

# **Wardbreaker**

**The Lillim Callina Chronicles, prequel**

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# Chapter 1

I shut my eyes as I tried to remember exactly what Professor Smathers had taught me about Earth currencies. It wasn't that it was particularly complicated, it was more that I wasn't quite sure what they used in America. Was it euros? Dollars? Pounds?

With a surge of confidence, I opened my eyes and shoved the handful of wadded up dollar bills I'd pulled from my pocket across the counter.

The dull-eyed convenience store clerk stared down at my money and heaved a huge sigh out of his lungs that shook his entire body. Oh no, had I chosen wrong? Damn... it *was* euros they used here. My cheeks burned as I reached into my pouch, wondering if I'd thought to take any. I hadn't exactly been picky when I'd grabbed the stash from my mother's purse. For all I knew, none of the money I had would work...

"That's not enough," he said, voice half-bored, half-annoyed as he thumbed through the bills. "You'll need to pay for the stuff in your pockets as well."

I froze, my body going as still as a rabbit when it smells a predator. I swallowed, my hands clenching and unclenching as I glanced down at the pocket on my sweatshirt. I'd stuffed things in there while I shopped, had I forgotten something? Did he think I was trying to steal?

Slowly, I snaked one hand down to the pocket and reached in, but feeling nothing, I looked up at him, confused.

"I... um... don't have anything else." I pointed to the counter where a small carton of chocolate milk, an apple, and a single string cheese sat there like a depressed trio. I'd picked them because out of all the stuff in here, I sort of recognized them as food. Where I came from, we didn't have brightly colored things in plastic pouches, but we did have cheese, milk, and fruit...

"Look, I saw you put the candy bar in your back pocket. Just take it out and pay for it, or leave it here. I don't really care what you do, but you can't have it for free." The clerk leaned forward, lips in a tight line. His face was pockmarked with acne and his flame-red hair stuck out at impossible angles.

Had I inadvertently taken some candy? My heart started racing as the realization struck me. Had I been so hungry I'd stuck something in my pocket and forgotten? Surely not... Surely I wouldn't have done something so stupid...

I reached down, rummaging through the pockets of my jeans but came up with only dryer lint and a piece of black string. Finding nothing else, I pulled the pockets inside out so they hung there like pathetic handles. They were so long that if someone wanted, they could grab onto them and steer me around. It didn't help that the jeans were a size too big. I'd gotten them from a thrift store down the block, and they didn't fit as well as they could have. Still, anything was better than the skintight leather jumpsuit I'd been wearing when I escaped to Earth. I'd ditched the uniform the first chance I'd gotten.

"I don't have any candy," I said, my stomach making that horrible squealing sound that came with hunger. It'd been a while since I'd last eaten. The stuff on the counter would comprise the first meal I'd have in about three days, and I was starting to go a little wiggy. "Can I just please pay for my stuff and leave?"

"No! I saw you take something," the clerk boomed. His voice was loud enough to make people turn and look at us.

"Then charge me for the candy and let me have my stuff," I replied, getting annoyed now. Was he trying to fleece me? Over a candy bar?

"It doesn't work that way, I have to ring something up." He pointed to the register beside him as though that made everything make sense.

"Is there a problem here?" The voice behind me was so low it made goosebumps rise on my flesh and my stomach drop into my toes. Great, I'd attracted attention. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I eyed the stuff I'd placed on the counter. Could I swipe them and make a run for it? Maybe I should just leave it behind...

Before I could do anything, the clerk glanced behind me, and his eyes got as big as dinner plates. He swallowed hard enough to make his adam's apple bob up and down beneath the milk-pale flesh of his throat. He slowly put his hands flat on the counter. They were shaking.

"Um... no, sir," the clerk said, taking my money in one grubby paw and putting it into the register. He scooped up some coins and practically threw them across the counter at me. "Here you go, miss."

"Good," the voice behind me said as I snatched up my groceries and my change and shoved them into the pocket of my sweatshirt. "I'd hate to hear you're back to picking on young girls again."

I took a deep breath, not sure what to expect behind me and whirled around to thank the person. Admittedly, part of me wanted to run out of the store as quickly as I could, but that was rude, and if there was one thing my mother had beaten into me, it was good manners.

A guy who looked like he was in his mid-twenties stood there, staring past me at the pimple-faced teen. He was at least six feet tall with a shaved head and skin the color of polished obsidian. Beneath his bomber jacket, he was wearing a long-sleeved, black dress shirt half-tucked into a pair of blue jeans. I could tell it was long-sleeved because as he moved one arm, the sleeve of his jacket slipped down, revealing the cuff of his shirt.

