

Katie's Hellion
Rhyn Trilogy, Book One

By Lizzy Ford
<http://www.GuerrillaWordfare.com/>

Edited by Christine LePorte
<http://www.ChristineLePorte.com/>

Cover art and design by Dafeenah
<http://www.indiedesignz.com/>

* * * * *

Includes exclusive excerpt from
Katie's Hope,
Rhyn Trilogy, Book Two

* * * * *

Copyright 2011 by Lizzy Ford
Smashwords Edition

Cover art and design copyright 2011 by Dafeenah

* * * * *

Smashwords edition license notes:

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to Smashwords.com to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

* * * * *

See other titles by Lizzy Ford at <http://www.guerrillawordfare.com/>

You can follow the GW team on Twitter:
@LizzyFord2010
@cleporte

@dafeenajameel

Twitter hashtags:
#guerrillawriter, #fantasy, #romance, #paranormalromance

* * * * *

CHAPTER ONE

Gabriel turned the pages of the Oracle's book, watching as words scribbled themselves across the parchment, updating a chain of events that changed with every decision made by the Council That Was Seven. Only the long-dead Oracle possessing the book and the deities could see the Past, Present, and Future.

He saw only the Present, like fractured scenes of a movie where the actors continually changed their lines and settings. Words leapt from the pages to form hologram-like images dancing over the book. Friends and strangers alike acted out their stilted scenes before dropping onto the page as words again.

Show me Rhyn.

He always peeked at his friend, whom he'd dropped off in Hell to serve an undeserved sentence. Rhyn's powers were beyond even Gabriel to control, and the unfortunate immortal was a loose cannon that'd accidentally almost destroyed the world more times than he could count.

Gabriel's lover and master, the deity Death, materialized beside him at the Oracle's altar in the center of an ancient fortress in the Sanctuary. Each of the four Sanctuaries sat on an island straddling the human and immortal worlds and housed an immortal treasure, such as the Oracle.

He sensed Death's disapproval.

"I know," he said, and turned the page in the book to continue watching Rhyn.

Death took her human form out of respect for the women of the convent-like Sanctuary that housed the Oracle. She was beautiful, a woman of sunshine, smiles, and eyes that changed from white to black and every color in between. At close to seven feet with eyes and hair blacker than night and a permanent scowl, *he* was what most expected Death to look like. Yet the lithe woman with the transparent skin and glow was exactly what people saw when they went: a bright, beautiful, peaceful light.

"I want to know if --"

"Rhyn?"

"Yeah."

"Immortals aren't so far off from humans, are they?" Death mused. "They share their weaknesses."

"I know what really happened, and I hoped others would figure it out. He doesn't deserve to be in Hell," he replied.

"You can't interfere more than you have. How many times have I warned you about breaking Immortal Code?"

"Does nothing bother you?" he asked without heat, knowing the answer. "And technically, I interfered by making him disappear before anyone figured out he'd saved humanity."

Death smiled serenely and placed her small hand on the book. He met her gaze.

"All things come to me eventually," she said, quoting the familiar words. "You, too, you know."

"Someday."

"And someday Rhyn. He's on my list, Gabriel."

He was quiet, the words and holograms before him blurring as he thought. The only immortals on Death's list were those who were about to become dead-dead. He'd always hoped Rhyn would have another chance, that Hell was a place to stash the dangerous immortal until the world was ready for him.

"He didn't deserve what he got," he voiced, troubled. "In all my time, I've never felt guilt at what I do."

"You're my best assassin, and you're the only one who can trespass in Hell and return. You had to do what you did. If nothing else, you know he's safe, and so are the little humans."

"Are you serious about making him dead-dead soon?"

"Let me show you something," she said, and stepped up beside him. "Keep in mind, you're not supposed to be anywhere near the Oracle. Only --"

"Deities and whatever," he finished with a roll of his eyes.

She gave him a stern glare that made him smile. Her human form was tiny enough that the Oracle's book reached her shoulder level.

Death's hand hovered over the pages, and she turned them quickly without touching them. She stopped and touched a page with her fingertip. An image sprung from the paper before them.

The earth in flames, with earthquakes swallowing whole towns and buildings burning.

Gabriel shifted, well aware Rhyn was capable of this.

Death gave him a pointed look, waiting for him to jump to his friend's defense as he always did. It was hard with the scenes she showed him flickering in front of him.

"The Future isn't set," he managed at last.

"It's not," she agreed. "But if I don't make him dead-dead, there's a good chance this is the fate of the human world."

"I can't believe there's nothing that can be done!" he replied with more emotion than he intended.

"You're going soft, Gabe."

"It's *wrong*."

"Odd, coming from my best assassin."

He said nothing, watching the scene. Death closed the book and looked up at him.

"Do you believe in him so much, or do you feel so much guilt?" she challenged.

"I believe in him."

She considered him for a long moment before turning away. He suppressed a sigh, sensing she was beyond mercy for anyone on her list. Normally, so was he. Death held out her hand, and an hourglass with black sand appeared in her palm.

"He could be such an asset to the Council That Was Seven. Right now, he's useless to them and anyone else, just an immortal whose freakish power should've landed him on my list long, long ago," she said.

She tipped the hourglass, and black sand began to spill.

"I'll give him a second chance," she continued. "For you, my sweet, not for him. But I can't let him stay alive long, or you've seen what'll happen. When the sand is gone, I'll make him dead-dead, unless he can learn to control his power and to work with his brothers."

Gabriel stared, surprised, then dismayed, at her conditions. He watched the sand that was Rhyn's life and met her gaze.

"And, you can't break the Immortal Code to help him."

The restriction smacked him hard, as he'd been ready to drag Rhyn out of Hell as soon as Death was gone.

"How do I get him out of Hell?" he demanded.

"You won't. Someone else will."

"Who?"

"The leader of the Council That Was Seven is about to make a decision that will alter all their paths. It involves a woman destined to be the first Ancient's mate and who's immune to immortals."

"He has a *mate*?"

"He might, if she doesn't die before the sand runs out."

Gabriel dwelled on this new information. He wasn't really sure Rhyn would consider being sentenced to eternity with a mate much of an improvement over Hell.

She slid the Oracle's book carefully into a satchel and replaced it inside the altar before placing the hourglass in front of him.

"Immortal Code," she reminded him.

"You won't kill me," he remarked, hope and frustration filtering through him. "I'm violating Immortal Code by serving you, by locking Rhyn in Hell to keep Kris from killing him."

"Take him this, and don't you dare break the Code again," she said.

A familiar vial appeared in her hand containing what looked like sand. Rhyn's name was etched in the immortals' tongue across the top. It was his immortal powers, which Death had yanked from him when she ordered Gabriel to take him to Hell.

Gabriel took it and smiled, cheered by the thought of the most powerful immortal ever born cursed with the self-control of a five-year-old in a room with fresh-baked cookies and no adult supervision. Rhyn couldn't do what others wanted, not when he couldn't control his own powers. Gabriel wondered if even a mate and a second chance could help him.

"He tends to destroy the natural balance of everything when he's free," Death said with some annoyance. "Maybe when he's stabilized, he can leave Hell."

He looked at her, and she smiled the same gentle smile she used to greet humans to the underworld.

"But who in Hell is going to become his mate?"

"His brother Kris will take care of it," she said.

"He'll make things right with Rhyn after their nasty break?"

"Not on purpose, but yes."

Intrigued, Gabriel relented from his stubborn position before the altar.

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. The leader of the convent that cared for the Sanctuary opened the door and curtsayed. Death curtsayed back, gave Gabriel a final look of warning, and followed the woman in grey to afternoon tea.

He watched her go, wondering how he could help his friend without breaking the Immortal Code yet again. Pocketing the vial, he willed himself to the shadow world, the place between worlds. It was hazy and cool, like a beach after the evening fog rolled in. Portals to the mortal and immortal worlds glowed warm yellow through the fog like beacons. He went to the only portal that glowed black --the portal to Hell --and stepped from the shadow world into the tiny, dark cell holding his friend.

He watched Rhyn's body contort beneath the spells of Rhyn's brother, Sasha. Without the contents of the vial, Rhyn was defenseless against any immortal. Gabriel couldn't help the feeling of deep satisfaction as he gripped the vial in one hand.

Rhyn was being given a second chance, and Gabriel hoped he killed Sasha before the sands in the hourglass were gone.

Rhyn didn't even know what shape he was. The world was dark as always, cramped, his skin hot and clammy. He'd been fevered for a zillion years, trapped in the tiny cell in ever-changing forms, always in darkness.

At least he wasn't burning or drowning or freezing or watching his skin being pulled from his body and screaming. Sometimes his brother let him out for a furlough, claimed he was free, and then yanked him back. If nothing else, his traitorous half-brother Sasha kept things switched up. He would stay in this holding cell on the outskirts of Hell until Sasha figured out some new grueling punishment.

A touch of coolness grazed his heated frame, which always grew hotter than Hell when he changed forms. His body contorted, and agony floated through him as the sixty seconds of being whatever he'd been was up and he changed again.

"Still dark in here," said the voice of his only friend.

"You here for me, Gabriel?"

"No, but thanks for asking."

Rhyn growled a painful laugh, appreciative of the death dealer's dark humor. Especially now, when he had no one else.

"What am I?" he asked, panting as he dropped to all fours.

"Not sure. You look like a cross between a were-beast and a bird."

Gabriel's touch was like ice, and Rhyn shuddered. He changed again and this time recognized his human form. One wall of his cell lit up suddenly. He shielded his eyes and gazed into an empty prison cell opposite his. Surprised, he crossed to the bars of his cell but found the whole wall disappeared when he touched it. In darkness again, he dropped his hands.

"Hell sucks."

"Yeah." Gabriel's voice was quieter.

"You and Death fighting?"

"Never. She'd win."

Rhyn snorted and faced the corner, making out Gabriel's eyes, which gleamed darker than a night in Hell itself. The death dealer was his only friend who'd stuck with

him since he'd been banned to Hell by his brothers and dragged there by the immortal death dealer before him. Gabriel's visits weren't often, but Rhyn had grown to like him.

"Brought you something."

Gabriel held out a vial he'd last seen in the hand of a furious Death. A thrill went through Rhyn as he claimed it. He popped the top off and dumped the sandy magic into the air. The sand transformed into a mist and swirled around him before settling into his skin. He felt the magic penetrate him to the core, and the ancient tattoos marking him as both an immortal and an Ancient blazed red in the darkness before subsiding.

For the first time in years, he felt whole again. He tested his ability to control the familiar magic. Hell buffered his natural inability to rein in the magic and absorbed much of his energies.

"Who'd you kill for this?"

"I have other means of obtaining stuff," Gabriel said with some offense.

Rhyn felt Hell's and Sasha's power roll over him like a boulder in a river. They couldn't control him once he left Hell; no one could.

Even Kris. Rhyn's anger made his cell wall shake before the energies of Hell itself began suctioning his power from him.

"Easy," Gabriel warned. "I'm breaking Immortal Code one last time to bring that to you."

"Fuck the code."

"Rhyn."

"Don't bother, Gabriel."

The death dealer chuckled

Rhyn stretched physically and metaphysically, testing the bounds of Hell. They were much older, much stronger than he. He sagged against the wall, exhausted.

"Are there any girls down here?"

Very little surprised him, but the death dealer's question did.

"Or...women, I guess," Gabriel clarified.

"You need a woman that bad?"

"No, no. Just thought I'd check."

Rhyn stared hard into Gabriel's dark corner and shook his head. He didn't know why the death dealer was distant this visit, and he didn't care. The only thing that concerned him now was killing Kris. And escaping.

Escape first then kill Kris.

"You wouldn't happen to have a key to my cell, would you?" he asked.

"I'm not allowed to break any more Immortal Codes," Gabriel said with some distaste. "Or I'll end up in the cell beside you."

"Better company than I have now."

"Not my thing."

"So you give me my power back but don't free me. This does shit for me here," Rhyn grumbled.

"I'm restricted by --"

"I know, Gabe."

The death dealer shifted but didn't leave, and Rhyn looked again at the corner.

"I need a favor."

Rhyn never expected to hear these words from the death dealer, who needed nothing from anyone.

"Whatever it is, I'll do it," he said without hesitation. "You've done more for me than anyone else."

"There's going to be someone you'll meet soon. I can't break Immortal Code to protect her."

"But I can," Rhyn finished. "Immortal? Demon? If you tell me it's one of my brothers, I --"

"Human."

"*Human?*"

"One of the immortals wrote a book about caring for humans," Gabriel said with some reticence.

Rhyn heard him place the book on the ground beside him.

"You could've asked me for anything in the universe, and you ask me to babysit a human."

He reached for the book, convinced Gabriel had finally gone crazy after all his years serving Death. The book was an immortal's, clasped in a flexible leather-like cover with thin, transparent pages. He was distracted by the feel of both after so long with nothing but stone walls beneath his fingertips.

"Where is this human?" he asked. "How do I find it when I'm stuck here?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," Gabriel admitted. "I'll let you know."

Rhyn lifted the book. He had no intention of reading it, but he liked how soft the cover was.

"Why is this human important?"

"Death won't say."

Rhyn snorted and let his head drop back against the stone wall. Death and her pet worked in their own ways. He didn't mistake his returned powers for a free favor. No, Death wanted something from him, and gave him the ability to do her will.

Yet another traitorous woman. He felt some peace knowing that --whatever Death wanted from him --she'd have to free him from Hell to get it.

* * *

Katie Young looked at the speedometer, which read thirty-seven when the blue lights flared up behind her, jarring her out of the pre-coffee morning stupor. She guided the car to the lit parking lot near the metro station, her destination. It was four-thirty, and she'd never seen a cop along this stretch leading up to the nearest metro station.

His glaring spotlight of a flashlight blinded her as he walked to the driver's door, and she held her hand up.

"Do you know why I stopped you?" the cop asked as she rolled down her window.

"No," she said.

"You were going thirty-seven."

"Yeah."

"That's speeding."

The light flashed away, leaving her in blackness studded with dim bulbs.

"The speed limit's thirty-five," she objected.

"So you knew that?"

"Yeah. I drive this way every day."

The light returned to her eyes, and she bit her tongue to keep from griping. She couldn't be late again for her job as an assistant general manager of a fast food joint, or she'd be fired.

"You were speeding intentionally," he said with a level of disgust she reserved for the revelation of her sister's ex-boyfriend cheating.

"It's just two miles an hour."

He said nothing, but the light disappeared and she heard him scrawling.

"Your taillight is out," he added in a clipped tone.

"I have four. There's only *one* out --the rest all work."

"So you knew your taillight was out."

More scrawling.

"Look, it's early, I didn't get much sleep, and these seem like minor issues," she said in what she hoped was a friendly voice.

"Your pupils are dilated. Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"On medication?"

"I took a sleeping aid last night, yes. I have a lot of trouble sleeping lately, probably because --"

"How many hours ago?"

"Four."

"Taking a sleeping aid and driving before eight hours has passed means you're driving while under the influence of a medication."

She rested her head against the steering wheel, frustration making her veins swell. Her headache worsened.

"I have you for reckless endangerment, driving while under the influence, driving an impaired motorized vehicle while dark, and speeding," he summarized, handing her one ticket for each crime. He waited, as if she'd reveal enough dirt to make his monthly quota then added, "They'll probably suspend your license. You'll have to report to court tomorrow morning."

"Sounds wonderful," she managed.

"God bless."

She rolled up her window, watched him return to his car, and cursed.

She beat the rush onto the metro and took up a comfortable position on the aisle side of the commuter train, book in one hand and purse in the other. The train lurched forward, the gentle hum of electricity soon pushing her into a near-doze, until the train lurched to a halt. As usual, the next stop filled the train, and she looked with some irritation at a five-year-old who shoved by her legs to stand next to the window beside her.

He was dressed in worn clothing and shoes and flattened his palms against the window, as if he'd never been on a train before. He turned to her twice and pointed out the window as the scenery whizzed, but she ignored him, reading instead.

Four stops later, she rose and tucked the book away, wading through the throngs of people to the door as the train slowed.

"Mama!"

The cry startled those around her, and she glanced back at the kid, who stared in her direction.

"Lady, that your kid?" someone asked as she stepped toward the door.

"Oh, hell no," she said with a smile.

The kid began crying and she waited, ticking off her mental to-do list to see where she'd start. First off, request the morning off to go to court tomorrow. Second, find out when the general manager of the fast food joint where she worked was returning from maternity leave. Third, call her snotty sister and find a way to back out of brunch Saturday. Fourth --

"Ma'am, your kid," a woman said, taking her arm and pointing with a look of such judgment that Katie reddened despite herself.

"Not mine," she said.

The kid was crying and began tugging on her coat. He spoke in tear-filled gibberish she didn't understand, and she moved away to the door. She was one of the first off the train while the kid wailed and several people around her muttered.

"Lady, you can't just leave him!" the first objector said, grabbing her arm. "You're like that sick lady who put her kid on a plane to Russia 'cause she don't want him no more!"

"How could you leave him on the train? What's wrong with you?"

There were three then five voices with a sixth calling the police and the seventh hugging the sobbing kid.

"He's not mine!" she insisted, unable to break away from the mob. She protested until the cops came and took them both to a police station.

Too surprised to understand what exactly was happening, she obeyed the police officer's instructions to sit down and shut up and sat in the quiet police station reception area. The kid sitting beside her made smacking sounds as he chewed on a huge wad of gum. She rubbed her face, certain the mistake would be clarified soon and she'd be released with an apology the size of a bottle of painkiller she desperately needed.

"Fill this out," a dour black lady said, handing her a clipboard. "C'mere, honey."

Katie ignored the glare leveled on her while the woman cooed to the little boy. The woman and boy left while she filled out the paperwork and then set it on a counter of what looked like an abandoned reception area. There was no computer, no office supplies on the other side. A single bell sat on the counter. She rang it. When nothing happened, she rang it again.

She looked around her, flustered. The waiting room consisted of two chairs, an empty magazine rack, and a potted plant in the corner. It resembled a doctor's waiting room rather than any police station she'd seen.

She rang the bell again.

"Please have a seat, Ms. Young," an irritated voice announced over the intercom.

She obeyed. Another hour of silence passed, and she started to pace. Her cell phone had no signal, her head throbbed, and the coffee pot was empty. When she felt ready to snap, the black lady returned with the little boy in tow. His dark eyes were glowing, and syrup was on his face.

"Officer David will see you now."

Katie grabbed her purse and walked quickly down a pristine hall to a placard that read Officer David. The little boy followed her. She knocked and entered with a smile that faded.

Officer David gave her the same glare.

"Have a seat, Ms. Young," he said. "You too, Toby."

"Officer, this has been just a horrible morning," she started.

"For your son, maybe."

"He's not my son."

The officer stared at her then held up an ID card with the boy's picture.

Toby Young.

"It must be some other Young," she insisted. "I don't have a son."

"I oughta call child services on a wack job like you," he muttered.

"Go ahead --call them!" she snapped.

"Parenthood is a responsibility that no one should take lightly! I don't care how..."

She listened to his rant, peppered with language no kid Toby's age should hear.

Officer David waved a piece of paper in her face depicting Toby's ID. Toby was quiet, and she snatched the paper, intent on showing him their addresses were different.

Only they weren't different. Toby's address was listed as hers. She set the paper on her lap and stared at it. She'd lived there for four years --almost as long as the kid had been alive.

"I don't understand..." she muttered.

"Your record is full of bullshit," Officer David said acidly. "Reckless endangerment? And now child endangerment? You're going to court. You damn well better have a good lawyer, because..."

She sucked in a breath and turned to the kid.

"Toby, kid, whatever. Tell this nice man the truth," she said, meeting the twinkling brown eyes.

The kid was adorable, with dark eyes and hair, sun-kissed skin, and a round face. He was well fed, though clothed like he'd been going to make mud pies and not to school like he should have been. He smiled.

"Toby, is this your mommy?" Officer David said in tones as sweet as they were bitter toward her.

Toby nodded. Katie's mouth dropped open, and she began to realize something was very, very wrong. This was a dream; she'd fallen asleep on the train and not yet woken up. With any luck, the worst part of her day would be missing her stop.

Toby took her hand. His soft hand was cold. The sensations assured her the surreal situation was really happening.

"Officer David --" she began in earnest.

"Enough!" he roared loudly enough to make them both jump. "I've had enough with deadbeat..."

He ranted, signed her papers with a vicious flourish, then shoved them at her and manhandled her out his door. She stood in the hallway, staring at the door slammed in her face, holding a fistful of papers she didn't know what to do with.

"The car will pick you up."

The black lady's tone left no imagination to what she thought of the latest deadbeat mom in her office.

Frustrated, Katie looked both directions down the pristine, eerily quiet hallway before following the kid toward the far end, where a bright red exit sign hung over the door. Her unease grew as she went. The placards on each of the other doors were blank, the

doors closed with no sign of light around the edges. The hallway smelled medicinal and clean, like the antiseptic-laced air of a hospital mixed with pine cleaner.

She'd never been in a police station, but she didn't think they'd be this different from the police shows on television! She paused near the end and turned back to see both Officer David and the woman watching her with disapproving looks and crossed arms. She'd not thought twice about their lack of police uniforms but was now struck by it.

This wasn't a police station. It couldn't be.

"Mama!" Toby called.

She turned and stared at him. He shoved the door open with all his might, revealing the steely skies of winter and the grey cement curb outside. Whatever this place was, she --and probably Toby --were better off somewhere else.

Toby was agitated and shivering, skipping up and down the sidewalk while shaking with cold. She'd been too flustered to pay attention to the trip to the police station and looked around, not recognizing the area. It looked suspiciously like the warehouse district near the Annapolis port, and she smelled the sea on the air. She twisted around. There was no handle on the outside of the door she'd just walked through, no number on the building.

She shivered in her wool coat, folded the paperwork, and called her sister. As usual, the phone rang until her voicemail picked up.

"Hey, Hannah, it's Katie. I need some help. Can you give me a call?"

Toby's pattering stopped, and she looked up, startled to see a massive man a few feet away. The sight of him struck her like a frozen water balloon. He was tall and clothed in all black, ominous and large against the slate sky. His trench was long and unfastened, the chilled winter wind whipping back one side to reveal a sword tucked against his leg. He looked like death with his dark hair and cold eyes, his panther-like physique, and gloved hands.

"Toby," she called instinctively.

The little boy ran to her side. The man in black approached. She took a step back, heart fluttering.

"We made a mistake. Toby, you can come with me."

He failed to make the cryptic words in any way friendly, and the cold glare seared through her.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she managed.

"You're early," Toby said, unafraid. "I want to go with her."

Katie turned to stare at the little boy, who beamed a smile.

The shadow-man's hand twitched and inched toward the sword at his hip. She stepped back even more and clenched the purse to her body, distracted as a sleek black car pulled up to the curb. A door opened, and Toby vaulted in without waiting for her. She took one more look at the ominous man in black and the sword at his hip and followed, shaking from more than cold. The man shut the door behind them.

"Goodbye, Gabriel!" Toby called from the interior of the warm car. He waved at the massive shadow lingering on the sidewalk.

"You'll be fine. I'll take you home."

The soft, firm words of the female in the driver's seat were the first kind ones of the day. Katie instinctively believed her and twisted, staring with Toby at the man in black who watched them drive away.

"My God," she murmured.

"No," said Toby. "Death dealer."

She looked at him, and he nodded as sagely as a five-year-old could.

"Death dealer, ha! Probably just some bum," the brunette driver said with a forced laugh. "We get lots of them around here."

"At a police station?" she asked skeptically.

"Yeah, sure," came the less certain answer. "You know, like, you can't have a cop station in a nice side of town. They kinda have to be in a crappy part of town, where the criminals are. It makes total sense, right? I mean, why would a death dealer be *here*?"

The grey eyes were beseeching, but Katie couldn't manage anything verbal let alone a lie to placate the driver. Instead she looked again to Toby, who'd begun to mess with the buttons on his side of the car.

"Shouldn't you have your seatbelt on?" she asked.

"Okay, Mama," he said cheerfully, and complied.

I'm going insane.

The driver said nothing the rest of the way and dropped them off in front of her apartment complex without asking for directions. Toby darted out of the car and shoved the door to the lobby open with all his might.

She trailed, even more perplexed when the janitor waxing the floor called out a cheerful, "Hey, Toby!"

She rubbed her head, wondering if the kid lived somewhere else in the building while unable to shake the sense that something was really, really wrong. Toby held the elevator for her and pressed the button for all twenty floors. She looked at him hard, unable to recall anything at all about the kid.

They reached the sixth floor, where her apartment was. He darted off the elevator and down the hall, stopping in front of her apartment. She opened the door, and he strode in as if he owned the place. Toby bolted to the first room on the right, the guest bedroom.

Katie looked around her apartment, eyes lingering on a drawing done by a child on the fridge. There were pictures on her mantle of the two of them together when he was younger, toys piled into a box near her couch, a school lunch menu and more pictures -- these apparently from past Halloweens -- on the bulletin board on one wall of the kitchen. She took it all in, feeling as if she'd stepped into the Twilight Zone, and followed Toby down the hall.

The guest room was redone in race cars and Disney characters. His energy sapped, the kid was sprawled half asleep across the race car bed. She stared at the walls, wondering who'd had the time to repaint her guest room. It certainly didn't smell like someone had painted it recently, and there were scuff marks, crayon, and dirt on the walls.

As if it'd been a kid's room for a long time. She hesitated, then covered him with a blanket and walked to the guest bathroom. It, too, was done up in a race car theme with toys lining the side of the tub.

Head pulsing, she retreated to the kitchen and painkillers, staring at a picture drawn by a kid, probably Toby, on the table before her.

She didn't have any kids. She'd never had kids. She'd never met Toby before this day!

Her cell rang, and she stared at it briefly through bleary eyes.

"Hey sis," she said after pressing the answer button. "I've had a horrible day!"

"Oh, hon, I'm sorry to hear that," her sis said in a distracted tone that said she really didn't care. "Toby still sick?"

"What?"

"Is Toby still sick?"

Katie drew the phone away from her head and stared at it, willing herself to wake up.

"Hello, Katherine?"

"Yeah."

"Ooooh, are you having one of your...issues?" Hannah whispered the last word.

"What issues?"

"You know...your amnesia issues."

"I have amnesia?"

"Hon, call Dr. Williams immediately."

"Who? Hannah, when I left home this morning, I had no kids! None. *None!*"

"God, it's getting worse, isn't it?" Hannah said with genuine concern. "Gio's paying for the best neurologist in the world. You may as well go in."

"So you're still engaged to Giovanni. And I work at..."

"McGillen's, like you have for the past few months. I think it's your third job this year."

"I remember those things. You can't tell me I'd forget my own child!" Katie all but shouted.

"Let me guess, you have a headache. You probably did something stupid like leave Toby on the train."

Katie's mouth worked without producing sound.

"We go through this at least twice a year." Now Hannah sounded bored rather than concerned. "Call the doc. You keep his number on the fridge."

Katie looked to the fridge, where a small business card was stuck beneath a cartoon magnet. She plucked it free.

"Yeah," she managed. "Yeah, I'll call him."

"We'll have brunch Saturday. Don't be late this time. I have to get ready for the Kingsly gala. Oh, and wear something decent this time. You looked like you were in pj's last time."

"Yeah."

Katie set the phone on the table and stared at the kid's drawings on the fridge.

How could she remember everything but *her child*? She felt sick to her stomach.

CHAPTER TWO

"Almost everything looks normal. There's an anomaly in your blood test, but you're physically healthy," Dr. Williams said with a warm smile at odds with the cold sterility of the room.

"Just a mental mess?" she prodded.

"Don't be hard on yourself," he chided, pulling a rolling chair up to the exam table.

"Your amnesia is trauma induced from the rape you survived six years ago."

"I was *raped*?"

"And beaten near death," he said with a shake of his head. "I don't know how you survived, but you did. To protect you, your mind backtracks whenever you feel overwhelmed, overly stressed, mentally threatened."

She gazed at him skeptically. Her file --two inches thick --was yet more proof that the world that seemed foreign to her really wasn't.

"So my mind blanks stuff out?"

"Precisely. It's a survival technique. The human mind is so wonderful and so versatile." By his glowing eyes, he loved his job. His enthusiasm and genuine warmth melted more of her resistance.

"But how is it I remember being alone getting on the train, and Toby got on at the next stop?" she challenged.

"It's how your mind wakes up from whatever sleep it went into. You fantasized him appearing at the next stop; it's how your psychosis snaps and brings you back to reality."

"That makes no sense."

"We've gone over this several times," he said. "You'll have to take my word on this."

"Do I usually do that?"

"No, but I'd like to get home to my wife before midnight. And I called the judge on your behalf and volunteered you to go to counseling. The judge liked that option rather than jailing a single mom."

Jailing a single mom, like her. She managed a nod. He gave another warm smile.

"Get dressed and take your file to the nurse. Please call me if you experience any other problems. I'll tell my receptionist to make you an appointment for next week. Your blood test results were unusual."

He handed her a business card and left. The antiseptic pine-laced air from the hallway made her nose wrinkle. She looked at the door, the familiar scent disturbing her, then down at her file.

Everything was documented, every visit, every doctor-scrawled record, every prescription she'd ever taken.

It was too real not to be real, yet it didn't feel real at all! She followed his instructions and traded the file for two prescriptions to drugs she'd never heard of. She considered debating with the nurse at the front desk, whose friendly grey eyes were familiar. Toby hopped up from his chair and waved to the nurse. Tired and confused, Katie left without asking what the drugs were for and stepped into the chilly fall evening. Toby trailed silently.

The cold wind felt good against her face and roused her dark thoughts. She breathed out fog, watching it rise to the dark grey skies. Dr. Williams' clinic had a blessedly late schedule; it was nearing eight, and the lights of his building still glowed. Having the world's best neurologist on call was one of the perks of the rich and famous, a world unfamiliar to her except that her sister had been gunning for it since her sixteenth birthday.

Hannah had succeeded in landing a big fish blueblood, a descendant of Italian royalty, whose old money placated the chilly welcome she received into a lifestyle far, far different from her own.

Katie shivered and looked around for a cab. Her eyes settled on a form across the street, so still and dark he would've been a shadow if not for his presence beneath a street lamp. She felt the cold, black glare and fought the urge to run back inside the clinic. He didn't move; for a long moment, she convinced herself he was a statue, not a man too still to be human. He was in black, unaffected by the cold or the light settling over him, outlining him like glitter on black construction paper.

Like one of Toby's drawings on the fridge.

Toby.

She didn't know why she suddenly felt near hysterics. She felt no motherly bond to the kid huddled beside her in a thick coat despite how adorable he was. With the living shadow staring at her, the winter wind sucking the air from her lungs, and the prescriptions clenched in her hand, she'd never felt less a part of her world.

A car approached, and a window lowered.

"You need a lift? Taxis quit coming this way after rush hour."

The voice of the friendly nurse from the nurse's station brought her back from her thoughts. Blinking back tears, Katie looked toward the shadow. He was gone.

"Yeah," she forced herself to say. "Thanks."

The nurse dropped her and Toby off, and they trudged to her apartment.

The shadow man was on her fridge. Toby had drawn him on black construction paper with silver glitter outlining the shape of a man. There was no mistaking the image.

Death dealer, Toby had called him.

Katie stared at the picture for a long moment, then emptied her pockets on the table. She attached the prescriptions to the fridge with another cartoon magnet and smoothed out the paperwork she'd been given from the police station. Toby dropped his coat in the middle of the floor and trudged to his room with a yawn. She slumped in a chair at the kitchen table, eyes blurring as she struggled to make out the forms. There were biographical forms and consent forms she hadn't really read, all signed in a loopy, angry signature, and a copy of Toby's birth certificate.

Wiping her eyes, she pored through the rest of the paperwork, growing cold despite her wool coat in the middle of her warm apartment. Biographical information on her and her immediate family, her own medical and employment histories, all forms she'd completed without question. Toby's birth certificate listed her as the mother, no father, and the naval hospital in Annapolis as his birthplace.

The paperwork otherwise had nothing to do with Toby or their accusation that she abandoned her kid on the Metro.

Aside from the birth certificate, there was no way the rest were official police papers!

Dropping the papers on her computer desk, she then stripped off her coat and passed by the guest...Toby's room. He was asleep.

She returned to the desk and scoured the paperwork for some sort of identifying information on the place she'd been or the company that developed the forms.

Nothing.

Frustrated, she searched the Internet for Dr. Williams until she found the eminent neurologist, whose picture she recognized. Somewhat relieved, she read his biography, impressed by his clientele, who ranged from heads of countries around the world to the richest families on the planet. He'd graduated from a Swiss medical school and practiced extensively in Europe before coming to the United States thirty years before...

...and dying twenty years ago at the age of sixty-four.

She reread the entry, brow furrowed. Yes, it was his picture and yes, his clinic had been located in the same place it was now.

She'd spent several hours in his office talking to a dead man?

"Mama."

She jerked. She had forgotten Toby...again. He stood sleepy and frowning, dark hair tousled.

"I want cocoa."

Did she even have...of course she would. Right next to her tea. She went to the kitchen and made him a cup in silence, glancing at him a few times as he propped his head up with both his hands.

"Do you go to school?" she asked awkwardly.

"Yes," he said, and rolled his eyes. "I have a map. I know you forget."

I can't be this crazy.

She sat across from him, cocoa with marshmallows before both of them.

"Do I forget often?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you like...school?"

"I guess," he said with a shrug. "The teachers are mean to me."

"That sucks, I guess."

"Yeah. I like marshmallows."

She stretched for the counter and tugged the bag off, handing it to him.

"I think the death dealer needs cocoa," he said.

"Why do you call him that?"

"Because that's what he is, silly!"

"Oh."

"He's outside my window. Can I take him some cocoa?"

"He's *what*?"

"C'mere."

Toby took her hand in one of his, with his other fist wrapped around a large marshmallow. He led her to the window overlooking the street.

The death dealer stood at the edge of the shadows as he had across from the doctor's office, waiting.

"What is he?" she whispered.

"He's a death dealer," Toby said with impatience. "He's not here for us."

The confidence with which he spoke floored her. She wiped her face again, the world around her spinning. Near hyperventilating, she sat heavily on the couch and clutched her head with her hands. Toby chattered, his tone lifting in a question that didn't penetrate the in-between world in which she'd fallen.

There were sounds that should've alarmed her, the feel of hot tears on her face. Something warm touched her back, and a jolt of hot electricity made her sit upright. Her mind cleared, and she wiped her eyes at the massive form in black before her. Panicked, she backpedaled until trapped into the corner of the couch.

The death dealer stared at her, much larger in her small living room than he was in the middle of the street. He was close to seven feet tall, with chiseled features and eyes as black as eternity. His clothing was thick and heavy this night, as if he expected to be

standing outside her window until dawn. His sweater, jeans, and trench coat were all of high quality with his heavy boots dwarfing her feet as hers did Toby's. She didn't see any weapons this night. He was muscular and buff beneath the trench.

Of all things, his gloved hands scared her the most.

"Gabriel!"

Toby started into the living room, spilled the cocoa, and then retreated to the kitchen. The death dealer moved silently, even over the hollow wooden floors.

She heard Toby's chipper voice as he invited the death dealer to share some cocoa with him.

What the hell was a death dealer? The grim reaper, here in her home?

In the course of a day, her whole life had gone to shit.

She tiptoed to the kitchen and peeked in. The death dealer took up much of the small space, his trench still on despite sitting at the kitchen table. Toby was showing him the glitter drawing he'd done. The death dealer glanced at it, his face so emotionless she thought him a statue again. He sipped his cocoa from a sticky cup filled half with marshmallows.

What kind of mother let her five-year-old son carry on with *death* like he was a favorite uncle?

"...and this is your portal into the shadow world," Toby said proudly, indicating a blob of silver on one side of the drawing. "Do you see where it goes?"

"Elisia."

"Yes!" Toby squealed. "Where the fairies are!"

She was shaking, cold with fear on the inside and fevered skin clammy on the outside.

The death dealer touched a gloved finger to a blank spot on the construction paper, and an orchid sprung up, ethereal and hovering over the paper. Its colors rippled and changed before the flower bent and delicate wings spread apart, revealing a creature that was surely a fairy.

Toby squealed again and bounced to his feet, beginning a whirling dance. She thought she heard ethereal laughter as the fairy danced with him. The death dealer touched the paper again, and another orchid appeared, stretched, and morphed into a second fairy. Toby laughed and whirled.

Katie's vision blurred and grew dark. She heard herself scrape against the wall as she fell and was out before she hit the floor.

* * *

So far, he hadn't been forced to change shapes since Gabriel's visit. Rhyn tested the bonds of his cell again until a mage in a brown robe hurried down the hall to repair the damage. Sometimes he could see out into the hallway and the empty cell across from his; sometimes he couldn't.

Today, the cell across from his wasn't empty. A human-like creature sat in the corner making snorting sounds he assumed was weeping. He looked closely at the creature. It was from the healer's guild, one of the oldest guild's in the universe. By the tattooed bands wrapped around his arms --each one depicting a millennium --the creature was nearly as old as Andre, the eldest of Rhyn's brothers.

"Shapeshifter!" someone called from down the hall.

He watched the mage in brown scuttle away. "Yeah," Rhyn grunted.

"I'm bored. Entertain me," the male voice down the corridor said. "Can you shut that healer up by eating him?"

"Yeah," he replied.

The sobbing, slender creature tensed and covered his head, as if expecting an attack from above. Amused, Rhyn stopped pacing and sat, staring the small creature down. The healer quieted.

"Good enough," the creature down the hall, Jared, said with a loud sigh. "What shape are you now, beast?"

"The usual."

"Not much for talking, are you?"

The rest of the freaks collected by Sasha, Rhyn's half-brother who aligned himself with the Dark One, were quiet on the cell block. They normally were, and if they weren't, their screaming was muted by the magic of their cells. Rhyn stretched out on the ground of his cell to stare at the ceiling.

"I heard Sasha's getting promoted by You Know Who," Jared continued. "Wonder if he'll be too important for his personal zoo."

"He'll make time for you, Jared," Rhyn assured him.

"I suppose. Not sure why he has a half-breed like you hanging around when he's got a full-blooded demon like me here."

Rhyn knew why well enough. In Sasha's zoo, he was at the bottom of the food chain of the otherworldly collection of creatures. He intended to keep his relationship to their zookeeper a secret. Sasha had an affinity for collecting the worst of the worst --creatures whose intentions toward humans and immortals alike were as far from the Immortal Code as could be.

Despite Rhyn's fury and occasional diversion from the Immortal Codes, he still believed in them, a *weakness* Sasha was trying to beat out of him since their eldest brother --the peacemaker and enforcer of the Council That Was Seven --sentenced them both to Hell.

"Fuck you, Sasha," he whispered into the darkness, not caring if Sasha heard him or not.

Fuck you, Kris, for making me do what I did, and fuck you, Andre, for pulling the trigger and sending me here with Sasha.

When he was out of Hell, he'd already planned on kicking the ass of their eldest brother, Andre, and killing Kris. The Council That Was Seven would survive without the three of them: Sasha, who'd sold out long ago; Kris, who needed to die; and him, whom Andre'd kill as soon as he killed Kris.

As much as they hate me for aligning with the Dark One, they hate you more for our father's death, Sasha had told him smugly more than once.

It was true, and only Andre supported his petition to be recognized as one of the seven sons charged by their father with protecting humanity against the Dark One. By the time he came of age, his other six brothers had not only come of age but also had each adopted a continent of responsibility. His late birth in the immortal world landed him Antarctica, where he could do little harm with his wild powers.

As much as he hated Hell, he hated Antarctica more.

Restless, he rose and paced again, wondering why Sasha needed an ancient healer in his zoo, a place where creatures came to suffer.

He sensed what Gabriel wouldn't say: things were about to change for him, and he suspected that meant he'd soon be free. Whoever it was he was to protect, even his promise to Gabriel wouldn't stand in his way of revenge.

I'm coming for you, Kris.

* * *

She awoke and readied herself for the world, convinced everything had been a nightmare caused by exhaustion. Her conviction wilted as she stepped from her room into the living room to find the black-clad death dealer seated in an armchair, facing the door as if on guard, with a lethal black sword across his lap. He'd laid his trench over the couch, though he still wore boots and gloves.

"I was hoping you'd be gone."

His gaze settled on her, and she'd wished she'd never spoken. She hid in the kitchen, cold inside once again. Her hands shook as she made tea. The glitter and construction paper picture was back on the fridge with no sign that any fairies had emerged from its depths. She breathed deeply, struggling to remain in control when all she wanted to do was run for the nearest psych ward and check herself in.

She turned and jumped.

"God, I can't take this! You, out!" she belted at the death dealer, who leaned his hip against the counter and managed to fill up the entrance to the kitchen.

He obeyed, and she gave a growl of frustration. She followed, intent on having her tea by the window as she did every morning.

"Your shit is everywhere!" she snapped. "And what in the name of everything holy are you doing with a *sword*? Is that even legal?"

He moved the sword off her favorite chair without answering and placed it on the trench stretched across her couch. He sat with his hands on his thighs and his eyes straight ahead, like a statue chiseled in Hell itself. He was perfectly still, and she tried to concentrate on her tea.

"This is impossible."

