scent?” he asked.

“The night I fought King. I took half his wolf. I caught a whiff of everyone there, including you, Brad.”

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you?” Brad said. “For the past two years, you’ve been playing like you knew it all. The big bad mage, always with an answer for everything. But I took all that away. Now you’re a Were’, like me, but not half as strong.”

“That just evens the playing field,” I said. “At least physically. But mentally...still way smarter than you.”

“You think you’re my equal as a Were?” Brad laughed. There was a hysterical edge to his voice, and oddly enough, hairy monkey brain was the one advising caution. “You’re not even playing the same game. I’m not just a werewolf any more, Chance.” Misty shapes emerged from his the belt, then dropped to the floor to coalesce into massive wolves. One of them was familiar, Tyler’s dark gray wolf.

“What have you done, Brad?” I asked, my stomach turning to lead.

“I’m Alpha now!” he yelled. “I’m not just one wolf, I’m a whole pack all by myself!”

“Run!” I told the five other guys. “Don’t stop.” They didn’t need any more encouragement. Five pairs of feet pounded in five different directions, but all of them moved at the same speed: as fast as possible.

“I’ll find them again,” Brad said as the other wolves started to circle me. I pulled my wolf to me and let it surface, letting its anger shape the snarl I let out when I assumed the hybrid form.

“I’ll kill you first. *What did you do?*”

“Me? Nothing much. I just found an Indian medicine man who was willing to teach me a few things.” An old, old term came to mind, one I’d read when Dulka had first taken me. He’d dealt with some of the native spirits of the American continent, and they were among many he didn’t relish dealing with. One of the ones he hated the most was a human who attained great power through a series of hate-fueled rituals. They became much more than human, and their power rivaled that of all but the most powerful of demons. Most of the People, the *Diné*, refused to share lore on these witches with non-Navajo. But between my work with Dulka and the memories I had from Dr. Corwin, I at least knew the name for what I was facing.

“*Yee naaldlooshii*,” I whispered. “You’re a god-damned skinwalker.”

“I’m so much more than that, even,” Brad said. “It’s a pity you only get to see this part of it. But at least you get to die knowing Shade is going to be with a real alpha again.”

I gave a single bark of laughter. “You’re hardly even a beta bitch, Brad,” I said.

To some guys, the worst thing in the world, evidently, was being compared to or called a girl. I had bet that Brad

was one of those guys, and he didn't fail to disappoint. With a roar, he leaped at me.

So did the dozen wolves he somehow commanded. Maybe my little plan had worked too well. I stepped to one side, letting the first attacks go past me, then arched backwards for a moment to let the next attacker sail over me. With one hand behind me, I brought my left foot up and caught a wolf in the throat with a kick that flipped it end over end. Sound and a change in the air pressure to my right gave me just enough warning to spin sideways, fall flat then push myself up to standing with the strength of my arms alone, like a reverse kickup. Movement to my left registered in the edges of my vision, so I ducked into a spinning roundhouse, bringing my head low while my foot went high to connect with a wolf's jaw. I ducked, dodged and parried as many of the attacks as I could, but even with my supernatural abilities and Kim's borrowed badass martial arts skills, there was only so much I could avoid. Finally, a pair of wolves caught me from behind, and I felt teeth sink into the back of my calf while another caught my forearm and dragged me down. Suddenly, they sprang away, and I caught a faceful of a thick, white powder. Hamstrung and bleeding, I kicked at the victorious pair, then scrambled away to gain a little breathing room, in both the tactical and actual meaning of the word. Brad and his creepy ghost pack advanced on me in a semicircle.

"You never stood a chance," he said, his voice tight. "It's kind of sad. You're not going to live to see your first full moon. Truth is, you were dead the moment we met. You just didn't know it yet. "

"Neither did you," I said, my own voice grating in my throat. "And I've still got a pulse."

"Not for long," he said, his smile too wide.

“Longer than you think,” I heard a familiar voice say. There was an explosion of sound in the confined room, and my vision went white from pain. Gunshots overwhelmed the high pitched scream in my ears, and I heard the cries of wounded wolves. Then the noise stopped, and blessed silence filled the room.

“What in the Nine Hells was that?” I moaned, my sight slowly clearing.

“A little hypersonic deterrent,” Lucas said. Wanda was behind him with a black box in one hand, and a slim semi-auto pistol in the other. Standing in front of both of them, armed to the teeth in full Sentinel gear, was Dr. C. A pair of pistols were holstered on his thighs, and he carried a silver *paramiir* in its sword form. Brad was nowhere to be seen. “Werewolves may be immune to most kinds of damage, but those enhanced senses were begging to be exploited.”

“My ears say screw you,” I croaked, trying to get to my feet and failing. “What did he hit me with?”

“Corpse powder,” Dr. Corwin said, kneeling beside me, his nose scrunched up a little. “He poisoned you.”

“Is there an antidote?” Wanda crouched on the other side.

“It isn’t fatal,” Dr. C said. He slipped one arm under mine and stood, pulling me to my feet in the same movement. “Not to a Were’, at least. The symptoms seem to weaken, not kill.”

“He needs me weak,” I gasped, struggling for breath. “Needs me...as a wolf.”

“Well, this will pass,” Dr. C said. “Your Were’ physiology should throw it off in a few hours.”

“How-,” I gave a wracking cough. “How did you find me?”

“I grabbed a hair from your shirt before you left,” Wanda said. “And Lucas and Dr. Corwin did a tracking spell. As soon as you turned human again, it zeroed in on you.”

“Details,” I whispered. Wanda smiled at me and nodded. “Call Mom,” I wheezed. “Tell her...Dee was right. She’ll know what to do...where to take me.” The world spun, and I fell into a black hole.

When the world came back, I wasn’t all that happy to be there. I felt queasy, my throat was on fire, and every muscle in my body hurt like hell. But Mom was there, and so was my grandfather. Dee’s face floated into the blurry field that was my vision, looking worried.

“Hey, sis,” I said.

“Don’t die,” she said, her voice suddenly small and plaintive,

“Nah,” I said. “Too mean to die. Old man...grandpa...” He leaned closer, his lined face creased even further now. I reached up and grabbed his shirt with one hand, thought the effort was almost more than I could handle. “Fix me.”

“There is nothing to fix,” he said. “The poison will pass soon.”

“Not the poison. The wolf. Fix it.” I pulled on the last reserves of my strength and drew him closer. “Know you can. Need to be...need to be ... who I was...who I was...born to be.” I fell back into the darkness, my thoughts turning to Shade as the world faded.

I stand in the clearing again, the moment I made for us. Without knowing how, I know that Shade is here, too. I wonder why I hadn’t come here before, and then wonder if Shade has.

“A few times,” Shade says. “Mostly in the past few hours.” In the afternoon light, she looks radiant, like a goddess on Earth, too good for mere mortals such as me.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"What for?" There is laughter in her voice, and it makes me smile.

"For what I'm trying to do." I try to look away, but she's there, her eyes boring into mine, and I can't hide anything from her. Don't want to. Her laughter is fleeting, the sadness, chronic.

"It's okay, baby," she says. "I know what you need to do. I think...I think I knew it before you did. In a way...I always knew."

"I want us to be together," I tell her. "Really together."

"Sweetheart, we always have been, haven't we?"

"What about your wolf?"

"What about her?"

"Doesn't she need...no, she doesn't, does she?" Sudden understanding dawns. "She's your wolf. That's between you and her, just like it's between my wolf and me. No one else gets to be part of that, do they?"

"That is why I love you baby," she smiles and kisses me. I taste sweat and pollen on her lips. "You...what's the word Lucas uses..."

"Grok," I say. "I grok you."

She leans into my embrace, and we hold each other in silence for a moment.

"I love you, Chance," she says. "Never forget that, and never let me forget it."

"I love you, Shade," I tell her, pouring my soul into those words. "Always will."

"I don't have much time. Jacob is coming. I'm okay, baby, but I need you. He's intent on doing that whole

dominant alpha thing.” The worlds strike chords in my head, and a memory surfaces.

“Shade, about the whole alpha thing....” The memories arc between us like electricity, understanding shared bone deep. Awareness of things going on around me begins to intrude, and Shade looks at me, then kisses me again.

“Chance, I-”

Pain flared, exploded through me, and I was pulled from oblivion and catapulted into agony. Screams ripped from my throat, and I thrashed, my hands clenching, legs cramping, all my muscles convulsing at once. I rolled to my side and emptied my stomach, retching so hard I wondered if I was about to taste my own feet. I heard my name, and stared wild-eyed up at Mom and Dee. My focus anchored on them, and the pain became separate from me. I was burning from the inside out, my heart was pounding like it was trying to beat its way out from behind my ribs, my lungs heaving like a bellows.

“You’re killing him!”

“Hang on, son!”

“Be strong.”

“It’s not working!”

“Hold his arms!”

Chance.

My name hit me like a wall of sound, like the chord played at the birth of the world. *She* was there, and everything stopped.

My breath was a hiss, my heartbeat an unending beat of a drum. Then...silence, and all the world froze in place. My head turned to one side, and I saw HER walking toward me. Thin tendrils of living Night reached out from her, flowed toward me.

Chance.

“Who are you?” I asked. The words came from somewhere else, unspoken but clearly heard. I knew I couldn’t talk because my body wasn’t moving. I wasn’t breathing, my heart wasn’t beating. I was okay with that. It meant I could finally stop carrying around all the weight of surviving, of what I’d done. I could finally just suffer in Hell, and not have to try to fix shit. I could finally give up, and no one would know how weak I’d been.

Even as I thought it, I fought it. I knew it wasn’t weakness. It was fatigue. I wasn’t even eighteen yet, and I was tired of living, tired of fighting a hopeless paradox. If I tried to redeem myself, I was still doing it for personal gain, because I knew what was waiting for me. If I didn’t, I was still damned. Every minute of every day, I questioned my own motives. My own fucking *worth*. Some part of me was still convinced I didn’t deserve to even be walking around and breathing. That Desiree and Tyler had more right to be alive than I did. That Mr. Chomsky should have lived, and I should have died that night in his classroom. That I should have died fighting Dominic King, and let Shade find someone better to be with.

The Night Woman slapped me. The impact sent me flying back, and showed me that I was floating above my own body. And that everything was still.

You made a promise. And then I was back in Mom’s old van.

I lean my head against the cool glass and look up at the overcast October sky.

“Give me a chance to make this right somehow,” I whisper to the night. “I’ll do whatever it takes. I swear I will.”

I remembered that sensation, the moment when I felt something hear my vow, the certainty that I had just made

a bargain with something...some *one*. The same someone who was standing in front of me.

“Who are you?” I asked. I wasn’t sure why, but that seemed important.

“You know me, Chance,” she said, her voice warm and comforting. “You move through me every minute of every day. You miss me when you are gone from me, and you protect me time and again. You are one of mine, my native son. I’m home, Chance. I am Night City. I am New Essex.” She came out of the shadows, and I saw her face. From one moment to the next, her features changed. First an Asian woman, then Hispanic, now Anglo, then African American, then Native American, an endless loop of faces and bloodlines. She was everyone in New Essex at the same time. Then the veil of Night fell across her face again, and she was dark and mysterious...just like New Essex.

“You’re the city?” My eyebrows came together, trying to connect like the dots in my head.

“I am the spirit of New Essex,” she said, her voice suddenly a million people talking at once. “I am the soul of Night City. I am what makes...”

“...the city what it is,” I finished for her, speaking as part of that collective. “And the city is what makes you.”

“You promised you’d make things right, and you said you’d do whatever it took. Your city needs a mage.”

“What about Dr. Corwin? He’s-”

“Not a part of New Essex. Not the one we want. You are. Time grows short. Make your peace with the wolf.” She turned away, and I felt like I’d just been turned down by every woman on the planet at once.

Then the wolf walked up. Massive, gray and white, with beautiful gold eyes and the bearing of a lupine monarch, he didn’t so much walk as he trotted in slow motion. When he

came to a stop in front of me, he put one massive paw on my shoulder and looked me in the eye.

Friend. The impression came in a rush, from a thousand things. Scent, posture, facial expression, tail movement and positioning, the way his ears perked forward and his head dipped a little bit.

“Hey, big guy,” I said, putting my left hand on his right shoulder. He leaned his head into my hand, and I rubbed at the base of his ear, the place that felt best. “I’m sorry. I can’t be a Were’ and be a mage at the same time.”

notwolf Again, a series of impressions, feelings and just plain gut instinct told me he was saying more than the one word could convey, and saying it better than that one word.

“I guess I’m not much of a wolf, am I?”

twoleg. thunder. fire. I got the impression of the power of a thunderstorm, the ever present fear of fire. And that those were the things I was about. Not the forest, the trees, blood and the hunt. Our eyes met, and in a heartbeat, I was even deeper. It wasn’t just *a* wolf or even *my* wolf. I was speaking to Wolf, THE Wolf.