His lips were pulled into a half-snarl that vanished into a sort of part-smile as he glanced from the clerk to me. He raised one enormous hand to his stubble-covered chin and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger as he appraised at me. It was strange because I could see recognition behind his eyes. Did he know what I was? No, that was impossible...

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice so quiet, I wasn't sure he actually heard me say anything. Not waiting for him to respond, I tried to make my way past him toward the doors of the convenience store, but found myself blocked by his linebacker-sized form as he shuffled in front of me. I took a deep breath, trying to stop myself from freaking out. Surely every person on Earth couldn't be a crazy person who would accost me given the chance? Surely my mother couldn't be right about that too? On a long enough timeframe she had to be wrong eventually, right?

“Miss, when is the last time you ate something?” he asked as the customer immediately behind him stepped around him and placed her purchases on the counter. She didn’t even so much as look in our direction as the man placed one large hand on my shoulder and ushered me toward the door.

I wasn’t quite sure how he managed it because I was confident I could have stopped him, but the next thing I knew, we were standing outside the Ye Olde Kwik E Mart and staring at the attached gas station. I shot one last, apprehensive look inside the store as the glass doors shut with a whoosh that made me jump.

The man laughed, a low throaty sound that reminded me of a cartoon bullfrog with a top hat. I took a hesitant step away from him, and as I did so, he watched my feet move. The urge to flee rose up inside me, so strong I could barely think past it. Still, he was just some guy. I could handle him. He wouldn’t make me run away...

“Go away!” I said, trying to make my voice sound as tough as I possibly could. “Just because I look like a teenage girl doesn’t mean I won’t knock your block off.”

He raised his hands, face melting into a laugh that made me want to punch him in his stupid bulbous nose. “There, there, miss. I mean no harm. You just look like someone I used to know a long time ago. She’d visit me from time to time, and whenever she came to town, I always took her out for fish tacos.” He stared far off past me as if remembering something and tears tugged at the corners of his eyes. “She hasn’t been by in a while. I heard she died.”

“Is that so?” I growled, suddenly angry though I didn’t know why. Something about the way he spoke tugged at the very far corners of my memory, but when I tried to pull the fragment in for closer examination, it evaporated.

“Yeah, um sorry,” he replied sheepishly. “I guess I got carried away with myself.” He held out his hand to me. “I’m Jean-Luc, but most people call me Luc. I sort of like that. It makes me feel less French.”

“You’re French?” I asked, taking his hand very carefully, and as I did so, a little nip of magic zipped across his skin like a static shock. What the hell was he? Something preternatural for sure, but whatever it was, I’d never felt it, and that was saying something since I’d been trained to fight Earth’s supernatural monsters from birth.

I jerked my hand away and stepped back into a fighting stance, my hands clenched into fists. I called upon my power. It welled up inside me at once, filling my muscles with strength and setting my cells ablaze. If he tried anything, I’d blast him into a smudge on the ground and worry about the consequences afterward.

“I’m not French. I’m named after a starship captain,” he replied, looking at his shoes like they were the most interesting thing in the world. It was strange because his entire confident demeanor seemed to have vanished. “My parents were idiots.” He looked up at me and his smile died on his face. “Um... what are you doing?”

“You’re some kind of magic user. Whatever you’re trying to do, don’t.” I took a deep breath, and as I exhaled, I held one palm out in front of me, calling upon my magic to make a tiny flame dance on it. The fire was small enough that I wasn’t worried about it showing up on the sensors back home, at least not without someone looking very closely. Thankfully, that was pretty unlikely. It was why I’d

chosen this town as my hideout. "Just don't. Just turn around and walk the hell away from me. This doesn't have to end with you as a chalk outline on the ground."

"Miss, I have no idea..." he trailed off as the flame in my hand grew bigger.

"It will take exactly zero effort to toss this fireball at you," I lied because it would take a lot of energy, especially if I didn't use any magic words, and since I hadn't eaten in a few days, the exertion might make me faint, which would be bad. Still, I was betting he didn't know that. It wasn't the world's best bet, per se, but what was that saying about dogs being more scared of you than you are of them? Only I wasn't sure which of us was the dog in this scenario.

"Okay, look," he said, holding his hands out palms up. "I know what you are. I know you're a member of the Dioscuri. Your job is to fight monsters and keep us humans safe, right? Well, I need your help with some vampires before things get out of control. It's why I followed you from the thrift shop into the gas station convenience store."