She marched to her bathroom and yanked out the five pill bottles, reading the labels. She'd done research on the drugs; they were antipsychotics, anti-anxiety pills and a bunch of other fun drugs. She grabbed a second bottle and went to the kitchen for water, dumping out two of each into one hand. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth, freezing when a black-gloved hand clamped around her wrist. She looked up at the silent shadow, whose chiseled features were unreadable. He swept up the pills and crushed them in his hand, then released the powder into the sink. He dumped the rest in the garbage disposal and turned it on, returning a few minutes later with the other bottles.

Too afraid to challenge him, she watched him destroy everything. He gave no explanation and headed toward her bedroom. She bit back an order to leave her stuff alone but stopped herself, watching him go through her medicine cabinet for any additional drugs. Satisfied there was nothing left, he tore her prescriptions to bits before returning to the chair and stilling again into a statue.

The living room started to spin and she sat, forcing herself to breathe deeply.

"We can talk."

The stoic offer made laughter bubble within her.

"I don't *want* to talk! I want my life back!"

"This is your life."

"Absolutely not! I'm not psychotic, I didn't have amnesia yesterday, I've never had a son! I don't care what anyone says, not Dr. Williams, not my sister, not *you!*"

"You weren't supposed to remember anything before Toby appeared in your life," he said.

"What're you talking about?"

He looked at her, a penetrating stare that made her again regret drawing his attention. She couldn't read his face. He rose and, with methodical patience, swirled the trench around him, placed the sword on the inside with an array of other weaponry, and then stalked to the door.

All it took was a hissy fit. The door closed behind him. She sagged into the depths of her chair.

"Mama, do I have to go to school today?" Toby called.

She ground her teeth, on the verge of throwing her cup at the wall before her.

* * *

"It's not working."

The man in the white lab coat, Ully, jerked from his hunched position over a keyboard, and fear flashed in his eyes. The unease passed quickly as he saw which death dealer stood before him.

"Of course it is," he said, twisting in the chair to face him.

Gabriel leaned his hip against the counter and crossed his arms in physical disagreement. He rarely spoke, and when he did, people rarely failed to take his words seriously. As the oldest and most revered of the death dealers, only the damned millennial generation failed to flinch when he spoke.

"Okay, so maybe it isn't," Ully said quickly. "You're sure?"

Gabriel said nothing but pinned him with a glare that had killed a few men outright.

"Okay, fine."

The brunet scientist leaned forward to hit the intercom button.

"Kris, death dude's here. We need to talk!" he called, then spun and started toward the conference room at the end of a lab that stretched the size of a football field.

Gabriel followed, ignoring the rows of delicate glassware, Bunsen burners, machines, and other science toys that employed the two dozen immortal scientists. The lighting was harsh in the lab; he didn't remove his sunglasses until they'd entered the romantically lit conference room. The brunet flipped the overhead lights on, and Gabriel flipped them off.

The conference room was silent, the air purified, the lighting perfect. Gabriel sat opposite the door while Ully flung himself into a cushy chair.

"I wondered where that went," the scientist murmured as he withdrew a vial of violet gel from his lab coat. He whistled as he shook it, and the color went from purple to orange.

"This is bad shit," he said to no one in particular. "It's contaminated."

Gabriel didn't need to understand modern science. Death dealers were immune to disease, poison, and any other thing humans could throw at them. They had to be, because mankind had been trying to outsmart Death since the beginning of time.

"Gabriel."

The immortal Council's leader, a silver-haired man with violet eyes and a face untouched by time, stood at the entrance. He was one of the oldest warriors among the immortals, a man with the body of a thirty-year-old and the soul of the Ancients.

Ully replaced the vial and leaned back in his chair.

"Death dude said it's not working."

Kris raised an eyebrow and turned to Ully.

"Where did we find her?"

"She was referred by another immortal, Giovanni," Ully replied.

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's not working," Gabriel said.

"Ully, check the info we got from her," Kris ordered.

The scientist hopped up with a cheerful salute. Kris waited until the door closed.

"You should've killed her, Gabe," he said with a frown.

"Sasha wants her as much as Toby."

"Sasha wants a *human*?"

"Yeah. She's an immortal mate, a special one."

Gabriel knew the impact of his simple words just as he knew the impact of his appearance. Kris's normally iced features clouded, his violet eyes going green as he thought.

"How special?" Kris asked, the worry lines on his forehead deepening.

"Special enough she's immune to immortal magic."

"That doesn't make sense," Kris said, and leaned forward. "Unless you're saying..."

Kris looked at him hard.

"Are you saying she's an *Ancient's* mate?"

Gabriel shrugged. Neither Kris nor Sasha was capable of mercy or empathy. For that sake, neither was *he*. But an immortal's mate was hands off. An Ancient's mate had never before been found. As the leader of the Council That Was Seven, Kris would be obligated to take the first Ancient mate.

Kris's features clouded, and Gabriel suspected it was because Kris had been with his current lover, Jade, for hundreds of years.

"This isn't good," Kris voiced. "Keep an eye on her and stay my execution order for now. Ully might figure something else out."

"The Council meets in two days," Gabriel reminded him.

"Trust me, I can think of nothing else. Sasha's planning something big."

"End of the world."

"Your sense of humor couldn't be worse timed, Gabe."

"You'll get to see my place finally."

Kris shook his head, his look of disapproval mixed with amusement. Gabriel liked Kris as much as he'd ever liked anyone despite the bad blood between Kris and his half-brother, Rhyn. They were different men with different purposes, yet both honorable to the core.

"You still think you can leave Death when you want?" Kris challenged.

"I'm a guest."

"No such thing."

"I'm an exception. She took me in as a favor to my father and will release me, if I ever wanted it."

Death had her pick of badasses from every generation of man and creature, and she wooed every one with the promise of endless riches and the ability to leave when they chose. His circumstances were different, and they both knew it.

Kris slid two rare green life crystals across the table, the common form of payment for an assassination not ordered by Death herself.

"Two for the girl watching Toby, in case you're right, and someone else grabs her," he said. "Your choice of death for her."

Gabriel took the crystals with a nod. Kris left, and Gabriel closed his eyes, crossing into the shadow world before emerging on the street outside the woman's apartment building. He watched the people pass as he had every generation of man. He sank into the shadows, at home in the darkness, watching. Always watching. Never a part of the world around him.

Some things never changed, like the blue sky, the sun orb, the grass and oceans. They were constants in a world where humans and their inventions passed through the world, less significant than an exhaled breath. He spent most of his time anymore in the shadow world, except when forced out by Death or called out by someone who wanted to buy an assassination. In the darkness, he was comfortable. In the darkness, he was alone.

In the darkness, he wasn't reminded of an ache he'd killed long ago, that which reminded him he once knew what it was to feel the warmth of the sun on his human skin.

He took up his position outside of Katie's apartment building to protect Rhyn's mate despite his promise to Death not to break any more Immortal Codes.

* * *

Katie poured more whiskey into her cocoa. She hadn't been able to shake the cold she felt and was dressed in layers despite the thermostat being set to eighty. Restless, she took her cocoa into the darkened living room and looked out the window, expecting to see Gabriel lurking across the street. He was there.

"I'm a four-hundred-thousand-year-old angel. I'm a baby in my world. More marshmallows!"

Just when she thought things were weird enough, Toby had started to talk to her. She refused to send him to school or to go to work, determined to figure out what insanity was going on under her roof. His eyes glowed as small marshmallows tumbled into his cup. He held out his hands. She ignored them and placed the cup on the table before him, then set down her own.

"You're a four-hundred-thousand-year-old baby," she repeated. "Then you're not my kid."

"I am!" he replied. "I have to have a human mother."

"You get a new one every eighty years or something?"

"I'm kinda reborn every once in awhile to a new mom."

She pinched her arm. She was still awake.

"And the death dealer is...what?"

"He's Death's hit man."

"Of course, why not." She poured whiskey into her cocoa.

Toby chewed on the crackers she'd placed before him, crumbs and chunks going all over his pj's. He didn't look like a four-hundred-thousand-year-old angel trapped in a five-year-old's body.

"His name is Gabriel. He's way older than me. I see him every few dozen years, usually when he's coming to kill my mama. He's cool."

She gripped her head.

"Gabriel, fairies!" Toby exclaimed.

She turned and gasped, heart leaping to see the death dealer lingering like the shadow he was in the middle of her living room. His eyes glowed darker than night, two black holes in his otherwise indistinguishable face. She groped for the nearest light and flipped it on, unsettled by the man even in the warm lamplight.

"Toby says you're going to kill me," she said, heart hammering.

"Not yet."

"Not yet?" she echoed. "You have a date in mind you'd like to share?"

"No."

"Soon, not soon?"

"No."

"Look, I get that no one survives life, but I'd like to know when you plan on taking me out so I can plan a few things, say farewell to my sister, maybe prepay for my burial!"

"There won't be a body to bury."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Gabriel takes people to the underworld, body and all," Toby explained as he grasped the large man's gloved hand. "Fairies!"

The death dealer went obediently to the kitchen. Katie's hands shook. She followed them and set her cocoa down on the counter, grabbing the whiskey and retreating with the intent of drinking herself to sleep. Gabriel's hand snaked out as she passed, and he yanked the bottle neatly from her hand. She snatched at it, and he pushed her away.

"Immortal Code," he stated.

Keeping her away with one hand, he dumped its contents into the sink. She watched, and then stalked out, furious and frustrated. After he destroyed all her drugs, she'd suspected he'd react this way and had hidden another bottle in her bedroom.

She slammed her door and rested her head against it, wondering how long this would continue before her head exploded. Or when Gabriel the death dealer killed her. She withdrew the final bottle of whiskey from beneath the bed. It was wrenched away from her, and she grated her teeth.

"No," he said. He held up the bottle and retreated to the bathroom.

She jerked her door open and grabbed her coat. She didn't care if she left a five-year-old kid home alone, not when he was a four-hundred-thousand-year-old angel! He had someone better than an army watching him. He had death's personal assistant.

She walked out onto the sidewalk, shivering in the cold.

I usually only see him when he comes to kill my mama.

The words echoed in her head, and she walked blindly for several moments, until the cold burning her lungs made her stop. She'd been seen by a doctor who'd been

dead twenty years, was babysitting a four-hundred-thousand-year-old angel, and the grim reaper spent the night on her couch.

Things really couldn't get much stranger.

"Ms. Young, I need a blood sample."

The man behind her was tall with glasses, a brunet ponytail, and a goofy grin. His lab coat was all the overcoat he wore, and he hopped in place beside a beat-up VW Bug whose engine coughed as if it were on its last leg.

"Let me guess, you work for a dead doctor," she said, crossing her arms.

"Oh, no!" he said with a laugh. "Technically, I *am* a dead doctor."

"Unbelievable."

"No, no, it's a really good story. I got to meet Death and everything."

She turned on her heel and walked.

"*Please*, Katie!" he begged. "No girls ever visit my lab, and Kris rarely lets me leave. Just one pinprick."

"You know Ted Bundy drove a VW Bug, right?" she challenged.

He opened the passenger door with a hopeful smile. She climbed in wordlessly, not surprised to find it cold. The vents rattled without producing heat.

"It's not far," he said with a cheerful smile despite his shaking body. "I'm Uilly."

True to his word, they drove less than two blocks before he entered a public parking garage and drove to the bottommost floor and parked in a dark corner with yellow no-parking lines. He turned off the car and touched the garage door opener above him, whistling as he waited. She jerked as the ground lurched below them, lowering them slowly through the thick cement layers into a tunnel wide enough for a dump truck.

He started the car again and drove through a series of tunnels and intersections, a virtual underground street grid, before arriving at a large garage filled with gleaming cars.

She trailed him to an elevator that took them even further underground. Her headache was returning, her heart beating so fast she knew she'd pass out if she didn't calm down. Her deep breaths drew Uilly's dark eyes.

He smiled in encouragement and led her off the elevator and through a series of cheerfully lit hallways with pictures on the walls and wood floors. He swiped a badge to enter what she imagined was the Mecca of all science labs, with rows of stainless steel, machines, computers, and glass. He parked himself at a computer, and she perched on a stool beside him.

"What is all this?" she breathed.

The air was cool and clear, as crisp as a fall day.

"Only the best lab *ever!*"

His enthusiasm for the underground world only made her feel more nauseous. He took her hand and pricked her finger. The pain and the sight of her blood made her vision dim. She fell into the in-between place, only vaguely aware of his panicked response as she sagged against him or of the muscular form that lifted her from the floor and carried her away.

The pungent smelling salts snapped her out of the in-between place. She swiped the hand away, blinking to clear her gaze as she stared into a fire. The hearth blazed opposite her position on a plush sofa with buttery leather in a small study with Persian

carpets. She thought the man before her old because of his silver until her vision cleared and she saw his face.

His white-silver hair was long and clasped at his neck, his bronzed face and forest-green eyes displaying no emotion. His features were chiseled, the firelight casting harsh shadows across the planes of his face. He was muscular and tall, clothed in dark jeans, a snug grey T-shirt that hugged his biceps and stretched across his chest and back and then sagged at his slender torso and hips, and a round black medallion that fell from his T-shirt as he leaned over her.

"Ully," he growled, turning to face the scientist.

Ully was pale.

Katie pushed herself up, startled by the stickiness on her hand. She looked down and saw the sleeve of her sweater soaked in blood.

"I am so sorry!" Ully gushed, stricken. "You fell, and I tried to catch you, but then you kind of veered to one side and I grabbed your arm but then you --"

"Out."

Ully frowned but obeyed. Katie sat up, wondering why her hand didn't hurt. It shook, and she was even colder.

"I don't know what you are, but I couldn't heal you. You owe Gabriel one," the silver-haired man said. He squatted beside her, wrapping her arm in a clean white towel before he rose and strode to the desk along the far wall. He picked up what looked like a medical file and became as still as the death dealer, as if forgetting her presence completely.

Her eyes skimmed his perfect, buff body before the pain in her hand finally registered. She tugged off her wool coat with some effort. Blood soaked her towel, and she stood.

"Do you have a restroom?"

He jabbed his thumb toward the wall behind him, where she made out the slender nickel doorknob in the space between two shelves of ancient books. He didn't acknowledge her as she entered the surprisingly large bathroom. She winced and pulled the towel free then turned on the water as hot as she could stand. She stared at herself in the mirror, wondering when she'd started looking like a pound dog. She glanced down to watch the blood stream down the drain then held up her arm.

It was healed, just as he said.

She flipped both hands front and back and looked at the blood-soaked towel and the sleeve of her sweater. Her hands both worked. With a sigh, she cleaned up the area as well as she could and pulled off the sweater, as it was warm enough in the study with her T-shirt.

She looked like shit. There were dark circles beneath her light eyes, her hair was in a half-assed lumpy ponytail, and her face was so pale and drawn, she looked ill.

Was this what crazy looked like? She breathed out another sigh and righted her ponytail, then splashed water on her face. Emerging from the bathroom, she was confronted by a pacing Ully.

"I, uh, dropped your blood sample," he said with a glance at the figure with his back toward them both. "Could I get another?"

She handed him the towel. He hesitated, then took it and left. The silver-haired man made no move at all.

"I need --"

"Have a seat."

His order was calm, the slight accent in his voice foreign. She stared at the back of his head, a chill running through her. Her move toward the fire was reflected in a small mirror behind the desk in front of which he stood.

He had no reflection.

She squeezed her eyes closed and breathed deeply, swaying. His touch made her jerk away and her eyes snap open. She stared at him, backing out of his reach until the back of her knees hit a chair and she dropped into it.

His eyes had changed color to a deep violet-blue, a beautiful shade of tanzanite. She felt cold again on the inside and shivered. He looked away finally and returned to his desk.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a measured tone.

She cleared her throat and said simply, "Yes."

As if sensing the weight of the word, he turned, brow furrowed. He perched on the edge of the desk, the fire casting shadows across his perfect, chiseled features. Any other day, she'd have stared at his hard body and the way his jeans hugged his muscular thighs and the round globes of his backside, or the T-shirt that fit so well.

"What's your name?"

"Katie."

"How did you get in my lab?"

"Ully brought me."

"From the Outside?" He crossed his arms, displaying his displeasure without his face changing.

She nodded. "You must be Kris."

"I am."

"Ully said you don't let him out much."

"I don't."

"And that he was once a dead doctor."

"Yeah."

She shuddered. They gazed at each other for a long moment, her shock and exhaustion too deep to fear the man who radiated power and control, even in a simple T-shirt. Tattoos of interlinked geometric shapes glowed on his arms before fading.

"Why do you need my blood?" she asked.

"Ully's testing it. It's what he does."

"Dr. Williams said my blood tests were unusual."

His eyes turned from tanzanite to deep emerald. She shivered again.

"I need a shot of whiskey," she said.

For a long moment, she didn't think he'd agree. At last he moved around the desk to a dark corner and withdrew a crystal carafe from a locked cabinet.

"Don't give me your good stuff. I don't intend to savor it," she warned.

He gave her an amused look, then poured her three shots worth of whiskey and handed it to her. She downed a mouthful, grimacing at the burn that went down her throat and all the way to her gut.

"I can't get warm any other way," she admitted, and took another gulp.

"You're in shock," he surmised.

"No argument there. I have a feeling you know already what the past two days have been like."

"Tell me."

"No, thanks."

He raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms again. She really didn't give a damn if he wasn't used to being challenged. She finished her whiskey and sat back in the chair, its warmth chasing away her internal chill. For now.

"Do Gabriel and Toby work for you?" she asked.

"In a sense."

"What does that mean?"

"Death dealers don't work for anyone really, just Death, though I do buy assassinations from him on occasion."

Buy assassinations, like he was ordering a new couch for his study.

"Oh," she managed. "And Toby, the baby...angel?"

His gaze had sharpened.

"I'm his guardian, yes."

"And you randomly assign him new moms every few dozen years and then send Gabriel to pick them off at the end."

"More or less."

"Do you ever bother to see if the moms want to have a baby angel in their lives?"

"I don't think I've ever had a *human* question me," he stated, eyes flashing golden topaz.

"It's really not cool to use women like this," she replied. "Even if we are puny humans."

"You're the first to object."

"No offense, but I'm under the impression the others didn't have a chance to object."

A light tap sounded at the door.

"What, Uilly?" he belted.

She jumped, unaware she'd ruffled him despite the calm exterior. Uilly opened the door without entering, his gaze fluttering from her to the angry non-human.

"I, uh, kinda need to talk to you, bossman, if you're cool with that."

The man with the jewel-toned eyes strode across the study without a look at her. She waited until the door closed before crossing to the carafe and refilling her glass. His anger surprised her with its intensity, and she judged from Uilly's reaction that seeing the lord and master pissed was not something the good-natured mad scientist wanted anything to do with. She didn't know what he was, but if he routinely played with the lives of puny humans and bought assassinations...

She drank the caramel liquid too fast and was soon too dizzy to stand.

* * *

"I thought something was weird based on what death dude said," Uilly said, stepping back from the rotating DNA molecule on the screen with a triumphant smile.

"Antigens? You're saying she's allergic to us?" a skeptical blonde woman with striking blue-green eyes asked.

Kris glanced at her and then back at the screen. His trusted deputies --the slender blonde Iliana and the raven-haired gigantic Jade with cocoa skin --sat across from him. Death dude sat at the back of the conference room, out of the glare of the screen.

"Sort of," Ully said. "Basically these antigens are acting as a screening agent."

"Meaning...?" Jade waved his hand impatiently.

"Meaning she's immune to many of our talents," Kris supplied with a frown. "How, Ully?"

"It's genetic."

"So one of her parents was like us?" Iliana asked, tapping a hot pink fingernail.

"Not exactly. It's kind of like..." Ully looked around and stretched for the pen on the table. "If immortals are pens, and normal humans are number two pencils, then she's a mechanical pencil."

"*What?*" Jade demanded.

"She's a hybrid," Iliana said, realization dawning on her face. "Kris..."

"Yeah, I know."

"She's also an immortal's mate," Ully added.

Kris studied the DNA molecule, now certain the woman's appearance spelled certain danger for him. His gaze settled on Jade's familiar features, and he studied his companion of so many years. Jade was everything he admired: brave, compassionate, dedicated. Loyal. He didn't doubt his second and his lover would move on, if Kris chose to take the woman as his mate. Yet he wondered if *he* could ever care for another the way he did Jade.

His duty as the leader of the fractured Council always came first. Jade's duty would, too. He'd found peace with Jade after Rhyn killed his first love, Lilith. But Jade was like most immortals: he'd only ever loved other men, whereas Kris valued mettle over sex.

As he weighed if he'd be forced to choose between someone he loved and an immortal's mate with a desirable gift, he couldn't help thinking Jade wouldn't take breaking up well. His love had a temper. It would take him a while to recover.

"We have two issues," Ully continued, sitting. "There's never been a mutation like this in the history of our people. If it's hereditary, then the mutation has been hidden from us for, like, maybe even hundreds of thousands of years. Second, I can duplicate the DNA with some time in my lab and isolate the antigen, meaning I can make someone immune to our enemies' powers."

"Or they can make someone immune to us," Jade said.

Kris felt the intent gazes of both of his deputies, who left the obvious unvoiced.

They were in more trouble than he'd thought once the Council convened.

"We know a few things," he started. "One, Sasha probably knows about her by now. Two, someone in our organization knew what she was when they set her up to be Toby's human guardian."

"Good job, death dude!" Ully cheered, earning him the scathing look of Jade.

"She's immune to all but the most ancient of us. The mutation started sometime after our births, Kris," Gabriel voiced.

Surprised, Kris eyed him.

"You know more than you're telling me?" he challenged. "This isn't a secret you're sworn to protect."

Amusement flashed across the death dealer's face, and Gabriel shook his head.

"Ully, do a full workup on her parents, grandparents, as far back as she remembers. Find any siblings and get their blood. We need to know how many people have this mutation and where they are," Kris ordered.

Ully bounced up.

"And Ully, be discreet," he added. "No more stalking and kidnapping."

The lab rat flushed but saluted and ducked out of the room.

"The Council meets in a few," Jade commented. "Do we return her and pretend we don't know or keep her where they can't get her?"

It's not cool to use women like that.

Kris had never heard anything so ridiculous. No human --nor most of those in his organization --would dream of speaking to him like that. And yet, she had without fear. Shock did much to humans, he knew, but she was either crazy or incredibly stupid to challenge someone like him.

Worse, they'd never run across this type of issue in all their years. That it emerged now, when the Council was on the verge of disintegrating, couldn't be a coincidence.

"Jade, send some men to her apartment and dig around. Check on Toby while you're there. Iliana, we have a Council meeting to attend in a couple of hours."

"You want them to take her back?" Jade asked.

"Yeah. Take her back and post guards everywhere you can. I want to see what Sasha's planning."

"You shouldn't go alone to the Council meeting," Jade warned.

"It's the way it is."

"Someday, one of you is gonna snap and take out the others."

"Let's hope it's me," he said with a small smile.

"If you wouldn't take out half the continent doing so, I wouldn't care. C'mon, death dude. Let's get her to her apartment. Travel safely, Kris."

Gabriel followed them out obediently, content to hang around them while bored.

Kris traveled via shortcuts through the shadow world as Gabriel did and willed himself to the in-between world. It was foggy and chilly, like a walk on the beach after the fog rolled in. Several portals glowed, and he strode across the silent domain toward the portal he needed. He emerged from the shadow world in a luxurious penthouse suite in Paris overlooking the Arc de Triomphe.

"You Americans. Jeans and T-shirt, Kris, really?"

He dismissed his uneasy thoughts at his eldest brother's accented voice. He shook the hand of his brother and friend, whose black skin clashed with his. Andre was dressed in cashmere and wool, his hair kept short and neat, his loafers more expensive than Kris's conference room had cost to build.

"Got nothing to prove, big brother."

Andre snorted and motioned to the pristine white sofa. Kris sat.

"I wasn't expecting you," Andre said. He crossed to the wet bar for two glasses, one with red wine and the other with whiskey. "I keep this cheap shit around just in case."

"I like the cheap shit," Kris replied, accepting his whiskey.

"You obviously clothes shop at yard sales."

Kris smiled, and Andre echoed the movement, the skin around his eyes crinkling in warmth.

"I hate these things," Andre admitted. "I'd rather stay home. Brother, go change. You're not going to embarrass me again."

Kris chuckled, at ease with his brother despite the unprotected penthouse on the top floor of a building that could be easily leveled by a single explosive charge. Being underground meant he was a much harder target to hit, yet despite his attempts to convince his brother to act likewise, he'd not yet succeeded.

He went through one of Andre's two walk-in closets, choosing a maroon sweater and chocolate suede pants. He knew his brother would disapprove but also knew Andre would view it better than jeans.

Andre pursed his lips in displeasure as Kris reappeared.

"Good enough," his brother grunted. "One of my most expensive shirts with the pants that went out of season five years ago."

"How's your spy network?" Kris asked as he poured himself a second glass of whiskey.

"Eh, not so hot lately. I've been losing some good ones. Still have an idea of what Kiki and Tamer are doing but no idea what Erik is doing."

"You keeping track of me as well?"

"Part of an older brother's duty."

Kris sat opposite his brother. Their alliance off the Council was as important as their balance of power on the Council. Despite being brothers, neither approved of what the other did. Andre's gift lent him great power and control over the mind, enough so that he had no problem recruiting spies as the others did. He was a pacifist, though, and viewed his position on the Council as balancing out the outwardly aggressive predators.

Andre was no threat to the others yet had a full vote on everything the Council did. It was how he walked easily among all the others, never threatened and routinely confided in. Even Sasha, who'd betrayed them all to serve the Dark One, still sought out his brother's counsel. Kris knew his brother too well to know he'd not betray the trust of anyone, even a man who wanted to kill him.

Next to Kris's whiskey Andre kept at the wet bar was Tamer's favorite vodka, Kiki's rice wine, and Erik's diet soda.

"What about Sasha?" Kris asked quietly.

"He's killed my last few spies. Got a good one in there now. Getting a lot of good info out of this one."

"Good to hear. You ready?"

Andre held out his hand. Kris took it and they walked through the shadow world through the portal leading to the Sanctuary where the Council meetings took place. His three other half brothers were already present and waiting, Erik pacing, Kiki at the table, and Tamer busy with his PDA. The conference room was plain, the white walls bare, the harsh lighting and round conference table centered.

"Let's go, brothers," Andre said. He sat, leaning back. "Shall we start with Asia this time? Kiki?"

"We started with Asia last time," Kiki snapped, oriental features and towering height marking his mixed breeding.

"Very well. Europe," Andre said, unaffected. "Erik."

"Everything's fine."

"Erik."

"The last time I said anything, all my men in North America disappeared. Kris, care to explain?" Erik challenged, ice blue eyes falling to him.

"Nope."

"Erik's right, brother," Kiki said. "We can't talk freely like we used to."

"We have a common enemy," Andre reminded them. "One who would like us divided so he can take over our world."

"I'll start," Kris said. "Today, we found someone who's immune to our powers."

All eyes turned to him.

"What do you mean, immune?" Tamer pounced. "There's no such thing."

"She has a hereditary blood anomaly that makes her immune to all but the oldest of our kind. We just found out and are researching it."

"Bullshit," Kiki snapped. "If you know that much, you know more."

"Think what you will, Kiki."

"Have you tested her?" Andre asked.

"We discovered her when she proved unaffected by one of our typical talents."

"She's a spy for Sasha," Erik said. "Probably revealed your entire operations by now."

"Not likely," he replied.

"I don't believe any of this nonsense," Tamer insisted. "She's a plant. Like Erik said, she's some mutant Sasha made to infiltrate your operations."

"Maybe you're the mole, brother," Kiki added.

The four stared at him. Kris didn't flinch. He'd long since suspected one of them was working with Sasha, but it wasn't him. If anyone, it was Tamer, whose isolation in Siberia and ability to outsmart Andre's spies gave him the ability to hide his actions.

"Bring her here," Tamer said.

"No."

"Then I'm not going to believe a damned thing you're saying."

"And I won't share how to counter her mutation so you don't end up at Sasha's feet."

"Fuck you, Kris!"

"Enough," Andre said with a sharp look at both of them. "Kris, the Council will need some sort of proof that this isn't another ploy by one of you to wipe out the others. It's been calm for the past few hundred years, but I don't think any of us have forgotten that five hundred year period where we were at each other's throats."

And they'd lost two of their brothers to the war. Andre himself had ordered their exiles when it was revealed they were Sasha's spies. He didn't say this, but Kris knew it was on everyone's mind.

"Would you object to my visiting her?" Andre finished.

"Nope."

"Good enough, Tamer?"

"For now," Tamer allowed. "No compartmentalizing this info, Andre. It's a common threat to all of us. According to the rules, we get to know everything."

"Everything," Kiki emphasized.

"You are entitled to know of anything that threatens you," Andre clarified. "As you know, I'm the only one here who actually adheres to our rules."

The others smiled. There was one rule they all knew better than to break, or Andre would order them killed. So long as they didn't put out a hit on one another, they could decimate each other at their own battles, lie, cheat, spy, steal, anything and everything.

"Other news," Andre said. "Kiki."

"Everything's fine."

"Kris?"

"Ditto."

"Tamer?"

"Same."

"Erik?"

"Nope."

Andre pursed his lips again. Kris sat back, satisfied. He'd done as required and alerted them about a potential threat. As far as he was concerned, he'd do nothing else, even if he learned how to counter it.

"Same time and place next month," Andre said, standing. "These meetings need to improve, brothers. We are not one another's enemies, and we'll never defeat our common enemy so long as we're squabbling."

No one spoke. Kris remained where he was, aware they'd destroy each other if allowed. Their turf wars and battle against the Dark One --and now Sasha --had stirred up some of the bloodiest wars in mankind's history.

One by one, the others left, until he was alone with Andre.

"No one knows her identity, and no one else sees her," Kris said firmly. "She's an unwitting participant."

"You know me well enough, brother."

"I'll send for you."

"What are you not telling me, Kris?" Andre pressed with brotherly concern in his voice.

Kris looked away.

"There's something else to this human, isn't there?"

"She's an immortal mate."

"Not uncommon," Andre replied. "What else?"

Kris chuckled, aware his older brother could wait him out.

"She's an Ancient's mate."

"Ah," Andre said softly. "Then you're in a bind, if you intend to claim her."

"Can't leave this one to fate," he said in the same quiet tone. "Do you..."

"You and I have always put the Council and our mission first," Andre reminded him. "Now is not the time to doubt yourself. Of all our brothers, you are the only one who can lead us to victory. If this woman gives you the power to do so..."

Kris said nothing, feeling at once foolish and like he was the child Andre used to chastise for failing to focus on his duties. Andre clasped his shoulder, bowed his head, and disappeared.

Kris willed himself to the shadow world and walked back to his underground refuge, heart heavy. Jade awaited him, as he expected. Kris accepted the glass of whiskey but avoided Jade's extended hand.

His lover of many years sensed his unease and waited for him to speak.

"The woman we found is an immortal's mate," he started.

"I know," Jade said, seating himself. "You have someone in mind for her?"

"I do."

Jade waited, and Kris held his gaze in silence. He watched the expectant look turn to one of disbelief. Jade's jaw grew lax before he managed to speak.

"You're serious?"

"I'm bound by my duty," Kris replied.

"But *this*? You'd leave me for her?"

"Not by choice, Jade. Her talent can --"

"You can mate her to one of our friends! There's no --"

"She's an Ancient's mate, not just any immortal's mate," he explained.

"Give her to Andre."

"Jade."

His gut twisted as raw emotion crossed Jade's face. His friend and lover searched his face hard, then rose and stalked out.

Kris let him go despite his desire to follow him. There was nothing he could say that would take away the pain he'd just caused.

He poured himself more whiskey and sat on the sofa, feeling utterly alone for the second time in his life.

His gaze strayed to the desk, where Katie's file sat. He'd go to her apartment tomorrow and explain to her what her fate was about to become. He suspected the conversation would go as well as his talk with Jade.

His chest felt tight, but he refused to admit his pain.

Jade stormed out of the study and shoved past two warriors in the hallway. Blinded by emotion, he made his way out of the underground compound without knowing where he went. He broke into a run when he reached the country road leading away from the compound.

He ran until his pounding heart drowned out his pounding feet. Cold air made his lungs ache, and he slowed then stopped, buckling over to catch his breath.

The pain in his chest couldn't equate with the pain and distress shooting through him like cold fire. He dropped to his knees and wiped messily at the snot streaming from his nose and the tears frozen to his cheeks.

Images of Kris, his only love in two thousand years, swam through his thoughts. He remembered everything from where they met, their first kiss, their first night together. The memories collided and tortured him, replaying with painful detail.

He'd never felt pain this intense in any of his battles!

He roared and slammed his fists against the ground.

"Kris's pet."

He whirled at the all too familiar voice and sprung to his feet.

"Sasha!"

"Hello, Jade," Sasha purred.

Jade straightened, eyeing the dark figure with bright eyes.

"Looks like the shape you left me in," Sasha said, "when you ditched me for dear Kris."

"Get away from me!"

"Who'd he leave you for?"

Jade said nothing, pain spiraling through him.

"He left you for someone," Sasha insisted, drawing near.

"What do you want, Sasha?"

"My lover is in pain, and you ask me why I'm here?"

"We've been through for hundreds of years."

"True. I still feel when you're upset. We've always had that bond."

Jade knew he should've walked away the moment Sasha appeared. He found himself lingering, wanting to feel a little less alone. Sasha was their enemy.

Kris's enemy.

He faced Sasha, recalling the years they'd spent together. He broke off their relationship when Kris took interest in him and soon after, Kris convinced Andre to banish Sasha to Hell.

Trying to convince himself he was too angry to think straight, Jade shook his head and turned away.

"Whether or not you still care for me, you care for him. Let me help you, Jade." Sasha's voice stopped him again. "A favor from an old friend who doesn't want to see you in pain."

"I don't trust you, Sasha."

"You did once, long ago. Come and sit with me, like old times. I'll take your pain away."

Jade squeezed his eyes closed and said hoarsely, "No one can help me."

"I can. Come with me. An hour is all I ask. If you tell me to leave at the end of it, I'll never bother you again."

He hesitated, at war with himself. There was nothing Sasha could ever say, nothing he could ever do in an hour. But right now, Jade needed someone who understood him, as only Sasha always had.

"One hour," he said. "Then you leave me alone forever."

"Deal," Sasha said. "Come with me, my love."

* * *

"Katie, your kid's on line two!" one of the cooks shouted back to her.

She looked from the computer screen to the phone with the flashing red light. She sat in the general manager's office of the fast food joint where she'd worked for six months. The office was small but clean and smelled of fried food. The general manager was on maternity leave, and she rifled through several drawers before locating a bottle of painkillers. She was hungover and tired, with a roiling stomach and headache, yet she managed to make it to work before the breakfast rush. Only after she tossed back a couple of painkillers did she pick up the phone.

"What's up, Toby?"

"Hi! I didn't want to go to school today and stayed home but we're out of marshmallows and Gabriel doesn't have any money so I told him that we could ask you to pick up more marshmallows because we both really like them."

"You need anything else from the store?"

"Nope. Oh, but you might want to get some... Gabriel, what does he like?"

She heard a mumbled response.

"Oh, never mind. Kris will send a car for you."

"Kris? Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"He wants to talk to you."

"Tell him I kinda have a life and don't really care what he wants."

There was a moment of silence, then a child's gleeful laugh.

"Can I really tell him that?"

"Please do."

"Awesome!"

"Listen, I've got work to do. I'll bring you marshmallows. Text me if you need anything else."

"Okay! G'bye, Mama!"

"Don't call me that. We both know better," she grumbled.

He laughed again, and she hung up, pressing the heels of her palms to her eyes. She'd fallen asleep in Kris's library after half a bottle of whiskey and awoken in her own bed with a throbbing headache and dry mouth.

She'd dared to hope again that everything was a hallucination brought on by too much alcohol, until Toby burst in chasing a cat she didn't remember owning. The boy had clambered across her bed, shrieked happily, and chased the cat under the bed.

"Katie! Visitor!"

She sighed and sat up straight a second before the door was pushed open to reveal someone she didn't know. He was well dressed, tall, and handsome with eyes too dark and still for her comfort.

"Ms. Young, I'm David Kingsly, from Kingsly Enterprises."

Surprised, she rose and shook his hand. His multimillionaire father's picture was on the wall, and he owned two dozen restaurants in the Annapolis area, including this one.

"It's a pleasure, sir. I apologize for the mess. I wasn't expecting you. Are you here for the GM?" she asked.

"No, no. I drop by on occasion to check on my father's restaurants," he said with a quick glance around. "The GM said your team came up with the latest marketing campaign. I wanted to thank you in person. It's increased profits about seven percent over last quarter."

"Thanks," she said, smiling. "We have a good group here."

"A good leader makes a good team the best, as my father says."

Despite the honor of his visit, she couldn't help but feel a trickle of familiar coldness at his still gaze. He smiled but his eyes did not. He resembled his father in height and narrow face, though there was warmth in his father's face she didn't see in his. For a moment, she thought she saw tattoos blaze across his neck and then disappear.

"We're inviting the GM to our fundraiser tomorrow night. My father feels it's important to recognize all those who support our family's success. We'd be happy if you attended our gala."

He reached into his jacket and produced an embossed invitation in peach and brown.

"I'd be honored," she said, accepting it. "Thank you, Mr. Kingsly."

"David," he said with another smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I look forward to seeing you there."

He rose and left, and she stared after him, excited. She dialed her sister immediately.

"Sis, I need some help."

"Oh. Another issue?"

"No. I was invited to some Kingsly gala. I need something to wear."

"Some Kingsly gala or the biggest event of the fall?" her sister asked with a laugh.

"Hey --you mind if I come over after work? Toby's...going to a friend's house for the night, and I'm sick of my apartment."

"Yeah, sure. You were supposed to come for brunch tomorrow. I'd planned a spa day tomorrow before the gala. We can add shopping to that; I know you don't have anything nice to wear."

Katie rolled her eyes. A day and a half with her sister was as much as she could tolerate; faced with the alternative of returning to her creepy apartment with its creepy occupants, she'd tough it out.

She survived the day of bitching customers and employees alike and arrived late in the evening to Hannah's, a mansion in the outskirts of Annapolis where her sister lived with her fiancée, Giovanni.

Hannah took one look at her and frowned fiercely.

"You couldn't change before showing up?" she asked, looking past her out at the street.

"It's not like you have neighbors, sis," Katie replied impatiently. "Afraid I'll make you look bad in front of the 'hood?"

"With the money Gio paid for you to go to Georgetown, you'd think you could get a better job than this!" Hannah started.

Katie sighed. Hannah stood aside as she entered the large foyer, lecturing her as they ascended to the second floor.

"...if you hadn't dropped out, you'd be graduating in a few months. A FEW MONTHS, Katherine!"

"I know, Hannah."

"You're twenty-two, a single mom, and you've got a shitty job and frankly, a shitty attitude about your future."

Katie pushed the door to her designated guest room and stripped out of the grease-stained, French fry scented clothing. Hannah continued on the same speech she'd heard every time they were together.

"You know I'm just concerned," Hannah finished. "Toby --"

"He'll be fine," Katie bit off. "I came here for a break, Hannah."

"Gio and I are worried. Everywhere you work, you're recognized for being the brilliant person I know you are. Why can't you pick a career or finish school?"

"I don't know, Hannah. I'm not sure what I want to do with my life."

"Well, do something!"

Katie flung herself on the bed. Despite Hannah's criticisms, she would still rather be here than at her apartment, even knowing Hannah would never believe her story about Toby and the death dealer.

"I'm assuming you already ate," Hannah said, nose crinkling. "Take a shower and come down to say hello to Gio. He's letting me buy your gown for tomorrow, so you might as well be nice to him."

Katie pushed herself off the bed and obeyed.

CHAPTER THREE

"Who throws a Halloween gala where no one dresses up?" Katie grumbled, uncomfortable in her formal dress. She'd last dressed up for Hannah's engagement party two years ago.

"Masquerade, not Halloween."

Katie didn't reply, gaping at a woman in her sixties with enough diamonds to reverse world hunger.

"Stop it!" Hannah hissed. "Pretend to fit in. Don't embarrass me."

Katie maneuvered her sequined ball mask into place only to see her sister on the verge of disappearing in the masses of women in custom gowns and masks. The women's coatroom was off one side of the entrance. Katie emerged in time to see her sister stop beside her fiancé. Katie moved toward them steadily, self-conscious in the snug teal gown that displayed the curves the slender women around her didn't have. The neckline was plunging, revealing the curves of her full breasts.

Her sister had chosen the gown and --thankfully --paid for it. It was three months' salary, though Hannah had added it to the black AmEx her fiancé paid in full every month without a second thought.

Just like their four-hour trip to the spa, the wardrobe Hannah bought Toby, the jewelry they both wore. Within a four-hour period, Hannah had dropped \$50K. For once, Katie was beyond grateful. She felt almost human again after the drama of her week. She fully intended to return the gown and tanzanite jewelry dripping off her ears and neck, but for the night, she enjoyed feeling like Cinderella.

She trailed Hannah into the massive foyer with a dangling chandelier, regally arcing stairway, and an army of wait staff in tuxes circulating alcohol and hors d'oeuvres. Massive ballrooms flanked either side of the foyer, one whose orchestra filled the mansion with calming music, and the other devoted to a buffet unlike any Katie had ever seen. The swirl of gowns of dancing couples drew her attention to the ballroom with the orchestra. She walked through the masses, comfortably hidden behind her mask. No one would know she didn't belong among the blue bloods in this crowd. Beyond the main room were two hallways, also packed, and opened doors along both where men and women circulated.