Wolf not for you, Wolf said. You are Mage. In your heart, always Mage.

“But, I want to be a Were’,” I said. “So Shade and I can be together for real.”

You love Shade. Want to be wolf for Shade. You are Mage. Be Mage. Love Shade.

“And you’re okay with this?” I asked. As much as I knew he was right, losing the Wolf still hurt.

Better. Wolf is for Shade. City is for you. Mage is you.

“I’ll miss you being part of me,” I said. He lowered his head and slowly bumped it against my chest.

Wolf still here. You Know.

“I know what?” I asked.

No Alpha. No Beta. Just...Pack. Always Pack. Hunt together. Live together. Care together. Always Pack.

Things I had read in Sinbad’s journal were one thing, but the certainty of what he gave me then... A Pack wasn’t about position, it wasn’t about hierarchy or status. Those were human things. Pack was primal, it was family. Brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers, wolves looking out for each other. It was a love that had teeth and claws, love that kept you and your packmates alive. The bond soldiers and police officers shared, the willingness to fight for your squadmate as fiercely as you would for your country. The same bond that made firefighters run into burning buildings to save one of their own, the same thing that made Lucas and Wanda as high on my list as Mom or Dee or Shade when it came to putting my life on the line for them. It was the same kind of thing that had led Sydney Chomsky to put his own life on the line to take me as his apprentice, and Dr. Corwin to take the same risk. The kind of fierce devotion you never felt worthy of, always returned in kind, but never asked if they deserved it. That was Pack.

My chest hurt, and I felt hollow inside, that place Wolf had occupied now empty and raw. My whole body quivered with the emotions I was feeling, overwhelmed by the intensity of it all. My attention turned back to the spirit of the city.

And you wonder why I want you to be my Mage. Her smile was hard to read, but it warmed some of the dark places Wolf had left behind.

“More than a little.”

You are a New Essex boy through and through. Now, get back in your body. You have work to do. Just remember. Darkness is your ally. I am Night City. And you’re my Mage, damn it.

The scene behind me had changed, people had moved some. Dr. C was pushing down on my chest, and my grandfather had a syringe in his hand. Kim was on the other side of me, her right hand glowing over my head. Mom and Dee were the only two who looked calm. They were also the only two who were looking right at me. Not at the me on the table, but at me where I stood. I wanted to go to them, tell them I was okay, but I moved past them with a sensation like being caught in a strong current. Sounds started registering, and things began to speed up, then I was falling toward myself, except it seemed like I was moving up.

I broke the surface of consciousness, my back arching while I gasped the first gulp of fresh air. My chest and ribs hurt, a white light filled my vision, and the rush of sound slammed into my ears. There was a metallic taste in my mouth, and every muscle hurt.

“Welcome back, son,” Mom said, her voice shaky.

“Ow,” I managed.

“I won’t ask you how you feel,” my grandfather said. I had to roll my head to one side to see him. His cheeks were wet with fresh tears, and his face was drawn in a tight expression.

“Thanks,” I said. “What did I miss?” I tried to sit up, but my body was suddenly heavy, and I slumped back down.

“Quite a bit, son,” Mom said. She put one hand behind my shoulders and lifted me into a sitting position. “Your body healed from the corpse powder, but you didn’t wake up. So, we finally decided to give you the Silverblood Elixir.”

“That explains the taste in my mouth,” I said. “How long was I out?”

“Several hours,” Dr. C said.

“You should rest for a few days, Chance,” grandfather said. “Your body has to readjust and get back to normal.”

Very few survive purging the wolf from their souls.”

“I can’t. There’s a Were’ that needs his ass kicked, and another one who needs killing.”

“You can take a few hours to rest, son.” Mom’s tone left no room for argument, but that wasn’t about to stop me.

“I gotta help...”I slumped forward, eyes heavy, brain mushy. “Shade. Gotta...” Darkness was supposed to be my ally, but just then, it felt like it was kicking me in the head.

Chapter 13

*~ Strange stuff, magick. Strange, and wondrous. ~
Lazarus Moon, Master and member of the Council*

Sunlight on my face brought me out of darkness, and I awoke to my room at Dr. Corwin's place. Junkyard was curled up beside me, and I felt something on my shoulder. Blinking, I moved my hand to touch whatever it was on my shoulder and felt fingers. I turned my head and saw Mom looking down at me over the edge of the bed I slept next to, her eyes puffy and bleary.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

I did a quick mental check. My muscles still hurt, but that wasn't new. I couldn't hear or smell everything, and I didn't *feel* like I could bench press a house. I reached for the sense of magick that I hadn't felt these past few days, and I came away with nothing.

"Empty," I said.

"He said that might not come back," Dee said. She was sitting with her back against the wall, where she could see me and Mom, her black curls caught up in a ponytail, and still looking messy.

"Who did?" I asked. Behind me, the bed creaked, and I caught a glance of Mom trying to shush Dee.

"Dr. Corwin," she said, either ignoring Mom or oblivious. "It made him sad."

"Deirdre!" Mom hissed.

"No, it's better that I know from the start," I said, getting to my feet. "I'm not sure if I smell bacon or not. Guess my sense of smell is back to normal." Dee was on her feet and out the door before I could finish standing straight.

Dr. C was in the kitchen, cooking his usual breakfast. Bacon, eggs, hash browns and toast were waiting in large bowls and on a broad white plate. I grabbed a plate and started to pile food on it. Amanda sat at the table with a plate of her own, but she wasn't eating the same breakfast I was. Fruit cut into precise squares decorated her plate, and a small bowl of yogurt.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Breakfast," Amanda said.

"Breakfast? That's barely even food," I said.

"Well, I see your brain is still deficient," she said, but the barb in her words didn't feel as sharp as it used to.

"Deficient?" I said around the first spoonful of scrambled eggs. "Classy, Amanda, real classy."

"Always," she said before taking a bite of something light green. "At least what I'm eating is actually healthy for me."

"Hey, kiddo," Dr. C said from the stove. "That's your Dad's breakfast, too."

"You're allowed to be archaic and unhealthy," Amanda said. "It comes from being so old." Dr. C laughed and I saw Amanda break a smile for a moment. He knew she was messing with him.

"Hey, Chance, have you taken a look at your aura? Maybe it's changed since you've been a Were'," Dr. C said. My eyes closed for a moment, then I relaxed and opened them, willing my Third Eye to open along with them. I almost focused on my hand, but nothing changed.

"What the Hell?" I shook my head and tried again, but the world stayed the same. "No...no, no, no, no!!" I got up and backed away from the table, trying to get my Third Eye

to open, trying to force it wide. But nothing continued to happen. The world kept on being its boring looking self.

“Chance, take it easy,” Dr. C said. “We don’t know if that part is permanent. Maybe your body has to get a chance to finish the process the treatment started. There’s so much we don’t know.”

“I’m tired of ‘if’ and ‘maybe’,” I said. “And I can’t live with ‘I don’t fucking know!’ I need answers. I need *something* to work right.”

“For what it’s worth, your aura looks normal,” Amanda said.

“I don’t *need* normal, damn it!” I shouted at her. “I need to be a mage!” I pushed the kitchen door open and stormed out of the house. The gate wards let me out, and I wondered for a moment if I could get back in again. But at the moment, it wasn’t as high on my list as getting out and getting away from the house. I needed to clear my head before...

I stopped on the sidewalk, suddenly realizing I wasn’t a danger to anyone any more. As a mage, as a Were’, I needed to keep my shit together and keep my temper under control so I didn’t hurt anyone on accident. Or, worse still, on purpose. Now, the worst I might be able to do is hurt someone’s feelings. My arsenal had been reduced from spells that could level buildings, or strength that could punch holes in armored vehicles to pretty much my fists and harsh language. The world was suddenly a much more dangerous place for me. I was no longer the baddest mother in the valley...I was the guy hiding *behind* that dude. It was scary as Hell.

I turned to go back to the house, realizing I’d made it more than a hundred yards down the road before I’d realized how stupid I was being. I was alone and without my magick or being a werewolf, I was unarmed in more ways

than one. And walking in the world I knew, that was like playing Russian Roulette. Now I understood why most *cowans* refused to believe in the supernatural. If they did, they couldn't function. Still, the normal world was dangerous enough. It made me wonder how normal people even functioned in their own world. Every car coming down the street, every breath of wind, every sound was a potential danger. My feet couldn't move fast enough to get me back to the gate. The ward tingled against my skin when I walked through the gate.

Dr. Corwin was still at the table when I got back inside, but Amanda was gone. He took a sip of his coffee, then set the mug down and gestured to my seat at the table. The other dishes were gone, with just my place and his still set with food.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said.

"Don't be," he smiled and picked up a slice of bacon. "You're frustrated, tired and scared. All the training in the world isn't enough to keep that from being overwhelming."

"Still, that was stupid," I pointed at the door. He shrugged.

"Not the dumbest thing either of us has ever done."

"So...what now?"

"We still have a lot to do," Dr. C said. "First thing is to find a way to get your magick back. And Lucas and Wanda are working another angle with Collins to try to figure out exactly what's going on."

"We already know it was Brad who killed Tyler," I said.

"We know he confessed to it, but there's a lot more going on here. Kain's also involved in this, but we don't know exactly how deep. I don't like loose ends, and Kain is a big one. We need to know his angle here, why he's involved. Because when you think about it, Brad's not smart enough

to get one of the *Diné* to share their secrets with him, not even an *adilgashii*. And he's sure as shit not so far gone enough to become a skinwalker on his own."

"What makes you think so? He hates me."

"To become a true skinwalker in the *Diné* ways, you have to kill a close relative with sorcery and eat their flesh. That takes a level of dedication and evil that I don't think Brad is capable of."

"Yeah, Brad may be a dick, but he's not *that* bad. And there is a connection between Brad and Kain. So, in the meantime, we work on getting my magick back."

"As much as I know you like to hit the books, I think this is more of a lab thing." He headed for the front of the house, then stopped as we got to the library. "Dear God, it's like Grand Central Station here this morning." His right hand came up with his index and middle finger extended, and he made a quick gesture with his left hand.

"Company?" I asked.

"Yeah. *Cowan*." Three knocks came at the door, unhurried, sharp and at equal intervals. Dr. C and I traded a look. Three more knocks came precisely five seconds later. By then, we were at the door, and Dr. Corwin was pulling it open. Michael Cassavetes stood there, practically sweating in his cheap looking Armani suit. How he made a thousand dollar designer suit look cheap was beyond me, but he managed.

"Chance," he wheezed. "I gave your message to your father. He wants to see you. Now."

"He needs to kiss my ass, that's what he needs to do," I said. "I sent you that message days ago, and now he wants me to come running to him on *his* schedule?"

"I gave it to him, kid, I did. He had pretty much the same attitude you do until this morning."

“Yeah? What changed?”

“He said it had something to do with your mother,” Cassavetes blurted.

I went still for a second, then raised a hand to point toward him. My brows knitted together, and I held my goofy looking expression for another moment.

“What about her?” I asked slowly.

“He wouldn’t even tell me, kid,” he said, his face looking sour. “But he said it was important. Look, most days, he doesn’t want to even say your name, but right now...you’re the only person he wants to see.”

I looked to Dr. C, not trusting my own feelings at the moment.

“Go, Chance,” he said. “I’ll even go with you.”

“No, beloved,” Kim said from behind Cassavetes. The lawyer jumped, and I did a double take. Dr. C just nodded like it was no big deal for her to show up out of nowhere. “I will go with him. You have things that require your specific skills. If there is any danger, I can handle it.”

“No, no danger, ma’am,” Nick said. He turned back to me and held one hand out, pleading. “Please, kid, you gotta come with me. Talk to your old man. I’ve never seen him this messed up over anything.”

“Only way he’s worried about anyone that much is if it screws him, somehow,” I said. “But I’ll go talk to the bastard.” I reached for my pocket and my keys, then checked myself when I remembered that my Mustang and most of my stuff was back at the campground where I’d parked.

“Don’t agree to anything while you’re there,” Dr. Corwin said, handing me my backpack. “No matter what he tells you.” Mike turned and headed down the steps. Kim and I

followed, our paths parting from his at the gate. We headed for the garage, and her white Viper. We got in, and I found myself having to adjust to the tight space while Kim pressed the start button and the car rumbled to life with a deep throated sound that made my heart ache for my own car. Still, the Viper demanded its own respect. When Kim backed out of the driveway, I could feel every pebble in the road, and when she turned to follow Mike, I was pushed against the door. With each turn, the car grumbled, like it was pissed we were going so slow. Or that might have been Kim, who was taking measured breaths and looking as if she was *working* at being patient. She came off of every stop like it was a personal affront, then pulled back to keep from driving up the tailpipe of Mike's Caddy.

"Is this a new car?" I asked over the rumble of the engine. "Because I'm feeling every bump in the road."

"It is not a luxury car," Kim said, the first hint of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. "It is made to do one thing better than any other."

"What's that?"