His words shook me to the core. He knew what I was? Impossible... and how the hell had he followed me inside? I'd made sure to look out for anyone. Hell, I'd even woven a tiny spell about myself to warn me of supernatural baddies. The only way it wouldn't have alerted me to his presence was if he had no magic... but then what had I felt? Was it something residual? Had he just handled a magical object recently... that had been known to happen.

"Lies," I said, taking a step back from him and willing the fire in my hand to vanish before it could attract attention. Maybe I could run away before he'd catch me and force me to blow up this gas station. Then again, there was always the possibility he could, I don't know, shape shift into a giant flaming bear and gobble me up. Maybe I should play dead? That works on bears, right?

"I'm a monster hunter," he said, reaching into his bomber jacket and slowly pulling out a piece of parchment that looked like it had been written a million years ago... and I totally recognized it. What he had in his hand was a writ, and it basically meant he was licensed by my people to hunt down monsters. So he hadn't been lying about knowing who I was, the jerk. "And I need your help. Please."

"How'd you get that?" I asked, deciding I needed to run away and find a new town to hold up in. I'd only been on Earth a few days, but if this guy had already identified me, how long could it possibly take for my people to find me? That was something I didn't want, since they probably wouldn't be happy I ran away... again. It was too bad because I liked the weather in Orange County, California. Not too hot, not too cold... It was like the Goldilocks of hideaways.

"I applied for it after some vampires killed my friend's dad. You wouldn't think you'd need a license to kill the undead, but there you go." The words came out of his mouth strangely brusque and disconnected, like he hadn't actually expected to say them out loud. Then again, I doubted monster hunting came up in casual conversation since talking about it with people 'not in the know' was pretty much forbidden.

"Uh huh," I muttered, glancing from the writ to him and back again. Something about this guy was off, I just had no idea what it was, and honestly, I didn't really

want to know. Whatever he was involved in would be trouble, and I'd had enough trouble in my short life to last a couple lifetimes.

Besides, if I helped him, I'd have to use my magic... if I did that, I was sure my people would find me since every time I drew on my power, there'd be a blip on the systems they used back home to track monster activity. If enough blips showed up where there hadn't previously been any, well, someone would come snooping around. That, I did not want.

"It's true," he replied, shoving the writ in his pocket with one hand. "How else would I have gotten it?"

This was an excellent point because writs were magically bound to the owner. If someone else tried to use it, the writ would disintegrate into ash. Damn.

"Who sponsored it?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him as I glanced around. There was no one else here. I could make a break for it and be halfway down the street before he took even two steps. So why hadn't I run? Why was I even having this conversation?

"Dirge Meilan," Luc replied, and everything inside me went sort of cold and empty. Of all the Dioscuri he could have known, why did it have to be her? I swallowed as panic crept down my spine like an icy spider. Was that how he'd recognized me? Was it because I looked so much like Dirge had? No... it had to be something else. Surely, it was something else... but even as I had the thought, I knew it was a lie.

"No..." I muttered, and before I could stop myself, I was sprinting across the parking lot of the gas station as fast as I could. I made it about three feet before a loud honk filled my ears. I glanced toward it in time to see an old brown station wagon plow into me at ten miles an hour. It smacked into my ribs so hard I was reminded of the time I'd been punched in the side by a yeti. My breath exploded from my lips as I flopped sideways onto the concrete. The sound of people shouting filled my ears. The vehicle lurched to a stop as I lay there, struggling to breathe.

It'd hurt less than I'd expected, but then again, when you're used to getting thrown twenty feet through the air by werewolves, well, what was a car? I tried to move, tried to crawl to my feet but everything was sort of hazy and far off. I shut my eyes, pulling in a deep breath, but when I opened them again, everything was still shaky. That wasn't good. Maybe I'd been hurt worse than I'd thought.

An old woman with hair the color of fresh snow and glasses that made her eyes appear huge and bug-like hobbled over to me, yammering in some language I didn't understand. Only... only I couldn't even hear her voice very well. Her lips were moving... how come I couldn't hear her?

I was about to ask when hands gripped me under my arms and hauled me to my feet like I weighed nothing, which wasn't exactly true. I might have only been five feet tall, but I was almost a hundred and twenty pounds of muscle. I tried to kick and fight, but before I could land even a single blow, Luc leaned in close and whispered into my ear.

"Let's get out of here before the police come," Luc said, and his voice was warm on my neck. "Something tells me that won't go well for you."