Katie paused to look around. She'd lost Hannah in the crowd. Her sister wore maroon, as did many of the other women in masks around her. She fingered the small teal evening purse hanging around her wrist, where her cell phone was. Worst case scenario, she'd call her.

Completely free, she relaxed and accepted a glass of champagne from one of the wait staff and waded toward the buffet. She paused in the doorway, realizing she was squeezed too tightly into her dress to eat anything. Instead she crossed to the full bar and traded the champagne for a triple shot of whiskey on the rocks. She sipped, surprised at the smooth flavor. It wasn't cheap like the stuff she bought.

"Triple shot of whiskey, no ice."

She shifted as the male form attached to the voice squeezed into the area behind her. Saluting the bartender with her glass, she started to move away when a warm hand

on her forearm stopped her. She turned, surprised, and looked up into eyes the color of her jewelry. Most of his face was hidden behind the mask, but his silver-white hair was too familiar to be anyone else's.

"We have similar taste in alcohol," he said, and lifted his glass to her.

"Did you follow me here?" she demanded, refusing his salud.

"I got you invited."

She suddenly felt foolish for believing David Kingsly. No blue blood like the Kingslys gave a damn about some small-town assistant GM at a fast food joint! She tossed the whiskey back and gulped it down, then slapped the glass on the bar before turning away.

She searched for half an hour before spotting her sister sitting in one of the airy rooms off the hallway near the buffet. There were several women sitting and talking while choosing delicacies from large silver trays. They'd all removed their masks.

Hannah glanced up with a smile at her approach and patted the seat beside her. Katie sat, irritated to see who followed with a confident stride and two glasses of whiskey, one with ice and the other without. He drew the eye of every woman in the room and silenced those around her with his presence.

"Excuse me, ladies. Katie, you forgot your drink at the bar," Kris said, holding out the iced whiskey to her.

She didn't miss Hannah's stunned look, as if it were a miracle her homely sister could catch the eye of anyone!

His move was too deliberate to be other than planned. He stood far enough away that she had to stand and walk a step to reach him. When she accepted the glass, he followed with a quick and confident, "Let's take a walk around."

If not for Hannah's surprised silence, she would've refused him. He held out an arm she ignored, instead marching past him. He caught up to her in the hallway.

"Whatever it is you want, the answer is no."

She felt his gaze and suspected she'd pissed him off again with her directness. He placed a hand on the small of her back and led her through the crowd to the ballroom with the orchestra and the dancers. He snatched the whiskey from her hand and placed their glasses on a table.

"I don't dance," she told him.

"Hush."

He spun her to face him and pulled her against him with one arm while his other took hers to the side for a waltz pose.

"Where you been hiding?" he asked casually.

"None of your damn business!" she snapped, craning her neck back to look up at him. Even in her heels he towered a head above her. His eyes flared amber then faded to tanzanite as he gazed down at her.

"You drop off some sort of demon in my house, try to convince me I'm either completely crazy or suffering from amnesia, stalk me to this gala, and expect me to tell you where I spend every minute of every day?" she demanded at his silence.

She tugged at her captured hand and was squeezed against him even harder.

"You weren't supposed to remember anything," he replied calmly. "You have a genetic --"

"Don't want to hear it. Take Toby and the damn death guy and leave me the hell alone."

"I can't."

"The hell you can't."

"You're in danger."

She studied him.

"Some very bad people know who you are now."

"So what? You feel guilty for dragging me into this and are obligated to help me?"

"Guilty, no. Obligated, yes. You're destined to work alongside us immortals."

His honest answer silenced her. She stepped out of his embrace, the two of them freezing in the middle of the dance floor like rocks in a flowing creek.

"Katie, I need to talk to you about something very serious."

He made no move toward her. At his severe tone, she took another step back, ready to exit as fast as she could in the snug dress and high heels.

Suddenly, the lights flickered and went out. A murmur went through the dancers, several of whom sounded as if they ran into each other before pausing. The orchestra fell silent, and somewhere someone --possibly the host --called for the generators to be turned on. A woman gave a cry, and the sound of jostling grew closer.

A man walked calmly through the crowd, strange red tattoos glowing all over his body, similar to the tattoos she'd seen on David Kingsly's neck when he invited her to the gala. She didn't know what he was, but she felt cold inside.

He was evil.

Kris rested one hand on her shoulder. She started to pull away.

"He can't sense you while I'm here," Kris whispered.

She watched as the creature neared in the shadowy darkness. Katie's breathing grew shallow. Her eyes stayed on the creature, which joined several more tattooed beings in the hall before they all struck out in different directions.

As if on cue, the auxiliary lighting came on, casting a romantic glow around her.

"No one should know you're here. We gotta get out of here," Kris said.

His hand gripped her neck loosely. A pulse of warmth dispelled the tunnel vision that had begun to form.

"We'll take a shortcut."

He took her hand and led her through the crowd at a steady pace. She looked over her shoulder, uncertain where the men with tattoos were. She didn't know what they --or *he* --wanted, but if the man before her was worried, she should be terrified. Kris reached an alcove out of sight of the crowds and faced her.

"Close your eyes," he ordered.

She stared at him. He gripped her arm. Before she could shove him away, the sounds of their world fell silent. She looked around, stunned. Their surroundings looked as if someone had left a fog machine on too long in a gym. Several doorways glowed around her, and Kris yanked her toward one. She opened her mouth to speak and then clamped it shut, her stomach turning. He all but dragged her through one of the glowing doorways before she vomited.

Kris muttered curses and touched her shoulder.

Warmth and cold shot through her, righting her stomach but bringing intense pain to her head. She pushed his hand away, unable to stabilize the hot and cold racing through her blood. Her teeth chattered and her body felt so hot she wanted to scream.

"Stop it!" she all but shouted. "God, my head!" She gripped it, vision blurred and balance precarious atop the four-inch heels. He reached for her and she stumbled back, holding up her hand to ward him off. He snatched both hands in one of his, balancing her with his body as he placed his other hand against her forehead. The sensations stabilized and then dissipated.

"Enough, enough, enough!" she belted with a shove.

Her vision cleared to reveal she now stood in a luxurious living room with several people in front of her displaying varying levels of alarm on their faces. She wiped the tears from her face, feeling more torn up than she had the day before. Tattoos flared on the arms and necks of the people in front of her before fading and growing invisible again.

"Whiskey?" Ully was the first to speak.

"Two," Kris replied.

She caught her balance against the arm of a sofa.

"Your rescue mission went well," one of them commented with a half smile.

He was built like Kris with dark hair. The similarities stopped at their tanzanite eyes and chiseled features; the speaker's skin was as dark as night.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He rose and motioned for her to take his seat in a plush armchair.

She didn't answer, concentrating on figuring out where the hell she was.

"I'm Andre. This is Jade and Ileana. You know my brother Kris. You also know Gabriel and Ully, I believe."

She lowered herself onto the sofa.

"Feels like I've been on a drinking binge," she murmured.

"Kris, real people aren't supposed to go through the shadow world," Ully said, wide eyes on the man with glowing amber eyes.

"No shit, Ully," the man named Jade responded.

"I went through the shadow world?" she asked, brow furrowing.

"Technically, you may have died," Ileana said with a sip of wine. "Death gets pissed when mortals go through the shadow world."

Built more like the beauties her sister surrounded herself with, Ileana was a natural bombshell with pillowed lips and large eyes.

"Hey, we're alike now!" Ully said, handing her two glasses of whiskey.

She took the glasses from him and downed them one at a time, then handed them back.

"Glad to see you're taking this so well," Kris said.

Fury lit her insides at his calm words, as if he wasn't responsible for destroying her life! She rose, wobbled, and pulled off her heels. She looked around until her eyes met those of the death dealer.

"Gabriel, you're taking me home," she ordered.

The death dealer rose.

"Sit, Gabriel," Kris responded.

Gabriel obeyed, and Katie flung a shoe at the domineering man with the jewel-toned eyes. He caught it with reflexes too fast for her to follow.

"You *will* send me home, and you'll remove Toby, Gabriel, and every other interference you placed in my life, down to the scuff marks in the hallway, which I know weren't there on Tuesday! No more dead doctors, no more kidnappings, no more blood draws, nothing!"

The angrier she got, the calmer Kris looked. His eyes went from emerald to tanzanite again.

"When you calm down, we'll --" he started.

"No. Now. I'm going home *now*. Back to my boring life, my horrible job, my tiny apartment. *Now*, Kris!"

She saw the white of his knuckles as he gripped her shoe hard and sensed she was pushing a wild animal. His jaw was clenched and ticking as the muscles jumped.

He wasn't going to budge. Neither was she.

"Let's take a step back, shall we?" Andre said, stepping in front of her. "We shouldn't take you through the shadow world to return you. If Kris didn't kill you on the way here, he might on the way back. I'm going to send Kris away and bring you a bottle of whiskey. Then we'll talk. Is that okay?"

His presence and words were as soothing as Kris's were not. She felt herself relaxing at his even tone and the words that seemed logical enough. She didn't want to be dead, and she definitely needed more whiskey. At her hesitation, he motioned for her to sit again and turned, continuing to block Kris from sight.

"Brother," he said with gentle command. "Jade, you, too. Gabriel, do whatever you do."

The death dealer disappeared. She heard Kris stir, and the cocoa-skinned Jade followed. Andre relaxed and sat on the couch near her while Ileana drew close as well. Ullly reappeared with a carafe of whiskey and set it down, taking Andre's head nod as a cue to leave.

Andre poured her whiskey and sat back. She sipped it, rubbing the back of her neck.

"You are handling this well," he said.

She eyed him. His words appeared genuine, unlike Kris's.

"You'd have to be pretty mentally tough to go through all this without cracking."

"Oh, I'm cracking."

He chuckled. Despite her fury and fear, she found his presence oddly calming, like sitting in a spa surrounded by incense with her feet in a salt bath. The air around her felt heavy and still.

He was doing something to her. Even with her precious whiskey, she shouldn't feel like she did. She shook her head, trying to clear it of the fog he'd placed there.

"I don't need you to placate me!"

He leaned forward, curiosity flaring in his tanzanite eyes. Whatever fog gripped her dissipated suddenly, and she breathed a sigh at the palpable release. She tossed back the whiskey, meeting his gaze only when he placed his hand across the top of the carafe.

"You've had enough," he said with genuine concern. "I apologize. I won't do it again."

She pulled the carafe from his hand and poured herself another two shots. He pursed his lips then poured himself a shot and sat back to sip it. They gazed at each other for a long moment.

"Did I really die?" she asked at last.

"No. But mortals shouldn't travel through the shadow world. It's hit and miss on what'll happen."

"What exactly is going on?"

He leaned forward and placed the glass on the table.

"It's a long story, one you don't necessarily need to know to understand your circumstances. My brother's people found you and identified your unique gift for... blocking their natural talents. It makes you valuable and dangerous. If our enemies find you, they can take your blood and modify the creatures who work for them to make them immune to us."

"Back up a sec. Natural talents?"

"Our ancestors were immortalized --albeit incorrectly --in myths. Mages, vampires, elves, immortal creatures with extraordinary powers who battle evil for supremacy and the ultimate fate of mankind."

"And my unique gift could make the bad guys immune to the good guys."

"Correct."

"Why is your brother so pissy when he interfered with *my* life?"

"My brother is never pissy," Andre said with polite offense. "He's unaccustomed to having his authority challenged. We nicknamed him the Phoenix, which is notorious for not only rising from ashes but also for taking down everyone and everything around them in flames. He's forever in that stage that precedes a perfect storm."

"Highly combustible, I get it. Send me home, get rid of everything that shouldn't be there, and move on. Everyone will be happy."

"I wish it were that easy."

"Why isn't it?" she prodded.

"Because our enemies have your blood and know everything about you. This started out as a mission about us but has turned into a mission about *you*."

"How did you trick my sister Hannah into thinking I had a kid, when you and I know I don't?"

"Angels must be raised by humans. It's something immortals learned long ago. Angels are mortals' allies, but they can't appreciate the intricacies of mortals without the years of exposure. When we placed Toby with you, we altered the minds of those in your immediate family circle. We learned that those outside of this circle are less likely to be concerned about the appearance of the child. The human mind is quick to find excuses to accept such things."

She gripped her head, feeling sick.

"Go and rest. We'll talk in the morning," Andre said kindly.

"I could use some food, though. Too much alcohol on an empty stomach."

"I'll send dinner. Your room is the third on the left."

He indicated a narrow hallway off the large formal living room. She stood, wobbled, and then went the direction he indicated. The room was dark, the floor-to-ceiling windows displaying the incredible views of the Eiffel Tower, whose frame was outlined

by lights against the dark Parisian sky She was about to step onto the balcony when a knock at the door drew her attention.

Andre entered, followed by a second man carrying a large tray of food.

"I included the whiskey, though I advise you to stop drinking soon," he said with brotherly firmness. "We'll be going to a soiree across the street in about an hour. You'll have some peace, at least until tomorrow morning."

Katie offered a watery smile, eyes going to the roast lamb, bread, and custard. They left, and she sat and ate leisurely. When she finished, she crossed to the balcony.

She'd never left the country and couldn't help but stare in wonder at the romantically lit Arc de Triomphe. The street below was narrower than it appeared on TV and packed with cars and elegantly dressed men and women walking to a gathering across the street --probably the soiree Andre had mentioned.

In the distance was a dark swath of park leading up to the lit-up Eiffel Tower, which was larger than she'd imagined. The air was chilly, but she left the window open to the street sounds and the cold, wanting to feel normal.

Wiggling her toes in the plush carpet she'd ever felt, she leaned against the window sill, exhausted yet wired. Andre was the only gentleman in this outfit and the only to take pity on her.

Her headache was gone, her stomach full, and another glass of whiskey in her hand. By the end of this ordeal, she'd be an alcoholic.

If it ever ended. Andre and Kris seemed to think she was there for the long haul. Her chest tightened again, and she sipped more of the warming liquid. She wondered if this was what immortality felt like, watching humanity progress down a road unable to join them in soirees or understand how precious every second of life was. Did humans understand both their universal significance and their individual insignificance?

She shook the thoughts away, suspecting they weren't hers. Whenever Andre tried his shit, her head felt foggy, and right now, she was foggy.

"Stop it!" she hissed at him, suspecting he'd hear her, even if he was one of those in attendance at the soiree.

The sense eased. She slumped against the sill, hot from the inside out while the late fall breeze chilled her skin. Her eyes fell to the entryway in front of the elegant building in which she stayed, then to the street further down, where several forms moved from beneath a canopy, trailed by a shadow darker than night. She saw Kris and squeezed her glass to keep from hurling it at him. Andre was with him, the beautiful woman, the dark man Jade. All trailed by Gabriel, who paused to look up and wave at her.

She waved back, wondering how the most damning of them all was also the only who seemed anywhere able to feel sympathy. Gabriel disappeared. She imagined he went to her apartment to check on Toby and was struck by her longing to return to the tiny, cluttered mess of a life that was hers. She closed her eyes, desperately wishing the whiskey'd take effect and knock her out.

The boom of thunder and a bright glare made her eyes open. It hadn't come from the sky but from one of the buildings across the street, diagonal to her. She suspected fireworks and saw something streak into the sky. It didn't explode into lights but fell to her side of the street. She watched in fascination, not understanding what it was until a floor several below hers exploded into flying stone and fire. The impact of the rocket knocked her on her backside. She heard another boom, then a third.

The building shuddered, one explosion hitting close enough to her room that her windows shattered. Fear lit her insides, and she scrambled to her feet, darting to the door. It was still locked.

"Let me out!" she shouted, beating on it.

It wasn't a cheap plywood door with a simple push lock but a thick, wooden door as ancient as the hotel with deadbolts, as if Andre regularly locked prisoners in his guest room.

The door didn't even flinch as she beat her fists against it as hard as she could. She stepped away, sweating from whiskey and fear. Another boom, and the edges of the door lit up and spit fire as the rocket exploded in Andre's apartment. The impact knocked her back. The door groaned but didn't give, though the wall on one side crumbled enough to leave a large opening.

Andre's apartment was black and fiery. The rocket had exploded as it landed on the floor, leaving a gaping hole. She squeezed through the hole in the wall to find there wasn't enough of the floor left to walk on let alone make it to the door across the apartment.

She wriggled back into her room, mind working quickly. Another boom, another flash of light outside the window, another shudder as the building struggled to stand upright. Screams and blaring horns came from the streets. She tiptoed through the glass and leaned out the window, eyeing the wide ledge. There were balconies along the far side of the building that hadn't been destroyed. Any thought she had at Andre's apartment not being the target fled as she saw the damage done to her side of the building.

The booms stopped. She saw dark figures jump from the top of the building across from her to the ground, unaffected by what seemed like a thirty-story drop. They wove their way through the panicked crowds toward Andre's building.

Coming for *her*.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

Half drunk, shoeless, scared shitless, she had no option for escape except to crawl from her balcony onto the ledge. She wiped the glass shards from the ledge and carefully stepped out, standing against the outside wall. The ledge was just wide enough for her foot to fit fully. The wind was harsher, colder than it was just a few minutes ago. She pressed the front of her body against the building, dug her fingertips into indents in the stone, and slid her foot along the roughened ledge to the right, stepping slowly and forcing her head up.

"I don't even speak French," she muttered. "No passport, no identification, no shoes."

She moved along, foot-by-foot, focusing on the next stone and on her anger to keep from sobbing and falling to her doom. The sounds of chaos below grew as emergency vehicles responded.

Boom. She tensed and held her breath. The rocket slammed into an ambulance parked in front of Andre's, the brilliant explosion throwing heat and light that reached her on what she estimated was the twentieth floor. She started moving again, panic rising as she realized not all the attackers in the building across the street had jumped to the street. She was vulnerable, exposed. If they wanted her dead, she'd given them the best target imaginable.

A shuffling drew her attention, the sound at odds with the chaos below. She looked back toward Andre's apartment, surprised to see two dark forms on the ledge following her.

She reached a balcony and lowered herself carefully onto it. The French doors were locked, and she beat on them, looking around wildly for deck furniture to break the glass. The patio was empty.

Boom. She dropped instinctively to the ground. The rocket smashed into the floor below, shattering glass and pulverizing part of the balcony. The impact was close enough to deafen her to everything but her own breathing. She stared at the broken glass before her and then at the men nearing on the ledge. Across the street, she imagined the man with the rockets taking careful aim at her. Her only chance at safety was across a swath of broken glass.

For the second time that night, she began to think she hadn't drunk enough whiskey. She rose unsteadily and brushed some of the glass away with her bare foot, near tears.

Boom.

She ran, crying out as glass shredded her feet. She forced herself to continue to the apartment's entrance and flung open the door, revealing a hall with auxiliary lighting reflecting off a white marble floor. She stepped inside, sagged against the wall, and lifted one bloodied foot. She pried glass free with shaking hands between sobs, then set her foot down and did the same for the other. Familiar dizziness assailed her. She shoved herself away from the wall and staggered down the hall. A hole in the floor was between her and the elevators.

Boom. The lights went out. She clung to the wall, at a loss as to what to do. Right about now, she'd be happy to see Kris and would even risk going to the shadow world!

She felt two tiny bites on her arm, and suddenly electricity flew through her. Her mouth opened in a frozen scream as the burning pain paralyzed her. The current stopped, and she convulsed on the cold marble floor.

Red flashlights blurred before her eyes. Gloved hands snatched her. A hood went over her head, and she was flung across someone's shoulder hard enough to make her ribs flare with pain.

Dazed and pained, she couldn't help but wish she'd just jumped off the ledge instead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sasha himself, followed by two members of his guard of immortal badass creatures, delivered the new, bloodied tenant to the cell across the hall. They were trailed by a man Rhyn recognized well.

Jade. One of Kris's warriors. With some satisfaction, Rhyn wondered if another of Kris's men had gotten as fed up with Kris as he had.

Sasha left without even a smartass remark, and Rhyn rose, gazing with interest across the hall. The scent of blood made his blood sizzle. The bloody mess in the next cell was a human. There was something very different about the human's blood, like comparing warm, homemade bread with stale crumbs out of the garbage.

He *drooled* at the smell, his gums and body aching for a taste. In all his years as an immortal, he's never *drooled* over anything!

Immortal mate. There was no mistaking the sense, just as there was no mistaking this human was so much more than a mate for the average immortal.

Ancient's mate.

Surprised, he cursed Death for dumping the vulnerable human he was meant to protect into Hell before freeing him!

The cell block fell silent, and he sensed the others also smelled the human blood. The cowering healer left his corner of the cell for the first time in a while and approached the human on the bed. Its tongue flickered out as it rolled the human. Gently, the healer began its trade.

Rhyn watched, even more fascinated when the healer hesitated suddenly and withdrew.

"What is it, Rhyn? And why does it smell like the best hamburger earth can make?" Jared broke the predatory silence.

"Looks human," Rhyn replied. "Smells human."

"My left arm for a bite..." Jared groaned. "What's that freak doing?"

The healer's nervous gaze flickered to Rhyn. It drew the human off the bed and dragged the body into the corner, as if to protect them both from the immortal prisoner.

"Nothing right now," Rhyn replied. "Worst healer I've ever seen. Should be done by now."

"N...no!" the healer replied, agitation crossing its features. "Not a normal h... human."

"Looks and smells normal."

"N...no!"

It said nothing more but ducked its head and began to clean the human with its long tongue, shuddering at each lick. Rhyn felt suddenly jealous, wishing he could taste what smelled so wonderful.

He paced again, wondering why Sasha would put a *human* in his zoo, unless this was the worst human in the world.

The more he watched, the less likely this seemed. The human was a female, and a young one. Her dark, curly hair was matted with blood, her features pale. The healer stopped to rest and pushed immortal sustenance --small square water and food cubes --into her mouth.

Her draw was insane. Her blood smelled sweet, and the oddly charged aura around her made his brow furrow. In all his years, he'd never seen anything like her.

Ancient's mate. His *mate*.

He froze. He'd heard how other immortals stumbled upon the humans meant to mate with them. There were few humans who could stick it out with an immortal; something in their blood made them different from all the others. He'd felt a familiar sense around...

Lilith. The woman whose death by his hand had landed him here in Hell.

Only the draw around this woman meant for him was much stronger. Much more dangerous.

He growled deep and low, glaring at the woman across the hall. The healer pulled her into its arms, his gaze flickering around again.

He'd thought himself in love with Lilith once, and so had Kris and half their brothers.

Fools, all of them! She'd been a siren, a human whose black heart lured any immortal she encountered into the hands of the Dark One!

The woman across the hall held the same beguiling aura.

Rhyn retreated to the wall and sat with his back against it, staring at the healer that held the woman protectively in his arms.

Every human had its own special power, similar to immortals. He wondered what hers was, and if it was the same gift of treachery that had doomed Lilith.

She awoke on the lower bunk bed in a prison cell with no windows and a tiny metal toilet and sink. Her blurred vision fell to the corner, where a creature with glowing emerald eyes crouched. She jerked back, pain shooting through her.

"You brought much blood," the creature said, its voice trembling a little with excitement.

She closed her eyes and pushed herself up, her breath catching at the sharp pain in her ribs. Her feet felt swollen and fiery.

"What are *you*?" the creature asked.

Its voice was hoarse, and it spoke with a small lisp.

She braced herself and opened her eyes. The lighting was harsh. Aside from its large, glowing green eyes, the creature appeared near-human with a lean body covered in some sort of leather jumper. She couldn't distinguish whether it was male or female. The voice sounded like the sultry growl of a woman, but it had short hair and no breasts. And four fingers on each hand. Its skin was porcelain pale, as if it never saw sunlight.

"I'm a human," she said.

"A *mortal* human?" it replied skeptically.

"Is there any other kind?"

The creature looked confused but shifted from its guarded crouch to a kneeling position.

"Does the mortal human have a name?"

"Katie."

"Katie," it repeated pensively. "Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaatie."

Her feet were swollen and shredded, as she expected. The creature repeated her name several more times while she examined her body. She was bruised all over and wondered if her ribs were broken as well. She'd be lucky to walk again soon, and without medical supplies...with her luck lately, she wouldn't die from infection, just suffer for the rest of her life.

"Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaatie."

"Would you stop that?"

"Katie."

"Do you have a name?"

"Lankha."

"Where are we, Lankha?"

"In Hell. Heeeeeeeeeeeelll."

She looked out of the front of the cell into a small corridor with equally harsh lighting. Across from them was another cell, this one darkened. Its occupant stared back at her with glowing silver eyes.

"He drinks blood. He smells yours," Lankha volunteered.

"What is he?"

"Don't know. From the mortal human realm like you."

"What...realm is this?"

"Heeeeeeeeeell. It's in the underworld, the only place where immortals can't come."

If no immortals could save her, she wondered who could. Who'd have ever thought she'd *want* to be found by the jackass, Kris?

"I need whiskey," she said, and rubbed her head.

"Whiiiiiiiiiskeeeeeeeey."

Lankha's voice was almost sing-song. It stood and retrieved small blue pellets from its bed, offering them to her.

"What is it?" she asked, accepting them.

"Water for mortal human. Warden says one every moon cycle."

She eyed them doubtfully but popped one into her mouth. It tasted like a plain jelly bean, until she swallowed, when it felt like a stream of water spilled from the back of her mouth to her gullet. Within seconds, she felt refreshed.

Lankha retrieved a small satchel from its bed and sat cross-legged on the floor beside her feet, withdrawing small vials and balled gauze.

"What're you doing?" she asked, watching.

"I'm a healer. Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeealer. Warden put you here so I could help you. I cleaned your blood. I started but grew tired. Now, I finish."

Lankha licked its lips in satisfaction. She feared asking more and braced herself when it took one foot in its hand. Lankha's hands were covered in what felt like soft, feathery, cool micro-suede. Its touch eased the heat and pain. She watched, astonished, as it carefully cleaned her feet without hurting them and then slathered on oil from one vial and wrapped them in gauze.

When it'd finished, she felt little pain, and the heat was completely gone.

"That's amazing, Lankha," she voiced.

"Amaaaaaazing," it agreed. "I'm the oldest male healer in my guild. There's one female older. Your body is stubborn, but you will heal."

Male, she noted mentally.

His hands traveled up her legs with the expertise and gentleness of a doctor, all the while spreading the soft coolness through her. His touch lingered on bruises, and he retrieved a small tool when he reached the hem of her dress. He sliced through it, and she pushed his hand away.

"You're hurt," he said, surprised.

"I don't have any other clothes! You can't be cutting up the only set I do have."

He looked concerned and stood again, retrieving something else from his bed. He dropped a leather jumper similar to his on her lap and then returned to his cutting. The creature across the hall growled. She didn't let herself think too much about what it might be, how she ended up in Hell, or why she'd just let some otherworldly creature with fuzzy hands cut off her clothes.

Lankha's hands remained on her ribs for a long, long time. He appeared satisfied at last and touched her breast. She slapped his hand away, and he looked at her, confused again.

"What *are* these?"

"Just ignore them and finish up."

He obeyed. He finished at long last and replaced all his things in his satchel. She pulled on the jumper, not expecting it to fit and surprised to find the leather-like material as flexible as spandex. It fit snugly, though it was so thin, she still felt exposed.

"What do you do?" Lankha asked, sitting back.

"I'm in the food industry. I help them with marketing, which was my major until I quit school."

"You make vegetables? There's a marketing guild?"

"Oh, no," she said, realizing his meaning. "I don't do anything...special like you." He frowned.

"Rather, doing nothing *is* my apparent talent," she clarified.

"You are not a normal mortal human."

"No. I'm, um, apparently unaffected by the...talents of other...guild guys, unless they're, like, really old."

"Oooooohhhh. Old like me, oldest in my guild."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Very nice talent," he said. "Very rare. Not good for you, though."

"Why not?"

"The Ancients are very rare. I've been in Heeeeeeeeeeeeeell forever, and if I wasn't here, I couldn't heal you."

"Only the Ancients can offer any protection," she murmured with a frown.

"Interesting."

"You'll die soon."

"Shouldn't I be dead already if I'm in Hell?"

He shrugged, not nearly as concerned with her life or death as she was. She set the blue water pills on her pillow and stretched back. Her ribs were sore but no longer painful. Amnesia was looking like a good option compared to Hell.

"Now you pay me," Lankha said.

"Excuse me? Pay you *what*?"

He smiled, revealing fangs among the neat row of white teeth. She shivered, cold inside.

"Blood," he confirmed.

She stared at him.

"Not much. I don't have the appetite of the *beast*," he said, lifting his chin to the glowing silver eyes across the corridor.

He took her hand gently in his feathery, cool hands and pressed a finger to the inside of her forearm. It fell numb. She said nothing, the world too surreal for her, and turned her head away as he dipped his head. She didn't feel his fangs sink into her, but she *heard* the sound of punctured flesh. He sipped quietly. As promised, he did not drink long, and she felt him press another finger to the wound to seal the seepage.

Her stomach turned. She didn't know how she could ever eat again.

The beast across the hall roared and threw itself against its prison. The cell wall buckled and bent. She scrambled toward the back of the cell, huddling with Lankha in a corner. She couldn't see what was there but knew it was on its way to get her.

"He likes mortal human blood," Lankha whispered.

"No shit!"

A man in a robe hurried down the hall as the beast battered itself against the weakening cell. The man paused and whispered something in a harsh tongue. The cell repaired itself until it stood straight again. The beast within continued to throw itself at it, ceasing finally when it saw the prison had been reinforced.

The robed man strode away, and Katie and Lankha eased from the corner. She sat on her bunk while Lankha climbed atop his. She stared at the beast across the hall staring at her and soon heard Lankha's snores. He was fed and happy. She shuddered, looking at the tiny scars of his teeth on her forearm.

One day, she'd wake up and find herself on the Metro again.

"Hey, human."

She glanced up. The voice came from a cell down the hall.

"Lunchmeat."

She moved to the bars at the front of her cell, aware of the beast across the hall doing the same with a growl. Pale hands draped through bars two cells down from the beast.

"Did you just call me lunchmeat?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. A little mortal meat, some cheese and crackers. How ya doin', lunchmeat?"

"Pretty shitty. Is there anyone here who doesn't want to eat me or drink my blood?"

The masculine voice gave a surprised laugh, and he pressed his face to the bars. He *looked* human, aside from the fanged smile.

"Sexy lunchmeat," he said. "You'd enjoy what I'd do to you."

"Never really been a fan of being eaten alive," she returned.

"Spunky. Me likey."

"Thanks, psycho."

"You talk big behind those bars, little girl."

She stared with surprise at the low growl from the darkened cell across from her.

"The rabid dog speaks," she noted. "I'm already in Hell. I'm thinking death might be a bit more to my liking."

The pale, fanged man laughed again.

"Which one of you will promise me a painless death?" she baited, at her last wit's end.

"I'll make it less painful than usual," the pale man said.

"I like pain," another voice down the block growled.

"Less pain than Jared."

"More pain than Jared but less than Khakhala."

"No deal."

"No death, just pain."

"Mortal blood rocks."

"Can I get some action and then give you a painless death?"

The immortals in the cell block threw out their best offers, and she couldn't help the sense of terror settling into her gut.

"No," she replied. "No action. Just the pleasure of killing me. You can do whatever you want to my body afterwards."

"No good to me dead."

"Only good to me dead. Not allowed to kill."

The voices down the hall were all male, though she doubted any of them were human.

"No pain," the beast before her said.

"Don't you want to drink my blood?" she asked skeptically.

"It won't hurt, little girl."

His menacing growl chilled her more than any of the others'.

"I'll think about it," she replied, and stepped away from the bars.

"Hey Lunchmeat," the pale man, Jared, called.

"Yeah?"

"Don't stick your hands outside the cage."

"I have no intention of doing so."

"Rhyn might grab one and pull you out. You'd be cut into pieces by the bars, and then no one would get their snack."

"Yeah, real shame, shithead."

He laughed.

"What're you doing here, Lunchmeat? Humans don't come here unless they're dead, and even then, only a couple make it onto our supermax zoo."

"No idea."

"Why aren't you crying, little girl?" the beast, Rhyn, asked in his gravelly, low voice.

"Maybe she's a spy," a voice farther down the hall called. "Here to listen to our secrets."

"I'm not a spy."

"Wouldn't matter if you were," Jared said, unconcerned. "The beast is right. You're holding up well. Maybe when they start the torture, she'll cry. Then she'll negotiate on that no-pain thing."

"How I ache to be there," another voice moaned.

"You taste as sweet as you look, little girl?" Rhyn mocked.

"Like soggy gym socks," she snapped.

"I like you, Lunchmeat," Jared continued. "Will be a shame when they break you. Or when one of us gets loose and kills you. Not sure what'll come first, though Rhyn there has almost broken through his cage twice now."

Supermax, inhuman predator wing of the zoo. Torture.

It figured. Her heart was beating fast, her palms sweaty. She returned to her bunk and lay down, cold fear filling her. She stared at the silver eyes staring at her, slowly falling into an exhausted, restless slumber.

The sounds of Rhyn slamming his body into his cell and snarling awoke her sometime later. Lankha was huddled in a corner, but she rolled to watch. She popped one of the water cubes into her mouth, head pulsing from a nasty hangover.

Rhyn had bent his cage again. Though she tried hard not to fear death, she wondered what kind of creature was capable of breaking through bars made of materials she'd never before seen and held in place with some sort of magic. She wanted to see what the beast looked like, what kind of monster he'd be, yet knew if she saw him in full light, he was on his way to kill her.

The robed man came again and repaired the damage. Rhyn fell quiet, and the robed man turned to her. His eyes were black and empty, his frame small and wiry. He wore a glowing talisman on a leather chain around his neck.

"Hey Lunchmeat."

"Yeah."

"If you take the amulet, no pain, guaranteed."

Her eyes dropped to it. The robed man sent what looked like a lightning bolt down the hall. Jared cursed.

"Come with me," the robed man ordered her.

The bars of her cell dissipated at his command, and she stepped into the hall. A narrow, lit walkway extended all the way down the corridor, the only part of the hall out of reach of the arms of the prisoners on either side.

He led her toward Jared's direction. The pale man was tall and lean, and he hung his hands again through the bars of his cell. He winked as she passed and licked his lips.

"Nice ass. Wouldn't mind a bite of that."

She ignored him and crossed her arms. Some of the cells were black like Rhyn's, some with bars, and others with glass. Some appeared empty while others...she stopped looking when she saw the fanged moth man. The predators were silent, watching their lunch parade by them.

She trailed the robed man through two doors and into a hot, dry night. He led her through a fortress too ancient for her to date, its blackened walls and well-worn stones massive and thick. There were two moons in this realm, one full and the other a sliver.

The robed man led her into the fortress and wound his way through bright intersections, down stairs, and into a more opulent part of the building. The halls grew wider, and the stone turned to carpet beneath her sore feet. She was surprised she could walk at all and knew a few ounces of blood had been a small price to pay for Lankha's work, which she'd never have gotten for all the money in the world at home.

She nearly leapt past her escort when he entered the banquet hall, the scents of roasted meat and a million other things making her stomach roar.

Until she saw the spit with the human-like body roasting above it. She stared, knowing no amount of counseling would fix her when this was over.

"My lord, Sasha, I have brought the human," her robed escort said in a monotone voice.

"Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

The robed man bowed and retreated to the door. She turned as the man called Sasha lifted one of her curls from her shoulder. He was a lean man with gleaming silver-blue eyes, teeth filed into points, and an aura so cold she stepped away.

"Like a doll," Sasha said, admiring her. "So full of life. Perfect."

"I told you, Sasha," a familiar voice said.

Katie looked past him, gasping. Jade stood near the spit, dark eyes blazing.

"And you were right," Sasha replied. "Now go, my love, before they notice you're gone."

Jade's glare stayed on her as he hesitated. Sasha turned to him with a smile, and Jade's gaze softened. He bowed his head and left her alone with the madman.. Sasha faced her. Katie took another step back, the stillness of his gaze unsettling.

"I've been waiting for a long time to claim you. We knew you'd appear eventually."

He motioned to a seat at the table loaded with food she feared eating. The seat was at his left, and he waited until she accepted before sitting. There was already food on her plate --meat from an unnamed source, vegetables, bread.

"I know you're hungry," he said.

She was starving. She took the roll and bit into it, surprised to find it tasted perfect. She ate the whole basketful while he watched. When he motioned to the meat, she looked toward the spit and then lied.

"I'm vegetarian."

He ate nothing. When her stomach was full, she allowed herself to look at him. His eyes gleamed. He took her wrist and raised his pinkie, where she saw the nail had been filed to a point and reinforced with metal. Before she could draw her wrist away, he pierced it. The pain surprised her after Lankha's gentle ministrations. The creature twisted her wrist and squeezed, capturing her blood in a small vial. The robed man who had led her to the hall strode forward and took the vial, then backed away silently.

"Verifying your identity," Sasha said with a polite smile.

"What do you want with me?"

"You know what. Your blood is rare. It can lead us to victory."

"You're the bad guys."

"We serve a different master."

He said nothing more, as if unwilling to say more until the identity verification was done. Still hungry, she ventured to try the vegetables. The broccoli tasted normal, and she ate all of them. She looked up at Sasha, her heart hammering under his hungry look.

The robed man returned and spoke in the harsh tongue. A look of satisfaction spread over the face of the creature before her. He gripped her wrist hard, lowering his head. She wrenched away. His reflexes were like Kris's, too fast to follow. He snatched her neck and rose, jerking her off the chair. Her air supply cut off, she tore at the hand holding her until the skin on his arm fell away to reveal smooth, black skin more akin to a reptile's than a human's. When the world narrowed, he released her. She fell, gasping for air.

"I want you alive, but I don't care how much you suffer. You will find I'm a reasonable...man. I offered you the easy way, you refused. Now that choice is forever gone. You are stuck with a way less comfortable for you. You're in complete control of how much I hurt you."

His calm words terrified her. She rubbed her neck, sensing the evil and determination in his tone. He paused a moment for the words to sink in. She caught her breath and waited. When he reached for her, she flinched but didn't fight him. He pulled her up and gripped her neck, pushing her head aside to expose the vulnerable skin.

She closed her eyes, telling herself she'd survive this and figure out how to get the hell out of there, even if it meant bartering with the monsters on her cell block. Her resolve to grit her teeth and bear it lasted until the pain.

He tore into her neck, and agony seared straight through her.

* * *

Rhyn's impotent frustration subsided some when they returned the human. He didn't know if Sasha would recognize her for what she was, or if only the immortal meant to mate with her would see.

She came back in the same shape as when she arrived: bloodied beyond recognition. He was surprised she came back at all --Sasha had no mercy and rarely left his victims alive.

Unless he wanted her for something else. What would Sasha want with her? What was her gift?

He slapped the wall of his cell, cursing Death again for not freeing him. He couldn't protect anyone from Sasha in Hell, and he itched to taste the woman meant to be his mate.

The robed man dropped her body on the bed, sealed the cage, and turned to Rhyn. "Your master will see you now," he said.

Rhyn growled at the robed man, who hurried away. Sasha's servants wouldn't get within a foot of Rhyn; instead, they shaped the magic of Sasha's realm around him and gave him only one direction to go, that which Sasha wanted.

"Ooh, come out as something different!" Jared exclaimed.

He'd amused them and himself by emerging each time in some other shape. Today, however, he was more interested in seeing Sasha and hearing about the human than amusing the zoo creatures. He waited for the barrier before him to lift and then strode out.

"A half-breed! Worst one yet!" Jared exclaimed, hanging his hands through the bars in his cell.

"Fuck off, demon," Rhyn growled.

He made his way through the castle with the black stones as he had many times during his long stay. The twin moons of the outer banks of Hell were bright. It was always dark here, and the moons rose and set each day. The fresh air was welcome after the musty scents of prison. He found some of his wired energy dissipating at the long walk and change of scenery despite knowing nothing good had ever come from a meeting with Sasha.

Sasha was waiting for him in his study, sitting beside a fireplace that burned with black flames. Blood had dripped down his face to speckle his shirt. His silver-blue eyes glowed with no warmth as he smiled.

"Time for our periodic chat, little brother," he said, and motioned to the other chair before the hearth.

Rhyn refused it and threw himself onto the comfy couch farther away from Hell's flames.

"How are all my pets?" Sasha asked.

"You know how they are, fuckhead."

"Another month and you're still defiant."

Normally, it was as far as they got before Sasha flew off the handle, had him tortured, and threw him back into his cell. Rhyn waited for it, determined to put up the same fight he always did.

It didn't come. Sasha was calm.

In fact, Sasha was *happy!*

Rhyn sat up, eyeing his brother warily. Sasha sipped blood from a goblet, content.

"I've decided to take a mate."

Rhyn laughed, thoughts flying to the spunky human in the zoo. Sasha glared at him.

"You, brother, will take a mate?" Rhyn goaded. "It's the human you threw in the cell across from me, isn't it?"

"She's beautiful and she's an immortal's mate."

"Beautiful? No. Not ugly, yeah. Our family has no luck with immortal mates.

Traitorous bitches, all of them."

"Sounds like *brotherly* concern," Sasha mocked. "You know, if you hadn't joined our family, I wouldn't be here, and Father would still be alive. You think I want to be in Hell at the side of the Dark One?" Sasha flung his arm around.