"Go *very* fast." Her normal stoic expression brightened enough to allow a smile to creep in, then she pulled into parking area for the Golgotha Federal Corrections Center on the eastern side of New Essex. Five stories of brick and steel, housing the most dangerous criminals in the state, Golgotha was a fortress. Massive concrete walls surrounded the main building, with the administrative offices on the outside of the walls. Cassavetes ushered us in through the long, fenced in walkway to the main gates, the only way in through three layers of chain link fence and concertina wire. The innermost layer was a broad, open gravel pit. The main gate was the only way in or out, unless you could fly or dig through limestone.

The black, iron doors of the main gate rose when we stopped in front of them, the slid back down behind us. Only after the outer gate clanged shut did the inner gate rise. All of us were frisked thoroughly, our IDs checked and double checked before we could go any further. Rather than head through the heavy glass doors that led into the prison itself, we went left, through a smaller, equally thick glass door that opened into a bank of cubicles. Thick glass separated half of that room, but we kept going, through another set of doors labeled "Medium Security Visitation." The door opened onto a room with a single table in the middle of the room. The edges of the table and the benches were covered in thick, green rubber, and everything was bolted to the floor. A yellow line ran through the middle of the room. On the far side of the scuffed yellow border, a message was stenciled on the floor. *Prisoners Stay Behind Line.* On our side, it simply read *DO NOT CROSS.* Two guards in padded body armor and visored helmets stood on either side of the door we entered through, and another pair manned the one on the other side of the room. Mike waddled to the table and sat down in the middle, patting the spot beside him. I sat beside him, and his expression soured as he moved his hand out from under me.

Moment's later, there was a loud buzz, and one of the guards pulled the door across from us open. My father marched in, his orange jumpsuit making him look like a pumpkin. He wore cuffs on his hands and feet, with a chain attaching the wrist cuffs to a thick leather belt. Another guard followed him in, and when he reached the table, locked the set of manacles he was wearing to the table. Once he was secure, the guards moved back and retreated through the doors, leaving us in the room with my father. For all that we had what looked like privacy, we were still visible through the windows and I could see at least four cameras in the room.

“Whoa,” he said when he saw Kim. “Who are you, babe and how much do you cost?”

“You don’t want to know,” Kim said, arching one pale eyebrow. “And a minute of my attention would cost you your life.”

“Babe like you, it might be worth it.”

“What did you want?” I demanded, trying to get things back under control.

“It’s good to see you,” my father said, wisely leaving off the word ‘son.’

“No it isn’t,” I told him. “I’m the reason you’re here. Well, you’re the reason you’re here, but trying to dick Mom over to get me back didn’t help. So can the bullshit and get to the point. Don’t give me any of that crap about having time to think or getting a new perspective. I’m not buyin’. Either help me out, or shut the hell up.” I said.

“You’re right, you are the reason I’m in here, kid,” he said. “And the way I see it, you owe me for that. So, you want my help, you do a little something for me.”

“Yeah, we’re done,” I said and started to get to my feet.

“Wait,” he said. “Believe me, you’re gonna want to hear this. You pissed off the Russians with your little stunt the other day. They’ve come at me in here because of it. They’re gonna come gunning for you and your mother next. There’s only one way to stop them, and that’s to hit them where they live.”

I sat back down on the cold steel bench and leaned forward. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. And if they’re coming after you, well that’s just a bonus. I’m not doing your dirty work for you any more, old man,” I hissed at him. “You want someone dead, you pay for it yourself. Besides, weren’t you the one who always said hire a pro?”

“Nah, violence doesn’t work with the Bratva,” he said. “They’ll just do something worse. Those assholes are great at putting bodies in the ground. No, with the Russians, you have to make it too expensive to ever piss you off again. So you have to hit them in two places, the wallet and the soul.”

“The wallet part I could do, but the soul...I don’t deal in that anymore. You know that.”

“They’re deathly afraid of magic, Chance,” the old man said. “That’s your edge. They deal with some nasty shit. Make them believe you’re worse And I can handle the wallet side of things.”

“Last I checked,” I looked around, “your fat ass was in jail.”

“I’m not without my resources.”

“Half your crew are singing like choirboys, and the other half are living large in extradition-free countries. Plus you lost your pet demon.”

“I’ve still got a little something up my sleeve,” he said with a smile. “And the best part is, I get rid of the Russians and take care of a few other loose ends at the same time.”

I stood, pieces falling in place in my head. “Now we’re done,” I said. “You’re trying to use me to fix your problems on the outside. Well, screw you, old man.” I headed for the door, Mike at my heels.

“Chance, please, wait,” he said, putting a hand on my shoulder. Before I could think about it, I had his hand in a joint lock, and the guards were pointing weapons at both of us.

“Hands off,” I told him, then looked to my father. “Don’t even open your mouth.” I let Cassavetes go, then stepped away. One of the guards grabbed the mic at his shoulder and murmured something into it. Seconds later, the door behind him buzzed, and we were out of the visitation room.

The sound of my feet on the concrete floors was too loud in my ears on the walk back to the exit, the white halls suddenly filled with shadows.

Halfway there, Mike called my name, and I stopped to glare at him. "Look, kid, sorry about that back there. Your da...the old man wants you to take this," he held out a cell phone. "Let us know if the Russians do anything stupid."

"If they try anything stupid with me, it'll probably make the news," I said, taking the phone. "But don't wait up for me to call."

When we finally made it to the parking lot, Kim faced me over the top of her car. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"When my father was talking about taking care of loose ends back there, there was only one person he could have meant. The only person who knew more about his organization than I did was Jeremy, his butler."

"Your father didn't strike me as that sophisticated," Kim said.

"Believe me, he's not. But he wanted to at least *look* legit. Besides, the women my father dated weren't big on cooking. Their skills leaned more towards shopping and cosmetics."

"Among other things, I'm sure," Kim raised an eyebrow. "How progressive of him. So, Jeremy is in danger?"

"Big time," I said. "And knowing my father, he's probably let just enough leak to the Russians to get Jeremy taken out of the picture. Which means I have to get to him first."

Kim nodded and we both got in the car. "Do you know where he is?" she asked as we pulled out of the lot.

"Not yet. If I had my magick, I could scry him, easy."

“You’re still a mage,” Kim said. “But you have no connection to draw on.”

“What?” I blurted. “How is it Dr. C can’t tell that and you can?”

“I am *kitsune*, I can see things even mages can’t. Most mages have a connection to magic, an astral thread that lets them channel anima through their will. For most, it happens naturally over time. Still, it is possible Trevor knows this, and simply hasn’t mentioned it. He is a wizard after all.”

“Time isn’t something I have a lot of,” I said. She nodded and opened the center console, producing a quartz crystal.

“This may help,” she said. My fingers tingled when I took it, telling me it was a charged touchstone.

“It might,” I said. “But for a divination...” I paused.

“You would still need the astral connection.” She was quiet for a moment, her eyes going to the rearview mirror a couple of times. “But now is not the time. Your father said the Russians fear magick, and he was right. Most Russians still have a strong connection to the folklore of their country. It is time we gave them reason to fear you.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Just act like you’re still a mage.” She hit the gas, and the car surged ahead, leaving slower moving traffic behind. “Good boys,” she chuckled. I looked in the rear view mirror and saw two black sedans pulling away from traffic as well. They never closed the distance between us, but they never got too far behind either.

“They’re not exactly chasing us,” I said.

“No, their job is just to keep track of us,” Kim said. “Now that we know who they are, it will be easier to have a chat

with them.” She slowed down as we approached another stoplight, then took a couple of turns that led us into a more brick-and-mortar district. She pulled into a space and turned the car off. “Let’s get some coffee.”

I got out after her and followed her to a nearby coffee shop, trying not to watch her anatomy too closely as she walked in front of me. We slipped into the shop and didn’t stop, heading straight through to the back and out into the alley. Kim looked left and right, then headed right, her footsteps silent as we moved across the pavement. I tried to emulate her, but it was a good thing no one was nearby. She ducked into another shop, and we ended up in the back room of an insurance agency. Kim was halfway across the room before anyone even noticed her, and we were out the front door before anyone tried to say anything.

We had come out behind one of the two sedans. Without missing a beat, Kim turned and walked past the rear door, then turned and leaned over so she could look in the front window. The guy in the front seat had a microsecond to register what he was seeing before Kim slammed his head into the dashboard. He bounced back into the seat, and his buddy in the back seat started to open the rear door but Kim kicked it shut in his face.

By then, the two guys on the driver’s side were out of the car. So was I. First, I followed Kim’s example by bouncing the nearest guy’s head off the back of the car. He rebounded hard enough to land on his back in the street. His buddy was faster on the uptake, and got a fist in the air. I dodged to one side, wrapped my right hand around his wrist and brought my left fist over his arm to hit him in the jaw. While his head was twisting from the force of the punch, I brought my left hand back, straightened it and drove my fingers into a nerve cluster under his arm. He dropped to the pavement, his muscles on the right side spasming so hard he couldn’t breathe. When I looked up, I saw that Kim

had disabled the four from the other car in the time that I'd taken to take down my two.

"What do you need for the spell?" she asked, giving me a broad wink. I shook my head for a second, trying to catch up to her. *Think like a mage*, I remembered.

"Hair or blood will do fine," I said. I reached down and grabbed the driver by the hair and yanked, coming away with a fist full of hair. Turning, I repeated the process with the moaning Russian in the street.

"We'll kill you and your whole family," the driver gasped. I stopped, and a cold wave flowed through me. My jaw clenched, and I turned to face him. He cringed when he saw my face, and I liked it.

"You threatened my family," I said, reaching into his shirt and grabbing a silver chain that was glinting in the light. "You'll be a demon's butt monkey before sunset. And whoever gave you this will be next in line." I held up the chain, and he went pale.

"No, please don't," he said, tears running down his face. "Please, she is good girl."

I knelt beside him and pulled him to me, my whole body shaking with rage. "So is my sister, asshole. Whatever you try to do to my family, I'll do to yours. I'm going to curse every member of your organization, everyone you've ever touched. You tell your bosses that, tell them to get their affairs in order, because after I'm done with them, they won't be able to do much of anything."

"You can't," he said, his breath coming a little easier. "You are mage."

"No, I'm the demon's apprentice, asshole. If you don't know what that means, ask around." I couldn't hit him hard enough, but I tried.

“You can not keep that,” Kim told me when I rejoined her on the sidewalk. I held up my hands and let most of the hair fly away on the wind, then handed her the silver necklace.

“No, but you can,” I said. “I need a back up plan. If they ever come after me...no, that’s not right.” I stopped and turned to face her. “When they come after me, I’m going to need something to use against them. Look, this whole thing with the Russians is something I fucked up while I was a werewolf, so I need to fix it. By *any* means necessary.”

Kim took the necklace and tucked it into her pocket. “By whatever means I deem necessary,” she said. “You are still a mage and you are still Trevor’s student. I will not allow you to dishonor him.”

“Whatever,” I said, and started toward her car.

“Excuse me?” Kim said, and I stopped. Her tone was sharp enough to cut steel.

I turned and faced her. “I mean, yes, *sensei*.”

“That’s better,” she said. “Now, we should go find your father’s manservant.” Behind us, people were starting to peek their heads out of shops. The whole fight had taken only a minute and had been pretty quiet as fights went. We were in the Viper and two blocks away before we heard the first siren.

“I have an idea about where Jeremy might be,” I told Kim.

“If we find him, how likely is your father to keep his end of the bargain?”

“As long as it’s good for him, it’s real likely. But if he can screw someone else, he’ll do it before he can think about it.”

“Hmmm,” she said, then pulled off the road by a Taco Pueblo. As soon as the car stopped, she was out and around

to my door almost before I had it open. She had her cellphone out and was scrolling through apps while she pulled me toward the trunk of her car. With a touch of a button on her key fob, the trunk opened. Inside were a couple of black tool boxes and an aluminum case. She opened one of the tool boxes and pulled out a slim wand on a cord. With the cord plugged into the phone, she ran the wand up and down in front of me, then made another pass over my waist.

“Give me the phone the lawyer gave you.” I handed the black device over, and she ran the wand over it, nodded and powered it off. Once that was done, she walked around the car, finally stopping by the passenger side rear wheel well. Bending over, she reached into the well and pulled out a black box about the size of a deck of cards.

“That bastard,” I hissed. “Maybe I should hex his fat ass.”

Kim set the tracker and the phone down in the trunk and pulled me a few yards away. “The phone probably has more spyware than a James Bond movie. He still might not know I found it, though, and he expects you to try to find him. And, in spite of this, I think we should do so.”

“Last I heard from Jeremy, he wasn’t going into the witness protection program. He could probably stay hidden for years just on what I left in the old man’s accounts, and he knows where every secret safehouse and property is. Unless you knew the my father’s organization, you’d never find him.”