Rhyn rolled his eyes and got up, grabbing an orange off the fruit basket on Sasha's desk. Sasha's moods were varied and fickle, never lasting too long. Of all the brothers, he'd always been the one to begrudge Andre's role as their leader.

"As long as I keep her out of your reach, so you don't kill this one, too," Sasha added.

"If she's yours, I'll kill her faster."

Even as Rhyn spoke, he was disturbed by the thought of the frazzled but sweet woman across the hall from him falling to his brother. She was a smartass worthy of any of his brothers, and yet, no human deserved *this*.

Especially not the immortal mate meant for him.

His gaze took in Sasha before sliding to the black flames. He'd forgotten what color real fire was, but he found himself thinking it was orange, like the fruit in the basket on Sasha's desk. Sasha was staring into the fire, pensive.

"She's different," Sasha muttered. "Easy to break. Still human."

"What's her gift?"

"Fuck off, Rhyn. Who would you rather see her with, Kris or me? Kris must be livid I've stolen her from him."

"She's better off dead."

He wanted to keep Sasha talking, to find out what it was about this woman that was so special that both Sasha and Kris wanted her. And to spend more time outside his cell. He'd long since stopped trying to escape, knowing the magic of Hell and the Dark One was too old for him to break. He'd still rather be humoring Sasha and eating his oranges than sitting in the damned cell!

"You don't seem too thrilled yourself," he added.

"The timing is bad," Sasha said with a glance. "I may need something of you soon."

"You know I'll refuse."

"We'll see," was the growled response. "I do have news for you."

"I don't give two --"

"Andre is dead-dead."

Rhyn fell silent. The only brother who'd accepted him and treated him half decently was gone?

"Thought that might mean something to you," Sasha said, searching his face. "I guess not. Maybe I've succeeded in breaking you after all."

"Never, fuckhead."

"Without your protector, you'll never be welcomed at the Council."

"I never was," Rhyn growled. "One of you was always trying to kill me."

"And now you've got no one to protect you. You've got nothing, Rhyn, but a place by my side. Think about it."

"Done. No," Rhyn said without hesitation.

"Get the fuck back to your cell."

Sasha left, pissed this time. Rhyn watched him, even more curious after the odd interaction. Sasha had told him many things before to try to break him, but this time, he sensed the truth behind the words.

Andre was gone. He felt heaviness sink to the pit of his stomach, and regret trickled through him.

Of all the brothers, Andre had been the only who believed in him. The eldest and wisest had found him when he was a child, wandering the immortal world, alone. Andre had raised him as much as anyone, sponsored his petition to be recognized by the immortals, cleaned up all the messes he'd never meant to make.

Regret turned to sorrow, and Rhyn gazed around him. Whatever killed Andre would never have succeeded if he weren't trapped here!

He snatched two more oranges before the magic constrained his movement. He took his time going back to the cell block.

Sasha was not a hard creature to understand. This time, Rhyn couldn't figure out why the creature wanted a human so badly he'd bring her here yet didn't seem eager about her becoming his mate.

He retreated to his cell and sat against the wall again, troubled by a familiar feeling of helplessness.

He could've saved Andre. He had the magic, the strength.

He simply didn't have the control. His brothers didn't hate him just because of his lineage. They hated him because he couldn't focus his magic. It came out when it wanted in what form it wanted.

They'd always said he was a danger to the human world because of this. In the darkness of his cell, he admitted this was true, but he also knew no one could've saved his brother but him.

He hated Kris even more. Fury and sadness made him loosen control of his magic. He didn't care that Hell would suck him dry.

He slammed himself against the cell walls, roaring.

* * *

"Still alive, Lunchmeat?"

She never thought she'd want to hear the monster's voice. Her world was one of agony and blurred colors. Someone had dumped her into a heap in her cell, and she felt Lankha's cool, fuzzy hands.

"He took too much," the healer chided.

She smelled her own blood. It covered her by the time he'd finished his sick games with her. Her heartbeat was shallow and fast; her head felt like it was in a clamp. He'd forced her to stay awake through it all despite her fainting spells, tearing open her veins and feeding until she was too weak to fight him.

He *wanted* her to fight him, to ratchet up the levels of agony. He got off on it as he dry humped her and sucked her life from her.

Rhyn made a racket in his cell. She wished, prayed he got free and ended her.

Lankha's cool magic worked quickly. He took away her pain first then shoved a water cube between her lips. It melted in her mouth and ran down her throat, soothing it after her screams had run it raw. The healer's soft hands took away her headache, then the throbbing in her neck, and worked on the other parts of her body until she felt whole again.

She was too weak to move. He gently removed the blood-soaked jumper and cleaned her. His touch was so soothing and cool, she vowed to give him whatever blood he wanted for taking away such pain. He tugged on another jumper and then lifted her onto the bed with strength that seemed at odds with his small form.

Still, she couldn't sleep. She relived the bloody scene in the banquet hall, heard the creature panting her name as he came against her thigh and then tore through the other side of her neck. He'd spent hours on her, disabling her and then hurting her.

Lankha shoved another cube in her mouth, then a third. They melted and trickled down her throat. They weren't water cubes; they tasted of nothing she could identify. They were metallic and sugary. He smoothed out her hair and finally rested a feathery hand on her eyes, easing her into a restless sleep that didn't last long enough.

It felt like mere seconds later when she opened her eyes but guessed it'd been much longer. Her body was weak but working, and there were more of the odd sugar cubes beside her pillow. Lankha was asleep above, and the clamoring of the cell block was gone. She rubbed her head, shaking despite the rest. She ate two more of the sugar cubes and a water cube, eyes lingering on the bloody mess that was her jumper in the corner.

She had to get out of there. She understood Jared's warning about torture and being willing to bargain. But she didn't think any of them could escape, or they would have.

"Not so brave anymore, are you, little girl."

Her eyes fell to the dark cell holding Rhyn.

"If you were half as tough as you sound, you wouldn't be stuck in here," she retorted.

"Lunchmeat's still kicking," Jared said. His hands appeared through the cell bars.

Rhyn smashed himself against the cell, as if to prove his strength. She ignored him and rubbed her forehead.

"What does the amulet do?" she asked Jared.

"Now you want to talk."

"Keeps us here," Rhyn growled.

"Yes, that neat little trinket is a source of constant magic that traps us. I hear you're immune to magic. You could get one of us out," Jared said.

"If that's the case, why on earth would I bother to free any of you parasites?" she asked, too tired to stand. She sat next to the bars on her cell.

"I guess you wouldn't if you didn't plan on leaving Hell. Sasha's men would kill you twice before you reached the front door."

He had a point, but she knew she'd be in as much danger from the monsters as from Sasha's men. If she had the amulet and could bargain for protection --and one of them not eating her in exchange for her freedom --she wondered if she couldn't escape. Or better yet --if the monster she rescued would kill her once freed.

"No pain," Rhyn said with a husky chuckle.

"Not too much pain, and I'll raise you a promise not to fuck you till you're dead," Jared offered.

"Jesus," she muttered.

"He ain't coming here," a voice down the hallway snickered.

"But I am!" another chortled.

She touched her neck delicately, tracing the scars. They were jagged and ugly, similar to those on her arms. Lankha was a lifesaver, but she didn't intend to spend the rest of her years being torn apart by some sadistic vampire with a hard on.

"We'll see," she said at last.

She hoped no one ever came for her, and she'd never have to choose which predator to end her life. The monster across the hall was no option, and Jared was little better. The others...she wondered if Lankha could defend her. Based on his cowering every time Rhyn roared, she doubted it.

Even Kris was better than any of these creatures, and she'd barely tolerated him! Her thoughts turned to him with some bitterness. What kind of human protector allowed one of his own men to turn her over to something like Sasha? Did Kris even know about Jade's betrayal?

"Hey, Lunchmeat, what do you call a human running down the street?" Jared called.

"What?"

"Fast food."

Several of the monsters snickered. She rolled her eyes and retreated to her bunk, hoping Sasha planned to give her time to rest before attacking her.

"Damn you, Kris."

"Kris?" one voice echoed.

"The Council's Kris?" another snarled.

"Yeah," she answered.

"He sent you here?" Jared asked.

"Don't know. My luck's gone to shit since meeting him."

"Rhyn, you hear that?"

She glanced toward the dark cell and saw the silver eyes flash dangerously.

"You know Kris and Sasha are brothers, right?" Jared continued.

"No, I didn't."

"There were seven of them. Sasha betrayed the others and aligned with the Dark One. He goes through Hell and collects us freaks down here."

"Hate Kris."

"He must die!"

"Kris." Rhyn's low voice was the most sinister of all the monsters' complaints.

He drew out the name, and she sensed a personal connection to the white-haired man.

"Kris's not stupid enough to send you here. My guess is Sasha snatched you. This is the only place immortal pets can't get you, or anyone else," Jared theorized. "Hey Rhyn, bet Kris wants this one back."

Rhyn smashed his cell hard enough for the walls to shudder.

Her luck grew worse. She heard the hisses that preceded the robed man's approach. She tensed and waited, willing him to continue. When he stopped at her cell, she sighed.

"Come with me."

The inmates began cheering. She hesitated, reviewing what the inmates had told her about grabbing the robed man's necklace. As she emerged, both of them jumped back as Rhyn smashed into his cell.

"Less pain," Jared reminded her as she passed.

"A million dollars."

"No pain but some fucking."

"I'll just eat you."

One by one the inmates made their offers as she passed. The robed man was small. Surely she could punch him hard enough to knock him out. She balled up a fist and looked at it, wondering how to hit him.

She wasn't going back to Sasha. Ever.

Hands darted from the cells to swipe at them, and she saw why the robed man kept to the center of the corridor. He reached the end, and she readied her fist. Once she had the amulet, she could bargain harder with the inmates.

Punch him, grab the amulet, bargain for her freedom. The plan was quick and easy.

The robed man opened the door for her as he had before. She waited for him to face her then punched him as hard as she could in the nose. It *hurt!* She shook her hand out.

The inmates erupted into cheers. The robed man didn't fall to her feet unconsciously as she planned but stared at her in surprise. She saw lightning forming in his hand.

"Hit him again!" Jared yelled.

"In the neck," another seconded.

She raised her fist to lay a right hook to his throat, beginning to panic when the lightning arced between his hands. He raised a hand to block, but she kicked him in the groin, and then in the neck. He bent over, coughing. She jerked the amulet off his neck, and the lighting flickered. The robed man stretched for her. She danced away from him, then away from a hand that brushed her calf.

She raised the amulet to stare at it, the cacophony around her rising as the excited inmates glimpsed their freedom. They began beating against their cell walls, and the lights flickered again.

The robed man was coming for her.

"Make me an offer!" she shouted, backing away.

"No pain!" four voices chimed at once.

"No pain and escape to your world!"

"A million dollars."

"NO pain!" Jared shouted at last.

"If you're Kris's, pain like you've never known."

"That's not how this works, Rhyn!" she snapped.

The robed man tackled her, and the amulet went flying. Arms, tentacles, and antennae stretched for it. It landed dead center in the hall, out of everyone's reach. She wrenched away, only for the robed man to snatch her ankle and drag her down. He shot lightning at her that bounced off and hit an inmate. The screams added to the chaos. She kicked the robed man, and both launched themselves at the amulet.

She snatched it; he grabbed her waist. When she dropped it, he bent. They tumbled to the ground, one foot --she wasn't sure whose --knocking the amulet away.

Silence fell. She and the robed man both stopped moving, watching in disbelief as the amulet skittered, rolled, and disappeared into Rhyn's cell.

Rhyn gave a chilling chuckle.

"You better run," Jared advised. "Both of you."

The robed man scrambled to his feet and darted for the door. A dark arm darted from Rhyn's cell and snatched him mid-stride. There was a small scream, then the crack of bone and ripping of flesh. Silence.

Katie rose, heart hammering. Weakened already, she struggled for her balance.

"C'mere, little girl."

His throaty chuckle scared her more than the thought of returning to Sasha. She eyed the door at the end of the hall, then her cell, and turned 360. One way out.

"Give me a head start, Rhyn. It's only fair since you're free because of me."

"Go for it."

His noncommittal response and stillness worried her more. She started forward.

"Farewell, Lunchmeat," Jared called in resignation.

This couldn't be how she died! She'd lived through too much the past few days to be eaten by some boogeyman in a dark cell!

She straightened her shoulders, determined to approach her fate without fear. She'd been terrified since being told she had amnesia, but she'd stayed strong.

"Do your worst, you rabid dog," she challenged as she approached the point where the robed man had disappeared.

Another smoky chuckle. She sensed his movement and closed her eyes, willing her death to be as fast as the robed man's. Rhyn snatched her into the darkness, and a familiar fog appeared around her.

Suddenly, the shadow world released her. She gasped and dropped to her knees, unable to see in the inky blackness around her. She didn't feel sick this time, only weakness. The scent of sea was in the air, a rough circle of lighter darkness before her. The ground was rocky beneath her hands and knees, the air chilled.

She shoved at Rhyn when he grabbed her again and hauled her up. He certainly felt human with a massive male body expending heat and warmth.

"I haven't eaten in thousands of years," he rasped, holding her easily despite her struggles.

He gripped her neck and tilted her head. She fought him harder, tears in her eyes.

"Not so tough now, are you, little girl?" His voice was husky.

She slammed her elbow into his ribs, and he chuckled, locking his other arm around her. His body was warm compared to the chill of the sea. Immobilized, she waited with panicked dread for an attack like Sasha's. He nuzzled her neck, his breath hot against her skin. She squeezed her eyes closed, heart slamming in her tight chest.

There was a pinch and numbness as his fangs sank into her neck. He drank for a long minute then threw his head back, roaring with pleasure.

"You do taste as sweet as you look," he said, voice thick with need. "In the name of the Seven, I claim you as mine."

His words confused her. He released her neck, touching it with a thumb that burned hot enough to singe her skin. Her legs were too weak to hold her, and he lowered her to the ground. She saw his large frame against the night sky outside the small cave, human one moment, then decidedly not the next. He growled a warning and peered back at her through the silver eyes of a cat-like beast the size of a large horse.

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dawn came slowly, followed by the brilliant blue sky of morning. She shifted from her seat in the cave to stand at the edge of the cave, furious at him for leaving her in a small cave on a sheer cliff overlooking the sea. She hadn't slept all night, afraid of what other secrets the night held.

She looked down. The churning sea below was littered with jagged rocks that looked small from her perch a hundred feet above them. Not only could she not escape, but she could just as well starve to death if he decided never to return.

She braided her hair to keep the stiff sea breeze from tossing curls in her face and squinted upward again. She was closer to the top than to the waves, but the cliff had too few hand and footholds for her to try to climb. She perched on a boulder near the entrance, wondering how many nights of Sasha-type treatment she'd take before tossing herself off the cliff.

Bored, restless, fearful, she retreated to the back of the cave, searching it again for any sort of door or anything that might aid her escape. There was nothing. *Nothing* she could use to escape.

Which was why he chose this spot, and she couldn't help shivering at the thought that this place was too perfect for this to be the first time he'd imprisoned someone here.

"What're you doing?"

She jumped but replied without turning, "Looking for a way to escape."

"One way out."

She steeled herself and turned, expecting to find a monster.

He looked human. He was taller than average, over six and a half feet, built like a rock with wide shoulders and tapered abdomen and hips beneath a jumpsuit similar to those worn by the prisoners. Its snugness drew her eyes to his crotch and lean thighs. His hair was dark, his eyes liquid silver, his complexion olive and unshaven.

He tossed fish tied together on a rope into the center of the cave, ignoring her inspection.

"I can't eat them raw," she objected.

"Then you don't eat."

He walked to the edge of the cave and dived out.

She followed, startled, only to see a massive black bird the size of a pterodactyl coasting along the tops of the waves. She shook her head, convinced she was going crazy. Her eyes fell to the fish, and her nose wrinkled.

Rope. She knelt beside the fish and unwrapped them with a grimace, cheered to find the section of rope nearly five feet long. She tossed the fish back to the ocean and coiled the rope, hiding it beneath several small rocks in the back of the cave. She napped, paced, and stared up at the ceiling. The sun crossed the sky, and an hour before it would set, he returned.

With more fish. She sat up and crossed her legs, eyeing the rope. He walked out again, and she tossed the fish and hid the rope, straightening just as he reappeared.

His eyes flashed silver as he glanced at her. He sat on a boulder near the entrance, as if he were the bouncer trying to prevent someone like her from exiting.

"C'mere, little girl."

"I *hate* that!"

"It's how this works."

"How what works?"

"I feed you, you feed me."

"Can't you eat a cow or a rabbit or something?"

"You taste better."

She didn't know what to think. She needed more rope to reach the top of the cliff, yet being dinner for any creature wasn't the way she'd like to go. And what if he attacked her as Sasha did, and she had no Lankha to heal her? She'd bleed out in this cave.

"I've claimed you as my blood slave," he said, as if reading her mind. "You're worth more to me alive."

"In that case, then, if you ever hurt me, I'll throw myself to the ocean!"

"Whatever."

She wasn't ready yet to prove it to him, not before she at least tried to escape. He gave her a look that warned her he'd get her if she didn't come to him. She rose, angry, and knelt beside him.

He gripped her neck in one large, roughened hand, tilting her head. She squeezed her eyes closed, heart quickening and her breathing fast and shallow. She gripped his wrist hard, wondering why he insisted on tormenting her by taking his time. At long last, she felt the warmth of his breath on her neck. He bit, and she stifled a cry. The pinch was less today, and the pain gone instantly, replaced by heat and warmth. He didn't drink long, and when he was finished he touched his thumb to the wound, cauterizing it again.

Only when he released her did she sit back on her heels and open her eyes. He was gone again. The blood loss and lack of food made her dizzy. She reached into her pocket and pulled out one of the three water cubes and the remaining sugary cube. She popped one water cube but replaced the sugary cube with some hesitation. If he brought her more fish tomorrow morning, she'd have rope enough to reach the cliff edge ten feet above. She'd need her strength for what she planned.

She lay down on her back to watch the sun set and didn't move until he returned early the next morning to toss stinky fish beside her. She rolled to face him, squinting in the grainy dawn. His silver eyes flashed from the darkness at the back of the cave, alarming her.

"You slaughter a party of Girl Scouts last night?" she asked, unnerved.

"Brave little mortal," came the growl. "Don't know the size of the storm about to hit you, do you."

She hated how he spoke to her, like he knew exactly what to say to terrify her. She was normally good at covering emotions she didn't want to display, but he read them all and threw them back in her face.

"What's it to you?" she groused.

"Need a mortal blood monkey. You owe me. Easy blood."

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. She'd like to think she was saving poor souls every day she spent with him donating her blood, but she couldn't help thinking she really wouldn't care what he did to get blood if she was gone.

"I owe *you*?" she echoed. "Who wrestled the crazy guy in a robe for the key? You wouldn't be free if not for me."

"You'd be in a thousand pieces if not for me."

"Like being a mortal blood monkey is soooooo far above lunchmeat!"

"You're alive, you're fed, and you're free."

"I am deep in your debt, my most gracious lord and master."

"Fuck you."

She skulked and imagined him doing the same in the back of the cave. He rustled around, and she wondered what he was doing so close to her precious rope. She feared asking him, not wanting to tip him off that she was plotting.

"And I'm not free," she added under her breath.

He stalked past her, his anger palpable. He dived off the ledge, and she scampered forward. The pterodactyl dropped and caught itself, coasting in the sea breeze.

She watched him until he disappeared, then freed the fish. She tied the lengths of rope together and hunted for and found the perfect boulder in the cave: a loose, rounded rock the size of both her fists that was light enough for her to throw. Tying her chosen anchor to one end of the rope, she sat to eat her sugary cube, checked again for the monster, and leaned out of the cave.

The cliff edge was around ten feet from the cave. She looked down, stomach unsettled by the distance. This was worse than ledge walking in the hotel; there was no balcony to catch her!

She swung the boulder up, ducking as it slapped the side of the cliff just short of the ledge and fell back to her. She tried again, releasing more rope this time. It clattered along the top of the cliff and fell. She continued to throw it until it stuck. She pulled hard on the rope, feeling some give, then tautness as the anchor lodged itself between unmovable objects.

Sweating already from the effort, she braided her hair to keep it out of her face and then leaned her full weight on the rope. It held. With another look down, she found her first foothold along the side of the cave and began to climb.

The ten feet to the top felt like it took hours, though the sun had barely risen when she finished. By the time she clawed her way over the edge, she was soaked with sweat and panting, her muscles burning from effort. She rested on her back for a short time before forcing herself up to sit up and look around.

Wherever she was, it was beautiful. Cliffs stretched as far as she could see in either direction with uneven stone and shale between her and the rest of the island. Some sort of goats watched her from the distance. Far, far, away, beyond the stone and shale, she thought she saw a swatch of green.

She might not be on her street or even in her neighborhood or city, but it certainly looked like she was back in her world. She trotted away from the cliff, slowing when she felt far enough from the edge. She walked through shallow stone valleys and hopped across boulders and shale toward the sun, casting frequent looks over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being stalked by a shape-changing demon with an attitude.

She found a narrow, rocky road and hopped from rock to road, surprised to see an older man leading a donkey pulling a cart ahead of her. There were small white houses here, one with a dog that barked as she passed. Fences that looked like nothing more than stacks of rock shingles edged each property. She followed the man at a distance, slowly confirming she was somewhere on her planet. She didn't know where exactly, but by the man's pale skin, she guessed Europe, maybe one of the Slavic countries.

The road rose, and she stopped at its peak to stare at the small village edging a wide bay below. The word "HOSTEL" was emblazoned across the side of what looked like a large red barn/bar in the center of the village. There were several small vehicles, several more men with donkeys, and a slew of boats departing the harbor for the morning catch.

The old man was waiting for her on the other side of the peak. He spoke a smattering of words she didn't understand.

"English?" she asked hopefully.

"Aye," he said with a chuckle. "Bit early fo' the tours to be comin' up this way."

"I wasn't on a tour. Could you tell me where I am?"

He looked her over, eyes lingering on her neck. She covered the bite marks self-consciously.

"Ye drinkin'?"

"Um, yeah," she said slowly. "I had all my...things stolen."

He gasped and crossed himself.

"Mother Mary," he murmured. "This is the second time in a year some thug's attacked a tourist. The world is going to shite."

"It is," she agreed. "Listen, I need a phone. I have to call my sister and tell her to send money so I can get home."

"Come, come with me," he said, resolution on his face. "Not all us here are thugs."

He led her back the way she'd come and to a small house with a couple dozen fluffy sheep in a pen in back. She paused on the sagging porch until he beckoned her in. The house was cozy and simple, with creaky wooden floors covered in rugs, a pot-bellied stove still warm, and worn furniture.

"Toilets are there," he said, pointing.

She grimaced, expecting an outhouse, and was pleasantly surprised at the cozy but modern bathroom. She looked first in the mirror and froze. Aside from the scarring, a maroon tattoo seemed to wind all the way around her neck. She turned slowly and craned her head to confirm the design covered every inch of her exposed neck.

"Son of a bitch!"

Rhyn.

He'd not just claimed her in deed but had the nerve to brand her like chattel as well! She'd never in her life wanted a tattoo, but to have some blood-sucking, shape changing, ill-tempered, *inhuman* beast's name on her neck was infuriating! She tried to scrub it off with no success.

When she emerged, she saw tea and cookies on the small table tucked into a corner of the living room. She joined him, hesitating before gulping down most of the cookies.

"Here ye go," the old man said, handing her a cell phone. "Yer American?"

"Yeah."

"Dial oh-one-one then the number."

He eased into the chair across from her and poured them both tea as she dialed.

"Hello?"

"Hey sis!" Katie exclaimed, never as happy as that moment to hear Hannah's voice.

"Oh, god, Katherine! Where are you? What happened? Gio had the police looking everywhere for you! They said you'd been kidnapped from the --"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I was...taken. Not sure where I am now, but I'm free and okay."

"Are you in the city? We'll come get you!"

"No, I think I'm in some other country."

There was a pause, and Katie covered the mouthpiece.

"Where am I?" she asked the old man.

"Innisheer."

"I'm in Innisheer, sis," she relayed. "You know where that is?"

"God, no. How did you get there? Did someone take you or....maybe you forgot?" Hannah asked in a hushed tone.

"Sis, I have no money, no passport, no identification, and I haven't eaten in a few days. I didn't forget anything. I even remember Toby, the Masquerade, and some guy snatching me when the lights went down."

"Thank god!" her sister sighed. "Toby's been staying with us. You really let him eat that many marshmallows?"

"Don't tell him where I am," she said quickly. "I don't want to worry him. Just say I'll be back soon."

"I don't even know where you are. I'm Googling it now."

"Sis, can you send me some money to get back?"

"Yeah, sure," came the distracted response. "Ireland? You're in Ireland?"

"I don't know where I am."

"It says it's an island off the coast of Ireland. I bet it's nice."

"I really don't care, Hannah."

"I'll send you money. It doesn't look like the place you're on has an airport. Can you get to Dublin? I'll book you a flight."

"I'll figure it out," she replied. "Thanks, Hannah."

With the old man's help, she caught the last ferry across the channel just before sunset. She stepped off the ferry and stood in a mostly empty parking lot, wondering how the hell to get to civilization from there. There weren't any cabs or buses like in the city; she didn't even see a town nearby. Just a road leading to the small parking area and a closed ticket booth for the ferry. The lone two people on her ferry got into a car and left. She stood for a long moment before striking out after them on foot.

The old man, Liam, had fed her and given her a handful of euro coins before putting her on the ferry. Grateful to him, she was likewise anxious to leave the island before the beast returned and flew off the handle.

She scratched at the tattoo winding around her neck, furious with him. She didn't walk far before someone in a tiny car speaking only Gaelic pulled alongside her and motioned to her. After several failed attempts to communicate, they proceeded in silence to the nearest town, a coastal resort-like town. As if sensing she was some poor tourist, he dropped her off at a youth hostel located above a bar already teeming with people. For an extra few Euros, the hostel manager gave her a clean though worn sleeping bag that matched the clean but worn bunk beds in the women's section.

The two German women sharing her room ceased talking when she entered and looked her over before one said in halting English, "You're American."

"That obvious?" Katie returned, tossing the sleeping bag and a small shaving bag filled with basics on one bunk.

"Yes."

"I like your clothes," the other said, gazing at her jumpsuit. "Very fashionable."

At least Hell kept up with the latest styles, she thought darkly.

"Your..." the other woman said, motioning to her neck. "Very nice."

Katie snatched the shaving bag and a towel, stalking to the bathroom. She bathed in the unisex shower room, grateful for the lukewarm water and the chance to scrub herself down and assess the damage. Her arms and legs were only faintly scarred despite the glass shards from the rocket attacks and the damage done by Sasha. She marveled again at Lankha's healing skill.

Her first shower in days made her want to stay in the hot water forever, until one of the men staying at the hostel entered the bathroom. Self-conscious, she turned off the water and wrapped herself in a towel before crossing to the sinks lining one wall with bright mirrors hanging above them.

Her eyes were drawn to the *Rhyn* tattoo snaking around her neck like a collar. The name was black against a band the color of red wine, both intricate and bold, with odd characters etched into the edges of the band. The geometric shapes changed as they circled her neck rather than stuck to a pattern; she assumed it was some kind of writing.

She wore a collar like a dog with her master's name on it. There was no other explanation. She'd never wear anything but turtlenecks ever again!

"Son of a bitch!"

"Awesome tat," a distinctly American male voice said.

She dropped the hair she'd been holding up and wrapped the towel around her tightly. She met his gaze briefly in the mirror. He looked like any normal nerdy American with big glasses and a scrawny frame. She thought she saw tattoos flash across his exposed chest. She blinked, and they were gone.

After her time in Hell --where most of the monsters looked human --she didn't trust this one. He shrugged as she ignored his hello smile.

She returned to the room, where the two German women still sat and talked while cleaning their camping gear. She dressed quickly to avoid comments on either her collar or her scars and flung herself into her bunk, reminded of her cell with Lankha.

She'd never had an opinion of bunk beds until this moment. She *hated* them!

"American, you like beer?" one of the Germans asked.

"Yeah."

"We're going down to the bar. Come with us?"

She hesitated. The Irish rock blaring from the bar below was loud enough, and cigarette smoke already curled in through the window. A shot of whiskey sounded heavenly!

"Yeah, I'll go."

She joined them at the door with enough loose euro change for a couple of beers and dinner. They spoke in German as they made their way down the narrow wooden stairwell to the packed bar. The music blared louder, the smoke became thicker, and the scent of food intermingled with body odor. They made their way to a small group at

one side of the bar and squeezed their way into a booth meant for four and already holding four. They made room for her and pushed fries at her, which she accepted.

Her gaze took in the crowd. She looked for Rhyn. She looked for Kris. She looked for any face she knew.

She was done with them. All of them. When she got home, she was kicking Toby out, buying a gun, and taking back her life. Her paranoia faded with the first round of beers and disappeared completely by the third. She joined the Germans and other backpackers in an Irish dance as the cigarette smoke thickened and the rock band grew louder.

"Fire!"

The shout went unnoticed until the panicked bartender grabbed the mike of the lead rocker.

"Everyone get out!"

She stared at him dumbly until the crowd forced her toward the exit. She let the bodies pressed against her shove her into the chilled night and blinked back her blurred gaze until she saw her German friends. Smoke billowed blacker than night above orange-yellow flames that mesmerized her.

The whole top of the building --where the hostel was housed --was on fire. The flames were beautiful and entrancing. She and the Germans stood in silent awe, too drunk to feel the cold.

"Rhyn, is it?"

She blinked and turned at the voice, not recognizing the American nerd until her vision cleared.

"Funny name for a girl."

"Whatever," she said curtly.

"I told my friends about your tat. Mind showing it to them? My friend Ziggy's a tattoo artist in San Francisco. Thought he'd like yours. It's kinda unique."

She sighed, her instincts too dulled by beer to warn her. She had nothing better to do, not with her source of alcohol gone and her bed in flames.

"You guys got any whiskey?" she asked, trailing him through the crowd.

He held up a bottle. "I grabbed this when everyone started panicking."

"Vodka? No way."

He lowered the bottle. She didn't notice how far they'd gone until the blazing bar disappeared around a corner. Only then did her senses register the three men before her, the alley, and the familiar bloodlust in their glowing eyes. This time, there was no mistaking the tattoos on their bodies.

She spun, the action rocking her precarious balance, only to come face-to-face with the American nerd.

"You don't want to do this," she blurted out. "I taste like shit."

One laughed.

"You should be used to it, or you wouldn't wear your dead master's mark."

"Dead? He's not dead," she replied. "In fact, I'm expecting him any minute."

"No one leaves his mate in a place like this. Penniless? Alone? Obviously too long under his keep to know what to do with herself in the real world?"

Mate?

"He's bigger than you," she warned.

"Bigger than this, bitch?" the American nerd demanded, shoving her against a building and riding his erection against her backside.

"I've seen popsicles bigger than you, jackass!" she snapped.

He pulled her away from the wall and backhanded her hard enough for her to feel nauseous. She was too drunk to feel the landing. He licked his hand, where blood from her lip remained.

"Sweet," he whispered, closing his eyes to savor her. "The Ancients always choose the sweetest blood monkeys."

"You can lie there still like you did for your master while we do our thing, or we can tie you and beat you into submission and then do our thing. Either way, we do our thing," another reasoned, kneeling near her.

"Let me think," she said, and rolled her eyes. "Why don't you walk away now before a certain Ancient tears you into pieces."

"Nice try, sweetheart. We've seen your type before. You won't last the night anywhere you go. He made his mark; it draws us to you."

She frowned, wondering when someone would explain the rules of this game to her. Wobbling, she rose, familiar coldness replacing the alcoholic warmth inside her.

"Sweet, little, defenseless, bet you're wet and taste just as sweet," the man who'd tasted her said. His eyes glowed more unnaturally than the others, the taste of her addling his senses. He looked like the rabid dog she'd expected Rhyn to be.

"Chill, Dean. First we all drink, then you can fuck her up," another warned.

"Appreciate the chivalry," Katie retorted.

If ever you were going to appear, Rhyn, now's the time!

Dean backhanded her again, following her to the ground. He pounced, tearing at the jumper. Her head spun. She batted at him with clumsy arms, at last landing a punch in the neck, as the creatures in Hell had taught her. He gagged. She tried to shove him off, but he snagged her hips and dragged her down, pinning her hands over her head.

She squirmed. His knife cut through her jumper, slicing into her skin.

"Dean, fuck, chill man! She's gotta last the night! We're all famished!"

She cried out, and the other three pried him off. She scrambled up, watching them wrestle Dean until he shook them off. She looked down at her newest cut. It wasn't deep but it stung. At their silence, her gaze returned to them.

She saw their expressions change as they got a whiff of her blood. Whatever control they hoped to maintain slipped.

"I'm warning you," she said again, backing away. "If you..."

She heard the beastly snarl and caught the blurred mass of darkness, punctuated only by two flashes of silver, as Rhyn flew by her. A new terror filled her. As if the four fledgling vampires weren't enough... She turned and ran. One of them snagged her, but his attention shifted at the strangled cry and sound of snapping bones. Dean's head sailed over them. She stared in horror and launched forward. The vampire holding on to her didn't fight her but joined her, running with her from the possessed shapeshifter. She followed him, praying he knew the town better than her, until they ran into a dead end.

Rhyn shoved her into the side of the building with a massive paw, holding her there for a split second as a warning before he launched himself at the vampire. She heard the kid scream and hunched her shoulders, nearly vomiting at the sounds of his body

being torn apart. When there was silence, she felt the beast approach her, its bloodied fangs at the same level as her head.

"Is it too late to say sorry?" she managed.

He growled low, and she jumped, squeezing her eyes closed. Swallowing hard, she tilted her head to one side in a display she hoped he took to be an apology. There was a long pause before she sensed him change forms behind her. He gripped her throat roughly and pulled her against his body. Her body shook, but she didn't dare fight him, not when he was so pissed.

There was no pain this time when he bit her, only numbness. She almost cried in relief. He didn't hurt her, even when she had obviously infuriated him. He drank longer than he had before and withdrew at last with a satisfied growl.

"Can't take you anywhere without you beheading folks," she whispered.

"That I let them die fast is not something I'll do for you if you betray me again."

"I'd rather die than be stuck in a cave."

"You think I can't replace you with a *willing* nymph who knows her place?"

By the stillness of the body at her back, he was deciding her fate. She waited, her breathing growing shallower and faster.

"Now you have nothing to say," he snarled. "You taste like cheap whiskey."

His words were accompanied by a push. He walked away. She gasped in air, heart soaring. She'd escaped death again, but how many lives did she have? Near hyperventilating, she bent over and drew in deep breaths until moonlight revealed the dismembered hand near her feet.

She darted after him, cold on the inside yet still buzzing from whiskey. He walked through the town to a large bed and breakfast near its edge. She didn't look up as they walked through a comfortable living room with several guests talking loudly about the fire. They grew silent as Rhyn entered and stared her down as well.

She followed him up a set of regal stairs to the second floor, where multiple rooms lined a hallway. He disappeared into one without turning on the light. She trailed, groping around the wall nearest the door until she found a light switch.

There were two beds in the room and a single bathroom off to one side along with a small living area. He said nothing, and she sensed his simmering anger. She sat on a trunk at the end of one bed. He flung off clothing soaked with blood, stripping with his back to her without one concern about her watching.

He was muscled like the panther-beast he turned into. She felt both awed and terrified watching his rippling, shapely muscles move beneath the olive skin. His shoulders and upper arms bulged while his long torso was lean and chiseled. He changed mechanically, as if accustomed to removing bloody clothing several times a day. He tugged on loose judo pants and flung himself on his back on the bed nearest the door.

"You're acting like you're normal," she objected, tears rising. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You run around turning into animals and tearing off people's heads and then just...a bed and breakfast? Come *on!* Now you'll just lay there and go to sleep? Is this where you hung out while I was in that cave?"

He pulled a pillow across his face, ignoring her. She stood and glared at him, wanting to cry, scream, and sleep all at once. Instead, she marched to the bathroom and took the hottest shower she could tolerate to try and take off the alcoholic edge. Her

shot nerves calmed until she rubbed a towel against the misty mirror and saw the tattoo again.

Rhyn.

Fury at her situation rose hard and fast. She suppressed it with deep breaths. She'd been to Hell and back; Ireland with a moody predator was far better than that. She put on the jumpsuit she hated and emerged, expecting her first night of good sleep in a week.

Her nose wrinkled at a familiar scent, and she looked first at the plate full of raw fish on the table and then at the silver-eyed predator with his roped forearms displayed across his wide, bare chest. His look was calculating and judging.

"That's it!"

She crossed to the table and lifted one from the plate, flinging it at him.

"You miserable son of a bitch! You all deserve to be in Hell! Damn you, Toby for ruining my life, and Gabriel and Uilly and Andre..."

With each name, she flung a fish at him. He was unaffected, batting the dead creatures away like flies.

"...and you, Rhyn, who should owe me something for freeing you from the depths of Hell! Fuck you all! I swear to God, I've had it with all this shit. One week ago, I was normal. *Normal!* I know you don't know what the fuck that is, but it means no immortal monsters sucking my blood and tearing up my body, no tattoos, no four-hundred-thousand-year-old angels in the bodies of five-year-olds, no buildings exploding when I get near them, no trip to Hell. And no raw fish!"

He stared at her, and she flung the plate at him, furious at his lack of reaction. He didn't care. He *couldn't* care. Monsters couldn't care!

Tears stung her eyes.

"Kris was right. I need to help him save the world from jackasses like *you*."

His eyes flared then narrowed. He moved toward her slowly, body tense.

"Oh, now you give a damn!" she snapped, backing away. "It's personal, isn't it? Like it's been for me for the past fucking week! Kris, Kris, Kris!"

With each mention of his name, Rhyn's eyes flared hotter. A low growl started deep in his chest, a warning that penetrated her rampage. She stepped back and whirled, darting toward the door. He snatched her around the waist and lifted her.

"Damn you, Rhyn!"

He flung her on the bed, and she launched up, meeting a wall of pure male. His solid, warm body atop hers immobilized her and he pinned her wrists to the bed, silver eyes blazing and elongated fangs resting on his full lower lip. She strained, unable to move but no longer caring if he did kill her.

"Fuck you, Rhyn," she said again, his silver eyes blurry through her tears. "I want my life back!"

"This. Is. Your. Life."

His words were controlled with effort, his body so tense, she thought he'd snap any second.

"You. Are. Mine."

"No!"

"You. Are. Mine."

She began to cry, no longer able to deny what she knew deep down: she'd never get her life back. Even without some sadistic creature's name around her neck, things would never be the same.

"There's nowhere you go where I cannot follow. Kris's *pets* can go anywhere but Hell. I can find you even there, and I will. I claimed you. You. Are. Mine. Forever."

She sobbed, her emotions from the week's events breaking free. He released her without another word, and she curled onto her side, weeping not only for the bizarre world she'd entered but from the realization she'd never, ever, ever return to hers.

Rhyn stormed out of the bed and breakfast. The streets of Dublin were too busy for him. He felt claustrophobic in the city, needed air and space. Without a thought as to who might be watching, he ducked into an alley and flung himself into the air. Pain blazed through him as he took the shape of the ancient creature. He beat the air mercilessly with his wings, rising high above the city and coasting on cold wind currents until he reached the ocean. He floated on the updraft of air off the water and then drifted to the beach below, changing into his human form as he landed with a gentle thud on rocky sand.

You. Are. Mine

He hadn't believed the words himself until he said them. He hadn't wanted them to be true. He wanted to fulfill his promise to Gabriel, piss off his brothers, and then walk away.

It wasn't quite as easy as he thought, especially since she was so helpless.

The doll with the large blue eyes crying on the bed bothered him on more levels than he wanted to admit. He'd meant to piss her off earlier, keep her from developing any sort of affection for someone who had no intention of keeping her.

That, too, was more for him than her. The minute he found her missing from the cave, he'd felt an uneasy, unfamiliar sense of concern. He didn't just notice she was gone --he found himself wishing she wasn't.

"What, Gabriel?" he said without turning.

"Brought you another book," the death dealer said, handing it to him.

"Hope it's better than the last."

"This one was written by someone in the human realm. The other one was from a bitter immortal."

Rhyn accepted the book, glanced at it, and flung it into the ocean.

"You're right," Gabriel said, unaffected. "That one was probably bad, too."

"I burned the other one. *How to Train a Pet Human*. Really, Gabe?"

"It was worth a try. I don't know anything about them."

"They don't eat fish," Rhyn grunted. "You never did answer my question about Andre."

"You know I won't."

They stood in silence, watching the waves fling the book around before sinking it.

"I fucking hate Kris," Rhyn snarled. "I've been waiting for someone to tell me what to do with this human."

"She's your mate."

"So why did you insist I protect her? Death doesn't have something up her sleeve?"

"Death always has all the cards," Gabriel grunted. "But the woman is yours."

Rhyn frowned, not sure whether he wanted the woman or not. Gabriel cocked his head to the side and then shifted.

"Death's calling. Talk later."

He disappeared. Rhyn sat and draped his arms over his knees, staring at the horizon. He'd been furious when Katie mentioned Kris. He didn't understand why the self-proclaimed guardian of humans would drag such a helpless creature into this web of evil.

He remembered little about how to deal with humans and nothing of how to deal with their women. The women he remembered were docile and *silent*. The men of his time had been harsh with them, and he thought he was doing well by tolerating her.