“Concealment is not the same as cover,” Kim said, pulling out her own phone and tapping at the screen. “Especially when your father knows his own resources. We cannot assume Jeremy is safe. I know it is adding another burden.” She looked up at me, her eyes dark and unreadable.

“Jeremy is not a burden,” I said. “I owe him. Big time. And he was a friend when I didn’t have anyone else.” I turned back toward the car. “Besides, if anyone knows how to hit the Russians in the wallet, it’ll be Jeremy. And I know where to start looking.”

Chapter 14

~ Family is where you make it. ~

Proverb

“This is the last place I would look,” Kim said. The ruins of my father’s house were mostly untouched. Crime scene tape fluttered across the door behind us, and the damage Shade and I had done a year ago was a pleasant reminder of how awesome my girlfriend was.

“That’s why he’d choose it,” I said.

“Is this your work?” she asked, gesturing at the double doors that were laying against the back wall of the foyer.

“Yeah, I can be rough on real estate sometimes. At least, I used to be.” I headed back down through the kitchen and opened the door to the garage. It was dark, but when I hit the button by the door, one of the garage doors slid up, letting sunlight flood into the empty spot.

“And you will be again,” Kim said. “It is only a matter of time. Now, how do we find Jeremy?”

“He’ll find us,” I said, turning back and heading down the hall toward my father’s office. The doors to that room weren’t just knocked off the hinges, they were in pieces across the room.

“More of your work?” Kim smiled as she asked it. I nodded. “I take it he’s seen us by now.” She nodded toward the corner of the room. A small anomaly in the woodwork concealed the lens of a camera.

“He has, indeed,” Jeremy’s voice came from behind us. We turned to see him holding an H&K MP5 on us. I wasn’t a big fan of submachine guns, but I knew the MP5 when I saw it. It was my father’s preferred weapon, both for use and sale.

“Jeremy, whoa,” I said, putting my hands up. “It’s all good, the lady is cool. Better than cool.”

“I shall have to be the judge of that, Master Chance,” he said. The gun never wavered. “Who talked you into coming to find me?”

“I did,” Kim answered before I could get a word in. “He was convinced he needed to leave you hidden. But secrecy is not safety. You *would* have been found.”

“Only Chance would have known me well enough to deduce that I would hide here,” Jeremy said. “Even Mr. Fortunato would not have been so insightful. But he might have deduced that Chance could find me, and Stavros is nothing if not cunning. He no doubt had you followed or planted some sort of tracking device on you.”

“He...tried,” Kim admitted. “We left it in the car.”

“Then I am as good as a dead man,” Jeremy said. “Once he knows you’re here, he’ll alert Sergei Khapolov to offer me up as a peace offering to the Bratva. His men will be here in moments.”

“We’re counting on that,” I said. Kim’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and she hit the answer button on her earpiece.

“Are you in place, beloved?” she asked aloud. “We’re sending him your way now.” She tapped the earpiece again, then turned to Jeremy. “Give Chance a bit of hair, then go to the garage. Someone will meet you there.” He looked to me, and I nodded.

“We’ve got this covered, Jeremy,” I said. “The old man is pretty predictable once you get to know him.”

“And you’ve a plan, no doubt,” he said, a smile coming to his face.

“Don’t I always?”

“No, but when you do, there is a marked tendency toward explosions and...mayhem.” He plucked a few hairs from the side of his head and held them out to me.

“What can I say?” I took the hairs from him. “I play to my strengths. Go on. We’ll take care of the rest.”

“Of course, sir.” I took the hairs and held them up. “*Tamquam egomet ipsum*,” I muttered, moving my fingers and hand in the gestures for an illusion spell that gave me the appearance of another person. I felt the magick trying to stir within me, but nothing happened at first. Repeating the spell, I drew on the touchstone, and the world shimmered around me.

“A very good image,” Kim said. “Now, let’s go put on a show for the bad guys.” She led the way to the front door, pausing for a moment to listen. When the sound of tires on pavement reached us, she took off at a run for her car. I followed her, keeping my back stiff and my shoulders back, trying to run like I thought Jeremy would. The car rumbled to life when I opened the door, and I saw three big sedans turn into the driveway. They slowed as they came toward us, and I could see gun barrels poking up from behind the seats.

“Um, I’m in,” I said.

“I know,” Kim’s voice was calm and level.

“They’re getting closer.”

“I see that.”

“They’re about to shoot at us.”

“Then shield us.”

I got the shield spell up a fraction of a second before they opened fire, and bullets sparked against the telekinetic barrier. Kim chose that moment to hit the gas and the Viper lunged forward. The three sedans burned rubber trying to turn around behind us, and we were on the road before they could get back out of the driveway. Kim slowed down halfway down the street, then accelerated again when the first big car bounced onto the street. I looked behind us as we turned the corner, just in time to see the muzzle flashes

of the AKs from the lead car. Asphalt sprayed my side of the car and I ducked back, grasping the touchstone. The thrum of magick from it was weaker now.

“I might have one more solid shield in me,” I said. “Then we’re down to dodging or hoping they miss.”

“Don’t block the bullets. Steal their power for yourself.” She took another corner, and bullets plowed into asphalt on her side.

“Bullets don’t have power!” I yelled over the roar of the engine. We skidded through a turn, the Viper hugging the road like a magnet. Behind us, one of the sedans slid into the grass before pulling back out onto the road. The other two had to slow down to keep from ramming it, which bought us a few more seconds of lead.

“Then how do they hurt you?”

“By hitting you really...hard. Kinetic energy. Bullets use kinetic energy, transfer of force.”

“Good. Now, less talking, more doing. I’m running out of corners.” She took another corner at an impossible speed, and we were on a long, straight stretch of road. The rear tires chirped as the Viper accelerated, and Kim flipped a switch on the center console. A section of the front fender retracted and popped up, and I felt more than heard motors at the rear of the car. Looking in the rear view mirror, I saw a spoiler rise and a pair of support struts turned and locked into place.

“What the Hell is all that?”

“Very expensive,” Kim said with a smile. “So please, don’t let them put holes in my car.” Our Russian friends came barreling out into the road, and I turned my focus back to the spell I needed. My version of the shield spell, like most of what I did, was pretty much just brute force. I stopped the bullets with a kinetic barrier. What Kim was

talking about was taking the momentum from the bullets so that they simply didn't have the energy to do any damage if they got to you. But...physics. Conservation of energy. All of that energy had to go somewhere. If I let it dissipate on its own, it would bleed off as heat. I looked down at the touchstone, then did some quick calculations in my head. Instead of creating a storage lattice for magick, I could create one for kinetic energy, and hang on to all the momentum I stole from the bullets. The thought of what I might be able to do with all that extra energy brought a smile to my face. My hands moved in an intricate pattern, fingers shaping a lens for the magick to flow through. Now all I needed was a trigger phrase.

"They're getting closer," Kim said after a glance in the mirror.

"I'm ready. I think." That earned me a raised eyebrow, and she took another corner a little too fast, the back end sliding out from behind us. Kim spun the wheel in the other direction and we straightened out on the access road to the highway. She shifted gears and sped toward the next onramp. We passed cars like they were standing still, then Kim wove between a panel van and a pastel blue Prius, taking the ramp at twice the speed on the yellow sign. We got a little air beneath us when we hit the end of the ramp, then we were passing a semi on our left.

"Be ready," she said. "There should be no collateral damage." I gave her a look, trying to load the irony of a former assassin trying to avoid killing people into a single glance. Of course, she was telling that to me, the guy known for leveling real estate like a bulldozer. Her lips turned up into a mocking smile she told me that she got that we were both sharks out of water here.

"There are a lot of cars between them and us," I said.

“You’re right. I need to give them a clear shot. Sit down and hold on.” She hit the brakes, slalomed between the tail of one semi and the nose of another, and crossed two lanes, then sped up again. Behind us, I saw the three sedans swerve into the same lane. Guns came out the windows, and cars around us veered to the side of the road. The moment couldn’t get much more ‘right’ for what I was about to do. The catch on the seatbelt came undone and I twisted in the seat to look behind us, wand at the ready.

“*Ut vis et copia,*” I said. *Take force and store.* The magick expanded behind us, not so much a shield as a field. Muzzle flashes blossomed from the barrels and I felt the bullets enter my kinetic sponge. The storage matrix started to fill, maybe a little too quickly. The rounds slowed, then stopped as the momentum leached away. Lead dropped to the pavement a few feet behind the Viper’s tail, leaving a trail of bullets behind us as more and more fire entered the field.

“Well done,” Kim said over the roar of the V-10 engine. “Trevor was certain you could do this. He’ll be so proud.”

“Well, I should probably do something with all this stored kinetic energy,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Definitely. We don’t want to make it look like we weren’t trying that hard to lose them, do we?” The grin Kim gave me was infectious.

My left hand closed into a fist around the wand and I held it over my open right palm. “*Deorsum percutiamus!*” I yelled, focusing the kinetic energy into a downward strike. The blow hit in the middle of the lead sedan’s hood. I caught a glimpse of the vehicle’s engine dropping out of the chassis before the nose was shoved down into the road. The back end came up and the whole car flipped end over end. The other two cars swerved around it, but the guns were back inside the cars, at least.

“So, what was our exit strategy?” I asked. “Because I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like going to Kansas today.”

“Nor I.” She reached into the middle compartment and pulled out a pair of die-cast models of her Viper that were set on little pads of clay. One was light blue, the other white. With a glance behind her, she leaned forward and pressed both of them against the dash. Magickal runes etched into the clay flared white, the magick within them activated when they were broken. We slid up between a flatbed semi and a line of cars, another vehicle blocking our path forward.

“Um, we’re kinda boxed in here,” I pointed out.

“It would appear so,” Kim said. She looked to her left, then tapped a button on the steering wheel, and I felt the car drop an inch or two.

“Kim, what are you doing?”

“I don’t want to scratch the paint.”

“You’re not going to do what I hope you’re not going to do, are you?”

“Most likely. Now, be quiet.” No sooner had the words left her mouth than she swerved left, bringing us under the flatbed trailer. I’d been with Lucas when he did this almost two years ago, and I closed my eyes, waiting to hear metal screech. But no screams of twisted steel came, no shudder as we hit the top. I opened my eyes to see the rear wheels and support struts of the flatbed in front of us. Where Lucas had swerved all the way across to come out the other side, Kim had simply stopped in the middle. Looking to my right, I saw another white Viper beside us, with Kim driving it. The air shimmered between us, and I realized that I was inside one illusion looking at another. We were inside an invisibility charm, and the other Viper was an illusion that had covered

us until we moved out of it. To our left, a line of cars was passing, and as soon as the last one went by, Kim pulled out behind it, then took an off ramp that pointed us south.

“You are one sneaky woman,” I told her when we shimmered back into view.

“Ninja,” she said, gesturing toward herself.

“So, what about the tracker?” I asked. “Are you sure your guy can make it point where we want it to?”

“The Pierces will have it handled,” she said. “They are very capable, and they know their limits, which are few. It will appear to stop transmitting about a hundred miles into Kansas. They won’t know where he actually is until it is far too late to do anything about it.”

An hour later, we pulled in the driveway to Dr. C’s Sanctum and parked beside his Range Rover. Amanda met us at the door, her expression softening a little when she saw both of us. Kim nodded to her daughter and went straight to the library. By the time I caught up with her, she had Dr. C in a full on kiss, both arms around his neck, her left foot raised and her eyes closed. Amanda and I stopped in the doorway and traded a long-suffering look.

“Master Chance,” Jeremy said from the foyer. “So good to see that you made it back unharmed.”

“Yeah, same to you. Everything went okay, then?”

“Oh, yes,” he smiled. “They never saw us leave, invisible or not; they went after you straight away and hardly spared a glance at the house.”

“Well, they think you’re running west right now, so they won’t be looking anywhere close to New Essex for a few days. Hopefully, by then, they’ll have other things to worry about.”

“I intend to see to it that they do,” Jeremy said. “A great many things. But for now, I should gather your sister. Your message gave the impression you wanted to meet her at the front gate.”

“Jeremy, I didn’t send any message.”

“It came from your phone, sir.”

“I don’t have my phone,” I said, heading for the door. “It’s at the lodge!” Amanda was right behind me when I swung the front door open. Dee was outside the gate, looking up and down the street. I called her name, and she turned back toward me as I heard the squealing of tires off to the left. Brad’s truck came barreling down the street, and a Were’ in hybrid form leaped from the bed. My feet hit the walkway at the same time the Were’ landed beside Dee. She had just enough time to let out a squeak of alarm, then she was gone, the Were’ sailing in a graceful arc toward the truck bed. Amanda ran to my right, letting off a yell of her own, flinging iron darts at the guy. Three of the four she threw stuck in his back, the fourth falling short when the truck sped away. The Were’ hit the truck with a lot less grace than he’d jumped with.

“Damn it, Amanda!” I yelled. “You could have hit her!”

“Not in a million years, *otōto*.” She shook her head, glaring at the truck as if she could stop it with her eyes.