Even so, his own conviction to keep what was his made him uneasy. A human was weak. A human mate was a liability he couldn't afford.

Yet he'd done what Andre always warned him about: he'd acted without thinking and affected someone he hadn't intended to. He'd claimed her as his, and the tattoo around her neck proved it.

You can't protect someone so fragile from what's coming.

Maybe there was a way out of it yet. Maybe he could undo what he'd done.

He dwelled on her scent, the taste of her, the kiss. He'd never felt such a connection with anyone. The sight of her being attacked by the lesser immortals infuriated him like nothing else ever had. He'd wanted to go back and tear apart the pieces he left.

Maybe there was a part of him that didn't want to undo whatever he'd done. She was destined for him. His mate.

He couldn't shake the sense he'd reached the first challenge in his life he didn't know how to handle. He'd never been entrusted with anything to care for, not when he was unable to control his powers.

And now he had a mate who infuriated him as much as she turned him on.

For the first time in years, he doubted himself. Could he really protect her, since he was now bound by Immortal Code to keep her? Or was this another Immortal Code he dared break, for the sake of another, and take whatever consequences came his way?

He'd been to Hell. The only thing worse would be to make him dead-dead.

Rhyn dropped back to stare at the sky. He wasn't ready to be dead-dead yet, not after all the time he'd spent in Hell and all the unfinished business he had.

CHAPTER SIX

"Blood puddin'?"

She almost lost her stomach at the innocent question from the middle-aged matriarch of the bed and breakfast.

"No, thanks," she managed. "More coffee, please."

She ate gingerly, her head aching from both her hangover and her mental breakdown. She'd cried herself senseless before falling into a sleep too heavy to bring her any real rest. Five cups of coffee later and a full Irish breakfast --without the blood pudding --settling in her stomach, she still couldn't shake the throb. The breakfast room

had cleared out an hour before, but the patient matriarch kept her coffee cup full and left her alone.

Because she looked like shit. She knew it. She wore a jumper that reeked of her own body odor. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, her hair in a half-assed braid.

"I need to get some clothes," she said, turning to where the woman read her paper. "You know a cheap place around here?"

"Consignment store down the road."

"Thanks. I'll bring this back."

She carried the mug with her down the street to a store that smelled like an attic. The sun was too bright, the people around her too friendly. She sorted through the clothing, finding a pair of jeans, another pair of cargo pants, a scarf, and a few shirts. She paid the cashier with the remainder of her Euros and returned for a hot shower.

New clothes had never felt so nice, even if they were used! She wrapped the scarf around her neck and almost felt normal. The room was straightened and the fish removed, though the scent of them lingered.

The owner had left a bottle of painkiller and a snack on the nightstand, and Katie smiled at the first piece of thoughtfulness she'd received in what felt like a year. The whiskey she'd asked for. She downed her painkillers with a swig of alcohol. Before she could take another drink, Rhyn appeared out of nowhere and snatched the bottle from her.

"What is it with immortals and alcohol?"

He ignored her and tossed it out the opened window.

"My sister is expecting me to call and then to actually show up in DC in the next week."

"I don't give a fuck."

He looked her over and then strode to her again. She took a step back, but he only snatched the scarf and flung it, too, out the window.

"I don't need the reminder every time I look in the mirror!"

"Not for you. They'll leave you alone when they see it," he replied.

"Just like the goons last night?"

He gave her a warning look. "You look like shit."

"I feel like shit, no thanks to you," she said, sitting on the bed. "My head hurts, my body hurts, and I was nearly sliced open before you decided to show up last night."

"You learned what you needed to."

"I already knew you could tear people's heads off."

She refused to admit he was right. She had learned her lesson. He'd find her no matter what, and he wasn't going to be swayed by her neck next time. And, he'd slaughter anyone near his property.

"I'm not chattel," she muttered.

"You are what I say you are."

"No, I'm not. If you want an obedient nymph, then go get one. You're stuck with me otherwise."

She thought she heard him grind his teeth and frowned.

"If you really don't want me around, why did you go through that effort to *claim* me?" she asked, crossing her arms and taking a step toward him. "Why not go get a stupid nymph, whatever those are?"

In daylight, he was almost approachable. Almost. He fidgeted with a couple of pens and doodled geometric shapes similar to those around her neck onto stationery bearing the seal of the bed and breakfast.

"You freed me. I repaid you by not killing you."

"That doesn't explain why you keep me around."

"I don't have to," he said, voice lowering into a growl.

"Those idiots last night said Ancients always pick the best blood monkeys."

"You were the only one around."

"So, this was an opportunity too good to pass up and isn't about getting back at Kris?"

One of the pens in his hands snapped, and she took a step back. The tension eased from his frame, and he said with effort, "No."

"The idiots also said that anyone --I assume monster --can sense me 'cause you did claim me."

"Wouldn't go out walking alone after dark if I was you, little girl."

"Then they said I was your mate, because I bear your mark. I don't know what --"

Snap. The other pen and pad of paper went flying out the window. This time the tension didn't leave his frame. He rose from his kneeling position and faced her. Wordlessly, he pointed to a spot on the floor before him.

"You just ate a little while ago!" she argued.

His eyes flashed, and she hurried to stand before him with her neck craned back to meet his gaze, toe-to-toe with the beast. He took her throat in one large hand, his thumb stroking the sensitive skin of her neck. They locked gazes, his intense silver eyes boring through her. Last night, after he'd beheaded the four, she'd innately known he wouldn't hurt her. Even when he spoke of replacing her with a nymph. Whatever claim he had on her, she was more than just a blood monkey, especially when he had his choice of blood monkeys outside of Hell.

What the fuck did he want from her, if more than her blood?

She closed her eyes and offered her neck, surprised to find her pulse quickening in excitement.

"You spit fire one moment and submit the next," he said, his voice thick with need.

"We are both complex creatures."

She gasped as his fangs pierced her throat. The pain subsided, replaced by familiar warmth. He didn't drink long and sealed the wound after.

"No more whiskey," he snarled, turning away.

When she opened her eyes, he was gone, and she was just as confused as ever. She caught her reflection in the mirror, and the sight of the tattoo around her neck infuriated her. She strode from the room through the house to the alley to retrieve what belongings she had.

She was on her way back to her room with the scarf securely wrapped around her neck and the whiskey that had fallen mercifully into an outside trash bin without busting when she felt the change in temperature. Not as severe as traveling through the shadow world, but close.

She pushed the door to her room open slowly, surprised to see who awaited her.

"Gabriel?"

He lifted his chin in greeting from his spot at the table.

"You here to kill me?"

"Nope."

She closed the door. His dark eyes dropped to the whiskey.

"What is it with whiskey?" she demanded. "You're immortal --can't kill you."

"Mortals need the power of reason to deal with us. It's Immortal Code. You have free will."

He took the bottle and tossed it out the window. This time, she heard it smash.

"A choice?" she echoed. "I haven't had a choice yet with you people."

"But if you did, you'd need to be sober."

Was he amused? She couldn't tell.

"Well, what do you want?"

He offered a hand. She took a step back.

"That's not a good idea," she said.

"Kris's orders."

"Why doesn't he come get me then?"

"I'm not allowed to tell him where you are," he said.

"Why not?"

He took her hand.

"We aren't to interfere in mortal happenings."

"Bullshit."

Her curse was lost as she was sucked into the shadow world. She wobbled. Gabriel steadied her. She turned around, but saw no doorway behind her. Forced to follow, she couldn't help wondering where the other portals went as he disappeared through one. She stepped from the shadow world back into her world and waited for nausea or pain. This time, there was none.

She looked around. They were in a burnt-out room...with the Arc de Triomphe a short distance away.

She had no good memories of Paris and crossed her arms. Kris rose from his squat nearby, flanked by Ileana and Jade. He looked her over intently while she stared speechlessly at Jade.

Jade withdrew his knife with a warning look.

"You look awful," she said to Kris. She wondered what it took for an immortal to look as if he'd been through Hell and back.

"So do you."

"I went to Hell."

He snorted, then looked back at her when she didn't break a smile. His gaze went to Gabriel.

"Hell?"

Gabriel shrugged.

"And you escaped?"

"Long story. Not about to relive it," she said, crossing her arms. "You dragged me into this shitty world."

He rubbed his face and glanced at Jade, whose frown was more pronounced than Ileana's.

"We'll talk about it later," Kris said. "I asked Gabriel to find you days ago. Didn't realize why it took him so long. Andre's dead."

"Oh." She softened. "I'm sorry, Kris."

His gaze lingered on her, as if he smelled her perfume and was trying hard to identify it.

"You summoned me here. Do you want something or were you curious if I'd survived the bombing after you all ditched me?"

"There isn't a creature in this realm that talks to me like you do," Kris muttered. "How the fuck did you survive Hell?"

"Made some friends. Met the devil himself and decided I'd had enough of this shit. Used my newfound power to steal a key from some robed freak."

"You met Sasha?" Ileana asked, interested for the first time.

"Intimately acquainted," she replied, cold gaze on Kris. "Not a fan of yours, either."

"No one has to like me. My job is to protect the fate of humanity, and I do it well," he snapped. "You can't possibly have somewhere else to be. My brother, Andre, was the mediator on the Council That Was Seven on which my brothers sat. World War Three is about to break out and the Council will dissolve if I don't introduce the human who's immune to us."

"You want me to meet the Council?"

"You will meet the Council this evening."

Rhyn'll be so pissed. Yet the thought of the alleged good guys losing the ultimate war because she didn't attend a stupid meeting didn't sit well with her. Her gaze again went to Jade, who looked ready to pounce. Whatever happened, she couldn't be alone with him.

"I need some coffee," she said.

Kris relaxed, as if expecting a refusal. He motioned toward a hole in the wall, and he and Jade and Ileana trailed her out of the destroyed building.

"I really am sorry about Andre," Katie said. "I liked him."

"He kept the Council focused on defending humanity and not killing each other," Kris replied. "I'll miss my dear brother."

"There are...were seven of you, right?" she asked.

"Who told you this?"

At his sharp tone, she quickly changed the subject, saying, "After the meeting, I have to go."

"No. You're staying where my brothers can't get to you, which is with me."

"No can do. Gabriel knows where I'm staying. You can send him when you want."

"It's too dangerous for you alone," he said firmly.

"I'm not alone, and I'm leaving."

They squared off, glaring at one another. His gaze dropped to the thin, stubborn line that was her mouth and then to her scarf. Understanding crossed his features, and he unwound it, ignoring her attempts to slap him away. His stunned look was accompanied by Jade's alarmed exclamation.

"That son of a bitch claimed you? I thought he was dead-dead!"

"Betrayer of humanity," Ileana whispered. "Almost succeeded in destroying the world."

Ileana's reaction scared her. Jade's look turned to one of horror.

Katie knew Rhyn was a monster, but of this magnitude...

"Thank god Gabriel got you away from him. There's no telling what he'd do to you," Kris said. "He's been in Hell for hundreds of thousands of years. He and Sasha betrayed the Council and humanity long ago."

She gazed at him, confused. Rhyn had been a prisoner like her.

"There goes that plan," Ileana said with a sigh. "Kris had planned to claim you. Uly found out Kris can use your power to make him immune from the other Ancients."

Jade glanced sharply at Ileana, then at Kris. Kris met his gaze, and the intensity of the exchange left her no doubt as to their relationship. A red flush rose in the normally unflappable Council leader's face.

A chill went through her. Was this why Jade sold her out? And did Rhyn know of her gift? Was that the plan of the betrayer of humanity, to use her to destroy the world?

But he'd treated her so differently than Sasha. Sasha she could see raping and bleeding her nightly to mask him from the Ancients. Rhyn had been...nice. Almost.

"Kris, what time is the damned..."

The voice was unfamiliar. She turned to see a tall, lean man with olive features that more closely resembled Rhyn's.

"Tamer, this is our Katie. Katie, my brother Tamer, who's in charge of Africa," Kris grated. "The meeting's at seven."

"So you weren't lying, brother," Tamer purred.

His gaze fell to her neck. He frowned.

"Kris, you have enough immortals to destroy Rhyn again? He can't be allowed to betray us again."

...destroy Rhyn again...betray us.

"I'll keep an eye on her," Jade offered.

How did she tell Kris his closest advisor had betrayed him? She was panicking, recalling the horrors of the hours at Sasha's hands. She met Jade's gaze, unable to look away. Her throat felt raw again, and the scent of her blood returned. If she looked, she'd be covered in it...

She had to get out of there before Jade found a way to alert Sasha.

"You look sick, Katie. I'll get you some whiskey," Ileana said. "And a bottle for me as well."

Katie nodded stiffly, unable to speak. She sensed Rhyn's presence before any of the others and braced herself, almost hyperventilating.

"Fuck," Kris whispered, rigid.

He stared past her. She feared looking at Rhyn, feared knowing what shape he'd taken. Instead, she tried to keep her trembling body upright and her vision from growing tunneled.

"You have something that's mine, brother," came the familiar, low growl.

"You should be in Hell with your fuck-buddy Sasha."

"You couldn't defeat me and Hell couldn't hold me."

By the look on Ileana's face, Katie knew Rhyn spoke the truth. Katie faced him and saw that he was dressed like Gabriel, all in black. His chiseled features were sinister in the fractured light, his eyes glowing with quiet fury. He was as tense as she'd seen him, ready to morph and attack.

Without looking at her, Rhyn pointed to the spot beside him.

"No, Katie," Kris said quickly, starting forward. He stopped at the growl that came from deep within Rhyn's chest. "Stay with us. He'll destroy you and then the rest of humanity."

"Stay with us, Katie," Ileana seconded.

She hesitated, her gaze turning to Tamer.

"Stay with us," Jade echoed.

"Now."

Rhyn's tone made her jump. She went to him, shaking with the thought of being vulnerable to a creature like Sasha again. Kris didn't know what Jade had done; he couldn't protect her. Rhyn could protect her from anything. Her head was spinning, her vision narrowing, and she paused close enough to Rhyn to lean against him.

"Take us away, take us away," she whispered.

He steadied her with one hand, and a second later the cool dampness of the shadow world swallowed her. He guided her through the fog, and they emerged in a dark room with the light of streetlamps filtering through two windows across what looked another hotel room. She rested fully against him, shaking too hard to stay on her feet. He pushed her head to the side. She didn't object when his fangs bit into her, instead sighing as the comforting warmth consumed her.

When he'd drunk his fill, his arms remained around her. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his strong heartbeat. Her shaking subsided. While she feared him, she feared the rest of the monsters more. At least this monster had indicated he was interested in keeping her around.

"Not so tough anymore, are you, little girl."

"You're not exactly the greatest protector!"

"You're still alive."

"Is that your standard? Me surviving?" she asked incredulously.

"If they turn that beautiful face ugly, I still get blood."

She opened her mouth to retort but stopped. In his own twisted way, he'd just called her beautiful.

He smelled of rain and night, a masculine musk she found as soothing as his bite. He seemed at once disgusted by the fact she was a difficult mortal blood monkey and yet primitively protective, holding her as she quaked after her run-in with a man who wanted to kill her.

"Why on earth did you choose me over a nymph?" she demanded.

He released her, the peaceful moment over. It was dark wherever he'd brought her, and she looked around in wary curiosity. He didn't answer but crossed to a window and flipped on a light.

"No more warnings," he growled. "You go nowhere without my permission."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Nowhere," he emphasized. "I don't care if Death herself comes for you."

"It's not like I have a chance to call you when you disappear," she pointed out. "You want me to tell Death to wait till you get back?"

His silver gaze swept over her.

"No more scarves. Or alcohol."

She rolled her eyes. There was one bed --a California king --in what she now realized was a plain hotel room. She flung herself onto her back and stared at the ceiling. He sat at the window overlooking the street two dozen stories below.

"You need only say my name, and I'll come to you," he grated at last, as if the words cost him a hefty bet. "Like you did when those immortal sons of bitches attacked you in Ireland."

"Some sort of monster psychic connection between us?"

He gave her a scathing look. She sighed, exhausted.

"Thanks for rescuing me again. You can teach me how to defend myself against monsters if you get tired of bailing me out."

"It's my duty," he said, eyes returning to the street.

"Thank you anyway."

He bristled. She assumed he was angry with her again for some reason. When she felt the cool touch of the shadow world, she sat up straight.

"Gabriel!" she exclaimed, her gaze going to Rhyn.

To her surprise, the monster didn't leap up and attack him. If anything, he ignored the death dealer.

"Sorry, Rhyn. I should've asked first," Gabriel said with a glance toward the window.

Rhyn shrugged.

"Gabriel, you have to tell Kris that Jade is working with Sasha!" she exclaimed. "He can't know."

"He doesn't," Gabriel confirmed, and sat in an armchair near Rhyn.

"Do *you* know?"

"Of course."

"Why the hell...is this that damn I-don't-interfere-in-other-people's-business thing?" she demanded.

"Something like that," Gabriel said with mild amusement.

"Can you tell him I told you to tell him?"

"No."

"Can you take him a note?"

"Why do you give a fuck, girl?" Rhyn snapped.

"He's your brother, Shapeshifter," Gabriel chided.

"Brother?" she repeated. She stared at Rhyn. "You're one of the seven Ancients."

"Who spent the last million years in Hell, thanks to Kris."

At the warning note in Rhyn's icy tone, she fell quiet. He wasn't a patient creature, whatever he was. She crossed to the small desk and rustled around for the complimentary paper and pen.

"Marriott, St. Louis?" she said with a frown. "Never wanted to go to St. Louis."

Neither spoke. She glanced up. Gabriel's head was tilted to the side, as if listening, and Rhyn's form had relaxed.

They were communicating silently. She wrote Kris a short message and folded the paper, presenting it to Gabriel. Rhyn snatched it and read it before tearing off the strip at the bottom with the hotel's address.

He gave her a dirty look. She rolled her eyes at him.

"I'll let Kris know not to worry about Katie," Gabriel said.

"He only need concern himself with his head," Rhyn responded. "The girl is mine. Nothing anyone can do about it."

"Unless someone kills you permanently," she said. "Right?"

Both looked at her, fleeting amusement on Gabriel's face but Rhyn's gaze flaring.

"Try it, and you'll spend eternity with Sasha," Rhyn snapped.

"How much do you charge for assassinations, Gabriel?" she asked, ignoring Rhyn.

"A life for a life."

"Defeats the purpose, doesn't it?"

"Not if you're already dead or immortal."

"Out, Gabriel," Rhyn growled.

The death dealer disappeared. Rhyn gave Katie a long, withering look that she bore with crossed arms. Looking ready to explode, he rose, snatching his trench coat.

"What does it mean that I'm your mate?"

"It means I can't kill you, as much as I'd like to!"

He breezed by her and wrenched the door open, slamming it closed. Frustrated when he was around, she couldn't help but feel unusually alone when he was gone.

* * *

Gabriel returned to the Sanctuary in the Caribbean and paced in front of the hourglass perched on the altar. He wasn't able to shake his unease. Rhyn wasn't as far along as he'd hoped.

The sand in the hourglass had begun to fall faster the past two days. Rhyn didn't have a week.

He needed more time.

Gabriel crossed to the window and stared at where the dark ocean and night sky met in the distance. He willed his friend to learn the lessons he needed to, and fast.

Of all the mortals and immortals alike he'd ever known, he'd never considered one a friend, not since his father's death. He'd often wondered if he had more family somewhere. If he did, he hoped he had a brother like Rhyn.

Feeling helpless, he glanced again at the hourglass. For the first time since he was a child, he was worried.

* * *

She awoke in a sweat, the blurred scenes of gore and screams of dying from her dreams fading. The room was dark; she was alone. Disoriented, she leaned over to turn on the lamp. It was almost two in the morning.

St. Louis. She was in St. Louis.

Rhyn was still gone.

A tremor of dread slid through her. She'd had an impending sense of doom since meeting Gabriel on the street outside the faux police station, but this feeling was... defined.

"Rhyn? Can you hear me?" she called, feeling foolish when nothing happened.

She rose. As she bent to tie her shoes, a gory vision made her stagger. It was her dream all over, the flashes of light, darkness and blood, the scent of sulfur and death. She landed on her knees, horrified yet knowing something was very wrong. Rhyn was in trouble.

She glanced out the window and spotted the Arch. It flashed, silver glinting off its graceful curve. She closed her eyes, and dampness slid through her, over her. She opened her eyes and froze, recognizing the shadow world. Portals to other places glowed around her.

"Rhyn?" she whispered, close to panicking.

One of the portals flickered as if in response. Terrified of what she'd find on the other side, she stepped through and tripped. Grass tickled her hands, a chilled wind nipped her neck, and the scents from her vision intensified until she was near gagging.

She pulled her shirt over her nose and mouth and sat back on her heels. She sat on the river bank across from a series of wide, large steps leading up a hill to the park where the Arch stood, framed against a black sky.

Death. It was everywhere. She rose, trying hard not to look or touch anything. The grass, the road, the steps...all were littered with bodies and soaked in blood. She didn't know what kind of massacre had occurred here --was it even real or was it a dream? She stepped through masses of flesh and body parts, holding her mouth, until she reached the road. It was less cluttered with bodies. Some of the tattoos of the dead still glowed, the eerie red tribal patterns punctuating the landscape.

She didn't feel cold inside; she felt frozen. She'd grown up never having seen death, and in the past week, she'd seen it in its most gruesome forms. She felt something squish beneath her shoe and almost vomited.

The sounds of heated discussion made her look toward the river. Three forms with glowing tattoos were moving slowly toward the road, stopping to sift through the dead bodies. One grabbed an arm and took a bite.

"Not here."

The words were loud. She looked around, panicked, and darted to the massive stairs. Keeping along the long wall, she inched her way upward, sticking to the shadows. The three creatures continued to hunt through the fallen, sometimes eating, most of the times pushing body parts aside in search of something.

In search of Rhyn. She reached the top of the stairs and stared at a similar scene leading past the Arch and all the way up the park toward the city.

She heard a shout and whirled. The three creatures made a run for the stairs.

"Rhyn!" she called, darting forward. "Rhyn!"

Another vision, one of the Arch through the branches of a tree. She staggered and looked around widely before going to the right. She stepped on something squishy but didn't let herself stop to think about what it was. Instead, she half ran, half leapt through the piles of bodies into the treed area lining two wide walkways.

"Rhyn!"

She was closer. She *felt* him. No vision came to her and she continued. The creatures had reached the top of the stairs and were looking around, trying to figure out which way she'd gone.

"Rhyn!"

Her shout drew their attention, and they started toward her.

"Goddammit, Rhyn!" she said, tears rising to blur her path.

The taste of death was in her mouth and if she looked, she knew her shoes would be covered in blood. She ran, eyes blurry and stomach turning.

Stop.

His command was weak, yet the air around her stiffened until she hit an invisible wall.

She dropped, surprised and disgusted when one hand landed in what was a human or creature at one point. She wiped her hand on her shirt and leapt up.

"Rhyn?"

Katie.

She turned, not sure if she heard his voice or if he was in her head. She hopped over another mess and searched the darkness. His was the only form in one piece; he was propped up against the base of a tree. She dropped beside him, crying, shaking, terrified, and found he was unconscious.

"C'mon, Rhyn, they're getting closer!" she said, and shook him.

He sagged against her. She smelled his blood, felt the weakness of his body when their skin met. The sensations surprised her.

The creatures were coming. They'd kill her. They'd kill him. He wasn't waking up.

She choked back a sob and saw the glint of starlight off a knife on the ground. She crawled over him and snatched it, wiping its blade on her clothes before she hesitated.

She'd never cut herself before. She looked at her wrist, where Lankha had bitten her, closed her eyes, and hacked. Pain made her gasp as blood welled and spilled. She placed her wrist to Rhyn's mouth, willing him to awaken, to drink her. She'd never thought she'd find a reason to want some creature to suck her blood; if ever, now was the time.

At first, nothing happened, and she readied herself to run. He groaned softly, licked his lips. His body tensed so fast she didn't have time to blink.

His silver eyes opened, glowing almost crazed in the night. Uneasy, she started to move away, but he grabbed her arm to keep her wrist in place and tore into it. She screamed, the creatures came closer, and sheer will made her close her eyes to envision the hotel room.

The shadow world...she staggered and floated through it, hauling him with her toward a pulsing portal that grew blurry fast. She toppled through it into their hotel room. It was silent aside from her choked gasps. Rhyn was unconscious again, his face marred by her blood.

There was nothing left of her forearm but a mangled mess. Horrified, she stumbled into the bathroom for a towel, wrapped her arm in it, and collapsed, sobbing.

* * *

Rhyn stared at her still body, uncertain what to do. Her breathing was shallow, the scent of her blood making him shudder. He was weak but alive, his body covered with his blood and hers.

His little mortal had come after him.

No one had ever come after him before.

The thought shocked him. He watched blood ooze from her arm. He wasn't a healer, and the only healer he knew was trapped in Hell. Humans had their own kinds of healers.

Gazing at her, he doubted a human healer could help her. He scooped her up, not knowing what else to do. He opened his senses to locate the immortal he wanted, and then willed himself there. It was the only place he knew where someone *might* help him.

He stood in the gently lit bedroom of his brother, Kiki.

"What the fu --*Rhyn*?"

Kiki whirled from his position before the hearth, his oriental features set off by electric turquoise eyes. The only brother not to declare outright war on him, Kiki was a distant second to Andre in his tepid support of their black sheep of a young brother.

"Gods, what'd you do to her?" Kiki demanded.

Rhyn ignored the accusation and pulled her away when Kiki tried to snatch her.

"Tell me where to take her before she bleeds out," he ordered.

Despite the animosity boiling at the back of his brother's gaze, Kiki's pragmatism snapped to the forefront. He whipped off his T-shirt and wrapped Katie's arm.

"No one told me you were out of prison," Kiki muttered as he worked. "You hear about Andre?"

"Why else do you think I'm *here*?"

Kiki glanced at him and whipped out a mobile phone. His conversation was short and curt before he tossed it.

"I'll take her somewhere safe," he said, holding out his hand.

Rhyn pulled the scarf he hated from her neck.

Kiki stared, even more stunned.

"Fool," he said, eyes narrowing. "What --"

"Kiki!"

His brother snapped his mouth closed and extended his hand, pulling Rhyn and Katie with him into the shadow world. They crossed through the fog to a destination Rhyn had never been before. They emerged from the shadow world and stood on a narrow, winding road. The fragrant ocean was too dark to see. The sound of waves rushing the shore and the firm sand beneath his feet indicated its location a few yards from them. A sprawling castle with thick walls, an old portcullis, and torches glowing along the walls rose up before them. The road leading to the castle was modern blacktop.

"What is this?" Rhyn asked suspiciously as Kiki started toward the arched door beside the portcullis.

"There are four immortal Sanctuaries on earth. This is one. Hurry."

Rhyn followed, painfully aware of the limp mortal body in his arms. Kiki didn't knock the door down as he could, instead beating loudly enough for the sound to drift down the road.

A small, older woman in severe grey opened the door. Kiki clasped his hands and offered a small bow.

"We seek your assistance, good guardian of the Sanctuary."

The woman curtseyed deeply in response and stepped aside. Rhyn shoved past Kiki into a small courtyard. The woman motioned them to follow, her quick steps echoing across the cobblestones. Another woman in grey emerged from a hallway. She bobbed her head and darted off at the murmured instructions of the first woman.

They stopped at a wooden door, which the woman flung open. The room was tiny, but Rhyn didn't care. He carefully lowered Katie to the small bed. Immediately, the second woman reappeared with a small basket full of medicinal wares.

"You must leave. You cannot be here," the first woman said, pushing Rhyn toward the door.

He ignored her order with a glare.

"Rhyn, come on. Ancients aren't welcome in Sanctuaries," Kiki said.

He resisted for a moment longer, watching the woman expertly slice Katie's shirt open. Kiki gave him a shove, and the older woman closed the door behind them.

"This is the best you can do," Kiki said. "Don't piss these people off by breaking their rules."

For once, Rhyn agreed. He trailed Kiki out of the castle to the boulders a short distance from the walls.

"What the fuck are you doing, Rhyn?" Kiki turned on him at last. "*You* are the last person in the entire fucking universe that should take a mate!"

"Back off, Kiki," he growled, knowing the words were true.

"No, Rhyn, I won't. I've never been as strong of an advocate for you as Andre, but I always thought you decent somewhere on the inside."

"Thanks for your faith, brother!"

"But you, Rhyn, have somehow managed to kill every mortal you run across! How the fuck did you --"

"Enough!" Rhyn roared.

Kiki fell silent, but his gaze was accusing.

"I don't know, Kiki!" he snapped. "Leave me the fuck alone."

"You don't know what?"

"I don't know why I did it. I wanted to piss off Sasha at first. Now..." He stopped, not sure how to explain the fact he now wanted something he shouldn't.

"This isn't...is it Katie?" Kiki asked, gaze sharpening.

"Yeah. And?"

"We lost her the same night Andre died. She was with you?"

"Sasha dragged her down to Hell. He wanted to make her his mate."

"So you did before he could," Kiki finished. "Real smart, Rhyn."

Rhyn ignored his brother as the lean man paced and pulled at his hair in frustrated silence. Rhyn looked toward the walls, unable to quell the flutter of worry within him.

She'd almost died to save him. He'd almost died many times, and in many cases, for the sake of his brothers. He never thought twice about walking into danger and rarely cared if he survived or not.

But no immortal --let alone human --had ever risked his life for him. For the first time in his life, he didn't know what to do.

"What do we do?" Kiki demanded at last. "You can't keep her."

"What do you mean I can't keep her?" he returned, facing his brother.

"I mean, you don't have what it takes to keep a mate alive, let alone safe. You're your own worst enemy, as Andre always tried to warn you."

Rhyn clenched his jaw, hearing the truth in Kiki's words.

"Do you have any idea how fucking pissed Kris will be?" Kiki muttered.

"Like I give a fuck what he thinks."

"He intended to take her as his mate, Rhyn. This is going to reopen that wound..."

Rhyn said nothing, giving his brother a bitter smile. Part of him felt triumphant to know he'd piss off Kris as well as Sasha. Kiki ceased pacing and stared at the walls.

"You can't keep her," Kiki said again.

"Yes, I can. And I will, Kiki," he breathed through clenched teeth. "She's mine. I've claimed her under Immortal Code. Why the fuck does everyone want her anyway? She's just a little human."

"Yes, but she's..." Kiki's retort drifted off.

Rhyn met his gaze, leery as Kiki turned, considering.

"You haven't blown anything up yet," Kiki said. "Hell tame you?"

"Nope."

"Something did."

Rhyn shrugged. He hadn't noticed until Kiki's words. Nothing had blown up or gone wrong since he'd returned from Hell. His power felt the same, but maybe his time in Hell had mellowed it out, made it more responsive to his command.

"I'm bound to tell Kris you're here," Kiki reminded him. "And the others."

"I don't give a shit."

"As for your mating...maybe you can find a way to undo what you did."

"Fuck you, Kiki."

"You're welcome, Rhyn."

And Kiki was gone. Rhyn took a deep breath before perching on a boulder outside the walls. He'd never been to a Sanctuary. He was glad Kiki brought him and just as troubled by his brother's doubt.

Katie had proved herself to him by doing what even his blood-brothers never would. No, Katie was his. He wasn't going to *undo* anything, especially not if it was something his brothers wanted!

CHAPTER SEVEN

She awoke in a mental institution. At least, that was her first impression of the eight-by-eight room with its steel-framed bed, simple mattress, and no furniture. The wooden door and whitewashed walls --along with the open window above the bed allowing in balmy air --soon brought to mind a more tropical place. She rose and flinched, expecting agony as she moved her arm. It was bandaged and stiff, but no pain.

She tugged the heavy door open by its old iron handle and gazed into a large square of grass, a courtyard, around which many similar rooms with heavy doors were arranged. Airy hallways led through the hacienda style structure on either side of her. There were more buildings past the hallway to her right. The hallway led into an open area with one car in the large parking lot and a medieval stone wall and turrets surrounding the entire hacienda. The heavy wooden gates marking the entrance to the compound were closed.

Stairs traced the inside of the thick wall, and she walked up them. The effort made her dizzy. She leaned against a wall, overlooking a stretch of rocky terrain punctuated with patches of yellow-green grass. In the distance, she saw the blue of an ocean meet the horizon.

And one dark form seated on the rocks, staring at the walls like an angry puppy thrown out of its master's house. She touched the tattoo at her throat.

Serves you right, she thought darkly.

"I've saved your life twice now, jackass."

He flipped her off, confirming he heard her.

"Vile creature," a cool, crisp voice said.

She turned, surprised to see the middle-aged woman in grey robes and sharp brown eyes.

"But he did save you," she allowed. "There's something in that."

By the austere clothing and stern features, Katie assessed she was in some kind of religious convent.

"Come. We'll feed you real food. You needn't worry about him," the woman said in her crisp voice, leading her down the stairs. "He can't come in the walls."

"Is this a holy place?"

"It is."

"Will he burst into flames or something?" she asked.

The woman chuckled. "No, we'll just kick him out again."

Katie trailed the fit woman through the hallway, past her room, and down a second corridor. The scents of fresh bread and some sort of meat cooking nearly nailed her to the ground as she rounded the corner. The woman led her straight into a small cafeteria with rustic tables and benches, an open fireplace, and a sagging buffet table along one wall. The windows were open with no glass, and heavy iron chandeliers hung from thick wooden rafters and were burning real candles.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"Have a seat. This is a Sanctuary, one of four remaining in the human world."

As soon as she sat, another woman in similar robes with a flushed face appeared, serving tray in hand. She placed warm rustic bread, whipped honey butter, and water before her. Katie bit into the bread, determined not to eat like a heathen that would shame her sister. At the first taste, she wolfed it and three more pieces down until the edge of her hunger disappeared.

"Wow," she murmured, and gulped her water. "What exactly is a Sanctuary?"

"We're like the Switzerland of the immortal world. All four Sanctuaries are neutral territory, governed by Death," the woman said with a small smile. "Any immortal who comes must check their weapons --and their talents --at the door, or be rendered dead-dead by Death. Only the Ancient Ones and Death may pass with their powers intact. We normally expel the Ancient Ones. They disturb the order here."

Katie sat back with a contented sigh, gaze dropping to her arm. She frowned. Rhyn had never hurt her until then. Granted, he wasn't exactly himself at the time, near dead, starved, weak.

She'd never thought a creature like him weak. Yet she'd felt it when their bodies touched. His guard was down, and she'd felt just how weak he was despite taking her blood. She knew he could've taken so much more, made himself stronger by bleeding her dry. He didn't, instead taking only what he needed to survive.

"He brought you here," the woman said, her eyes on Katie's bandaged arm. "We have a member of the healing guild on staff, but her skill wasn't old enough for you. We did what we could. You'll have full use of your arm, even if it's scarred."

"I've gotten so many...marks...the past couple of weeks. Don't think another really matters at this point."

The woman's gaze dropped to her neck, and Katie caught the troubled look in her eyes before she hid it. There was reason to fear the Ancients, especially *this* Ancient, who seemed to have no alliance to anything good or bad and was so unpredictable. At least he'd thought enough of his blood monkey to bring her here, if only to keep her healthy so he had a food source.

She frowned, troubled by her thoughts. Rhyn was weak but drew only what he needed to survive; he was both hunter and hunted. He'd claimed her, whether in a fit of jealous fury after hearing Kris's name or for some other purpose. In her mind, dragging a human around seemed like a pretty serious liability.

She didn't understand him. Or this world. Or why she couldn't just go back to her life and be normal again. Her throat tightened. Willing herself not to cry, she pointed to her neck and said instead, "Do you know what this means?"

The woman hesitated and took a slice of bread, toying with it.

"You're his mate," she said at last, as if this should mean more than it did.

"I know. So?"

"You're *his mate*."

"Assume I never knew this underworld existed before a little over a week ago."

The woman studied her for a long moment. The second woman with the flushed face returned with a plate heaped with half a cooked chicken smelling of garlic and spices, rice, and fried plantains. Katie dug in, unconcerned with the woman's silence while there was food in front of her.

"If it helps, I'm allegedly special somehow," she prodded.

"Of course. You were born an immortal's mate. Still, you'd have to be something more to attract an Ancient."

"Why?"

"It's just the way things are," the woman said. She paused then shook her head. "I'm Daniela."

"Katie."

"Welcome, Katie. Your mate dumped you on me in the middle of the night. I knew he was an Ancient --a powerful one --but he wasn't much for talking."

"Yeah, he's like that. Drags me around the world without telling me where or why we go anywhere," Katie said.

"You said you've known him a week?"

"I've known him a few days. I was introduced to this world a few days before that. I don't know anything about either."

"Very, very unusual. No Ancient would..."

Katie held her breath, awaiting the awful news. Daniela shook her head again and smiled.

"What's so significant about being his mate?" Katie asked.

"It's hard to explain to an Outsider. There are only so many immortal mates born into the human race, far fewer than there are immortals. It was believed that no Ancient would ever take a mate, because none ever have. For all other immortals, they get only one shot at a mate in its life cycle. One mate. That's it. Many immortals go extinct without taking a mate at all. They wait so long, they forget they can have one, or they choose not to have one, or they simply just don't."

"Why would any Ancient creature choose me?"

"I don't know. I'm sure he knows."

"I'm not so sure about that," Katie said with a shake of her head.

"There is the theory that the mates of Ancients are predestined like those of other immortals, that if the Ancients don't find their mates during the mates' life cycle, they never will."

"That's kind of sad."

"Yeah, it is."

"I buy into this preordained theory. Rhyn wouldn't saddle himself with a blood monkey he had to actually take care of voluntarily. Doesn't seem like the type who wants to be slowed down by a liability like that," Katie mused.

Daniela shrugged.

"Or he wants to use me for my talent," she added. "I could see that."

"Unlikely, since he only gets one, unless he planned on dying dead soon. If he doesn't die-dead, he'd have to spend eternity with you. Maybe it is predestined. He's the least friendly Ancient I've ever met."

"He's been in Hell for a long time," she replied. "Wait, did you say *eternity*?"

"Of course."

A familiar headache started, and she stuffed the last few bites of food down her throat, feeling ill for a different reason. She hadn't been able to keep a job or a boyfriend for more than a few months, let alone an eternity!

"You got whiskey?"

"We make our own alcohol. It's closer to brandy."

"Bring it out."

As if on cue, the flushed cook returned for her plate, and Daniela ordered the brandy and two glasses.

"I don't get this whole free will thing," Katie complained when the cook returned. She poured herself amber liquid and took a long swallow. "It's not really free if the choice is made for you."

"The immortals must give humans a choice. It's Immortal Code. They've been working for millions of years to get around this one; they're quite crafty at it. You may have wished your life to be different or made some statement in anger. They're better than lawyers when it comes to taking things out of context, and there are no judges keeping track of what really happened."

"It's a sham."

"It exists to protect mortals, and in many cases it does. In some, it doesn't. Just depends on the immortal."

Katie wasn't sure if the homemade alcohol was stronger than normal or if her weakened state made her more vulnerable to its effects. After two shots, she felt woozy.

"Are there any benefits to being an Ancient's mate?" she asked.

"Prestige. You move to the head of the immortals' hierarchy. Immunity to Death, children with magical powers --"

"*Children?*"

"--protection from enemies, a really comfortable lifestyle, and some mates even are able to tap into their immortals' talents."

Eternity. Children.

She couldn't have one day without some sort of surprise or other? As if sensing her distress, Daniela poured her another two shots of brandy.

"Where are we?" Katie asked.

"In the Caribbean on an undeclared island."

"Undeclared?"

"Protected by magic. No one knows we're here, except those seeking refuge."

"Is refuge...free?"

"Always. We sell our liquors and also are the beneficiaries of various immortals. The Ancient Andre, who became dead-dead recently, left us his fortune, as have many others before him."

"I met him. He seemed like a good man. Ancient. Whatever."

"He was the glue that bound the Council That Was Seven. Seven brothers with one common immortal father and seven separate mothers. Their father fought the Dark One and left his children to carry the torch. Only, the siblings couldn't ever get along. It was said two of them turned on the others, aligned with evil, and only Andre had the power to kill any of the others. He was their elder, the peacemaker, and the executioner. He sentenced both brothers to Hell for eternity."

"Sasha and Rhyn," Katie said quietly, touching her throat again. "What did they do?"

"They turned on their brothers and against humans and the order of good. Massacred millions. The human race barely survived. The legends are thick in every culture, from floods to plagues to volcanoes and the ground rising up to swallow people, to the influence of men who slaughtered whole nations for entertainment."

"They did all that?"

"According to the legend. Sasha was the first to align with the Dark One, and Rhyn..."

"Rhyn what?"

"They say he went mad when the woman he'd chosen as his mate chose Kris instead. She died at Rhyn's hands. The legends don't say what happened, but after Rhyn killed the woman, he tried to kill Kris. Andre stopped him, and Death made him disappear."

"How awful," Katie breathed. "Does that mean your theory about mates is wrong, if they fought over one woman?"

"Maybe, maybe not. It's hard to know. Maybe she was an Ancient's mate, too."

Rhyn was a mass murderer, a creature who had tried to wipe out the human race.

The story didn't sit well with her. It explained his and Kris's palpable animosity, but it didn't explain why Rhyn was a prisoner. Or how Sasha swayed Jade. Or how Andre died.

Or why Rhyn kept her around, unless it was purely for her ability to make him immune from the magic of other immortals.

She drank more brandy, a familiar sense of panic deep in her chest. It and impending doom had been with her since meeting Gabriel. Her headache pulsed and she felt hot from alcohol.

"Think I'll go for a walk," she murmured. "Thanks for the talk. Mind if I take this?"

Daniela filled her glass with two more shots and smiled. Katie raised the glass in a salute and left. It was muggier than she was used to, the air clinging to her already hot skin. It was near dusk, with the sky growing dark in the distance. She made her way to

the wall, needing to feel the cool ocean breeze. Rhyn was gone, and she leaned against the wall.

A hand took her brandy and flung it and the glass over the wall. He wasn't gone after all. She glared at him.

"You're not allowed in here," she told him.

"You're not allowed alcohol."

"If I didn't keep learning how insane this world is every second of the day, I wouldn't have to drink!"

His eyes glinted rather than flashed, his copper skin tight across perfect, chiseled features. He didn't have Kris's noble look or Andre's delicate features. Rhyn was a wild animal with a wild beauty, harsh angles and planes, a body built for survival. He said nothing, and she offered her good wrist.

"You're weak," he scoffed.

"So are you."

She dropped her arm and gazed up at him, troubled and lightheaded.

"You don't look like someone who could kill millions," she murmured. "Then again, I saw what you did at the Arch." She shivered involuntarily. "Did you really almost annihilate the human race?"

He said nothing and mirrored her position, leaning against the wall in what she knew was irritated mockery.

"I don't believe it," she went on.

"You're a fool. I killed over a hundred of Sasha's creatures at the Arch with only a fraction of my power. You think I can't do the same to a bunch of weak humans?"

"You can't hate humans so much if you chose me as a mate. Why did Sasha send his creatures after you?"

"I took you from him and escaped. He's pissed and wants us both back. Probably heard you're my mate."

His silver gaze went to her neck and flared. She didn't know what that meant. His eyes slid away to the distance.

"Is it your duty to protect humanity?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"More or less, as long as they're not in my way."

"And I know firsthand how you take your duties."

He gave her a sidelong glance.

"You take them pretty seriously," she added. "You could've killed me a million times over, but I'm your mate. You haven't, yet, because protecting me --albeit poorly --is still your duty. No, you didn't try to kill humanity off. One stupid little human is so much easier to kill than a few billion, and you chose duty instead."

"You drink too much and talk too much. You should've died in Hell."

"Tell me about it. Might have made life easier."

At her bitter note, he looked at her again. She felt angry tears welling and forced them back, soon distracted by the warmth in her blood. Other thoughts collided with her emotions, ones that reminded her that she was forever trapped with some otherworldly creature that viewed her as a food supply and nothing more.

"Eternity's a long time," she whispered.

"Longer than you know."

"You're welcome for saving your ass, by the way."

"You interfered," he replied.

"It's not how I remember things! I saved you from Hell, and I saved you from those things at the...at the Arch."

Memories of the massacre made bile rise and her chest clench. "I'll be a raving lunatic at the end of another week!"

He didn't disagree. She wanted to scream at him, hit him, send him far away. Instead, she slumped against the wall, defeated by alcohol and impotent rage. It didn't matter what she said or did; he wasn't going anywhere. He'd made his claim clear.

You. Are. Mine.

"You chose me," she said. "I want to know why."

He was silent.

"You owe me this, if nothing else!"

Her words were accompanied by a punch to his arm, one that merely earned her an impatient look.

"Tell me why, Rhyn," she ordered, pushing him to face her. She glared up at him, swaying toward him.

His gaze slid over her face and down her body to her breasts. She gritted her teeth and waited. It was hard to reconcile the man before her with the creature that tore apart bodies like meat in a blender.

"I wanted you," he said in his low growl, the one that gave her chills.

"Why? So you could block others? Revenge against Kris? An easy food source following you around for the rest of all time?"

She jabbed him in the chest with each question, unwilling to back down. He snatched her upper arms and pushed her against the wall, his body close enough for their chests to brush when either breathed in. The silver eyes were fiery, and apprehension fluttered through her. His scent tickled her senses, his nearness making her warm body warmer.

"I. wanted. You."

His words were forced through clenched teeth.

"There's gotta be more!" she returned. "You're immortal. You could have any woman you wanted in any time you wanted, including one who'd be far more docile than I am."

"You came after me at the Arch."

"Yeah. So?"

"Why?" he demanded.

"I knew you were in danger."

"You could've left me to my fate, and you didn't. You were a loyal blood monkey."

The thought of leaving him to die had never crossed her mind. However, the thought of swan diving off a cliff the next time he called her a damn *blood monkey* was getting more tempting with each day!

"I can't do this much longer," she whispered. "I can't deal with all this shit."

"You're strong. You'll survive."

"I don't want to *survive*! I want to be happy and not worry about creatures trying to kill me or how often I'll be wandering into one of your massacres!"

"This --"

"I know, I know! This is my life, and I belong to you. You're such an insensitive bastard."

She strained against him. He didn't budge. Exhausted, she rested her head, then her body, against him. She was tired of fighting, tired of his attitude, tired of everything.

He'd hugged her before, an anomaly, she was sure, until his arms now moved around her again. Would she *ever* understand him? He didn't give a damn about her, and he sounded as if he'd rather she jump from a cliff than bother him.

And then he brought her here to be healed. He held her. At one point, he'd called her beautiful and tonight, he'd called her strong. He rested his chin on her head. She liked the way he smelled, how strong and solid his body was. It was more than comforting; she wanted to melt against him and stay there.

The intense sensation startled her. That a mass murdering *demon* was the only man she'd ever felt so comfortable with made no sense. She'd risked her life to rescue him because it was what good people did. After all, in his own twisted way, he'd tried to help her.

"I still don't believe you," she murmured. "There has to be another reason you chose me."

He said nothing.

"If you're hungry..."

...*you should eat*. She couldn't bring herself to say the words.

"Whiskey tastes like shit," he replied.

"Now who's whining?"

"Careful, little girl," he growled.

"You're not going to kill me. Might try to chew through my other arm. That *hurt*, Rhyn. You owe me for that. And for rescuing you twice."

"More fish?"

"You won't even apologize for my arm, will you?"

"You should've left me," he said.

"So you repay me for rescuing you by eating my arm."

"You can't face those things. You were a fool to follow me."

"I didn't follow you," she snapped. "I traveled through the shadow world, which is also how I got you back! You think I lugged your heavy ass for two miles?"

"You found your way through the shadow world on your own?"

His words were measured enough that she looked up.

"Got a problem with that, too?"

"It's as it should be."

She studied him. There was some satisfaction in his response, the first shred of positivity she'd heard from him yet. Their gazes locked, and she felt a different kind of warmth slide through her.

Could she really be sexually attracted to an immortal mass murderer of millions? It was not a stretch, not with his muscular body pressed against her and his rugged features so close. Even the liquid silver eyes that once terrified her were hauntingly beautiful, when not glowing like some hell-beast's. She liked his smell, his warmth, his strength...even his snarkiness.

She was crazy. There was no way a monster like him would ever be interested in his blood monkey!

He touched her neck, and she waited, assuming he'd take blood from her despite his distaste of alcohol. His thumb traced the line of her jaw lightly, and heat skittered

through her. He lowered his head, and she bared her neck. Though his hot breath tickled her, he didn't bite her. The pad of his thumb traced across her lower lip. She closed her eyes, breathing growing shallow.

He nipped her neck, and she gasped, embarrassing herself. Her blood was thrumming even faster than the alcohol alone would have caused, her body growing too warm for comfort.

His lips traced the line from her neck to her jaw with small, hot kisses, sending exquisite shivers through her. There was a pause before he kissed her lightly on the lips, his full lips oh-so-warm. God help her, she responded! She tried to tell herself it was the alcohol scattering her thoughts and not the growing feeling of respect or concern she felt toward him.

Sensing her yield, he deepened the kiss. It became less of a request and more of a demand, with his tongue flickering to taste her. He tasted like he smelled, rich and musky, his kiss intense enough to dispel the fogginess of alcohol. She'd never felt anything like his kiss or the warmth that flowed through her. She wanted more of him, *all* of him, and the heat of need settled into her lower abdomen.

A throat cleared behind him. Rhyn twisted his head away with a warning growl, and the world crashed down on her.

What in the name of everything holy was she doing? Getting ready to tear her shirt open and throw herself down for a monster? She felt the heat --his heat --within her, branding her from the inside out.

"Sire, you've been warned," Daniela said in her crisp tone.

Rhyn turned to face the robed woman, and Katie slid away from him. Her thoughts jangled in her head, some desperate for him to continue, others claiming she couldn't go home if she started down this path, and still others saying she was screwed either way, figuratively and literally.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Whatever Daniela said to him after she fled worked, and Katie didn't see him for the rest of the day. The next morning, she leaned against the wall and stared at the dark form crouched on a rock a good distance from the Sanctuary. He was staring at her. She didn't know what he thought from the distance, but she imagined him pissy as usual. He deserved it for kissing her and making her feel things she never, ever, ever imagined she'd feel for any man, let alone a monster like him.

"Katie."

She whirled. "Gabriel!" she exclaimed. "Are you here for me?"

"No, but thanks for asking."

"You're not funny, Gabriel."

His amusement was fleeting. He leaned his elbows on the wall with a wave at Rhyn. He wore his customary all black, his dark eyes hidden behind dark shades.

"I gave Kris your message," he said. "He wasn't happy."

"His problem, not mine."

"It *becomes* your problem if he doesn't believe you."

"Does he?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not yet."

"You can't take me to him, you know. Rhyn will kill everyone in his path."

"You can choose to come with me," he stated.

"Would cause an even worse rampage."

"Very well. He said to give you this."

He handed out a note. She took it and read the single sentence.

I'll return your life to you.

She expected joy at the offer but felt wary instead.

"Andre said Kris planned to do what Rhyn did and make me his mate. Can I ever *not* belong to Rhyn now that I do?"

"Not unless Rhyn is dead-dead."

"And Kris doesn't believe me about Sasha," she mused. "He's not really offering me anything. He can't wipe my memory --even Andre couldn't and he's older --and he can't fix what Rhyn's done. Does he think me so naïve that I'd leap at some empty promise?"

Gabriel met her question with silence and another look of passing amusement.

"He must've forgotten I went to Hell already. I'm not the idiot he took me for when he assigned a certain baby angel to my guardianship. Of all the screwed-up men...*beasts* I've met, I'd trust Rhyn before Kris, even not knowing what Rhyn really is or if he really did try to annihilate mankind alongside Sasha."

"Do you believe he did?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"What do you feel?"

She knew what she thought and suspected he did, too.

"Doesn't matter if I'm sorta stuck with him, does it?" she replied icily.

"The answer's not for me. I know what happened."

"Daniela called him wild. I'd say that's true, but I don't think him capable of walking away from a duty so great."

"Then you'd be right," he agreed.

"Was he always so wild?"

"Hell made him worse. What shall I tell Kris?"

"Tell him to leave me alone."

She handed back the note, more determined not to give the white-haired man what he wanted now that she had confirmation --and somehow she believed Gabriel --that Rhyn hadn't destroyed millions. Her hand rested on her bandaged forearm. She'd peeked at the healing wound the night before and found the scar not just ugly but hideous, a jagged seam between two lumps of uneven flesh.

"Gabriel, who was the woman they fought over?" she asked. "Daniela said this was what spurred their fighting."

He was quiet. She thought he'd refuse to answer until he said slowly,

"A truly unworthy woman. She was the first Ancient's mate born and should've been Kris's mate, if she hadn't first promised herself to the Dark One. She played them against each other and betrayed them both to Sasha. Rhyn killed her to protect Kris and his brothers. Kris never knew and never forgave him for killing the woman he meant to take as his mate. Rhyn probably saved humanity by doing so but was sent to Hell and nearly lost his mind."

"Why didn't he *tell* Kris she was evil?"

"Rhyn's not a talker."

She stared at him, astonished.

"So he'd spend eternity in Hell because he couldn't sit down with Kris and tell him what happened?"

"It's complicated," he said.

"No, it's not!"

"There's more to the story. The woman, Lilith, was pregnant with Kris's heir. No matter what Rhyn would've said, the damage was done. To be quite honest, he was so abrasive anyway, even if he hadn't killed the woman, they'd have broken paths. Though all seven were constantly fighting, Kris and Rhyn were always at each other's throats."

"That's dandy, but it doesn't sound like he deserved Hell!"

"He's not exactly a pure angel, Katie. He did a lot of bad things, and his mother was a demones, a powerful one who seduced his father. After they mated, she killed him. The brothers on the Council were looking for any excuse to expel or kill him, and Andre was his only advocate. Despite his demon powers, despite his wildness, despite his struggle to remain dutiful to their cause, he was a danger to anyone around him."

She couldn't imagine an upbringing with no parents, a clan of brothers who hated him, and no ability to change his nature.

"Gabriel, he's protected and helped me more than once since the dungeon and done it out of some sort of sense of duty. Even if he's done bad things...I don't know. I don't think he's the lost cause you're making him out to be," she said, disturbed.

"You saw what he did in St. Louis."

Her gaze shifted from him to the dark form seated on a boulder. She assumed...she *hoped*...all of the dead were bad guys. Even so, she'd seen what he could do to a human-esque body in a few seconds.

"Are you saying I *should* go with you?" she asked.

"I believe your choice to be the right one."

"Do you think...why do you think he chose me as his mate?"

"Daniela seems to think it was preordained. You're an Ancient's mate, and maybe you were meant for him and only him," he said.

"He told me he chose me."

"You didn't ask why?" he challenged, amused again.

"Of course I did. He said he wanted me. He's not a man of many words, Gabriel."

"Maybe that's the truth of it."

"I know there's more," she insisted.

"Maybe you stabilize his wild power, though he doesn't know it yet."

She considered the new possibility. He certainly didn't seem to have much control, as far as she could tell. He'd massacred every human she'd run across to date.

"You mean he was *worse* than this before?" she returned, surprised.

"Much. Would've wiped out the island by now and half of Cuba without realizing he'd done so."

"He's using me."

"He needs you and wants you. He needed his brothers and still left them. As much as he's done wrong in his life, he's not a liar."

The information filtered through her skepticism until she admitted he spoke too logically to be anything but right. Her disbelief that Rhyn had chosen someone like her over a supermodel was softened by the rationale that he would also innately recognize his intended mate, even if he didn't recognize her ability to help him control his power.

What a horrible life he'd lived, if this was the best it'd ever been for him! Yet he didn't seem too affected by a life of pain, exclusion, and conflict. If anything, he seemed absolutely sure of himself and what he wanted, even if his nature didn't allow him to control his own wild talents.

"Kris may want to come here to talk to you," Gabriel added. "He knows he can't take you anywhere, but if he asks..."

"I don't care if he comes to me. I can't trust him enough to go to him. And he comes alone, Gabriel."

"Understood."

He was gone before she could tell him goodbye. She leaned against the wall, eyeing the distance from her position to the rock on which Rhyn sat. She doubted he'd come if she called.

The conversation with Gabriel turned over in her thoughts as she descended the stairs and left through the opened gate. She felt bad for Rhyn, though she suspected the emotion was wasted on someone who didn't have a drop of self-pity. She crossed her arms as she neared. Rhyn watched her, unmoving, like a predator watches its prey.

"You don't have anywhere else to be aside from sitting here day and night staring at the wall?" she asked.

"I'm immortal. I have time."

She drew a deep breath. Instead of retorting, she said, "That's not how I wanted this conversation to go. I came out to thank you for bringing me here and saving me more than once from those things."

He stared at her.

"So, thank you. If you're hungry, just let me know."

He said nothing, his tense frame never relaxing. At the silence, she turned away and started back to the compound, irritated.

"What did Gabriel want?" he asked before she'd gone more than a few steps.

"Kris sent him to fetch me," she replied without turning.

"And you said *what*?"

"No."

She didn't hear his silent step. He gripped her arm hard and stepped in front of her, his size sending a tremor of unease through her.

"Why?" he growled.

"He can't make me, and I don't want to go," she said archly.

"Until he offers you something you want."

"He did. He offered me my life back."

He bristled more.

"You're the lesser of two evils," she said at the unspoken command. She pulled her arm away and returned to the Sanctuary. As she walked, she began to wonder how to train a wild animal. She'd had cats before, but she'd never even owned a dog. She couldn't imagine potty training one let alone training some ancient creature to contradict his nature.

"You turned down returning to your life to stay with me," he stated with one of his low, evil chuckles. She hadn't realized he was following her. "Foolish human."

"Maybe I know he's promising more than he can deliver. Really, why do you all think we mere mortals are all idiots? I'm so sick of this whole better-than-thou attitude you all have!" she snapped, facing him with her hands on her hips.

"I never said you were stupid."

"Whatever, immortal overlord of the universe! Every time one of you opens your mouth, you patronize me. It gets old and I think I've done damn well in this sick world of yours."

He said nothing, and she raised an eyebrow. He was impossible to read. He wore all black, though he was dressed more simply than she'd seen him, in dark jeans and a black long-sleeved T-shirt and heavy boots. His hair was tied back, his jaw and chin scruffy from a couple days' growth of hair. His liquid eyes were assessing but not flared, his large frame still imposing.

"No smart-ass comment about your blood monkey?" she challenged.

"Nope." He looked amused, if a statue could look amused.

"What *are* you waiting here for?" she asked.

"Nothing a blood monkey could understand."

"Son of a bitch!"

She marched back to the Sanctuary, wearied by the exchange. Daniela just inside the entrance, and her normally calm face took on an expression of sudden irritation.

"Oh no you don't!" Daniela cried, and flew past her toward the rocks. "Sacred ground!"

She couldn't imagine what Rhyn had done and hesitated to look. Curiosity drew her to the gate again, where tiny Daniela was animated and angry as she stood between Rhyn and Kris. Katie couldn't help but pity the woman; it was her fault they were both there. She felt beat already but forced herself to once again leave the confines of the Sanctuary.

Kris's white hair, fair complexion, and amber eyes were at odds with Rhyn's darkness and glowing pewter gaze. Both were outwardly calm, though tense enough that a hair landing on their arms would make them snap.

Daniela finished her lecture on the Sanctuary's rules and waited. Neither spoke. Katie approached uneasily.

"What do you want, Kris?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"I came to talk to you. Alone."

"You're not allowed in the Sanctuary, and I doubt Rhyn will agree to disappear. He's a stubborn jackass like that."

Both looked at her. Daniela paled.

"It'd do you well in our world to learn some respect, especially for the Ancients," Kris snapped.

"What do you want, Kris?" she repeated.

Kris looked at Rhyn, who refused to take the hint. Kris lifted his chin at Daniela, and the woman offered a curtsey before hurrying back to the Sanctuary.

"I couldn't believe you wouldn't want your life back and wanted to hear it from you," he replied, facing her.

"You don't have the power to offer me that."

"Of course I do."

"Obviously one of us is confused. I haven't lived for millions of years in your world, but I believe Rhyn here would have to die permanently so his claim on me was nullified. And then you'd have to find someone older than Andre to wipe my memory and put everything the way it was. All of this would assume that you've decided you have no further use for me."

"You've learned a lot but not everything. There are ways of releasing you from Rhyn's claim, and there are ways of erasing your memory."

"But are you done with me, Kris?"

He didn't respond. She frowned.

"You don't seem to understand how important you are," he said at last with barely restrained impatience. "You can right the imbalance of our world so that evil is held in check. Do you want humanity to go down the toilet because you didn't feel like helping?"

"You had no intention of returning my life to me."

"Eventually, yes."

"Kris, you can't use people! Do I want to help you save the world? Yes, I do. But I don't trust you. If you lied to me about everything so far, why the hell would I trust your word about anything, even saving the world?"

He wiped his face, and she sensed again he was unaccustomed to being challenged. Andre had claimed Kris was highly combustible. She didn't want to find out, but she wasn't following him blindly.

"You used Jade, too, didn't you?" she accused. "Look where that gets you!"

"I trust Jade with my life! You think I believe the word of some stupid mortal?"

"I know what I saw, Kris!"

"So, what is your solution?" he ground out between clenched teeth. "You stay here with *him* while the world falls apart around you?"

"He's the only reason I'm alive, Kris," she reminded him. "You dropped me into this world, and he's kept me alive."

"How noble of the beast that nearly destroyed the world once!"

"You didn't come here to talk. You came here to do the typical immortal thing and boss me around."

They stared at each other. His gaze turned from amber to fire, and she wondered if she'd pushed him too far. Rhyn, for once, was quiet. She'd never seen his attention stay any one place for long, but today, he was actually calm. His arms were folded across his chest, his frame growing more relaxed as his brother grew tenser. With effort, Kris drew a deep breath and blew it out.

"I am one of the leaders of the immortal world. Yes, I am used to giving orders, orders that *everyone* follows. I understand that you don't know our world, and that you have the disadvantage of having been through some truly awful things since being thrown into our world."

Despite her anger, she recognized the physical effort he put into his words.

"For what it's worth, I apologize for treating you like you were subhuman. I need your help for the sake of humanity."

She softened at his obvious struggle. Her gaze went to Rhyn, who looked almost amused again, then back.

"And how can one puny little human save humanity?" she returned.

"Sasha and the Dark One will destroy everything they can. Uly is experimenting with your blood to find a way to create a sort of antidote we can inject into our immortals to render them immune to the powers of Sasha's creatures. He's close but needs more time and more blood."

She took in his words, surprised he'd admit to needing a human.

"Thank you, Kris. I'll help you on two conditions."

"Name it."

"You take the bounty off Rhyn's head and readmit him to whatever weird immortal society you belong to AND I get to leave whenever I want."

"You gave me three conditions, not two. I'll allow you one in the angel of *compromise*," he said with distaste.

She sensed a brick wall and hesitated, considering. She really did want to help humanity, and she really did want her freedom from stupid immortals bossing her around. Her gaze settled on Rhyn, who was waiting as tensely for her response as Kris.

"Bounty," she said with some effort. "No more hunting, tracking, targeting, hurting, killing, or anything else. He's your brother, for God's sake."

Kris's gaze flared again, and she assumed he'd expected her to ask for her freedom. She heard him grate his teeth, then say, "Rhyn, bring her to the compound."

He turned and stalked away, disappearing with a puff of cool breeze.

"Foolish human," Rhyn said more quietly.

"Everyone deserves a second chance, even you, you jackass," she responded. "I'm going to get my things."

He was silent as she turned and walked away. He was watching her, a predator who'd either figured out his prey wasn't edible or needed more study to kill. His penetrating gaze gave her a different kind of chill, one that made her blood quicken as well as her step.

She gathered her things and searched for Daniela --or anyone --but no one was around. She left the Sanctuary one final time. Rhyn stood in the same place she'd left him, unchanged in any way. She stood before him and waited. This time when he reached for her, she knew it was for blood. She closed her eyes and tilted her head, anticipating the pinch. He drank long, until she was swaying and leaning against him. When he released her, he touched her arm. Warmth shot through her, energizing her.

She looked up at him. She hadn't noticed his pallor beneath his copper skin, but she saw it now. He returned her gaze, steadying her with a possessive hand on her hip.

"Were the guys you killed in St. Louis all bad?" she asked in a measured tone.

"More or less."

"What does that mean?"

"Trust me."

God help me, I think I do.

As if hearing her thought, he gave a slow smile. Before another insult could leave her lips, he kissed her, a commanding, intense kiss. One arm looped around her and she braced herself against his chest, vaguely realizing that --by not refusing him the day before --he'd taken her response as a blank check. The familiar warmth, his intensity --both lit her blood afire, and she couldn't help but imagine what his hot, talented tongue could do to other parts of her body. The vision in her mind made her bones too weak to hold her on their own.

He drew away with a satisfied growl. She wanted to be angry at him but was too dazed, too surprised at the sensations running through her. He'd pursue her like a predator its prey, and he'd consume her. All of her.

They gazed at each other for a long moment. She sensed he was reading her thoughts, and she wondered what he was thinking.

"You're not wearing any underwear."

Then again, maybe she didn't want to know.

"Aren't you supposed to take us somewhere?" she snapped, face hot.

He bared his teeth in a grimace, then turned her so her back was to him. She didn't know why until she felt the fog of the underworld and then the warmth of wherever it was they went this time. He tensed as they stepped through the portal, clutching her against him with one arm, and she blinked.

Only to find herself staring at the bubbles of blood forming from within his fist, which was clamped around the blade of a knife a few inches from her face.

"Jade, no!" Kris shouted too late.

Silence surrounded them, not the good kind, but the heavy kind that made her want to hold her breath lest she break it and all hell erupt. There were many still forms around them, with only Kris moving. She saw Ully, Jade, Ileana, Gabriel...and a dozen more she didn't know. The walls were made of uneven, massive stones, the same kind beneath her feet. The air was chilled, still and damp, like she imagined a castle dungeon would feel.

"Rhyn is our...guest," Kris said, as if eating glass shards. "And Katie."

Rhyn tossed the blade back to Jade, who caught it with a look that made Katie want to hide. The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch.

"Katie," Ully hissed, as if they were kids hiding under the porch and not in the obvious line of sight of everyone in the room. "C'mon."

He held out a hand, motioning toward the door. She went. Rhyn refused to release her, and she sighed, leaning her head back against his shoulder in defeat. His arm loosened, and she hurried to Ully, who grabbed her hand and pulled her from the room.

He shoved the massive oak door closed.

"I do *not* want to see what happens next!" he said, breathing out hard. "Kris told us you both were coming. I think they have some things to discuss with your..."

His gaze went to her neck as he fell silent.

"As long as he's okay," she said with a frown.

He gave her an odd look and started down the hall, waving for her to follow.

"You don't know much about us yet, do you?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Rhyn's mother was a powerful demon, and his father is the same as Kris's. There isn't an immortal out there who'd face off against Rhyn now that Andre's gone. Have you done much to civilize him?"

"There's no civilizing a man like him."

Even as she spoke, her thoughts went to what Gabriel told her. Compared to how Rhyn had been, she *had* made him civilized.

"Probably not," he agreed. "I'll show you to the women's wing. I'd stay there if they let me!"

His step grew quicker, and his face brightened as they wound their way through the compound.

"Are we underground?" she asked.

"No. This is just a really huge place. It's pretty easy to navigate after a few decades of trying."

"*Only* a few decades?"

He didn't catch the sarcasm in her voice; his gaze was trained on a woman clad only in a towel and trailed by steam, emerging from a door along one wall. Katie heard the sounds of laughter and talk from behind the closed door. They followed the woman, who looked like a fitness warrior if she ever saw one. The black-haired woman had dark Mediterranean skin and tattoos down her back and across her shoulders. She was barefoot.

"Ully, you're not supposed to be down here!" she called without turning in a distinct British accent.

"I have a reason," he said quickly. "I'm showing a new member to her room."

The woman turned, interest then puzzlement on her serene, chiseled features. Her eyes were almond shaped and clear amber.

"Not a warrior," she said, her questioning look lingering on Katie's neck. "Wow, really?"

"Yeah, really," Ully said. "Megan, this is Katie. Katie, Megan. Megan is one of the chic fighters."

"Female warriors," she said, raising an eyebrow in warning.

"I'm too wimpy to beat up," he reminded her.

"Right. I'll take her from here."

"But I --"

"Out."

Katie almost smiled at his fallen face as the stern voice of the Amazonian-size woman before them. Ully was too harmless to be angry at, like a kid brother. He turned and smiled at her, then retreated, lingering at the door to the shower room.

"You're..." Megan trailed off, as if debating what to say while trying to figure out what was standing in front of her.

"Short? Human? Disrespectful? Not accustomed to the rules of this world?" Katie supplied with no heat. "You can say it --Kris won't let me forget I'm a square in a round hole."

"I was going to say you look like a living doll," Megan said with a half smile.

Katie smiled in return, deciding she liked the Amazon with the British accent and wild tribal tattoos.

"Nearly all of us girls here are warriors. None of the Ancients have mates, though some other immortals do. C'mon. I need to change, then I'll show you around."

The women's wing was a beehive of activity. They crossed through a common area with a kitchenette and large, flat-screen TV, past a gym, a library, and a few other common rooms, and into the barracks area, which bustled with activity.

Katie crossed her arms, self-conscious with the looks the others gave her. Her arrival silenced conversations and made most everyone do a double take. Even if not for Rhyn's name scrawled across her neck, she'd draw attention. None of the other immortal Amazonian warriors were below six feet. They came in all colors and

complexions, some slender and graceful like dancers while others were muscular. She heard several different languages spoken before those she passed fell silent.

"This room's empty. Go ahead and make yourself at home. I'll come get you in a minute," Megan said, pushing a door open near the end of the hall.

The room was more welcoming than she expected, the stone walls covered and smoothed with Sheetrock painted a light green and edged with pumpkin orange. The room contained two full-sized beds and two large wardrobes along with military-style trunks at the foot of each bed. She had yet to see a window. She sat on the bed, placing her small satchel of belongings on the nightstand. The room smelled of vanilla mixed with some other exotic scent, the beds covered in soft white duvets with pumpkin-colored pillows.

She looked at her belongings and then at the room around her. It was nice, but *eternity?*

She felt a deep sense of loneliness and longing. For the first time in years, she wanted her sister around. Tired and conflicted, she lay back on the bed, taking great satisfaction out of a real bed after the few days on the flimsy bed at the Sanctuary.

"You need to rest, or do you want to see more of this place?" Megan asked, chuckling as she leaned against the doorway. "I'll show you where to go for logistics."

"Logistics?"

"Clothing, bathroom stuff, anything. They have all kinds of good stuff. You can order things out of magazines or from your favorite stores or pick from what they've got."

Megan led her again through hallways that fell silent when she passed. They crossed more intersections, descended to the level below, and stopped outside of double doors.

"Clothes, rations, gear," Megan said with a toss of her hand down the hall toward several other open double doors. "Cafeteria's on this level, too, all the way down at the dead end. This is the women's clothing department."

Katie braced herself for a storage room full of military uniforms and was surprised to see what looked much like a women's department section.

"Cold weather, transitional, summer weather. In the back they have more exotic clothing, like Indian saris and the like. Pajamas, underwear, socks, bras in that corner. You know what hemisphere you'll be in when you leave?"

"No idea."

"It's always chilly here, more so now that it's autumn. We're in northern Europe, so you can't go wrong with sweaters."

Megan wandered, looking through piles of sweaters and pants. The walls were lined with blouses, formal wear, business wear, jackets, and other kinds of clothing, while displays of knit shirts, sweaters, jeans, and slacks spanned out before her.

"Megan, how much do these cost?" Katie asked, lifting a cashmere sweater.

"Free. One of the perks of our job."

She replaced the sweater and began hunting in earnest. She selected a few items, enough to get her through a few days in the new world. Light sweaters, long-sleeved shirts, a couple pairs of jeans. Megan helped and stacked socks and underwear in her pile and then brought her a light wool jacket, leather gloves, hat, and scarf. The Amazonian picked out a couple of T-shirts, her thick upper arms exposed in the tank top and jeans.

Katie gathered her clothes into a wool satchel and slung it over her shoulder. Megan led her down the hall to a room dedicated to shoes. Most were either boots of various kinds or running shoes, but there were a few more stylish pairs. Katie chose a pair of wool-lined clogs, shower sandals, and waterproof ankle boots.

She almost felt normal. Next Megan took her to what looked like a large drug store, where she plucked a few items from a shelf filled with top of the line skincare products. Katie's eyes widened in surprise as she recognized a brand of moisturizer that cost a few hundred dollars.

She grabbed the moisturizer and its cleansing counterpart and eye moisturizer. When she'd gathered everything she needed for bathing, she trailed Megan through the maze of hallways back to her room. Megan left her alone, and she unpacked. Then she grabbed her shower gear, sandals, and a plush towel and headed to the showers.

Steam and dampness clung to her as she set foot in the bathing room. No less than twenty showers separated by waist high walls lined the area before her. Another door led to a chamber with several bathing tubs. Still another door led her to a locker room with mirrors along two walls and another door to the restrooms. The final door led to a sauna. Several women bathed in stalls, the easy banter between them marking their camaraderie.

The hot water pounded over her body. She sighed deeply as it beat against her sore muscles. They responded and began to relax. She stood for a long time, letting the hot water pour over her, before she lathered herself up from head to toe. When she finished, she felt refreshed for the first time in weeks. She shut off the shower and wrung out her hair, then wrapped herself in the thick towel. She turned and gasped.

"Rhyn, you ass, how long have you been there?"

He looked her up and down in approval from his position leaning against the wall nearby. His glance went to the other women in the showers, who either ignored him or weren't going to say something to someone whose mother was a demon.

Exposed, irritated, she pointed to the door. He didn't budge. She tossed her hair over one shoulder and walked to him, pushing him toward the door.

"This is the women's locker room!" she said. "Give me ten more minutes of peace, and leave these poor women alone!"

She didn't notice the amused glances the women gave her, but she did see their appraising looks at Rhyn. He made no attempt to hide his perusal of the tall, athletic women around her.

"Missed a spot," he said, looking pointedly at the tattoo around her neck. "Might come off if you scrub hard enough."

"Jackass," she muttered, pushing him again.

She told herself he'd gotten there after she'd wrapped the towel around her. She didn't want to think of him watching her bathe naked; the idea made her body thrum with something she didn't want to feel.

He left, though she sensed he sought her out for a reason and wasn't about to grow patience. Determined to enjoy her first relaxing experience in a few weeks, she watched to make sure the door closed behind him and went to the locker room. She hadn't thought to bring her clothes. It was, after all, the *women's* wing. Her clothing from the Sanctuary was in a garbage can. She'd taken great pleasure in stuffing it there. Left with

her towel and her toiletries, she took her time applying the thick moisturizer and lotion over her entire body, then finished by combing through her hair.

"*That's* the Ancient Rhyn?" Megan asked in disbelief, appearing through the door leading to the hall. "The girls wanted me to ask since they haven't met you yet."

"Unfortunately," she grated.

"Wow. Not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"A demon or something. He's quite a looker. You are one lucky woman to go to bed with that one."

Katie ignored her, irritated. She looked at the tattoo on her neck and slathered lotion on it, wishing it were paint.

"I'll tell Aisha not to hit on him," Megan said.

"She can have him."

"Trust me, if he weren't an Ancient and he looked that good, she'd snatch him up, even if he had a mate," Megan said with a laugh. "That girl knows no bounds and can land any man."

Megan's words pissed her off. She didn't want to feel attracted to Rhyn. She wanted him to find someone else, but the thought of that happening made her furious. No one else would share his incredible kiss...or anything else that might happen between them. Her heart fluttered at the thought.

"Aisha wouldn't want him," Katie said with more calmness than she felt. "He's...you know, small."

Megan looked ready to laugh but smiled widely instead.

"You can say you haven't slept with him. I won't tell," she said. "I'll tell Aisha to back off anyway."

Katie flushed without answering. She gathered her things and left. Rhyn was standing outside the door, and she passed him without a look. He trailed her through the halls. She wasn't the only one who stopped traffic and conversations. She expected someone to be angry that there was a man in the women's wing. Instead, the women gave him open looks of lust and approval, as if he were the hunted and they the lionesses lining up to take their turns at him.

She was scared to turn around, almost as if afraid he'd be passing out his phone number to every lithe, beautiful Amazonian they passed. She wouldn't put it past him. He wasn't known for his morality or virtues. They reached her room, and she threw down her shower things on the bed, agitated. The door closed softly behind him. She was surprised he made it and wasn't screwing one of the Amazons in the hall.

"I need to put on some clothes. Please turn around," she said.

"Nope."

She faced him, suddenly overly aware of how small the room was and the fact that he leaned against the only way out. He watched her with an intensity that made her blood quicken and her nipples harden. She crossed her arms. He wore the long-sleeve knit shirt, snug enough to show his physique without clinging to it, the snug jeans low on his lean hips.

"What do you want, Rhyn?"

"My room, too," he said.

"What? No. You have to go to the men's wing."

"Nope."

He lowered a backpack from his shoulder to the bed, nearing her. She all but jumped away.

"Scared, little girl?" he growled without looking up.

"Scared, no. Suspecting you're in the women's wing to get something other than sleep, yes."

He looked at her closely, a slow smile spreading across his face. He pulled out a small stack of clothing from the backpack and peeled off his shirt, displaying the lean, muscular body beneath. She stared, awed. He caught her and said nonchalantly, "Only one woman in this wing I'll fuck."

"I see you've met Aisha," she said stubbornly, flushing.

He took a step to close the gap between them, and they were kissing again. Emotion and desire fueled her. She responded as aggressively as he. He wrapped one arm around her and pulled her against him. The feel of his warm skin against hers thawed her resistance, teased her with the image of his naked body against hers. He smelled of sweet rain and dark grasses, his taste just as exotic.

His strength, his heat...in seconds, she couldn't think of anything more than feeling more of him, tasting more of him. His arousal rose solid and thick against her belly, and the soft towel agitated her straining nipples. She met his aggression with her own, nibbling his lower lip, tasting him. Her hands roamed his chest and back. He pressed her against the wall, moving against her slowly while intensifying the kiss.

"Say yes," he ordered in the low growl.

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

He chuckled and lowered her onto the bed, his body atop hers. She surrendered to the heat in her blood.

CHAPTER NINE

They made love twice, then once again. When her mind had cleared and her body no longer thrummed with need, she tried to figure out what the hell had happened. She felt too sated to move. She breathed deeply of his scent and listened to his heart beat from her position sprawled atop him. She'd never felt such a connection to anyone. It was so much more than their physical joining; she'd felt him from the inside. For the first time since she could remember, she felt at peace, whole.

She didn't exactly understand the sensation except that she didn't ever want that feeling to end. She felt alone when he was gone, and while he frustrated the hell out of her, she still felt better when he was near.

"Rhyn..." she whispered. "Was this supposed to happen?"

"Don't start."

"Don't start what?"

She lifted her head to look at him. He propped his head with one folded arm, silver eyes glowing at her.

"You're my mate."

"So...that's permanent."

"Yep."

"Guess that means I'll have to stop sleeping around," she retorted.

"Go ahead. Don't ask where I hide the bodies."

She chuckled. His confidence was too strong to shake, and she suspected he knew just how damned good in bed he was and how unlikely any woman who'd had him would choose another man over him.

"Don't expect me to sleep with you at your bidding," she warned. "You're still a jerk."

"Only have to say yes once."

She sighed, content to rest atop him. His confidence was the only rock to stand on she'd found in this forsaken world of immortals. She didn't know if she could trust him, or Kris, or anyone yet, but she could at least know the man beneath her was probably the only man she was safe from. It wasn't much, but it was more than she'd had in what felt like a lifetime. He'd protected her and made it clear anything that got near her would die a nasty death.

Albeit everything he did was on his terms. Always on his terms. She couldn't swallow his ability to be a fierce beast shredding human-like creatures with no regard or morals. She didn't understand why he'd chosen her of all people. She feared knowing what he truly was, that she'd married a *demon*. There really couldn't be any kind of good demon, could there?

Troubled, she dozed, waking when she heard the knock at her door. Her demon lover was gone and her body covered with a sheet. She and her bed still smelled of him, and she breathed deeply.

"Hey, Ully wants to see you. Something about science experiments," Megan said, poking her head in.

"I'm coming," she replied, stifling a groan as she shrugged out of the sheet to stand. Her legs were wobbly, the muscles of her inner thighs stiff.

Megan disappeared, and Katie changed into one of the outfits she'd chosen. She almost felt normal in the jeans and light sweater. She slid her feet into clogs and left the room, meeting Ully just outside the girls' locker room. He beamed a smile and offered his arm, which she accepted.

"All hell's broken loose," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Sasha's created some sort of funky monster that even an immortal can't kill."

Her thoughts went to Jade, and she frowned, troubled.

"Awful."

"Yeah," he agreed. "The tests I did with your blood came back promising, but I can't nail down the right genetic code."

He led her down a floor to a large gym where a group of men stood in a loose cluster on a mat. Her eyes found Rhyn first, then Kris. Jade was there, another man with Kris's eyes but whom she didn't recognize, and a fifth man. All but the man with Kris's eyes and oriental beauty were sweating and bloodied in at least one spot.

Ully stopped a short distance from them, as if expecting them to launch into a battle despite their relaxed poses. The oriental man held a PDA and was frowning as he read through notes while the others waited for him to speak. Ully cleared his throat. The five turned, and Rhyn winked at her. She crossed her arms, forcing herself not to cover her

neck as four sets of eyes landed there. Her gaze settled on Jade, whose dark eyes still held the fire of danger.

"Kiki, this is Katie, Rhyn's mate," Kris said coolly. "Katie, Kiki, one of our brothers."

The oriental man looked her over, almond-shaped turquoise eyes assessing.

"Pleasure, Katie," Kiki managed before returning his gaze to his PDA. "That's five, brother."

His voice held an accusatory note that Kris ignored.

"Your theory looks legit, Ully," Jade voiced at the tense silence. "Rhyn is immune to everything. Kris was for all of five minutes."

"Five minutes?" Ully repeated with a frown. "That would mean..."

"Either we get an emergency five minutes or you figure out how to make it work longer," Kris said.

"It'd take *all* her blood at this point," Ully said absently.

Five sets of predatory eyes fell to her, as if realizing there was a lame lamb in their midst. She moved closer to Ully, even while knowing the skinny nerd was the least likely to defend her.

"Is it because she's his mate or because her blood sustains him?" Kiki asked, agitation on his face.