“Your son is trying to reach you on your mobile device,” I heard from by the front gate. It had to be Mom’s ringtone for me. I bolted to the gate and grabbed the flashing phone, then scrambled back inside.

“What?” I growled.

“We have your mother,” Kain’s voice whispered over the line.

“No, you don’t, dumbass. You took my little sister. If you thought taking my mom was going to piss me off, you really

screwed up taking Dee. I am going to seriously fuck you up now.”

“You will do exactly as you’re told, nothing more, and absolutely nothing less, or you’ll be attending your sister’s closed casket funeral.”

“Look, you want me? Fine, I’ll go where you want, do whatever you want. You want to try to beat the crap out of me? Fine, punch your black little heart out. But hiding behind an eleven year old girl? I thought that was beneath even you.”

“Shut up, gamma. You will come to Radio Springs Park at in two hours, and submit yourself to Alpha’s and my command again. When you show up, we let the girl go. Come alone, and tell no one where you’re going.”

“Really? You’re going there?” I asked, but the phone was silent.

“What does he want?” Amanda said. Behind us, Dr. C and my Mom were coming out the door.

“Where’s Dee?” Mom demanded, her voice wavering between hard-ass tigress and hysterical mother.

“Kain has her,” I said. “We tried to stop him, but they were ready the moment she stepped outside the gate.” I pulled up the texts and saw a single message from my phone. *Meet me out front.* Dee would have had no reason to doubt that it came from me.

“What does he want?” Mom asked, suddenly all tiger mother.

“Me. Alone. Two hours, Radio Springs Park.”

“I’ll be back,” Mom said, heading back into the house. I started after her, but Dr. C took me by the shoulders and turned me to face him.

“No, Chance, let her go. I recognize that look.”

“Well, I don’t,” I pushed against him.

“Of course you don’t. It’s the same look you get when you have a plan in that head of yours. Your Mom knows what she’s doing. And one thing I’ve learned is that it’s best to let you do your thing and not try to second guess you. It’s worked out pretty good so far.” We heard cars pull up at the side of the house, and went around to see Wanda, Lucas and Collins heading up the sidewalk.

“What’s going on? Wanda asked, her frown set almost to scowl.

“Kain has Dee,” I said.

“He’s done fucked up now,” Lucas said.

“That’s what I told him. What do you have?”

“Lots,” Collins said. “None of it good.”

Chapter 15

~ Remember, if you're the one sitting around waiting for someone to show up to fight...you're the boss fight. ~

Guy Midnight

“So, you mean Jacob Kain has been prowling around in the Ozarks since the end of May?” I asked incredulously. “How did he do that without the Conclave or even Sinbad knowing?” We had retired to the library. Dr. C was behind his desk, and we’d brought in chairs from the kitchen so everyone could sit down. Kim sat on the edge of the desk, half facing Dr. C and turned so she could see everyone else. Lucas and Monica were on the love seat, naturally, and Wanda and Collins were in a pair of chairs taken from the kitchen table. Amanda was sitting tailor fashion by the desk, and I was pacing.

“Simple,” Collins said. “He flew into St Louis or Kansas City on commercial flights, rented a car and drove down here. Stayed in a series of cheap motels under a string of fake names.”

“Seems he was fond of using the same credit card for each stay,” Wanda said. “I’d bet it’s off the books. He probably thought he’d taken all the precautions he needed to. To cover his tracks, he’d change the card number every trip, but it was always still the same account.”

“Also, his credit card receipts correspond to a string of disappearances and mysterious deaths since then,” Collins added. “So I’d say he’s been recruiting a little, too. With what he pulled today, we’re adding kidnapping and child endangerment to the list.”

“How did you guys find all of this, anyway?” I asked.

“That was all Wanda,” Lucas said with a proud smile. Wanda blushed at the praise, but I couldn’t help but notice her eyes turning toward Amanda.

“I just noticed that he was driving a rental car, and I know you need a credit card for those, so I wondered if we

could help track his movements that way. And since he kept hitting you and Shade...”

“I could follow up on it as a child abuse case. But what we turned up was...way more than I expected,” Collins said. “Your boy Kain has been busy.”

“So now what do we do?” Lucas asked.

“I don’t know what you guys are going to do, and truth is, I shouldn’t. You’re not coming with me, that’s for sure.”

“But what we do on our own,” Kim said with that smile I’d come to recognize was born of excitement. “Well, that is up to us. You can no more prevent us from acting independently than you can keep the sun from rising.”

“Whatever you guys do on your own, I can’t know about,” I said. “Besides, I have other things I need to deal with before I go running head on at Kain.”

“I can help you there,” Dr. C said. “Kain gave you only two hours to cut down on the time you have to prepare to face him. He also thinks you’re still a Were’. By the time you go face him, you’ll have a few new tricks up your sleeve. Come with me. The rest of you...scheme to your heart’s content, but don’t disturb us upstairs.” He gave Kim a lingering kiss as he came around the desk, then led me upstairs to the working area of the Sanctum.

“Kim tells me you put together a spell on the fly and cast it with your wand.”

“Had to use a touchstone to power it,” I told him while we climbed up the back stairs. Narrower and steeper than the stairway in the front of the house, this set was the servants’ passage to the entire house, which meant they went all the way to the attic, which was now the third floor.

“Well, you might be interested to know that you weren’t using a functioning wand when you cast it.” Dr. C stepped into the Sanctum and turned to face me.

“You sabotaged my wand?” I said.

“No, we just never repaired it.”

“So the whole time I was at the Franklin Academy...?”

“And last semester and all summer long,” he added.

“... I was casting spells with a busted wand?”

“And doing it like you actually had one that worked.” He smiled like I should have been proud of him.

“I could’ve been killed!” I said, my voice rising.

“I made sure you were doing okay before I let you keep going. And no, I wasn’t crippling you, I was making you stronger. Why do you think I want you to take your mage trials before the end of the year?”

“I thought it was because you wanted to get rid of your problem student,” I said. My face got a little warm at saying that out loud.

“You know better than that. Look, we don’t have much time, Chance. I told you that because I need you to be at your absolute best right now.” He turned and started taking things from the bench in front of him.

“I’m kind of at my absolute worst. Kim told me I’m not connected to the source of my magick. I don’t know that even happens, but I’m pretty sure I’m not going to do it in an hour.”

Dr. C turned to me, a thick black rod in his hands. His eyes had that slightly unfocused look he got when he was thinking about something ‘fuzzy.’ Those were the time I’d learned to listen to him the closest, because those were the moments when he told me things that mattered.

“Only half of magick is in what we know, Chance,” he said. “Being a wizard isn’t so much in what goes on up here,” he touched two fingers to his temple, “as what we have here.” He put the same two fingers over my heart.

“Remember, emotion and faith drive magick as much as knowledge and rules. And connecting to the source of our magick is all about that first part. It can happen in the span of a single heartbeat if the right pieces are in place. Which is part of why I’m giving you this.” He held the black rod out to me, almost reverent in the way he cradled it in his hands. It had a thick quartz sphere at its base and a quartz tip that flared out and angled back in for an inch or so, then tapered further to a sharp point. A silvery metal was wrapped around the ends, and a blue and red gem was set opposite each other at either end. It was beautifully made, and I could feel it resonate almost on its own from a few inches away.

“Sir, I’m still just an apprentice. A rod is...”

“The rod is the tool of a mage as much as it is a badge of status,” Dr. C said. “And in both cases, I think you’re ready for it. I’ve been working on this since the day you first became my apprentice. It’s African ebony, one of the strongest, densest woods in the world. The base is rutilated quartz to help you draw and conduct energy. The tip is cut to focus energy with laser precision, and both ends are connected by a silver-osmium core. If your wand was a large caliber pistol, this is a large caliber *cannon*. It’s not just powerful, though, it’s precise and it’s versatile. Ebony wood and quartz aren’t particular to any one kind of energy, so it won’t get in your way. I gift this to you, the tool of a mage, freely given. Use it well and wisely.”

“Sir, I...” I paused, the weight of the moment suddenly hitting me full on. I was about to go into a den of wolves in a very real sense to try to rescue my sister, and help my girlfriend get her pack back. There was a weight to this moment, and it resonated within me.

“Master, I accept this gift with humble gratitude, not for the gift alone, but for the knowledge it stands for. I wouldn’t

be here without you, sir. Without all the things you've taught me. Not just about being a mage, but about...being a good man."

The moment I touched the rod, I felt like I'd grabbed a tiger by the tail. It practically buzzed in my hands. The wood was warm against my skin, and I felt the jolt of power through my bones. The surge of emotion I was feeling looped back to me, the buzz changing pitch to match it. That alone made the gemstones and the quartz ends glow slightly.

Dr. C smiled. "That isn't the only new trick you'll be taking with you.," he said.

Kain and Brad were waiting for me in the middle of the park, trying to look scary and impressive as they faced the road they figured I would take to get there. But I wasn't driving. I wasn't even on the ground. No, I was coming in on my own personal magick carpet, the solidified cloud spell I had perfected for prom. I floated at treetop level, coming in over the lake, a little to the west of the park. Kain and Brad were facing east, standing there with their arms crossed, listening for the sound of a car approaching. They stiffened and puffed their chests out, probably hearing one of the caravan of vehicles approaching from the east. That seemed like as good a cue as any, so I tilted the cloud and banked in behind them, slowing and dispelling the soft bubble I'd kept around me to contain my scent when I was about thirty feet away.

They both caught my scent at the same time, and turned to look in unison. Kain started when he saw me hovering twenty feet in the air. Brad, to his credit, just stepped to one side and folded his arms across his chest again.

"I'm here for my sister," I said.

“You’re here to submit and acknowledge your place in the pack. Now get down here.” I felt his will hammer my will, but without my wolf as a backdoor through my defenses, it got him nowhere.

“No.” It was hard to tell what I enjoyed more. Just telling him no, or his reaction when I did.

“I told you once to get down here, boy. Don’t make me tell your gamma ass again. Now get down here...*now!*” Again his will battered my defenses, and again...nothing happened.

“I told you,” Brad said. “He figured out how to beat our control. He’s known for that shit.”

“Shut up, you pitiful excuse for a beta,” Kain snarled.

“Seriously, you have got to stop with this Greek letter shit,” I said, circling the cloud around to my left so I could keep Brad and him in sight at the same time. “That whole wolf pack hierarchy stuff you keep spouting is junk science. Wolves don’t do ranks and roles. Packs in the wild are families, asshole, they don’t play your bullshit dominance games. Only captive wolves do that.”

Kain roared and leaped at me, but halfway to me, he hit the kinetic sponge I had waiting for him. He slowed until he hung in midair a few feet from me, and I put my hand out. “I find your lack of faith disturbing,” I said, triggering the telekinetic chokehold. He hung there in midair, his hands clawing at his throat.

“Bad dog,” I said, and slapped him down with the kinetic force from his own leap, channeled back at him through the same spell that stopped him. “No biscuit.” Behind Kain, Brad snickered. I’d used the same line on him once, but not as effectively. At my mental command, the cloud dropped lower and I let it dissipate when I was a few inches off the ground. Maintaining it was taking more power out of the

reserve I'd built with the rod than I could afford, and I hadn't found another power source to draw on yet. I had the rod and three more touchstones to call on, then I was out.

Kain got to his feet, his nose bleeding for a moment. "Boy, you better get down on your knees right now unless you want to see your sister dead," he said to me. "And you better figure out whose side you're on," he said over his shoulder to Brad.

"I've got news for you, Kain," I said, advancing on him. "I'm not a werewolf anymore." Brad took a step back and Kain frowned. His senses were trying to tell him I wasn't lying, I was sure, but his brain seemed to be having problems believing it.

"That's impossible," he spat.

"No, just improbable. I have friends who know things. Now, about my sister. Do you really want to throw away the only leverage you have?" I blinked, bringing my mystic senses up. With magick coursing through me, I could use my Third Eye more easily if not very effectively.

"Do you want to throw her life away?" Kain asked. I could see the red lines of aggression arcing toward me, some fading, others getting brighter as he considered his options to attack.

"If you kill her, I have no reason not to obliterate you." The aggression lines all faded a little while he processed that. "If you let her go, the only person you have to deal with is Shade, and that's only if you decide to stick around. No, wait, you also have to deal with Sinbad, too. You know what? There's a long list of people here you've pissed off. On second thought, you should probably just run. And pray. I hear that helps sometimes."

"Shade can't touch me," Kain said. "She's my docile little bitch now. I've broken her and I've taken her. She

comes when I call and she does as she's told." I looked behind him and saw Brad shaking his head, his face a mask of fury.

"Ha! Like that would ever happen," I said, playing to his game.

"She took some convincing, but in the end, I made her see things my way," Kain said, swaggering toward me.

"I'll believe that when I see it," I said, feeding him a straight line.

"Then believe. Shade, get out here, bitch." He gestured toward the trees, and Shade stepped into view. Her head was down, her hair draped down on either side of her face. She walked toward us with her shoulders slumped, even her pace subdued.