"Both, I'd say," Ully said. "If my serum worked, then we know her blood will give immunity. Rhyn's bond as her mate amplifies her natural ability. He needs less to do more."

"Sasha's figured it out," Kris said. "His monsters are tearing through our warriors like they're made of cotton candy."

"I know, I know."

"He drank her blood," Rhyn said.

"Sasha?"

"Yeah."

Once again, the predatory look from all. She wanted to shrink away and hide. Instead, she drew herself up to her just above average height, and confirmed, "He nearly killed me. He brought in a healer who pieced me back together when he was done."

"Before or after your mating to Rhyn?"

"Before," Rhyn volunteered.

"Would have to knock you off for that to work now," Kris said with thinly veiled hostility.

Kiki rolled his eyes, and Jade inched away from Rhyn, who bared his teeth in a humorless grin.

"Like children on a playground," Katie murmured.

"Worse," Kiki agreed. "In any case, it looks like Ully needs to go back to the drawing board, and we use Rhyn for now to take out Sasha's henchmen."

"Have you learned some control of that demon power, little brother?" Kris asked.

"Didn't have to," Rhyn said.

"Katie stabilizes him," Ully offered. "I did some tests and then asked Ginny for some research help. The mates of old balanced out the powers of your badass predecessors."

"Let me rephrase. Have you learned any sort of *discipline*?"

"It doesn't matter, Kris. We don't have much of a choice," Kiki said pragmatically. "I'll go with him."

"I don't need a babysitter," Rhyn snapped.

"Yes, you do," Kiki said firmly.

Both Rhyn and Kris sulked. Katie smiled, deciding she liked Kiki's no-nonsense attitude.

"We'll report back nightly," Kiki added. "In person. Jade's coming with us."

"Very well," Kris relented.

She frowned at the thought of Rhyn being gone all the time but was glad Jade would be with them and not around to try to drag her back to Sasha.

"I'll introduce you to the mates of the Immortals. Your place is there," Kris said dismissively. "Ully, take her to the royal wing."

She bristled, feeling as if she'd been sentenced to nothing more than a sewing circle for good little wives. Before she could object, Kiki took charge again.

"Rhyn, go get ready. Kris, can you spare a few warriors?"

"Yeah."

"We'll test this out and see how it goes."

Ully stepped aside as the massive men passed. She scowled. Rhyn slapped her on the butt as he passed. She cursed him quietly. When they'd gone, she turned to Ully and demanded, "What do the mates of Ancients do?"

"A lot of things," he said cheerfully. "They take on the roles the Ancients and immortals can't, like working with human counterparts, touring the Council's facilities all over the world. They're into the arts, and charities to raise money for our war. Most... well, all but you come from the elitist circles of their times. The Ancients and immortals could choose anyone they wanted as mates, and they chose from among the royalty, the wealthiest, and most influential."

"I really won't fit in."

"It really doesn't matter what they were when they were mortal," he assured her with an uncomfortable chuckle. "The rank structure in the immortal world is based on your mate."

She'd never in her life wanted to be a princess. She'd always wanted to be a financial planner, and the thought of becoming a socialite with no real responsibilities made her gut sink.

Eternity?

"Sounds awful," she said.

"You'll be the envy of us lesser immortals," he assured her.

She wanted to go home. In the face of a fate she doubted she wanted any part of, she felt homesick again.

You. Are. Mine.

There really was no chance of it. She felt she'd been a good sport since entering the immortal world, but she knew she'd never fit into a world where her sister surely would.

"When you see your room, you'll totally feel better," he said, and held out his arm.

She went grudgingly. He led her to the uppermost floor of the castle, to a hallway with magnificent views of a green valley with towering trees. She felt immediately out of place, even in the hall. The ceilings were gilded, the chandeliers dripping with crystals. Enconced lights glowed in the midday, and antique furniture, rare paintings, elegant

marble sculptures befitting a museum, silk Persian rugs underfoot, and many other priceless displays of prestige lined the wide hall.

He pointed as he walked, indicating the dining room, the library, the reception room, and others, each sounding stuffier than the last and all marked by polished oak double doors. They left the common area for the bedchambers wing. His voice grew hushed, as if the all-important guests behind each door might hear him. He paused at one room toward the middle of the hall and pushed it open.

No one in this place believed in locks. She crossed her arms and followed him in. Her bedchamber was half the size of a small house, with a domed ceiling replete with vibrant paintings of the sun progressing across the sky. The bed was the largest she'd ever seen, with a finely spun silk bedspread of pale yellow. The bedchamber was done up in pastels, soft rose drapes, light blue and green rugs, yellow pillows and highlights, which seemed to take the chill out of the stone walls.

She wondered if she'd freak everyone out with a few Hello Kitty posters to take away the severity of the rooms. They strode through the bedchamber to a small living room to the side with a flat-screen TV and comfortable-looking couch. The windows all faced east, over another valley, and a terrace was decorated with dainty iron-scrrolled chairs. Off the living room was a private dining area.

Opposite the living room was a massive bathroom with marble floors, a Jacuzzi, small sauna, and a large shower with multiple shower heads.

"Doesn't this make you feel so much better?" Ully asked, envy in his voice.

She saw the glow of his eagerness and tried to be more upbeat than she felt, for his sake.

"It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen."

"I know!"

"And this is mine?"

"Yep! And Rhyn's, unless he wants to stay with the other Ancients in their hall."

She didn't think he would but remained silent. At least, she *hoped* he wouldn't.

"I'll leave you here. Make yourself at home."

She didn't fully register his words until the door closed behind him. The bedchamber was silent. She looked around, feeling very much alone in the cavernous room. She couldn't help but think the barracks and all their activity and life were far more appealing than the solemn, stately apartment that was hers.

Her sister would be in heaven.

She felt like crying again. She roamed the apartment again and opened all the closets and drawers, not surprised to find them filled, as if she'd lived there all her life and hadn't just arrived.

It was creepy. She left the apartment and walked down the silent halls, turning down the hall with the common areas in time to see the back of a silk ball gown disappear into opened doors. She slowed until she smelled the scents of dinner. Suddenly ravenous, she quickened her step despite her dread of meeting one of the elitist mates.

Her gaze landed on the dining room, which looked much like that of a fancy restaurant. Small tables seating four were well spaced for privacy, with candles lighting each table and an assortment of flatware she'd never seen before. The room was warm and cozy, its walls done up in dark lacquered wood, the warm glow of chandeliers non-

imposing. The soft sounds of talk drifted to her, but it was the dress of the women within that drew her eye.

Few women wore similar fashions from similar eras. There were wide eighteenth-century ball gowns, women in little black dresses, one in a fifties poodle skirt, and several in dark dresses with ornate brocade on the bodice, like that of wealthy Middle Age royalty. One woman wore rustic battle wear from an era she couldn't name, another flowing Grecian robes, yet another robes of a different era. While their dress was different, their faces were similar: stunning beauties from across history.

"Ms. Katie?"

The maître d' looked at her skeptically, as if the woman passing in a revealing Middle Eastern belly dancing costume ahead of her was normal and jeans were not.

"Yes," she replied, her gaze going from him to the grand buffet in the center of the dining room.

"Shall I seat you?"

She nodded, hungry enough to set foot in the room with the most beautiful women in history. He led her to a private table in the corner near the buffet, as if sensing her unease. She had barely sat when a servant bearing a tray of coffee and diet root beer -- her favorite -- set down the drinks in front of her.

How was it possible they knew everything about her?

Rather than go to the buffet herself, the servant joined several others selecting morsels and food for her to try. He returned and set it before her. She looked at him, then at the silverware, and picked a fork she recognized.

The food was heavenly, the duck crisped to perfection in a light, tangy sauce, the vegetables still fresh. Even the honey butter was a perfect balance between sweet and rich, and the rolls still warm when she bit into them. Dessert was a slice of five different kinds of pies, and she dug into everything, eating fast.

"...only fitting he'd choose a classless barbarian. He's a demon."

She froze at the cultured voice with its rich accent, knowing the woman at the nearest table spoke about her. She shouldn't care, but part of her did. She was alone in a world she didn't fit into, and she wanted more than anything to escape.

She glanced around, abruptly aware of the number of looks she received. Some were politely curious, others pitying, still others resembling that of the maître d'. More than one went beyond polite disdain and glared to the point of hostility.

Declining seconds, she finished her meal and rose, suddenly wishing she hadn't been seated in the far corner. Those at the tables she passed quieted and watched. Ignoring the looks on their faces, she marched to the door. Once she was out of sight, she ran. She didn't know where exactly she went aside from down from the top floor. She followed what she thought was the path Uly had brought her on and found her way to the women's barracks.

There was life here, and friendly looks as she passed. She made her way through the common areas to the dorms and cautiously opened the door to the room that had been hers. It was blessedly empty.

She flung herself onto the bed, tears in her eyes. It still smelled of *him*, and she couldn't help wishing he was there, even if all he did was piss her off.

"Katie."

She wiped her eyes and twisted, surprised to see Kris in her doorway. He gazed at her for a long moment, an odd gleam in his eye. She sat uneasily. He entered and closed the door.

"What do you want, Kris?"

"Why aren't you in your bedchamber?"

"I like it here better."

His gaze slid to the floor, and he shook his head ever so slightly, as if trying to shake free an unpleasant thought.

"Did Rhyn make you cry?"

"No," she said, crossing her arms at the odd question. "Rhyn's been the only man to take care of me in this godforsaken world."

His eyes flared amber. Before she could blink, he snatched her and shoved her against the wall, pinning her to it with his body.

"By all rights, you should've been *mine!*" he snarled in a low growl.

"Kris --"

"Shut up! He stole *her* from me just like he did you."

She said nothing, afraid to move, afraid to speak. She rested her cheek against the cool stone wall.

"The only human who can help us defeat evil, and you chose *him.*"

"Kris, you're not yourself," she whispered.

"You think I give a damn about one stupid, feeble, weak human, especially one mated to Rhyn? You think I'd let you stand between me and my fate?"

He wrenched her head back and gripped her neck, nuzzling it.

"Kris, don't do this," she managed.

"Whatever is in your blood can tame evil."

She tried to pull away, but he pressed her harder against the wall until she could barely breathe. His fangs sank into her neck, and she jerked, feeling her skin and muscle tear. She cried out and arched, blinded by pain as he held her against the wall. He didn't take blood gently as Rhyn did; no, Kris *wanted* her to hurt!

He drank deep and long until she began to grow woozy. His erection pressed hard against her backside, and tears slid down her face. She shook from pain and fear of what he'd do next, if he was more like Sasha than Rhyn.

She closed her eyes and wished herself home. The shadow world appeared hazily around her. She willed herself there, concentrating hard to keep from losing the connection.

Kris released her and stepped away.

"Oh, god, Katie..." His voice was hoarse, a mix of pleasure and horror.

She sagged against the wall and gripped her bleeding neck. The shadow world swallowed her in its fog. There were several portals, and she hesitated, focusing on the image of her apartment. One of the portals grew brighter. She staggered toward it, stumbled, then fell through it and landed flat on her back on a familiar, faded red rug. It was dark, the spinning world lit by the kitchen and hallway light.

"Mama!" Toby cried.

She closed her eyes, terrified of bleeding to death right there in her own home.

"Wait in the kitchen." It was Gabriel's voice. He was blurry as he knelt beside her. His black gaze was still visible in the dark living room. She felt him assess her before he pried her hand free and rested his there, sealing the wound.

"Juice, Toby!"

He propped her up, and she sagged against him, unable to keep from crying at the thought of one sworn to protect humanity nearly killing her!

Gabriel lifted her and carried her down the hall. She shied away from her reflection, from the paleness of her skin and the stark red of her blood soaking the cream sweater. The death dealer set her on the bed. Toby clambered up beside her, spilling the juice.

"Rhyn's mate?" he exclaimed. "Wow, Katie, wow!"

"Go make cocoa," Gabriel said, expertly rescuing the juice before more spilled.

Toby obeyed. Gabriel waited until he was gone before pulling a chair to the side of the bed.

"Rhyn didn't do this," he observed, handing her the juice.

She wiped her face again and shook her head, pain thrumming through her body. Rhyn could make it leave. She didn't know how, but she knew he could. Gabriel touched her forehead, and cold lightning buzzed through her, absorbing the pain. She released a tight breath. His hand remained, and she felt the cool lightning in her mind, ruffling through her memories.

"Gabriel," she objected.

"Kris?"

She said nothing.

"Rhyn needs to know."

"It's the last thing he needs to know! He and Kris are barely working together as it is. I think Kris is right --the fate of humanity is more important than me."

"Doesn't give him a right to break the Immortal Code. You don't touch another's mate."

"The Immortal Code has done me no favors yet, Gabriel," she said, beyond exhausted. "Can we talk about it in the morning? Please?"

Gabriel fell silent, and she closed her eyes, exhausted.

* * *

"His time is up, my pet."

Gabriel replaced the hourglass after several unsuccessful attempts to shake it. The sand at the bottom didn't move.

"He's almost there," he replied, facing the bright figure that was Death.

She offered one of her warm smiles and approached him, looking up at him with a mischievous twinkle in her gaze. The heavy Caribbean air rustled the pages of the Oracle's book. A storm brewed on the horizon, visible through the window behind Death.

"What?" he asked warily. "The last time you looked at me like that, I lost a bet."

"I guess it's cheating when you can see the future," she mused.

"Damn right it's cheating."

"Then you better answer this question right."

He crossed his arms, aware she was the only creature not intimidated by his displays of strength. She whirled away and crossed to the Oracle's book, closing it after his failed attempt to see Rhyn's fate.

He watched her grab the hourglass and toss it in the air. It disappeared before it could hit the ceiling. He felt dread knot in his stomach at the sign she wasn't going to give Rhyn yet another chance.

"Would you do anything for your friend?"

His jaw clenched at the question. She'd been trying for years to have his voluntary service revoked.

"I've always done everything you asked," he replied. "I've served you longer than any of the others. You'd put me in the position of choosing my freedom or my friend's life?"

"I sensed a thaw in you. The moment one of my assassins hesitates --or starts to care --I make them dead-dead. I don't own you like I do them, and I like you, Gabriel," she said.

"You're threatening to kill me now?" he asked, bemused.

"We both want something. Just say yes, you'll do anything for your friend, and I'll spare him a little longer."

"How much longer?"

She looked at him knowingly before saying, "You don't trust me?"

"You know I do."

"Then say yes, Gabriel. You've served me long enough to know what I am. Unless you were considering leaving me?"

He said nothing, aware the thought had crossed his mind more than once lately. His gaze went to the incoming storm. His life wouldn't change drastically if he agreed. He just couldn't walk away.

Ever.

He'd taken Rhyn to Hell. This sacrifice was the least he could do for his friend.

"Yes. Give him more time," he said softly.

Death smiled slowly, satisfied with the prize she'd won.

* * *

Katie was thinking of how much whiskey it'd take to dull the edge of her headache when the phone rang. Irritated, she would've ignored it if not for Toby, who snatched it in excitement.

"What're you doing?" Toby yelled into the phone.

She looked at him. In four hundred thousand years, he hadn't learned to answer a phone right? He carried on a conversation for a few minutes, and she rested her head back, staring at the ceiling.

Though she hated to admit it, she'd hoped Rhyn was calling. Her heart leapt then dropped to her feet when she realized a man like that didn't call. He'd just appear whenever he felt like it. If he ever felt like it. If he cared AT ALL that his blood monkey and mate had been totally abused. Again.

"It's for you!" Toby called, holding out the phone. "It's Auntie Hannah!"

"Heya, Katherine."

The sound of her sister's voice made her throat tighten. She'd never been truly happy to talk to her.

"Heya, Hannah."

"Toby said you've been under the weather. You're interested in coming to see me for a few days?"

Katie glared at Toby at the skeptical note in Hannah's voice.

"Gabriel said --" Toby started.

"I would," Katie replied. "Been having a rough time on my...medications or whatever."

"Oh, I understand. Will Toby come?"

"No, he'll be with a friend," Katie replied.

"I'll send a car to get you!"

"Thanks. You spending the weekend with your...friends?"

"Don't start, Katherine. I know you don't like them. "

"Hate them, actually."

"You'll get used to them. Maybe one day they'll rub off on you, help you get a decent man."

Katie touched her throat. *Decent* wasn't the word she'd ever use for Rhyn. Her sister would have a heart attack once she saw the tattoo and found out she'd basically married the type of man Hannah'd always warned her about.

"Will you be ready in an hour?" Hannah asked.

"Sure."

"See you soon!"

Katie clicked the phone off and looked at the five-year-old doing wind sprints across her apartment. She waited for him to finish before crossing to her room to change. The effort of a shower left her even more exhausted. She dressed comfortably and packed her overnight bag, then searched the room, certain she was forgetting something.

"He's not in the closet," Toby said, then laughed.

She rolled her eyes at him and snatched her stuff before leaving her apartment for the sidewalk in front of her building. She waited in the cold winter day until the familiar Lincoln Town Car arrived. She dozed in the car during the forty-five-minute drive into northern Virginia, where her sister's fiancé owned a mansion secreted behind towering shrubbery and a gate that swung open to welcome her.

Her sister waited in the reception room, sipping tea and flipping through a magazine. She looked as healthy as Katie didn't feel. Hannah looked up as the butler let her in, her smile turning to a frown.

"You look ghastly," she said. "How long have you been..."

Too late, Katie realized she'd not thought to wear a scarf. Hannah's eyes widened, and she rose, angling her past the butler and a maid dusting a painting to the second floor. She closed the door behind them in the massive bedchamber that was hers and whirled.

"You know how trashy tattoos make women look? Why on earth...Gio will be so angry!"

"I don't care what your man thinks," Katie replied, agitated already. "I had it done in Ireland. It's some sort of Celtic...thing."

"What's a *rhyn*?"

"I'm not having a good turn, sis. Can we please just...do something?"

"The girls and I are going to brunch."

Katie didn't bother hiding her grimace. Hannah rolled her eyes and looked her over. Her gaze lingered on Katie's face, which Katie knew was pale. It was this that saved her from some snide comment about her less-than-fashionable clothes. Hannah gathered her things and led her down to a warm, waiting car. Katie pretended to listen as Hannah discussed the Paris fashion show she'd attended and the month in Monte Carlo she'd spend in January to escape the coldest weather.

Katie watched the world go by as they drove, half-listening to Hannah's chatter. The grey skies of winter and grey cement of the city depressed her. This place had nothing to the castle in the Alps, though she never wanted to go back.

In fact, the normal world --while comforting --seemed a bit boring after her trauma. She relaxed and sank into the soft leather seats of the Town Car, telling herself she was being granted a chance to be normal. She didn't doubt that the only creature Rhyn would listen to was Gabriel, and that Gabriel had told him to leave her be. She was grateful.

Sorta. Part of her ached with loneliness even her sister's presence did nothing to help.

They reached the trendy teahouse in the wealthy section of DC, Hannah still talking about Paris fashions. Katie trailed her into the stately Georgian mansion and glanced down as the polished wood beneath her feet creaked. A butler took her coat. She forced herself not to cover her tattoo with her hands as she followed her sister to the second floor, where the private rooms were.

Hannah warmly greeted her friends, four coiffed women in expensive clothing with diamonds the size of her thumbnail on their ring fingers. Most wore trendy boots and coats, sat in designer jeans and sweaters worth a month of her salary, and wore make-up that coordinated perfectly with their expensive clothing and hair.

She felt frumpy the moment she stepped into the room. The women --even if not beautiful --were dressed beautifully.

"I think you all remember my sister, Katherine?" Hannah said, fully knowing they did. "She just returned from a trip to Ireland, where she got her tribal tattoo. She's a bit jet-lagged though."

Katie bit her tongue. Hannah was apologizing for her pale features and dark-rimmed eyes. The four women looked at her, one gasping as her gaze fell to the tattoo and another paling, while the other two looked down their noses at her.

As usual. She'd shocked them all. Hannah sat and began talking about Paris again to an audience eager to hear her.

Except for the one who'd gasped, Molly, the half-Asian, half-Italian with beautiful coffee eyes and olive skin. She was tall and willowy, a former model that'd made it big. Her gaze stayed on Katie's neck until one of the others addressed her.

Katie wondered if she'd shocked her that badly or if there was some other reason Molly was so surprised. She knew very little of Hannah's friends, except they were all richer than sin.

"What took you to Ireland this time of year?"

It took her a moment to realize one of them had addressed *her*. It wasn't normal for them to acknowledge her existence, let alone address her.

"Sightseeing," she managed, unable to think of any other excuse.

Molly appeared skeptical while the others exchanged knowing looks with each other. *Another wild adventure by the black sheep of a sister that was dear Hannah's.* She'd heard them say it.

"It's an interesting tattoo," another said with forced interest. "What does Rhyn mean in Gaelic?"

"Nothing, I don't think," she responded.

"Is it Old French or English?" another asked.

She glanced at her sister, who seemed interested as well.

"No," she said.

"What is it?" Hannah pushed.

"It's a name," Molly said.

Katie met her gaze. Amusement was deep in Molly's gaze, though she made no effort to come to her rescue.

"Ooooooh, you had some sort of fling over there, didn't you?" one asked, interested for the first time.

"Not exactly."

Katie sipped her tea, hot from head to toe. Sensing some sort of lurid story, all five of them waited for her to speak.

"I actually got married while there." She forced the words out.

"No!" Hannah exclaimed.

All four women gasped in unison. At the end of her patience, she rose.

"Going to the little girl's room."

And she marched off, chest tight.

It was not the relaxing day she'd hoped for. She sat on a couch inside the gold lacquered bathroom, rubbing her face. She ignored the door opening until someone spoke to her.

"You're that new, aren't you?"

She looked up at Molly's voice. The svelte model wore towering boots and a one-piece cat suit that left nothing to the imagination. Molly rolled one legging up to display a tattoo similar to the tattoo around Katie's neck. It read *Fendril*, apparently the name of Molly's mate. She replaced the legging and perched delicately on the loveseat beside Katie. Molly dug through her purse to retrieve a familiar brownish cube, like the ones Katie'd eaten to stay alive in Hell.

Shocked, Katie hesitated and then took it, the sugary taste soothing her headache as she swallowed.

"Your Ancient drew too much too fast," Molly said. "He needs to learn some control. It's worse than a hangover."

"He's always gentle," Katie replied. "For whatever reason, people like to attack me."

"Oh. Have another." Molly offered her a food and water cube, both of which lessened the pain throbbing through her.

"The first Ancient to take a mate," Molly said with both awe and disappointment in her tone. "Rhyn? Isn't he in Hell for trying to wipe out mankind?"

Katie sighed.

"I didn't have much of a choice, either," Molly admitted. "I'm among the youngest of the immortals' mates, only a hundred years old. They allow us to lead as normal of a life

as possible. You'll find your mate will move around a lot, but you can still make friends wherever you go, and immortals' mates are an amazing group. It's an incredible life! You must be thrilled."

"No."

"Well, it does take some getting used to. It's an honor to be among the first to welcome you officially to the family."

Katie glanced up, surprised to see Molly was genuinely smiling. The beautiful woman pulled a card from her small purse and handed it to her.

"You're always welcome to call me, and I hope you think of me when you're prepping for the Spring Gala."

Molly rose and left. Katie watched her go, feeling better with the otherworldly sustenance in her system. She composed herself and psyched herself up for a day of shopping, awkward questions about Rhyn, and flaky friends.

Hours later, she dropped onto the plush guest bed, clad in a T-shirt and underwear after a hot shower. She was barely on her feet and debated whether or not she'd get up to turn off the light or fall asleep right there.

A touch of coldness made the hair on the back of her neck rise, and she sat up, fearful Kris or Sasha had come for her. Rhyn emerged from the shadows near the window, dressed in black with his hair tied back. His eyes flashed silver, his rugged features covered in a few days' growth.

Fear flashed through her at the memory of what someone his size could do to her. And then she relaxed. Rhyn was the only man who'd never hurt her.

"You look worse than usual," he observed.

She flushed and pulled her T-shirt over her bare legs, resting her chin on her knees.

"How's the war?" she asked as he neared.

He growled deep in his chest, a warning for her. He sat beside her and reached for her, his gaze on the newest scars given to her by Kris. Despite her determination not to, she flinched as he gripped her neck.

"Who hurt you?" he growled.

"No, Rhyn."

"You will tell me."

"No."

His eyes flashed. She waited for him to explode. Instead, his hand dropped to her shoulder, and he pulled her against him. Her body sang in happiness at the closeness, and she felt herself relax. She breathed his scent and released her knees, wrapping her arms around him.

Embarrassed, she felt tears in her eyes. He pulled her into his lap, his possessive touch and warmth soothing her.

"You will tell me," he said.

"Nope."

"You're not supposed to leave without permission."

"I wasn't going to bleed to death on the floor, and you weren't around," she snapped.

"You know how to call me."

"It's no big deal."

"I don't know what the fuck you're smoking," he said.

She gripped him harder. He reciprocated.

"You're not one to talk about not breaking sacred rules," she pointed out.

"No one hurts what's mine."

"Everything hurts what's yours!" she retorted with feeling. "I'm not going to survive your world for long, Rhyn!"

He said nothing. He smoothed her hair and rested his chin on her head. She loosened her grip on him, sensing he wasn't going to leave, whatever his mood was. Her eyes were heavy, her anger draining her last bit of energy.

When she opened her eyes, he held her tightly against him. They lay in bed beneath the covers in the dark room. She couldn't help but feel grateful he was there; she didn't want to know what other creatures lived in the darkness of her world.

"Why wouldn't you just tell Kris the woman he loved was evil?"

He growled.

"Don't you dare!" she snapped. "You owe me some explanations. Every time I turn around, I'm getting my ass kicked by some beast, many of which are probably after you!"

"I like you better when you're quiet."

She gritted her teeth, unwilling to leave the sanctuary of his arms and cursing herself for her weakness.

"I broke the Immortal Code."

His words surprised her. She twisted, trying to see him in the dark. His eyes glowed pewter.

"You don't follow rules, though," she said, confused.

"I respect the Code. Doesn't mean I always have to follow it."

"That makes no sense. You break the Code when you feel like it?"

"When I must."

She pushed herself up despite his grip, staring at him hard. Despite his monstrous habits of shredding anything in his path, he had a sense of honor more deeply ingrained than she'd ever suspected. He'd broken the Code for a brother who'd never cared one ounce for him and accepted his place in Hell.

"Isn't there anything in the Code about your mate?"

"I've never had anything to take care of," he snarled. "You're weak and foolish and Gods, if I could find a magic pill that'd knock some sense into you --"

"I have a great deal of sense! What you fail to realize is that --whatever I am --I draw good and evil to me. Nothing corrupts someone like the temptation of invincibility."

"It was one of Kris's warriors," he said, his voice lowering into another feral growl. "I knew when Gabriel summoned me to you and went to Kris."

"I didn't tell him. He went through my memories," she said with a note of anger.

She felt him turn thoughtful.

"No, Rhyn. Have some respect for my mental privacy!"

He snorted and pulled her down into his arms again. Resistance was fruitless. She allowed him to wrap his arms and one heavy thigh around her body.

"What's Kris supposed to do to someone who broke the part of the Code about someone else's mate?" she asked quietly.

"Don't care."

"What?"

"Don't care what Kris does. I'll kill whoever it is."

Her heart slowed. She didn't like Kris, but he did what he did for some greater cause than himself. He wasn't a bad man, just a misguided one.

"Is this Code written down anywhere?"

"Nope."

"Can you tell me what it says?" she prodded.

"Nope."

"Rhyn, I --"

"Shut up and sleep. Nothing else bad will happen to you."

She fell silent. Her body was still exhausted from Kris's attack and a day spent with Hannah and her friends. Though she fought sleep, it started to claim her anyway.

"Rhyn?"

"What."

"I think I love you."

"*What?*"

"I'm smarter than you, too."

CHAPTER TEN

Gabriel's soft cluck of disapproval filled the air around him as Rhyn sat in the corner, watching the most vexing woman in the world --his mate --sleep. He sensed another immortal in the house but couldn't place where exactly.

"You just don't listen," the death dealer said, materializing, a shadow darker than night.

"Why would I start?" Rhyn replied.

"Thought you'd learned something after all those years in Hell."

"Nah."

Gabriel was his only friend who didn't judge him. Rhyn patted the chair beside him. The death dealer sat, his trench coat rustling.

"You're lucky you don't have to defend Death against anything," Rhyn grunted.

"Much more complicated than it looks."

"Free will's a bitch," Gabriel lamented.

"Yeah."

They sat in comfortable silence, the quiet room filled only with the woman's soft snores. She was tired, frustrated, and, worst of all, scared. She'd been scared since Hell, if not before, for which he blamed Kris.

"Kris --"

"Don't start," Gabriel warned. "At some point, you two need to trust each other."

"Not gonna happen."

"Immortals are about as imperfect as humans. I don't know any more."

Rhyn looked squarely at the death dealer, sensing unease for the first time in their long history.

"It never sat well, what I did to you," Gabriel said.

"I never held a grudge," Rhyn reminded death's top assassin.

"Maybe you should have."

"Nope."

Gabriel chuckled then said darkly, "How can you be so sure?"

"I know," Rhyn replied. "I know what I am, I know what you are, and I know what my brothers are. The rest I don't care about."

Gabriel lifted his chin toward the bed.

"Work in progress," Rhyn replied with a grimace. "She's mine. The rest will follow."

"Wish I had your faith."

"I think you mean narcissism," Rhyn said.

"Big word for you."

"It was Kris, wasn't it?"

Gabriel said nothing, and fury unfurled within Rhyn as his gaze went to the sleeping woman.

"I know my brothers," he repeated more softly.

"You are quick to assume the worst," the death dealer said at last. "She refused to tell you."

"Yeah."

"Then leave it be. Listen to me this time."

Rhyn didn't want to leave it be, not when his own brother had attacked his woman. Maybe Kris thought turnabout was fair play. Or maybe he'd succumbed to the weird draw around the woman. Or maybe to his own desire for power. In the end, it didn't matter.

"She never feared me before tonight," Rhyn said in a growl.

"I'm sorry, Rhyn. I've wanted to protect her, but Immortal Code --"

"Not your fault."

"I didn't know he would hurt her. I would've broken Immortal Code and interfered had I known," Gabriel said.

"You broke Immortal Code what? Twice in your life? Both times for me. No, Gabriel, don't do me any more favors."

"I righted a wrong, which required another wrong of sorts."

"Don't grow a conscience now. One of us has to walk the straight and narrow. It won't be me," Rhyn assured him.

"You can't go after Kris. That's strictly forbidden."

Rhyn said nothing, aware the penalty for an Ancient killing another Ancient was death-death and eternal Hell. He was sick of Hell, yet Kris's crime deserved punishment.

"And you have to realize that he didn't know about Lilith's betrayal," Gabriel added. "You're lucky all he did to your mate was take her blood."

"He made her fear me. He was an idiot to fall for Lilith. She wasn't even his mate --she had no protection from Immortal Code. My mate does!"

"She's barely made it this long, Rhyn. Before you run off and kill your brother, you should probably see her safe. Because of her, you can control and channel your power. You aren't surviving day-to-day anymore as you have your whole life, and for the first time, you're fighting for something other than you."

Gabriel's words struck hard. Rhyn thought hard for a minute, then said with effort, "I don't know how to be a mate, let alone take care of a human, Gabriel."

"I gave you books to read," the death dealer said, bemused. "It's the best I can do. I'm not human."

"You were once."

"Too long ago to remember. You'll just have to figure it out on your own."

Rhyn grimaced. He didn't know a thing about being a mate. His gaze drifted again to the woman whose pale features made him feel both proud and worried. He was the only line of defense she had against the immortal world. Thus far, he'd barely managed to keep her alive.

He didn't know what else to do. She couldn't defend herself, and every immortal she drew to her ended up hurting her.

Even Kris, the protector of mankind.

His thoughts darkened as fury blinded him for a moment. Gabriel clapped him on the arm, and Rhyn shook his head to clear the anger.

"Kris sent a message for her," the death dealer said, withdrawing a folded sheet of paper from his pocket.

Rhyn reached for it, but Gabriel pulled it away.

"Only for her. If he's apologizing, let him do so in peace."

Rhyn wanted to destroy the letter. Instead, he watched Gabriel cross the room and leave it on the pillow beside Katie. Rhyn's gaze fell to her again.

What drew him and others to his mate? It was her curse. He had to protect her while keeping her from those who could help. He had to protect her from Sasha and the Dark One; he had to protect her from Kris and his people.

I think I love you.

The woman was crazy, and yet, a part of him liked that about her. She'd proven herself to him in a way no immortal ever had.

He couldn't *not* believe her to be his match!

Gabriel was right --he had to figure it out before he lost his mate.

The assassin left him in peace, and he stayed awake the rest of the night, watching over her. He braced himself for more syrupy love sentiments when she awoke but was relieved when she gave him a warning look and disappeared into the bathroom, the letter clutched in one hand.

He stripped off his clothing and changed into what Gabriel told him was *normal* for this place: jeans and a sweater. And steel-toed boots that would go right through any bad guys who got in his way.

She emerged still pale, her gaze troubled. Her skin was scrubbed clean, her dark hair wet. He saw no sign of the letter.

"Hannah won't approve of you being here," she told him.

"Who's Hannah?"

"My sister."

"You have a sister?"

"You know, we mortals have real lives, too, or do you immortals assume we're all just sitting around waiting to have our lives intruded upon by the likes of you?" she snapped. She whirled and marched to a closet, wrenching it open.

Despite her ordeals, she still had her spark. He wasn't sure if he liked that or not about her. She reached for a scarf, and he growled. Her hand dropped, though she

didn't acknowledge him otherwise. He took in her shape. She wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty enough with a body she plainly took care of.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" she demanded.

"Someone's gotta keep you outta trouble," he replied.

"Like you've bothered to do that yet!"

"It's a new day."

At his quiet response, she faced him, searching his gaze. She frowned and he breezed past her, pulling the door open before the woman on the other side could knock. The woman he assumed was Hannah stared at him, her mouth dropping open.

"Hannah, this is Rhyn, my...the guy I met in Ireland."

Hannah was beautiful in the model sense, with a slender form and large eyes that grew wider when they swept over him.

"*Really?*" Hannah almost gaped.

He felt Katie tense. She crossed her arms.

"Yes, *really*," the smaller woman said in a sharp enough tone to draw Hannah's attention.

Hannah wasn't the immortal he sensed, though she exuded a calming power that stabilized his powers, similar to Katie's, though weaker. He began to believe Kris was right about the bloodline of his mate's family. There was something unique about them.

Hannah shook herself visibly and said, "I didn't hear you come in last night. Are you staying for long?"

He felt Katie's gaze settle on him at the question.

"No."

Hannah waited for more. When nothing came, she mustered a smile and motioned down the hallway.

"I'll take you to meet Giovanni, my fiancé. He's interested in meeting our Katherine's husband. Katherine, I have a small breakfast waiting for us with the girls."

Katie grumbled beneath her breath. Hannah paused a few doors down along the wide, tall corridor with plush red rugs and gilded cornices. It was the kind of place his brothers would love: opulent and openly displaying signs of wealth. With her carefully crafted outfit and makeup, Hannah fit right in.

She tapped at a door and ducked inside.

"Really, how long are you staying, and what do you want?" Katie hissed as they waited in the hall.

"No rush. We're immortal."

"I told Gabriel I didn't want you around. You couldn't give me some peace?"

"I'm your mate," he grated. "I'm supposed to...take care of you."

At the effort he put in the difficult words, she looked up at him, her clear blue eyes vexed.

He hated how pale she looked, hated the scars on her body. He admired her strength but knew everyone had a breaking point. Hell had taught him this, if nothing else. He wasn't sure what he felt toward the woman, but he didn't want her to come to harm, and he didn't want her out of his sight.

"Come on in, Mr. Rhyn," Hannah said, pulling the door open.

The immortal he sensed sat inside a large library. The man's stunned look didn't change at Hannah's quick introduction or when she left. Even the sound of the door shutting did nothing to jar him.

Rhyn studied him, taking in the tattoos only other immortals could see. The immortal was relatively young, maybe a thousand years old, with Mediterranean features tinted olive and thick black eyebrows. At that age, he was relatively low on the immortal totem pole, though his obvious wealth indicated he had powerful connections somewhere.

"Forgive me," the man said, and stood, shaking his amazement away. "I'm Silvestre Giovanni. I never expected to meet one of the Council That Was Seven, let alone have the honor of hosting you."

"It's fine," Rhyn said.

"Is there anything I can procure for you? Please, my home is yours for as long as you like."

Rhyn almost wished he had even a fraction of Andre's manners. He hadn't dealt with lesser immortals since before he went to Hell.

"I'm fine," he said again. "My mate and I won't be here long."

"Hannah told me about Katherine. I didn't realize her Rhyn was..."

An awkward silence fell, and Rhyn knew what the immortal before him wasn't saying by the look of half-alarm, half-curiosity on his face.

"I get that a lot," Rhyn said. "Your house is...nice."

"Thank you. I purchased it because it reminds me of my beloved Venice. I left many years ago and haven't gone back. Hannah and I plan on taking our honeymoon there."

"Does she know what you are?"

Giovanni gave a half-laugh at the blunt question, and Rhyn sat. The lesser immortal relaxed some and joined him, pouring him a glass of ice water. Rhyn took in the small marble statues and portraits of wealthy Venetians on the walls.

"Not yet, no. I planned on telling her soon. Does Katherine?"

"Yeah."

"You chose Katherine?"

Rhyn glanced at him. Giovanni appeared genuinely puzzled.

"She's a good girl," Giovanni said, "but she's a bit of a lost cause. We've been trying to help put her through a good school for her advanced degree, so she can start working some place and make decent money. She's never known what she wanted to do, unfortunately. Just seems to float from job to job. Hannah gives her all her old clothes, which aren't cheap, and she never even returns Hannah's phone calls."

Rhyn bit his tongue out of respect for Katie. Giovanni pitied Katie, and yet, Rhyn suspected he knew more about the woman than either the man before him or Hannah. Part of him was gratified to find she, too, was the black sheep.

Part of him was pissed.

He knew if he did anything, Katie would suffer. Again. So he clenched his teeth and nodded.

"Maybe that's all in the past. The immortals can polish her up a little. It'll make Hannah so happy," Giovanni said with genuine warmth.

Giovanni took Rhyn's silence as encouragement and began to discuss his pedigree and which immortals he knew. Rhyn found he didn't need to respond; Giovanni was capable of discussing himself --and his Hannah --without any sign of stopping.

Instead, Rhyn began to wonder where exactly his mate would fit in. It wasn't here, in a place best suited for privileged immortals accustomed to wealth. It wasn't in the barracks of Kris's fortress. Gabriel had told him just how small and cluttered her apartment was.

She was like him: someone who didn't fit in anywhere she should.

He had nothing, no castles or gold like his brothers. He had nowhere else to go. It'd never been a problem when it was just him. Now, he had a reason to care what tomorrow brought, and he wasn't certain he liked the newfound feeling.

Hannah returned a short time later, the only thing that interrupted Giovanni's ramblings. Rhyn pulled himself from his thoughts as he stood. He didn't like thinking --he preferred to act.

"...my greatest honor to meet you," Giovanni said with a warm smile. "You're welcome here with Katherine anytime."

Katie, Rhyn corrected him mentally.

Hannah appeared puzzled by the invitation but smiled when Rhyn turned to her.

"Hannah, dear, please instruct the servants that Rhyn and Katherine are given whatever they ask for."

"Of course, sweetie," Hannah replied. "Katherine's waiting for you. She said you were interested in taking a walk around the estate."

Rhyn said nothing and followed her out of the study. They strode through the opulent mansion down a stairwell spilling into sunlight and swaths of green grass at the side of the main house. He was unaware how tense he was until Hannah left him, and he breathed in deeply. His muscles were so bunched, they ached when he shook them free.

"They can be pains in the ass," Katie said from her seat on a stone bench beneath a massive oak tree. "They mean well, I think."

He gazed at her, at once hungry and pensive. He didn't know much about the woman staring at him except that she was the strongest person he'd ever met. She was genuine, straightforward, and sweet. He wanted her in his life, permanently, only he'd need his brothers' help. To keep her, he'd go to them.

"I have to go somewhere," he said abruptly.

She frowned, and he couldn't tell if she were more disappointed or relieved at his news.

"You'll be safe here. Giovanni is an immortal."

"Giovanni?" she echoed, surprised. "Hannah must not know. She can't keep secrets like that."

"She doesn't. I'll be back soon enough."

She looked as if she wanted to say something, then crossed her arms with a glare. He didn't want to try to interpret the look or await her scathing return, not when he needed to find a place for them to go. Instead, he started walking away and summoned his powers, wondering which of his brothers could be coerced into giving him what he wanted.

"Rhyn, wait!" she called.

He faced her. She approached him, gaze troubled once again.

"Kris sent me an apology," she started.

"And?" he asked impatiently.

"He said he knows someone older than him who can put my life back the way it was."

Her words surprised him. She didn't meet his gaze.

"He said he only needed two months of my time, and even if he didn't do what he needed to at the end of it, he'd let me have my life back."

"You trust him after what he did to you?" he demanded.

"He's not a bad person, Rhyn. If he's making the offer, he'll keep his word," she said. "I can't live like this, Rhyn. I won't make it."

Stunned, he waited. She fell silent.