"I'm here, Jacob," she said when she was a few feet away, never looking up.

"Show these two gamma fucks whose woman you are."

"Shade, no," Brad said, his anger washed away by the pain on his face.

"This is who you wanted me to be, Brad," she said, her voice flat. "It's who you let Dominic try to make me, and who you wanted Jacob to bring back for you." My fists clenched as I fought down my own reaction, and Shade took another step forward.

"Tell them, Shade," Kain said, his eyes bright. "Tell them whose woman you are."

Shade closed the distance between them until she was standing only inches away. "Jacob Kain, I am..." she paused, finally looking up as he reached for her. "...my own woman, asshole." Her right knee came up like a rocket, and drove Kain a few feet into the air. His eyes were wide, and even in mid-air, his hands went to cup his wounded pride. He hit the

ground like a slab of beef, landing on his side, still curled around his deflated manhood, moaning in pain. She turned and walked toward me, now straight and tall like the goddess she was.

“You rock,” I told her.

“Damn straight I do,” she answered. “Whose man are you, baby?”

“All yours,” I said with a smile. “All yours.”

“And I’m your woman,” she said, leaning in for a quick kiss. “He’s got Dee locked up at the Wolmert Institute building, about a mile northeast of here.”

“Thanks, babe,” I said. “I got you a little something, too,” I said. “*Compulsis negatis.*” The insidious hexes Kain had been using burned away by the same extra strength spell I’d used to break Dulka’s controls over me. Kain slowly got to his feet and looked at us.

“I thought you would understand,” he said. “Only you were worth my time, worth the effort to break your will and mold you into something better. But instead, you slink back to this...half-breed mage. And worse yet,” he turned to me, “you take the worthless slut back, knowing what I did to her.” Shade and I turned to give him matching glares.

“Who are you calling half-breed?” Shade asked, her voice going into a low growl.

“The Gypsy mongrel who just lost his sister!” Kain said. He sprinted forward, transforming as he went. Shade sprang after, and I started running and casting. The cloud formed beneath my feet and lifted me into the air between steps. I arced up over the trees and saw Shade racing Kain, her lean black wolf gaining on his massive gray one. Once I cleared the trees, I spared a quick look to either side before swooping down behind them, leaning into the cloud’s forward motion. On my right, I could see Dr. C’s Range

Rover bouncing across country, leaving long gouges of turf ripped apart in its wake. Sinbad's bike followed it, the mane of white hair as distinctive as the paint job on the gas tank. On my left, two oversized foxes ran alongside Kain, one with five silver tails flowing behind it like ribbons on the breeze, and another with one tail half as long as her mother's five. Further off, I could see a green Barracuda and a blue VW heading down one of the few remaining streets.

As he went, Kain split into two, then six, then twenty wolves. Four split off to the left, and two went toward Shade. That left only Kain and me out front, with a dozen racing behind him in an uneven V. They were moving too fast for me to split my attention between speed and offense, so I poured on the speed, overtaking him in the last quarter mile and speeding toward the big, gothic building ahead of us. When I got to the front of the Wolmert Institute, I twisted in mid air and drop to the ground at the top of the steps.

A terrible, dark presence pushed against my senses, one I remembered from my previous visit to Twisted Oaks Asylum, not far from Nevada. For anyone else, this might be something to avoid, but there was a familiar cruelty to it for me. I transferred the rod to my right hand and stretched my right arm behind me, toward the building. There was hate in this energy, a futile anger, a madness beyond the reach of any reason, and a certain purity to its malevolence. I smiled.

I could work with this.

Kain and his dozen furry doppelgangers ran up, and he transformed to human, wearing the same kind of fur belt I'd seen on Brad, but where Brad's had only one fur strip, this one had more than a dozen that I could see, maybe more.

"Can you feel it, little mageling?" Kain asked, his face twisting into a harsh smile. "There is evil here that will crush you. Did you think you beat me? I *let* you get here ahead of

me. No, you ran to the one place I wanted you, herded like a sheep to the slaughter.”

“So, this is you telling me I’m right where you want me?” I said, adding a few shades of sarcasm to my voice.

“I’ll do better than that,” Kain laughed, then uttered an Infernal Syllable. Dark magick flooded me, hitting every chakra and energy point with a hundred thousand volts of pure evil. I felt it flare around me, an unholy fire that consumed all the light around me. Instead of trying to fight it, I focused on drawing it into the rod, into myself, on infusing myself with the raw wrongness of it. I let out a sound that was part roar and part primal scream. Every ugly, nasty impulse I ever had tore through me, and I focused my thoughts on one person: Jacob Kain.

“Yes!” Jacob yelled. “It hurts, doesn’t it?” He uttered another Syllable, and the energy got even more intense. “You can’t last much longer!”

“You think this hurts?” I roared. “You think this is painful to me?” I stepped forward, wrapping myself in the dark fire. “I was *raised* on this shit!” I threw a bolt of Hellfire at him. He jumped to one side, then all twelve of his wolves bounded forward, heading for the building. I roasted two with a single gout of Infernal power, but the others leaped through the windows, intent in one thing: killing Dee.

In that moment, I made a painful decision. I turned my back on Kain. If not out of love for my sister, then for hatred of him, and the desire to deny him of any satisfaction. Another wolf went crispy, but then the rest were in the building. I started for the door, hoping to get in before they got to Dee.

I got a feeling that something wasn’t right even as I twisted in place. My body went from leaning into a step to leaning back to get out of the way right before the heavy doors exploded outward. I was vaguely aware of someone

flying past me, but my full attention was on the person on the other side of that threshold. Standing there enveloped in the dark fires of her pre-teen wrath was my little sister, her eyes blazing a purple energy, hair standing on end, fists ablaze with dark fire.

“Leave me alone!” she shouted. Glass shattered at the sound of her voice, and eight wolves vanished just by being too close to her. She stepped out into the sunlight, then came to my side.

“Dee?” I asked. She gave me a thin smile.

“Now we match,” she said. A crack appeared in the perfect wall of darkness inside my head. This was my sister, tainted by the same kind of evil I had just willingly absorbed. Then her smile turned a little bit closer to normal, and she gave me a wink. “Let’s show this guy what we can do.”

“Oh, this is perfect,” another voice came. I looked down to see that Kain had been joined by a young woman not much taller than Dee. She was pretty in a waifish way, looking younger than she probably was, her face round and cherubic, her eyes cruel. Her voice was familiar, but I was having a hard time placing it.

“Have we met?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, warlock. We’ve met before, back at the Franklin Academy. Let me remind you,” the girl said. “*Fulmens!*” A jagged bolt of electricity arced toward me, and I brought my right arm up. Runes on the leather vambrace I wore flared to life when the bolt struck it, and the electrical charge was absorbed into the matrix on the vambrace. Dr. Corwin had originally designed it to absorb Hellfire, but it worked well for pretty much and kind of plasma energy.

“We meet again, Miss Hart,” I said, remembering where I’d last heard her voice with the attack. She’d gone missing

from the Franklin Academy to hide her own involvement in the coven of warlocks that had been working there. She'd even gone so far as to use neglinom charms to mask the presence of her own room. We'd run into each other when I was trying to find and beat the coven during my single, short semester there. The last time we'd faced off, she had blown me out her window. Then, I'd been trying to stay under the radar. "But you missed."

"How did he get his magick back!" Hart demanded of Kain.

"I don't know. I didn't think he could!" Kain yelled back at her.

"Well, he obviously can, and what were you thinking, bringing him here? He eats this kind of magick like candy!"

While they were yelling at each other, I looked to Dee and nodded toward Hart and Kain. She nodded, so I tossed the rod to my left hand. Dee snarled and brought her fists up, channelling so much power that it lifted her off the ground. I leaned forward and yelled "*Mitterre!*" A column of fire flew across the space between us, then Dee's assault hit like a tidal wave. Channeled by my rod, my attack felt like it was a hundred times stronger than it would have been on its own, while Dee's was more just raw power thrown at her opponent. We matched, alright.

Hart crossed her forearms in front of herself and held both of our attacks off for a full minute, but the sheer force left a pair of furrows in the ground from where her feet had slid along the turf. This girl's shields were tough. More importantly, she knew how to use them. By letting the attack push her back, she'd effectively drained out attack of a little of its *oomph*, and instead of trying to brute force block it, her shield was angled so it deflected more than simply stopped the bulk of the energy. Dee and I broke off the attack at the same time, both feeling the dark power we

were tapping into starting to wane. Steam rose from the ground around Hart, and a black circle of scorched earth surrounded her. Dee floated back down to the ground, then came over and held her hand up in a fist. I tapped my knuckles against hers, and felt the thrum of power passing between us. My eyes went wide for a second, then I forced my attention back to Josie Hart.

“You failed,” Hart said over her shoulder to Kain. “He still has his magick, and now his damn *sister* is throwing spells around, too. I told you not to involve his family.”

“We can still kill him,” Kain said. Beside me, Dee was gathering power for what I assumed was another attack, her eyes bright with an unnatural glee. I put a hand out to her and shook my head.

“I don’t need him dead, and I don’t need him like this,” Hart said. “You’re on your own. At least one of us did their job right.” She turned to Dee and me. “I’ll see you two again soon enough.” She smiled and brought her hand to an amulet. Then she was gone. There was no flash, no sound, she was just not there, like a bad film edit or something.

“I don’t like her,” Dee said, then her gaze fell on Kain. “And I don’t like him.” She took a step in his direction, and I put a hand on her shoulder. The surge of power started again the instant I touched her, and I knew what I had to do. The longer she was exposed to this kind of corruption, the worse it would get, until she was consumed with rage and hate. I couldn’t let that happen to my little sister, not when I could stop it. With a grimace, I shut down the connection to the Woltmer Institute’s tainted energy. Dee staggered and fell to her hands and knees, and Kain thought it was a good idea to come at us.

“*Ictus*,” I said with a casual wave of the rod. Even weakened as I was, the rod amplified my TK bolt to the strength of a small howitzer and sent Kain flying back,

proving my suspicions correct. My astral connection had bonded to Dee, not the local magick energy. And without me trying to vacuum up the dirtiest, most polluted source of power in the area, Dee was still connected to magick normally. And my little sister was strong in the Force.

Dee came to her feet, her face twisted with rage, her fist drawn back for a punch. I caught her knuckles in my palm. "Dee," I said, and her eyes focused on me. "Chill, sis." She shook her head, then looked around.

"Wow," she said. "That was weird."

"Yeah, now get behind me." I turned to face Kain and take stock of things. Brad had finally caught up, and Kain had summoned a troupe of his own wolves, almost two dozen strong. On my right, Kim and Amanda were facing down a group of Weres', with Shade holding down the middle, and Dr. C, Lucas, Wanda and Sinbad facing down the left side. And not far behind all of them was the Mulani Clan, advancing with guns drawn.

"Jacob Kain!" Sinbad yelled. "Stand down and get the hell out of my state."

"Fuck you!" Kain said. "I'll kill you and take over all your damn packs. I challenge you for alpha of your packs."

"Hell, no," Sinbad yelled back. "That's not how we do things."

"It's how I do it, so you either face me or-" Whatever threat he was going to make, Shade shut him up with a punch. He hit the ground and slid to a stop at the base of the steps. Brad leaped to his side, standing over him in a protective crouch.

"No, asshole," she snarled, apparently unconcerned with the fact that she was standing in the middle of his wolves. "You don't get to come here and tell us how to run our packs."

“Shut up, bitch!” Kain yelled, coming to his feet. I felt his will hammer at Shade, but this time, she was ready for him. With his hexes burned away, all he had was his own mental strength, and he was no match for her.

“No,” Shade snarled. “That mind control bit doesn’t fly here. We follow who we choose, if anyone. I lead my pack because they *give* me that.”

“I’m an alpha, you will treat me-” Kain went to backhand her, but she caught his fist against her forearm and stopped it cold, and stopped his words just as hard.

“Only tame wolves do the alpha-beta thing,” Shade said. “I’m a free bitch, mister. And you’re in *my* house.”

“Then die in it,” Kain said, reaching for his waist. He groped for a moment, not finding what he was looking for.

“No,” Brad said from behind him. Kain turned to see his belt in Brad’s hands. “I won’t let you hurt her. Not any more.” He turned and leaped for the edge of the circle, but Kain was still too fast. Even as the younger wolf leaped, Kain transformed to his hybrid form and slashed Brad’s back open.

Brad landed in an ungainly heap, and Kain was in the air the moment he touched the ground. So was Shade. Mere inches behind him and in a slightly shallower arc, she also effectively blocked my shot at him. But I knew Shade, and I was pretty sure of what she was really doing. I took the steps two at a time and hit the ground a microsecond before they did. True to my guess, Shade landed in a crouch that covered her injured ex-boyfriend and also knocked Kain off target. He hit the ground, rolled to his feet and drew his hand back, claws out.