"You said you loved me last night," he said at last. "I'm leaving now so I can find a safe place for you."

"I was tired and probably half-drunk," she whispered.

"I read your mind."

"And you wonder why I want out of this world?" she snapped, fire lighting up her features. "It doesn't matter what I feel, Rhyn, when I know I don't belong in this world or here with you, and I know without a doubt I won't survive, even if you find some place on another planet to stash me! I don't want that, Rhyn!"

"Gio and Hannah say your life sucks as it is," he pointed out.

"But it's my life, even if it does suck. You try but you can't protect me, Rhyn, which you've proven a dozen times over. Two months is all Kris asks, and I'm free. What do you have to offer?"

He said nothing. He had nothing. They both knew it. She turned away, but he saw the tears gathering in her eyes. He'd never felt inadequate in his long existence until he stood before a mere mortal with the knowledge he had nothing to offer her.

"Don't come back, Rhyn," she said softly. "Please."

"You said you're giving Kris two months. How about me?"

"How about you *what*?"

"If, at the end of those two months, I haven't fixed things, you'll go back to your world. If I make things right, you'll stay. With me," he said in a hushed tone. "As my mate."

She was quiet briefly, considering, before she said, "Fine. Sixty days."

Emotions spiraled through him. He wasn't sure what he felt, but it wasn't gratitude. If anything, he was stunned she agreed so quickly. It meant she didn't believe him.

She walked away. He watched, sorrow and then fury filling him.

He'd never had anything worth fighting for until now. He'd spend the rest of his existence in Hell before he'd let her go without a fight.

The Rhyn Trilogy
Katie's Hellion (May 2011)
Katie's Hope (September 2011)
Rhyn's Redemption (March 2012)

Rhyn Trilogy: Origins (October 2011), short story

Continue reading for exclusive excerpt from
Katie's Hope (Rhyn Trilogy, Book II)

Chapter One

Three weeks later

The dream took shape as it did every night. Even when she knew she was dreaming, she couldn't wake herself up or shake the fear that this time, Rhyn wasn't going to come.

Katie stood between the assassin and the demon. Her choices were plain: Death or Hell. Bad or worse. Screwed or *screwed*. One of them was taking her to his underworld. The other would kill her. As the two stared each other down, she wasn't sure who had the better chance of winning: Gabriel, an Immortal sworn to serve Death, or Darkyn, the leader of all the demons in Hell.

Her hand went to her neck, where the name of her Ancient Immortal mate, Rhyn, had been until he broke their mating bond two days before. Desolation unlike anything she'd ever felt made her want to sink into the ground and stay there.

A shadow blocked the hot Caribbean sun, and she looked up to see Rhyn in his pterodactyl form circling above them. She gasped, hope racing through her as he dove toward the ground, switched to his human form in mid-air, and landed hard on the stony island's ground. He met her gaze, and her body bloomed with warmth in response to the possessive gaze that swept over her from head to foot before his eyes settled on the demon. Evaluating each other, the three creatures stood in tight silence before Rhyn spoke at last.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Darkyn?"

"Half-breed," the demon leader sneered. "Negotiating with Gabriel over who gets your former mate."

"Death ordered her dead-dead," Gabriel said. "And Death always wins."

"Brother, I'll kill you both if either of you tries to take her," Rhyn replied. "You have a contract on her, Gabe?" The assassin nodded. "Let me guess, Darkyn, the Dark One, ordered this."

"We'll just say he doesn't disagree with me."

"All right." Rhyn drew a knife from his boot. Katie watched, her optimism fading. "I'm challenging you, assassin, demon. You can have her when I'm dead."

"Rhyn, no!" she cried.

"I can handle it," he said.

"Rhyn--" She started forward, and Gabriel held out an arm to block her. Furious and terrified, Katie planted both her hands on his arm to push it away with no success.

"Back off, Gabriel. It's not like I can run anywhere!"

"Two minutes," he warned. "By Immortal Code, Darkyn and I are obligated to accept his challenge."

She hurried to Rhyn and stood looking up at him. His silver gaze was on his foes then dropped to her.

"This is the stupidest thing you've ever done," she said.

"Letting you go was the stupidest thing. I'm doing something right for once." The resolution in his face was unmistakable. He wasn't backing down. His eyes returned to the demon.

"They'll kill you," she whispered.

"If they do, go with Gabriel. Death's a bitch, but she's better than Hell."

Her eyes watered. She'd barely known what to do when he un-claimed her two days ago, but at least he was alive. If he left forever ...

"This isn't right," she said, her throat tightening. He looked down at her again, his gaze taking in her face. He cupped one cheek with his roughened hand and rubbed away a tear with his thumb.

"I'm not dead yet," he said, amused. She wrapped her arms around him, comforted by his scent and tormented it was the last time she'd smell him.

"Can't we just run away, right now? Turn into a bird and carry me with you?" she asked.

"Even if we did, they'd both come after us."

"You can go. I'd rather know you're safe than live without you."

"No, Katie," he said softly. "I know where I belong, and it's right here with you. I have to make things right. I couldn't live if I lost you."

"Katie," Gabriel called.

"Rhyn, I love you," she said.

"I know." He pulled away from her and pushed her hair from her face. With a tender kiss on her forehead, Rhyn stepped away. Gabriel drew a long sword, and Darkyn pulled two free. She felt cold from the inside out. The assassin motioned her over. She went woodenly, her stomach in turmoil.

"Break the bond, and Death will save you both. Rhyn will die-dead otherwise," Gabriel whispered then left her standing by a group of boulders. The words struck her as odd, but she had trouble concentrating when the men launched into a three-way battle.

Break the bond, and Death will free you both. She tried to decipher his meaning as she watched them fight, terrified to take her eyes off Rhyn. Rhyn already broke their bond, unless ... she had to break it, too.

Death would free them. *Her* death. She was the only one who had the power to end this before he died. Her attention turned to a different direction, the way she'd walked half an hour ago from the beach. She hesitated only a second more before she started running. She ran hard and left the sounds of the battle behind her, her thoughts on Rhyn and nothing else.

The distance to the beach was short in her dream, her body full of fear and adrenaline. She made it to the sand before being forced to slow to a walk by the ankle-deep, loose sand. Agonizing over how much time Rhyn had, she finally reached the water's edge and sucked in ragged breaths as she knelt for a moment of rest.

"Death will free us both." Heart hammering, she rose, took a deep breath, and waded into the warm water.

Trust my Gabriel, human, a woman's voice whispered into her mind. *This is the only way.*

Katie awoke sweating in her bed in the cavernous room to which she'd been exiled upon arriving to the Immortals' castle in the French Alps. The fire had died down, and someone had turned off the light to her bathroom, rendering the room completely dark. The dream had seemed so real. In it she had even recognized where they were: the Caribbean Sanctuary, where she'd been before coming here.

A movement from the balcony caught her attention.

"Another nightmare?" The voice of Gabriel was as dark as the room. He stood in front of the glass French doors of the balcony, taking up the whole space with his massive frame and heavy trench coat.

"Yeah," she whispered. "Every night." Her hand went to her neck, and she threw off the covers, crossing the cold stone floor to the bathroom. Flipping on the light, she confirmed the tattoos and Rhyn's name still circled her neck. He hadn't left her. She looked tiny and frightened in the large bathroom's mirror, and her gaze was drawn to the lumpy scar marring one arm. She rubbed it as she'd begun to do whenever she was upset.

"You okay?" Gabriel asked.

"Just making sure ..." *he's still alive*. She couldn't finish her thought in front of him, partly because it made no sense and partly because she didn't want to admit her soul felt Rhyn's absence like the draft from a cracked window on a winter's night.

"You ever find it odd you feel comfortable waking up to find *me* here?" Gabriel asked.

She rolled her eyes at his twisted sense of humor, which normally teetered on lethal. As Death's best assassin, Gabriel wasn't the type of person anyone ever wanted to run into, let alone when awaking in a dark room after a nightmare.

"I want the light on, Gabriel," she said.

He shook his head. "I don't like it, and you'll have bad dreams either way," he reasoned.

"Makes me feel safer."

"Nothing safer than hanging out with someone who can't be killed."

"Gabriel," she chastised. She left the bathroom light on and returned to her bed, chilled by the drafty chamber that was now hers. It had the combined square footage of every apartment she'd ever rented. It was cold and large, not the kind of place she'd ever choose to live.

"Mama!" Toby's grumpy voice drew her gaze toward the small bedroom whose door was near the bathroom. She'd stopped gritting her teeth whenever he called her that and-- God help her!-- she'd even started responding.

The five-year-old angel, whose appearance in her life several weeks ago plunged her into the Immortal underworld, squeezed through the cracked door. He trudged across the bedroom, climbing into bed with her without asking.

"Toby, you're too old to be sleeping in my bed," she said. He ignored her and snuggled deep beneath the covers. If not for the nightmares, she'd carry him back to his bed, whether or not he liked it, but she found some comfort in having the angel so close. Despite her efforts to stay awake, she fell into restless sleep again.

Her alarm clock woke her at dawn, reminding her it was time for her morning run. She turned it off and eased out of bed, stopping to gaze out the French doors. Verdant forests stretched to the steely sky, a swath of green, brown, and grey. Uneasy after her dream, she dressed in running clothes and padded out of the room. Gabriel was gone and Toby still sleeping.

She walked through the castle quickly, not liking the quiet, and emerged into a courtyard leading to an expansive cobblestone driveway. The courtyard bordered a

small grassy park off which several trails ran from the grassy area into the still dark woods.

Her running partner, Uilly, wasn't there. She shook out her arms and stretched, cold in the early morning air. The trails appeared muddy even from the distance and the air smelled of snow.

She heard the soft step of someone approaching and turned, surprised. Her mate, Rhyn, stood in heavy boots, running pants, and a tank top. Relief trickled through her to see him alive. His snow cloud-colored eyes were piercing, his muscular frame making her warm from the inside out. The tank top displayed his thick biceps and shapely shoulders. If she stepped just an inch closer, she'd feel his body heat.

"Uilly's not coming," he said.

"Why not?" she asked, disappointed. Her morning run was the only moment of peace she would have during the day.

"I saw your dream."

"You're not supposed to be in my head."

He said nothing.

"Are *you* running with me?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Her gaze went to the sky again as she recalled the nightmare. She'd been avoiding him for the same reason her dream revealed: she might just care too much about him to leave when the time came for her to go. The sense of loss from her dream returned, and she was embarrassed to feel her throat tightening.

"I haven't seen you since we arrived," she said. "Are you in the dungeon with the rest of the warriors?"

"Do you wanna run or not?" he asked.

"Are you really running in boots?"

"I can run naked."

She turned away before he saw the flair of interest accompany her irritation. Her face felt hot as she recalled the one night they'd spent together. How could she forget the experience that had effectively doomed her, branded her as his forever?

Rhyn growled low in his chest. Suddenly, a massive black jaguar leapt past her toward the nearest trail. Its back reached her shoulder, and it moved with restrained, lethal power. She'd seen a couple of Rhyn's shapes, but she'd never get used to the fact he could shapeshift.

Rhyn turned to peer at her through silvery eyes, flicking his tail in impatience. She started forward with a sigh and joined him at the beginning of the muddy trail. She picked her way through the first few steps, startled when he launched himself at a tree, clawed his way up, and bypassed the muddy section by leaping to the next tree.

"Stupid cat," she muttered. Rhyn leapt down from the tree a few meters in front of her and sat to await her as she slid and maneuvered the muddy trail. When she reached the other side, he trotted forward. She followed, expecting him to disappear into the trees at any point and reappear with a herd of deer clenched in his jaws.

They ran through the forest toward the cliff, then ducked deeper into the forest before the trees gave way at the cliff. She stopped at the edge, where the trail was nothing but mud. Puffing and energized, she paused for a breath when cold fingers brushed her neck.

Darkyn. He spoke to her, and his cold presence was close. She jerked away, surprised, and slid in the mud toward the cliff edge. Rhyn snatched her and wrapped his arm around her, lifting her out of the mud and farther back onto the trail. Almost immediately she wished he'd let her fall off the cliff. She'd rarely seen him-- and never touched him-- since arriving a few weeks ago. The warmth of their bodies pressed together made her forget Darkyn, the cold, and the nightmare. The silence was thick and awkward. She sensed him waiting to see what she'd do.

"Thank you," she managed. "For coming with me today." His warm breath on her neck made her shiver, and she instinctively tilted her head. His grip tightened around her, but he didn't bite her.

"Did you mean what you said?" he asked in a husky tone.

"About thanking you? Yes," she said.

"You know that's not what I mean," he growled. "In your dream, you said-- "

"I don't know, Rhyn. I've got a lot to figure out."

"Fine. Then tell me you *don't*."

She sighed. She belonged here in his arms, and yet she feared what that meant. She'd lose her sister, her only family, and Rhyn hadn't yet proven he could keep her safe.

"You can't say it," he said, satisfaction in his voice. He turned her to face him, and she gazed up at him, once again awed by his size, heat, and intensity. His silver eyes were molten, his rugged jaw line shaded by two days' growth. His hands were hot on her hips and his body blocked the cold wind whipping up the cliff.

"Can you?" she challenged.

"Don't need to."

"Rhyn-- "

"I've done almost everything you asked me to the past few weeks. I need a reward, before the demons in the forest attack us."

"Demons?" she echoed. Any fear she might have felt disappeared when he rested his hand on her neck and brushed her cheek, then her lips, with his thumb. Her blood was already on fire from their bodies being pressed together, and heat pooled in the base of her belly.

"I watch them watch you," he said. "You draw them out on your runs, and I kill them. We're a good team."

"Until the day you're not there." Her words escaped before she thought to filter them. The sense of loss returned. Warmth passed through his gaze, and the skin around his eyes softened as he took in her expression.

"I win," he said. He withdrew, and the cold wind swept over her. She started after him, senses scattered.

"You didn't get your kiss," she objected, her blood humming with need and frustration. She followed him back to the trail. Her eyes swept over his muscular form, from his shapely shoulders and wide back to the thick thighs outlined by the sweats. He whipped out a curved knife from the small of his back and tossed it in the air, catching it easily.

"You better start running. They're coming," he said.

"You weren't joking." She eyed the forest around them. It was quiet and cold.

"I don't do much right, but I can kill things," he said. She turned to see him gazing at her again. His eyes traveled to her neck and lingered. "Hate demon blood."

Fear made the wind seem colder. She wasn't about to stick around for this one. She started past him. He gripped her arm and pulled her against him once more. His kiss was hot, demanding, and quick, his lips warm and soft. Just as her body melded against his, he pushed her away. Stunned, she stared up at him. His gaze was on some point in the forest. She heard them coming, the sound of creatures crashing through the forest.

"Go, now," he ordered. "Don't stop running until you're back at the castle."

Lust turned to adrenaline. He slapped her backside to jar her into gear, and she bolted forward. The sound of fighting erupted behind her, and she stopped before the trail curved out of sight to see Rhyn standing over his first victim, a demon in a jaguar form. He wiped the bloodied knife on its pelt and straightened, meeting her gaze.

She wasn't sure if she should thank him for protecting her or curse him for the kiss. He lifted his chin in dismissal. Intent on fleeing him as well as the demons, she ran as hard as she could back to the castle before doubling over to catch her breath. Her eyes went to the number she wrote on her hand each morning.

5

She had exactly five weeks left in her bargain with Kris, the Immortal's leader. She squeezed her hand closed to hide the number and faced the forest, waiting for him to reappear.

"What're you doing out here?" Kris's cool voice made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

"Finishing up my morning run," she answered.

"You were told to take Ullly with you."

"I went with Rhyn."

"You don't have much longer here, if all goes according to plan," Kris said and moved beside her, his eyes the color of tanzanite, his white hair the color of snow.

"I know, Kris."

"You're better off without him. That may be the only good thing that comes of returning you to the mortal world."

She looked up at him, anger heating her blood again. She'd never understand how Kris could treat his own half-brother as he did. Rhyn was all she would take away from the twisted Immortal world.

"Go inside. Ullly's waiting for you in the lab."

"I'm nothing but a means to an end to you," she muttered. "So tired of all this." *At least I have Rhyn.*

She didn't wait for Kris's response but trotted inside.

Rhyn lopped the head off the last demon and wiped his knife again. He'd fed on the first one and was full but not satisfied. No blood could sate him as his mate's could, and he hadn't tasted her in weeks. Gabriel said she needed space. Kris said she needed anyone but him in her life. She had no idea what he wanted. For once, Rhyn was the only one who made any sense. His blood still raged from their kiss. If not for the demons' interruption, he and Katie would be doing a different kind of mud wrestling.

He growled, irritated as much by demons as he was with the cold weather. Snow fell in lazy, fat flakes, sticking to his clothes and hair. He swiped at the flakes then braced

himself to change into his jaguar shape. Hot pain slid through him as his body contorted into the new form. He released a sigh when he'd transformed and shook snowflakes from his thick coat. He loped along the trail through the forest and trotted into the park around the castle, where the person he least wanted to see awaited him with a glower and crossed arms.

"You had somewhere to be half an hour ago," Kris said.

His tone reminded Rhyn that coming here had been Katie's idea and no one else's. He'd come to keep an eye on her and, allegedly, to help his brothers on the Council, though not even he believed he had a decent bone in his body.

"I thought it important for you to see our father's crypt," Kris continued. "He's been interred here since he became dead-dead at the hands of your demon-mother."

Kris waited for him to change forms. Rhyn breezed by him, much warmer in his jaguar shape than he'd been in his human shape.

Hell was a bitch, but at least it was warm, he thought darkly.

Kris strode past him and led him through the castle's ground floor, whose wide, carpeted halls felt nice on his paws. The massive halls were chilly, with ugly stone walls and wooden beams far above. Kris's décor was similar to his ever-changing eyes: jewel-toned drapes, pillows, and tapestries, edged with gold.

Several people stopped to stare or skirt them as Rhyn padded through, and one startled gasp drew his attention briefly to a stairwell. A child-angel-- the first he'd seen in hundreds of years-- gazed at him with large brown eyes before darting up the stairs. He wondered what poor fool was stuck babysitting the high-maintenance angel as he followed Kris.

"I'd prefer you didn't act like such an ass around here," Kris muttered as one of the servants dropped a tray of dishes at the sight of the massive cat.

Rhyn stayed in his form until they reached a narrow, winding set of stairs. He changed shape before descending behind Kris. They walked down and through an unused part of the dungeons. Their path dead-ended at a large wooden door. Kris produced a key chain from his pocket and unlocked the five locks before pulling the heavy door open.

"You afraid Pop's gonna escape?" Rhyn asked, amused by the security.

"The magic lingering in our father's blood renders the ground here sacred. I've sealed off the crypt with magic to keep Immortals from entering through the shadow world, and installed locks for those who wander where they shouldn't be," Kris said.

"We should just toss him in the deepest hole in Hell."

"I don't expect *you* to understand what it is to care about someone else."

Rhyn said nothing. His brother had no idea the depth of emotion even a half-demon could feel. When he'd looked into Katie's eyes and dared her to admit she didn't love him, he'd seen everything he needed to know. He didn't feel like the half-demon bastard he was when he was with her.

"Pay your respects, brother, while I allow it," Kris said, and pushed the door open. The chamber beyond was dark, lit by the soft glow of a single torch beside a clear sarcophagus. Rhyn's eyes lingered on the body on the altar before he took in the seven statues of descending size surrounding the altar.

Kris lit another torch to shed light on the murals on the floor. There was one beneath each statue representing a continent. The largest statue was Andre, their eldest brother

who had recently become dead-dead, standing over Europe. Kris was next in size, standing on a mural of North America.

The smallest statue was Rhyn as a child of five or six, standing on Antarctica. He circled his statue, barely recalling his life growing up. Each of the Council That Was Seven was represented, dutifully overlooking their father's corpse. Rhyn faced the sarcophagus, surprised to see his father looked as he had when he last saw him thousands of years before. Their father had Andre's dark skin, and his hair was grey at the temples. His features were most like Rhyn's: heavy and roughly hewn, while his body was lean like Kris's.

"This might interest you more," Kris said in a cold voice.

Rhyn bristled and turned. Kris lit another torch to display a darkened case on the wall. Rhyn's fists clenched as he took in the beheaded, dismembered body hung for spite on the wall.

"My father's killer," Kris said, taking in the demoness's body.

"You kill my mother," Rhyn snarled. "Yet you've never come after me."

"Andre killed your mother and kept me from destroying you as I should have," Kris replied. "You're a cancer on everyone around you. Andre was too kind to kill you. Even Katie is better off without you."

Rhyn heard without listening, instead taking in the tortured features of his mother's face. He'd gone from being tormented by his own mother to the *affection* of an abusive father who regretted ever having him. What small maternal instincts a demon could have had led her to destroy the man who took her son; then she in turn was killed by Andre.

Andre had taken Rhyn in when he was five and he fled his bullying brothers when he was ten. Andre, however, unanimously approved Rhyn's petition to be recognized as a son of their father when he was old enough, despite his brothers' objections.

"They both deserve what they got," Rhyn said. "Andre alone has ever shown me any kindness."

"And look where that got us all. If he'd killed you, he'd be alive and Katie would be safe."

"Safe?" Rhyn echoed. "You'd force her to become your mate."

"I wouldn't force a human to do anything."

"But you'd hold her down and take her blood." Rhyn's voice lowered dangerously and he faced his brother. Kris fell silent. "Did you think I didn't know?"

"She told you."

"She didn't have to."

"I didn't intend for it to happen," Kris said.

"You're no better than Sasha," Rhyn said.

"And she's better off with you? You have nothing to offer her."

Rhyn faced his mother again. The words were too familiar. Katie had said the same. He hadn't even been able to keep her safe when they were together, and he had nothing-- not even a home-- to give her.

"Don't destroy anything while you're here," Kris said and left.

Rhyn ignored him, turning from the mother who'd never wanted him to the father who'd wanted him dead-dead. He'd had one friend in his life, Gabriel, and his mate, a woman tough in spirit but vulnerable in flesh. He didn't belong here with Kris's kind, yet

she was safe. People around him had a way of dying horribly, and he wasn't entirely sure what to do about it, now that it mattered. He wished Andre had stuck around a little longer, so he could've asked him what to do.

He sensed the entrance of another before his companion spoke.

"She looks like the Council, dismembered beyond recognition."

Rhyn snorted and faced Sasha, the brother charged with governing Australia, and the first to abandon the Council in favor of serving the Dark One. Sasha was lean and pale, his gaze turquoise.

"You're not surprised to see me," Sasha surmised.

"If Kris let me in, he'd let anyone in," Rhyn replied.

"Miss Hell, brother?"

"Warmer than this place."

Sasha chuckled, his gaze taking in the sarcophagus. He neared it with a small frown. Rhyn stayed where he was, wary yet unafraid of Sasha, who'd been the zookeeper among the animals with him in Hell.

"I wonder if he were still alive if things would be the same," Sasha mused, his eyes on their father.

"I'm glad the asshole's gone," Rhyn said.

"I suppose."

"What're you doing here, Sasha?"

"I'm here to see Kris, of all people."

"You can't manipulate him like you do everyone else," Rhyn said, well aware of his brother's ability to twist the minds of others.

"No? Wanna bet?"

"People like us don't pay up."

"True. We are more alike than the others. How's your little human treat?"

Rhyn eyed him. Sasha gave a faint smile.

"I'm not here for her," he said. "Wouldn't you like to have Kris out of the way, so you and your human treat can live in peace somewhere?"

"I wouldn't trust anything you offered."

"Very well, then, how about we make a deal for you to come back with me as my personal bodyguard, and I'll make sure she's safe and happy the rest of her life? I learned in Hell how you can un-mate her. She'd be better off without you, Rhyn."

She'd be better off without you. He'd heard these words more than once over the past few days and couldn't help the small part of him that agreed. The rest of him didn't give a shit what anyone said: Katie was his.

"You know Kris'll kill her when he's done with her. One human is nothing to him in his version of the big picture," Sasha continued. "Not sure which of us is more twisted."

"Fuck off, Sasha. You did me no favors in Hell, and you'll do me no favors here."

"Think about it. I'm off to see Kris."

Rhyn watched him go, wondering just what his brother was planning, and how he'd figure it out before Katie was hung on the wall next to his mother. Agitated and chilled by the chamber, he transformed into his jaguar form to terrorize more Immortals on his way to hunt the demons in the forest.

* * *

From the shadows of the crypt, Gabriel waited until the half-brothers were gone to dump the contents of the velvet dice pouch into his palm. Two small green gems-- holding the dust of human souls-- glittered in the torchlight of the dead-dead Immortal's chamber. Kris had given them to him weeks ago as payment for two assassinations. Wanting to give his friend, Rhyn, a moment of peace with his dead-dead parents, he waited until Rhyn was gone before withdrawing from the shadows.

"He looks so un-dead-dead," Death said, a rare trace of interest in her sweet voice.

Gabriel put the gems away and looked up to see her slight frame standing beside the sarcophagus. Her white hair and snowy skin glowed in the dim chamber.

"I wondered where you'd been going," she said.

"You always know where I'm going," he replied. "You can read my mind."

"You come here a lot."

"I do."

She turned and raised an eyebrow at him, her rainbow eyes flashing with every color between white and black. "I want to hear you say why," she ordered.

"To see my friend and protect his mate."

"You're not independent anymore, Gabriel. I own you now," she reminded him. "The other assassins go nowhere without my permission."

"You know where to find me when you need me," he said.

"You can't influence destiny, Gabe," she said. "You shouldn't be here at all."

"I have one friend in the universe. There's nothing wrong with-- "

"You sacrificed your immortal soul for him. You've done enough."

He clamped his jaw shut.

"And he's still not doing what he should be," she continued. "I think you wasted your freedom. Poor choice, but you were a human once. Maybe your human compassion led you astray."

"I thought you appreciated my *human* perspective."

"I *did*. But I think you've become a liability to me, Gabriel."

He'd heard the speech before, though this time, it was different. Three weeks ago, he'd bargained his soul in exchange for her taking Rhyn off her list of those to be made dead-dead. In all the years he'd served her, she'd never owned him until three weeks ago. He still didn't doubt his friend or his decision, but he was the only one.

"I'll stay away," he said. "If it pleases you."

"Stay today, Gabriel, but know that the next time you return, you will take the lives of two of them," she said. "Kris paid for Katie's death and the death of another, whose name he did not mention, but I will."

Heaviness settled into the pit of his stomach. He wondered if Death would've been more lenient if he stayed home with her and played nice instead of spending half his day in the mortal world.

It was too late for him to know.

"Who else would you have me take?" he asked in a monotone. Death smiled, and when she spoke, he looked away. "You would ask this?"

"You're lucky this is all I ask. Normally, when an assassin goes soft, I make him dead-dead. You've been my lover for ages, and I am doing you a favor."

"Next you'll say you've kicked me out of your bed."

She said nothing, and he met her gaze once more, genuinely surprised.

"I guess you no longer interest me, since you're just another of my slaves. You're no longer exciting and different to me," she said with a shrug. "I am sorry for this of all things, Gabriel. You are still my top assassin, assuming you don't fail in your executions."

"I wonder why you agreed to my deal, if it rendered me boring!" he snapped.

"Everything comes at a cost, Gabriel, which you know. I broke Immortal Code to grant your favor of not killing Rhyn. You had to pay the price for it, and so did I."

Her words did nothing to quell the anger boiling within him. It'd been too long since he'd felt such strong emotion, and it caught him off guard. At his silence, Death went on.

"Today's your last day here. Next time, you make them dead-dead."

"I understand, mistress."

"Very well."

At his tone, she softened. "Gabriel, you know there are things I cannot tell you. You must understand there is a reason behind what I ask of you that will not become clear for some time. Trust me. This is the only way."

"As you wish, mistress."

She left him alone in the dark with his thoughts, and he began to understand more how his friend Rhyn felt in a world that was pitted against him. He'd expected things to change once he pledged his soul to Death, but he hadn't expected anything so drastic, so soon. He clenched the pouch with its gems.

Instead of going to see the Immortal leader, Gabriel crossed through the shadow world, squinting as he emerged into the bright mid-morning sunlight. He put on his sunglasses, which did little to alleviate the headache sunlight gave him. The lush Scottish Highlands around him were covered in a blanket of snow that stretched for miles, the white world interrupted only by a few narrow roads snaking in different directions.

It was rarely sunny in this part of the world, and he chalked the irritation up to his sudden plunge in luck. He breathed in deeply of the scent of snow. The chances of him ever returning were slim to none. He was early this year, but he'd rather visit now than risk he'd be grounded during winter solstice in a month.

He'd miss the smell and sight of his homeland and yearned already to stay here rather than return to his dark corner of the Immortal underworld! He began to think Death was right-- he was going soft. Before he gave his Immortal soul to death, he'd never noticed how sweet the air was or how the grass sang as the wind whipped through it. He missed the smells and sounds in winter.

He walked a familiar path to a graveyard so old, not even legends remained about its location or the importance of those buried there. A stone cottage up the road was the only sign of inhabitation, and a herd of sheep raised their heads as he neared. He ignored them and went to a place only he knew, stopping when he was atop the graves he sought.

"Mother, Father," he said quietly, "I may not be able to come back again."

He never expected his long dead parents to respond but waited anyway. When only the winter wind greeted him, he continued.

"Father, I did as you told me not to do long ago. I gave Death my Immortal soul. It was for a worthy cause, and I don't regret what I've done," he said.

His gaze lifted, and he recalled vividly the last time he'd seen his parents in this very spot, when they were cut down by bloodthirsty demons during the only period in Immortal history when demons attacked humans. They'd been led by the demon leader Darkyn, whom the Dark One had punished when Death discovered what the demons had done. He didn't know what happened to Darkyn, but Death adopted him, raised him, and trained him to be the most ruthless of all assassins.

Rhyn had become like a brother to him, and the idea of killing his mate reopened wounds that hadn't bled since he stood in this place thousands of years before. He tried not to think of that sad time, instead blinking away dark memories and focusing on the snow at his feet.

"I'll come back whenever I'm allowed," he said with resignation. He gazed around once more and then turned and walked away, back into the shadow world.

* * *

Still in her jogging clothes, Katie made her way to the super-lab on one of the castle's upper floors. She knocked and waited.

"You stood me up this morning. Kris yelled at me for it," Katie said, leveling a glare on Ully as he opened the door. His bright features turned pink beneath his wire-rimmed glasses and straw-colored hair. At barely above her height and slender, the mad scientist was very unlike the Immortal warriors that filled the castle.

"You know, I just ... well, Rhyn ..."

"You can say he scared you shitless," she said.

"Yeah, he did," he said, then brightened. "But I have good news for you!"

"You figured out how to make an immunity injection?"

He whirled away from the door and strode into the lab. She followed, uninterested in the sterile glass and stainless steel landscape. As she did every day, she went to the table near his cluttered desk to await her blood draw and any other experiments he wanted to do. He scampered across the lab to a fridge that held cold tools and bottles of mysterious serums, everything except what a normal person put in a fridge.

"Nowhere close." He retrieved a small bottle of what looked like perfume and brought it back, holding it out to her. She took it skeptically.

"I was hanging upside down this morning with Rhyn snarling at me and I thought, this doesn't just suck, but it's gotta suck even more for a little human like Katie," Ully said. "Kris said the normal Immortals aren't allowed around you, because they tend to attack you. This will help. Try it."

She sprayed the perfume on her wrist and coughed.

"Oh, god, Ully, this smells like a skunk crawled into my clothes!"

"I know!" Ully said, excited. "I created a pheromone repellent. It should cause temporary blindness in Immortals as well as mask your pheromones."

"I can't wear this."

"You don't have to. Just spray any Immortal that gets too close."

She looked at the bottle anew, thoughts going to the long list of Immortals she could've used it on instead of bearing their attacks.

"This is the first useful thing I've seen you do," she said. "You have more of this?"

"I have travel-sized, too. Sit down. Time for some blood."

She sighed and held out her arm, setting the perfume on the table as she sat. She still couldn't watch Ully draw her blood and covered her eyes with one hand. He was quick about it and placed a Hello Kitty Band-Aid over the small puncture before dropping the vials into his coat pocket.

"And you're no closer at all?" she asked, holding her breath for the answer.

"Nope. I had to start over yesterday. I told Kris I don't think it's possible to duplicate the antigen that makes you immune to Immortals. I can probably get close with a few years of research, but not in two months."

She suspected Kris might override his promise to let her go in five weeks, if Ully couldn't figure it out. She released her breath, satisfied on more than one level to postpone her return to the human world.

The wind chime above the door tinkled. Kris entered, followed by someone whose appearance made her gasp. Sasha looked over her, uninterested, and both her hands went to her throat at the memory of what he'd done to her in Hell. Fear fluttered through her, and her gaze flew to Kris, whom she trusted little more than his sadistic brother. Kris's gaze was amber, a visual indicator of his anger despite his calm features.

"Ully," he said in a clipped tone. "Test this." He tossed a vial whose contents were the color of blood. Ully caught it and held it up.

Katie snagged the perfume off the table as the two brothers neared and eased off the chair, placing it between her and them. Sasha seemed to be ignoring her, though a small smile of amusement was on his face.

"What is it?" Ully asked curiously.

"The solution to our problem," Kris answered.

"My lab in Hell didn't have the ethical reservations you do in using Immortal or demon test subjects," Sasha said.

"How could you let him in here?" she demanded of Kris, unnerved by his sudden appearance in a place where she was allegedly safe.

"I came bearing gifts, namely the immunity blood you all need to fight the Dark One's army. I seek an alliance against my former employer and to regain my place at the Council," Sasha answered.

"Cut the shit, Sasha," Kris snapped. "I haven't decided what to do with you yet, and you may end up with an assassination contract on your head."

"As you wish," Sasha said in a voice so calm it drew the gazes of everyone in the room.

"Ully, test that now," Kris ordered. "Sasha, you'll follow me to your room."

Sasha bowed his head in a mocking show of respect. Katie watched him go, her nightmares in her thoughts and her heart pounding. When the door closed, she looked at the vial of blood.

Suddenly, she feared a new fate. At least before, Kris had a reason to keep her around, because he wanted something from her. What happened if he got what he wanted elsewhere, before she knew what she wanted?

"Ully, how long will that take you?" she asked.

"A few days, maybe a week."

She gripped the perfume bottle more tightly. She couldn't help but think Sasha's sudden appearance was related to the demons in the forest and her dreams. Her thoughts went to Rhyn.

"I'll see you later," she heard herself say.

Ully nodded, already seated and scribbling at his desk. She exited the brightly lit room into the hallway, crossing to look out the nearest window at the falling snow. A dark figure in the snow-covered park area caught her attention. Gabriel was sitting alone on top of one of the half dozen picnic tables. She made her way to the back entrance to the castle and stepped into the quiet, chilly day. The snow fell straight from the sky without the wind and was soft and fluffy beneath her feet.

"Gabriel?" she called, crossing her arms at the chill. He didn't face her. "You okay?"

"Better than you."

She paused a short distance from him, sensing something wrong. He didn't speak much. She knew nothing about him, except he'd been a friend to Rhyn.

"You're early today," she said.

"I can't stay tonight."

"Oh. You've got, um, work?"

"Yes."

"You'll be back tomorrow?" she asked at the ominous note in his voice.

"No, Katie. I'm not coming back."

"Ever?"

"For your sake, not if I can help it."

"So when you come back, you'll be back for me for good?" she asked.

"Yes."

She was struck by his words, feeling as if the one person she relied upon was not only running out on her but would chop her into pieces the next time she saw him. Her hand went to her neck. He looked away as his words sank in.

"Take care of Toby and Rhyn," he said, and stood. "And ... take care of yourself."

"Gabriel, maybe you should just take me with you now and save us all some grief," she said.

"Humans have free will," he reminded her. "You have some other decisions to make first."

"But if I choose Rhyn and you come back for me tomorrow, it doesn't seem very fair to him."

"You're not making this easier on either of us!" he said, a flare of emotion in his voice for the first time since she'd met him. Taken aback by his anger, she watched him run a hand through his hair in an unusual sign of agitation.

"Guess I don't understand the rules," she said quietly.

"I'll stay away as long as I can. I may not have a choice, though."

"What do I do, Gabriel?"

"I can't tell you that."

"But you can tell me you're coming back to kill me," she said, anger rising.

He looked up at the sky. Dressed all in black with his dark eyes and hair, he looked like a living shadow in the snow-covered world.

"Rhyn is my friend," he said after a long pause. "He cares about you. I've never thought twice about any life I've taken until now."

"I understand but I'm having a hard time sympathizing, considering it's me you're gonna kill."

"It's not just you. The next time I visit the human world, I'll be leaving with two souls."

“Okay, so you’re taking me and someone else, but this still doesn’t help me figure out what to do!” she said.

“I can’t tell you that.”

She drew a deep breath. Her hands shook as she stood there discussing her own death with a creature that resembled the Grim Reaper.

“It’s not Toby or Rhyn, is it?” she ventured.

“No.”

“Good. They’re both growing on me.”

“I have to go, Katie,” Gabriel said.

“First the nightmares, now this. Why do I feel like something really bad is happening?”

“Sometimes things get worse before they get better. Most of the times, things just never get better. Doesn’t help that I got demoted. No alcohol,” he reminded her.

“Kris tossed it all out after he found me knocked out on the bathroom floor last week,” she admitted, rolling her eyes.

“Good. You’re going to need your head clear.”

She searched his face. The snow began falling harder, and he met her gaze again finally. The regret in his dark eyes made her want to beg him not to kill her and comfort him for the pain he’d surely feel hurting his own friend. Her throat tightened, and in the end, no words came out. She wondered how accurate her dream had been, if her only way to save Rhyn was to sacrifice herself.

“Farewell, Katie,” Gabriel said in a hushed voice.

“Farewell, Gabriel.”

Death’s assassin turned and walked away, disappearing into the shadow world. The coldness of fear within her grew stronger. She rubbed the lumpy scar on her arm, her attention caught by the sight of a jaguar dropping from a tree branch to the edge of the park and the forest a short distance away. It was not all black but had a white patch around one eye. It stared at her through green eyes, and she frowned, uncertain why the sight of the creature bothered her.

A gust of wind flung snow into her face. She retreated to the castle, up the back stairwell off limits to everyone but her, and to the warmth of her chamber. Toby’s giggles reached her before she opened the door. She walked in to see Rhyn’s jaguar form sprawled across the bed, shredding a down pillow. Her bed looked as if a flock of geese had combusted over it, and she counted at least ten dead pillows.

Toby laughed and tossed Rhyn another pillow, delighted when he snatched it from midair and shredded it in an explosion of white feathers. Reining in her emotions, she tried to distract her dark thoughts by focusing on Toby.

“Toby!” she exclaimed. “Where did you get all these pillows?”

The baby angel and half-demon turned toward the door.

“From our neighbors,” Toby said. “I had two and you had three and the fat lady down the hall had four, so then I got hers and that mean man’s pillows.”

“Just what I need,” she grumbled, wondering what other insults the castle’s Immortals’ mates would fling at her after this incident. She didn’t fit in; they made it clear every chance they could, just as their leader did. “Wash up for dinner.”

“Okay, Mama!” he sang and sprang away. She bent down to pick up a yet unscathed pillow, startled to stand and see Rhyn had changed to his human form.

"You got stuck with the baby-angel?"

"Maybe that should be we got stuck with the baby-angel!" she shot back.

"He's all yours. What smells like shit?"

"I think I like you better as a jaguar. Much easier to get along with," she said with a shake of her head, unable to help the warmth that spread through her whenever she saw him. "Gabriel left for good today."

"He always comes back."

"Not this time."

He was quiet, digesting the news. Still shaken from her discussion with Gabriel, she couldn't decide if she wanted to run to the comfort of Rhyn's arms or send him away for good, before Gabriel took her away.

"Mama, I'm ready!" Toby said, reappearing.

"Okay, come on," she said. She held out a hand. He took it and tugged her to the door. Rhyn gazed at her, and her whole body responded despite her fear. The memory of his kiss made her insides warm. "If you want, you can come by later."

His gaze flared with heated interest.

"For tea," she clarified. "And to talk or whatever."

"I like whatever," he said.

"I'll get more pillows," Toby said.

"You're not invited," Rhyn growled.

"But how can we play?"

"You'll be in bed."

"*That*, no, Rhyn," she corrected him. "I mean tea. Daylight tea."

"Breakfast tea."

Toby giggled, and she glanced at him, afraid Rhyn was going to dive headfirst into a discussion Toby shouldn't hear.

"Afternoon tea. C'mon, Toby," Katie said and turned away, allowing Toby to pull her down the hall to the dining chamber, which had yet to fill up. She braced herself for the resentful looks and whispered insults she was glad Toby was too young to understand. They made their way unscathed through the dining room to their own little corner, where Toby's favorite food combination of mac-n-cheese and French toast waited for him on the table.

She couldn't eat, feeling more stressed than she had in the past three weeks. Sasha was somewhere in the castle, and Gabriel was gone. She'd cracked the door to her heart for Rhyn to shove his foot in the door and now needed to close, lock, and deadbolt it closed again.

I do love him, she admitted silently.

***Katie's Hope* is available from the following outlets:**

Amazon: <http://amzn.to/pkmlUW>

Barnes and Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/katies-hope-lizzy-ford/1105860193>

iTunes: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/book/katies-hope-rhyn-trilogy-book/id467570537?mt=11>

Smashwords: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/85845>