“*Ictus!*” I yelled, sending a TK bolt screaming over Shade’s arched back to slam into Kain. He tumbled across the turf a little ways, then came up snarling and spitting. If I

expected him to jump back at me or do something equally dramatic and easy to counter, I was wrong. Dead wrong if Jacob Kain had anything to do with it. He was still in hybrid form, but he stayed low to the ground, and he came at me in a zig-zagging path. I blew big chunks of real estate up when I had clear shots, but before I knew it, he was on me, and I had to duck under his claws.

Tactically, it was a smart move, since it kept anyone else from jumping in to help for fear of hurting me or getting hurt themselves. Not that there was anyone who could help me. Not all of Kain's wolf buddies had come from his belt. Easily half a dozen were still slowing down my friends. Even with my upgraded fighting skill and the residual flexibility from being turned, I knew that I was only holding off the inevitable if I stayed on the defensive. And the rare opportunity to go all out against something without worrying about hurting or killing them? That was pure bonus.

I dodged a slash from Kain, then kicked at his right knee, enjoying the sound of it breaking. He went down on his good knee, and I grabbed his arm, pulled back with one hand and landed a shot across his scapula to dislocate it. He was staggering to his feet even before I could step away from the second blow, so I did a spinning kick that hit him in the side of the head and staggered him again. I channeled the momentum from the spin into a punch that broke bones in his back, then followed up with a series of kidney punches that kept him off balance long enough for Shade to jump in with a slash across his side that sprayed blood on the steps. It spin him around to face me, and I unloaded a side kick into his jaw that knocked him back onto the steps. No sooner than he landed, Shade ran at him and delivered a kick that sent him flying across the steps to slam into one of the statues flanking the entrance.

He scrambled to his feet almost as soon as he hit the ground, so I sent a TK bolt at him, bouncing him off the statue to land at Shade's feet again. She punched down, cracking the concrete around them and bouncing him into the air to meet her fist again. Only this time, we'd given him too much time to recover. He swept his leg around and knocked Shade's feet out from under her, then kicked her at me. I caught her in the kinetic sponge, but by the time she came to the ground, he was on me, and I was frantically ducking and weaving away from his attacks. But by focusing on me, he left himself open to Shade, and she came at him from behind with a flying leap.

He was ready for her. Instead of trying to hit her, he caught her in midair and threw her at me. We went tumbling across the top steps and landed by the doors. As much as I liked being tangled up with Shade, this wasn't the time. We rolled apart, and I found myself face to face with Dee and, to my shock, Mom. My mother was crouched beside my sister, evidently intent on getting her the Hell out of here.

"Get her out of here," I hissed, then turned to face Kain. Shade was on her feet and at my side, her fists in front of her, teeth bared. His hands were glowing, and Shade cast a worried glance my way. Even as dulled as my senses were, I could feel the dark power he was calling on, and it felt familiar.

"What's he doing?" she asked.

"Calling on his patron," I told her. "Calling on Gedeon." I reached for the rod, and felt it fly to my hand.

Kain's fists burst into black flame. "You know what's coming, little warlock," he said. "And I can feel your strength fading. You can't last much longer."

"Go high," I said to Shade. She leaped at him, and he brought his hands up. I aimed a burst of solidified air at the ground five feet in front of him, and let it bounce under his

hastily made shield to hit him in the chest and knock him back to the statue I'd bounced him against earlier. This time, he got his feet behind him and kicked off the statue, bouncing under Shade's leap and coming at me. He probably thought I'd never get a shield up in time, but he must have forgotten that my tendency was to attack before it was to defend.

"Ictus latior!" I yelled, and caught him with a wide TK shot. It stopped him in midair, but not much more. *"Obex!"* I called. With his focus on me, he wasn't ready when Shade kicked him in the back, and I got a good look at his face when it plastered against the surface of my shield. He hit the ground, rolled and came up in a crouch, facing me. The shield collapsed from the impact, and Shade leaped over the leg sweep he tried, landing beside me again. This time, I didn't get the shield up in time, and he hit both of us with twin columns of Hellfire.

Soul searing pain drove me to my knees, and seemed to go on forever, even though I could count the two heartbeats it lasted. My back arched as every muscle spasmed, and the rod fell from my fingers. When the pain finally stopped, I slumped forward onto my hands. But even as I pitched forward, I felt stronger, as if the exposure to Hellfire had rekindled my connection to magick. For a moment, I fought a sense of panic. The absolute last thing I wanted was an Infernal connection to anything. I felt a small hand on my right shoulder, and heard the voice of a pissed off little angel behind me.

"Leave. My. Brother. Alone." Dee's voice was soft, but it stopped Kain in his tracks.

"You're a brave little girl," Kain said. "You'll share his fate."

"I know," Dee said, but her tone sounded as if she was talking about something very different than he was. He

looked at her, then up and at something behind her. His expression changed, and for the first time, I saw something like worry in his eyes. Something like fear. I turned my head to see what he was looking at, and saw a dark form step between Shade and me, interposing herself before us. The world went quiet around us, and I felt everything fade except that welcome comfort of a familiar darkness. I looked up to see the misty black avatar of New Essex looking down at me. She laid her left hand over Dee's on my shoulder, then looked back up at Kain and raised her right arm to point at him.

"What are you?" Kain asked. Around us, I could see that *everyone* had stopped what they were doing; all eyes were on us.

"I am New Essex," the dark form said. "I am..." The avatar faded, revealing my mother with a revolver in her hand.

"...Mara Murathy, daughter of Clan Mulani," Mom continued. "I am your death." She stepped forward as she pulled the trigger, and the revolver roared before Kain could react. It spat a foot long tongue of flame, and Kain staggered back, his eyes wide and mouth wide open. Without blinking, she took another step forward and fired again. Another step, another explosion of sound. The rounds knocked him back, and three red blossoms appeared on his shirt. Mom took another step forward and fired again, knocking him back two more steps.

"You can't..." Kain gasped.

"I can," Mom said, and pulled the trigger again. "Silver handed down from father to daughter. Not even you can survive against the power of the Mulani bloodline." She pulled the trigger again, and Kain took a step back, then dropped to his knees. He stared at Mom for a moment, then coughed, spraying blood, then fell forward. The rest of his

pack looked from one to another, uncertainty in their stances and expressions.

“You got about twenty seconds before the rest of Clan Mulani shows up to kill your asses,” Sinbad called out. “You’ve got a couple of choices. Run or die.” They ran, and the others let them. I could see the sun glinting off the windshields of the Clan’s vehicles. My grandfather was going to be pissed. I got to my feet, every muscle aching with the slightest movement. Shade wasn’t moving too fast either, but she wasn’t looking nearly so fragile as I felt. Dee held my arm until I was upright, then put an arm around my middle and squeezed gently.

“Mom,” I said, taking a little extra time with each step. “You okay?”

Mom turned to me, her eyes suddenly brimming. “You’re okay,” she said. “So I’m fine, sweetie.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I’ve been where you’re standing. It ain’t easy.”

“No, you haven’t, son. I know you killed another werewolf, but he wasn’t threatening your children. This...this was the easiest decision I ever made.” She wrapped me in her arms, and I realized that she was right. King might not have been threatening my children, but he had been threatening the people I cared about most. Killing him had been a split second decision, one that maybe, I didn’t need to be carrying around quite so much guilt of my own over.

“Shade,” I heard as Mom let me go. Brad stood on the steps, the skinwalker belt in his hands. “I’m sorry. For everything. I... Shade, this was all my fault.” Behind him, Dr. C, Sinbad and the whole crew were approaching. Sinbad looked like Zeus about to drop a thunderbolt on someone’s ass, and Dr. C looked like he was willing to help him aim it. No one behind them looked happy.

“You’re not wrong kid,” Sinbad said. “And I’ve got a lot of reasons to want your ass dead. Give me a good reason not to kill you right now.”

“I can’t,” Brad said, hanging his head.

“As much as I might not want to do it,” I said, “I can.”

“Didn't see that comin’,” Sinbad said. “But go ahead.”

“Because I said so. You agreed to let me act as your liaison to the Conclave, and asked for their assistance. Well, let us assist.” I pointed to Dr, Corwyn. “Let him help you decide what to do.”

“At least let Brad speak his piece, Sinbad,” Shade said. The old Were’ smiled and nodded.

“Now you’re startin’ to sound like a leader,” he said. “Okay, let’s do this. But let’s do it somewhere else. This place feels wrong. Ain’t nothin’ good gonna go on here.” Shade shifted back from her hybrid form to fully human, naked and glorious. But this time, there was one difference. Her hair was no longer red, but had turned as black as her wolf’s fur.

Epilogue

*~ I see your True Colors/ Shining through.
I see your True Colors/And that's why I love you. ~
Cyndi Lauper, 1986*

The sun was low in the sky by the time we all made it to the Mulani camp. Brad was chained in silver in the middle of a circle of chairs, his shoulders slumped, head bowed. I stood to his left, since this was my idea. Dr. C stood on his right, his own head down, his expression not a happy one, while Lucas and Wanda stood behind us. Sinbad sat next to Shade, and they were flanked by Dandry on their right and my mom and her parents on the left of them. Shade's pack and the rest of Clan Mulani made up the rest of the semi-circle on either side. My grandfather looked around and leaned over to Mom to whisper something. While he spoke to her, Dee trotted out to stand next to me and take my hand.

"Sis, no," I whispered to her. "You shouldn't be out here."

"Yes, I should," she whispered back. "You'll see."

"Let's get started," Sinbad said. "Brad Duncan, speak your piece." Brad's head came up and he took a shuffling step forward

"Kain came to me after prom," he started. "He said there was a way to take Chance out of the picture and put him in his place. He would turn Chance, and I would train him while he brought Shade to heel. We'd break them both, and get what we wanted. I'd take the pack and get Shade, and he'd take over from Sinbad. But..." he paused, and his eyes closed. When he opened them again, tears streamed down his face. "Kane made me claim that I killed Tyler. But I never could hurt him. That was Kane. He never told me he

was going to kill him. I didn't even know he was dead until after Chance was turned."

"Kain didn't get here until after Chance was turned," Sinbad said.

"He was here days before we even knew he existed," Wanda said, stepping up to stand between Brad and me. She held up a tablet and went on. "I tracked his credit card account, and he took commercial flights under assumed names to St. Louis, Kansas City and Wichita, rented cars and drove here." Sinbad glared at her, but she matched him, and he waved her back.

Brad spoke again, his voice more subdued. "He had a belt, like a loup garou, but he'd harnessed the powers of a skinwalker with it. Whenever he killed a Were', he took their wolf and used it to make himself stronger. He had other magick, too. Ask Chance and Shade, he used it to control other Weres'... me included. You all saw that he could use Hellfire, too. I...I wanted what he was promising, but..." He took a step forward and spoke directly to Shade. "When I saw what ... what he was doing to you, and I saw that he was no different than Dominic, I finally got how bad I'd fucked up. I should've seen it sooner. I'm sorry, Shade. I...wish I could undo everything he did to you. Whatever you want to do to me...I deserve it for what I let him do to you." He turned to me. "And for what we did to you."

"So, why did he have a beef with us?" I asked.

"Kain sired Dominic, taught him the Law of the Wolf. I guess he was his favorite. But thing is, he was working with that other girl, Josie. He argued with her a lot about how she was running things. He thought it would be easier to just kill you, but she said you had to be alive but without your magick."

"Is there anything else anyone wanted to know?" Dr. C asked. There was silence and a shaking of heads in

response. "So, then it comes down to what punishment should be handed down. What do you say, Sinbad?"

"I want to kill the kid for what he let happen, but it seems like there's more to the story. Officially, I say exile. If he ever shows his face back here, I'll rip his heart out myself."

"The Conclave also recommends exile," Dr. C said. "But in the end, Shade, it is your pack that was most affected. What say you?"

Shade looked to me, her expression conflicted. "I don't think I could be fair. I'd be okay with exile."

"That's not fair!" Dee blurted.

"Dee!" I hissed. "Not the time!"

"Yes it is!" she said. "It's just like what happened with you, Chance. He had a bad teacher, just like you did. But you got a second chance. You got to live with us, and you have Mom and Dr. Corwin to teach you. Who did he have? No one. If you send him away, he's just going to do the same thing somewhere else, because no one's going to show him how to be better."

Silence followed her outburst, and I could see the rest of the adults thinking over what Dee had just said. It was my grandfather who spoke up first.

"There is wisdom in this," he said. "Even I can see that, and my first instinct, until recently, was to kill any thought of mercy for a werewolf."

"I'm not seeing it," Sinbad said, his voice rumbling.

"What if he goes back to Boston," I asked. "What kind of welcome to do you think he would get? What kind of things do you think they would teach him?"

"Nothing good," he said, his scowl deepening. "What about you, kid?" he asked throwing the question back at

me. "What do you think?"

"I think my sister's right," I said. "Last summer, I stood in front of the Conclave and asked for the same thing for three other people. I may not like you, Brad, but I have to ask for the same thing for you that I would for someone else."

"Upon further consideration, the Conclave will support Chance's recommendation," Dr. C said.

"You do realize you're making a decision someone else is going to have to make good on, right?" Sinbad said.

"Exile is still an option," Shade said, "but you did ask for the Conclave's help. And Dee's right. If you kick him out, he could do the same thing somewhere else. And even if it isn't done to your packs, it would be on you. You set yourself up as the father figure to every pack in a two hundred mile radius, Sinbad. Even mine. So you kind of set yourself up to handle this."

"Yeah, yeah," Sinbad growled. "Kid, you got a long way to go to prove to me and mine you're serious about this. I'm going to be hard on you, and you can bet there's going to be some punishment involved. But the little girl might be right. Maybe all you need is for someone to show you how to act right. So you got one shot. Don't fuck it up." He stood and walked out to Brad, turning to Dr. C. "I accept the Conclave's suggestion. Brad Duncan will be taken into the care of my pack. We'll try to teach him the way of the wolf. So, kid know right here and now, the wolf pack isn't about status. There are no alphas or betas or any of that bullshit. The pack is family. We look out for each other, we protect each other, and we don't keep score of who owes what. Can you deal with that?"

"Yes, sir," Brad nodded. "Thank you."

“Don’t thank me yet, kid,” he said. “We haven’t even started yet, and you got a long way to go.” My grandfather came to them and unlocked the shackles. Sinbad gave me a long look, then gave a quiet grunt and the suggestion of a smile before turning and leading Brad away. Mom and Dee joined us in the middle of the circle as the Mulani and the pack started to disperse.

“Mara,” my grandfather said. “Please, you and your family are welcome at my fire. They are my family, too. At least stay for dinner. Let me get to know my family again.”

“Oh, we’re family now?” Mom asked, a little acid still in her voice.

“Please, Mara, let an old man make amends for his mistakes.”

“We’ll stay, dad,” she said. Dee smiled and clapped her hands together a couple of times.

“I need to go get my car back from the lodge,” I said. “We’ll be back in a little while.” Dr. C caught my eye before we turned to leave and pulled me to one side. Kim stood at his side, her face its usual mask of serene mystery.

“Take the next couple of days off,” he said. “School starts next week. But more importantly, you need to be ready for your mage trials soon. Even if I wasn’t already thinking about it, after what I saw today, I would be.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Chance, you may have noticed that I usually say that I’m the acting mage of New Essex. Today, I saw the spirit of the city act to defend you and give you her benediction. The next true mage of New Essex is you. You have your work cut out for you.”

“Great. Things are gonna get even harder. Thanks for the head’s up. You staying for dinner?”

“For a little while. We’ll probably be here when you get back.”

“Don’t have too much fun,” Kim said as Shade and I headed for her bike.

“No such thing,” Shade said. The ride out to the lodge was quick since we were already on the north side of Diamond Lake. Shade took old 54 out to the highway, turned north, and in minutes, we were pulling into the road to the camp. My car had been moved down to the lodge, and Shade parked next to it. No sooner were we off of it than we were up against the side of my Mustang, kissing like we hadn’t seen each other for a month.

“You changed your hair,” I said, when we finally came up for air.

“You like it?” she asked, suddenly shy, ducking her head for a second.

“Yeah,” I said. I took a thick lock of it between my fingertips and brushed the ends against her left cheek. “I love it. And I love you.”

“I love you, so much. I was worried, Chance. Kain kept trying to tell me that you didn’t really love me, that I wasn’t really in love with you. Some of the things he said... I didn’t want to believe them, but with the way he was getting in my head, it was like one minute, I was convinced he was right, but then, the second I wasn’t around him, none of what he said made sense and I felt bad for ever doubting you. And I-” I kissed her, trying to put into action what words weren’t big enough to say.

“I get it,” I told her. “He was trying to do the same thing to me. But he couldn’t beat us. And we’re still here, still together...”

“And so hot for each other. I’m glad you like the new color. I wish I could say I did it on purpose, but it just kind of

happened. Today, though...knowing what you told me about wolves, that I don't have to be an alpha or any of those other things, that I can just... *be*. It's like I took off all the masks, because I get to show my true colors, and be who I really am."

"And... are you okay with me *not* being..."

"Baby, being a mage, that's who you really are. Those are *your* true colors, and I love them. When you were a Were', nothing worked right for you. It's not who you were meant to be. This is." She kissed me, slow and gentle this time. Without another word, we headed for the trail to the chapel. The lodge was still too painful to spend time in. We got to the little building, and Shade unlocked the front doors. A mattress had been laid on the floor near the front window, and boxes were stacked in the corner. At the back of the chappel, a tarp covered what I was guessing was a motorcycle.

"Wow, you've been busy," I said. "What's all this for?"

"My backup plan," she said. "You're the only person who knows about this place. It's yours if you ever need somewhere to go. But tonight...this is where I first tried to have sex with you."

"I remember," my voice was rough as the memory of her taking her top off played through my head.

"I wanted to do it right this time. I finally feel like I know who I really am, and I want to..." She stopped, then kissed me again, her hands on my cheeks, the point where our lips met feeling like everything was pouring through me and into her, and like she was trying to pour herself into me through that kiss.

"So do I," I said. Monkey brain was in full, ecstatic agreement. She reached for the hem of her top, and her phone rang. My eyes rolled and I tilted my head back,

frustrated by the power of technology to ruin a moment. She pulled it from her pocket and looked at it, then smiled at me.

“Damn, how does she do this? I really need to take this, then I’m all yours.” She hit the answer button. “Hi, Mom....Yes, I’m with Chance right now... I know you did, but I’m not going to... Mom, believe me, drugs are the absolute last thing you’d ever have to worry about with him...You’re right, Mom, I have changed...Mom, stop. There is so much about me you don’t know. Look, we’ll talk about this later... Well, you better get used to that tone, because I’m not going to be living under your roof after tonight, and I’m not going to that damn prep school... Good-bye, mother.” She pulled the phone away from her ear and ended the call, then turned it off just as it started to ring again. “Now, where were we?”

“You’re moving out?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she looked down, then back up at me. “It’s time for me to become my own woman. But that isn’t where we were. Oh, yeah, I remember. We were about to go back to have dinner with your Mom and everyone else.”

“I think you skipped ahead a little bit.”

“You’re right, I did,” she slipped into my arms. Her features softened a little, and the bite marks on her shoulder reappeared. “I completely skipped the part where I stop being an alpha werewolf and you stop being the mage of New Essex for a little while and we get to just be naughty together.” She pulled her top over her head.

“This isn’t naughty,” I told her. She dropped her shirt on my head, and we fell onto the mattress giggling and laughing. My magick was still weakened, I had just been told I was the mage for New Essex, and there was a powerful warlock running around in my city, doing who knew what. I had a very full plate, but right now, my family was safe, and

it had gotten just a little bigger. I had a small (in more ways than one) army at my back, and Shade and I were closer than ever. Big things were coming, maybe bigger than I could handle. But that was for tomorrow's me to handle. Right then, I had a woman in my arms who loved me as much as I loved her. The rest of the world could wait for a little while.

Dear Reader:

Thanks for reading True Colors. In many ways, this was the hardest of the books to write for a couple of reasons. One, it was the one that was most vague to me in terms of what was going to happen. All I knew for sure was that this was the book where Shade really came into her own. And two, it was the one that was the crucible for Chance and Shade, both together and individually.

When I first started writing The Demon's Apprentice, I had a clear idea in my head of where this arc would go, but I had moments early on when I wondered if I would ever get this far. Now, as I near the completion of the first arc and start planning the second stage in Chance's adventures, I am truly grateful to everyone who has stuck with me thus far, the folks I call True Believers. You are the reason I've made it this far. Your support makes all the difference.

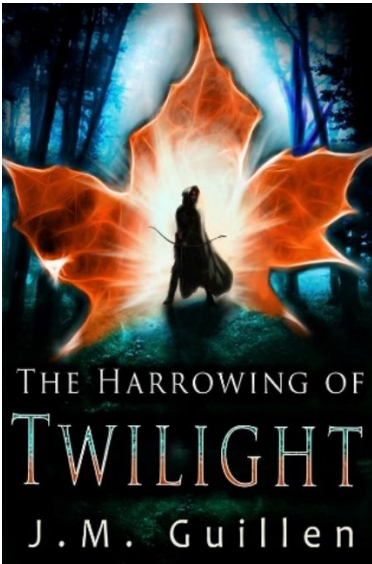
As always, I'd like to ask you to leave a review for True Colors on Amazon once you've finished reading it. I try to listen to my readers, so this is how you help to improve each book. It's also one of the best ways to help your favorite authors out.

So, thank you again, and I hope you're enjoying the ride. I know I am. I'll be working on the seventh book in the series, tentatively titled Reign of Angels. My hope is to get it out in 2019, along with another manuscript for my agent. In addition, I have at least one spinoff series in mind for Lucas as well. 2019 is going to be an exciting year, and I'm glad you'll be there with me for what's to come!

If you enjoy the Demon's Apprentice series, please take a moment to look at the offerings from some of my fellow indie authors as well on the next pages.

Sincerely,

Ben Reeder



[The Harrowing of Twilight](#)

History winds toward an inevitable end. Strangers wield cold iron. A lost world hides within eldritch darkness.

Beneath a silvered moon and through a twilight grove, Tommy Maple is on the run.

Bestial, naked, and filled with forgetting, the feral hunt has fallen upon him. As autumn again falls across the land, hawk and owl ghost behind. His people faded, his world waning, Tommy seeks only to lose himself.

Yet this is not to be.

Soon Tommy is snared, caught by a nameless stranger. She reveals to him secrets he had once thought lost, a people hidden in the very shadows behind the world. She burns with mortal-born glamour, a power Tommy has not seen in centuries. Entranced by the story she tells, he agrees to a terrible journey. He shall follow her into the Twilight, a land of shadows and ever-winter.

Here, he finds darkness dire.

As savage and slaving miscreations hunt them from the darkness, Tommy is forced to face the terrible ramifications of his own life. He soon finds himself in a web of a bent and broken history, a sundered story that stretches back over a thousand years.

He finds himself captured by his own choices.
Here, the Herald of Autumn faces a Telling which changes everything.

The Harrowing of Twilight is a thrilling addition to JM Guillen's [Irrational Worlds](#). If you like strangeling darkness, inhumanly beautiful fae, and snarky supernatural characters, you'll be enchanted by J.M. Guillen's fantastical tale. Get your copy and join the wild hunt today!



[Grave Dealings \(The Grave Report book 3\)](#)

Don't make deals with the paranormal. They're better at it than you, and they never play fair.

Paranormal investigator and soul without a body, Vincent Graves, did just that—a deal made in desperation. Now it's coming back to bite him in the middle of a case.

He has 57 hours to investigate a string of deaths involving people who've made some devilish bargains. Too bad devils don't deal in good faith. It'd be easy enough, if he didn't have to deal with things such as:

Being hunted through the streets of Queens by a dark elf with a motorcycle fetish.

Ending up the target of a supernatural hit.

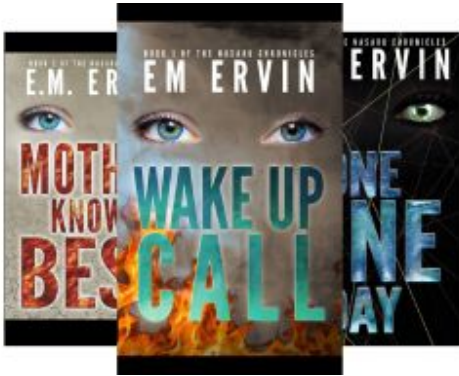
An old acquaintance dragging him to a paranormal ball where he could end up on the menu.

And having one of his closest guarded secrets brought to light...

Not great for a tight clock, because if he doesn't get to the bottom of this case in time, Vincent and company might just lose their souls.

Dirty deals are never done dirt cheap. And the supernatural always collect—big!

Give The Otter King R.R. Virdi a visit on his [website](#)!



[The Nasaru Chronicles](#)

Jo is your average, everyday seventeen year old girl.

Wait, no she's not. Not by a longshot.

She is a girl with a secret. Possessed of powers no one would believe even if they knew that she had them. The ability to create illusions at a thought is a dangerous weapon in the most responsible of hands, and Jo's aren't exactly squeaky clean.

Ever the trouble magnet, Jo is accustomed to finding more than her fair share of problems - most of which she brings on herself. The rebellious daughter of a senator and a diplomat, she has a rap sheet and has been kicked out of nearly every prestigious private school on the Eastern Seaboard.

This time, she's vowed to make an actual effort. Not to fit in - that'd be impossible - but to just not get kicked out.

Of course, this would be the school that turns out to be the favorite hunting grounds of a homicidal ghost.

What could possibly happen?

Don't forget to check out EM Ervin's [website](#)!