He smiled at me as he tucked one arm around my shoulder and began hustling me away from the lady. I wasn't sure where I was going exactly, but it didn't

matter. He was right. I did not want the police finding me. If they did, they'd want all sorts of things I wouldn't be able to give them, like identification and my parents' phone numbers.

## Chapter 2

We were sitting in a restaurant I'd never been to before which wasn't that surprising since I'd never actually eaten in a restaurant on Earth before. I'd tried to tell Luc I didn't have any money, but he'd insisted. So we were here even though I couldn't afford anything. Everything smelled so good, I could feel my mouth water. Maybe I could just order water? I'd remembered reading something about water being free in American restaurants, but maybe I wasn't remembering things correctly? Either way, I'd have to do something or the smell of food was going to drive me insane.

I'd never been the world's best student, especially when it came to Earth's studies courses. There were tons of countries, all with their own customs and things. Besides, most of our lessons usually revolved around how to deal with supernatural shenanigans, like say chasing a vampire through a blood bank or paying a mortician to forget a zombie really had tried to eat him. I'd had exactly one hour of class time pertaining to restaurants which isn't very long when you consider how many countries had restaurants...

"So what will you two be having to drink?" asked a lady with short brown hair and eyes that seemed way older than they should have since she looked only a few years older than I did. She shifted in annoyance, tapping her plastic blue pen against a green pad of paper in her hands as her gaze shifted from Luc to me. Her eyes lingered on my soft lavender hair before she glanced back at Luc and raised an eyebrow at him. The gesture made my cheeks heat up. Was there something wrong with my hair? Even among my people colored hair was pretty rare, so I usually dyed mine, but I hadn't had time before I'd made my escape. Hopefully, it hadn't been a huge mistake.

"I'll have coffee, the whole pot," Luc said before gesturing at me. "What would you like to drink?"

"Um... water, I think," I said, looking down at the menu on the table. I had glanced through the drink section, but hadn't seen water with a price listed next to it. Should I ask how much it was? No, then I'd seem like an idiot. Still, if it cost money, I wouldn't be able to pay.

"You think?" the lady asked, raising one eyebrow at me.

"Occasionally," I replied, smiling sweetly. "Though usually I get distracted by shiny objects."

Luc laughed as the waitress shook her head and walked away, her black tennis shoes squeaking across the dirty linoleum floor. Watching her go made me a little jealous because her jeans fit her way better than mine fit me. Then again, hers probably hadn't come from a thrift store, so there was that...

"Let's start this over," Luc said, grinning as he ran one chocolate-colored hand over his bald head before holding it out toward me. "I'm Luc and you are?"

“I’m Lillim,” I replied, staring at his hand, unsure of what to do. So I copied him. I ran one hand through my short hair before holding it out across the table like he was doing. He glanced at my hand for a second then shifted his gaze back at me and chewed on his lip.

“Are you messing with me?” he asked, staring at my hand like it somehow offended him. I fidgeted and retracted my hand before dropping it into my lap as I looked sheepishly at the table’s brightly-colored top.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” I whispered as my cheeks burst into flames. “I... um... I was trying to return your gesture.”

“It’s called a handshake,” he said slowly. “It’s how we say hello.” He flung himself back against his seat as he shook his head. Clearly, he didn’t actually want to shake my hand so I retracted it and dropped it into my lap. His eyes followed me, and he flushed slightly, embarrassment clouding his features. “Sorry. I don’t really know much about you guys. Dirge is the only Dioscuri I’ve ever met...” He left the “and she seemed pretty normal” part of his statement unsaid, but at least he had the decency to look like he meant the apology. That was something. I guess.

“It’s okay,” I squeaked, ashamed I didn’t know more as I stared down at my hands. Dirge had been an earthborn after all. She would have known how to act before she’d been recruited to hunt monsters by my people, the Dioscuri. Sometimes it seemed like all the knowledge she’d passed down to me was useless. It sort of pissed me off.

“Look, I’m not trying to make you feel bad,” he said as the waitress came up to us and placed a big glass container filled with black liquid on the table along with two white mugs. Then she put a glass of water with three pathetic looking ice cubes drifting inside of it in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said because good manners never really go out of style.

“You’re welcome.” She smiled, though it didn’t reach her hazel eyes and pursed her lips. “What would you two like for breakfast?”

“Two specials,” Luc said, tapping the menu in front of him with one dark finger. “And a side of pancakes with extra syrup.”

“Anything else?” she asked, writing furiously on her little pad and though I could see the words, they didn’t make any sense to me. Maybe she had her own little code?

“Orange juice. That will be all.”

“Two specials, pancakes with extra syrup, and an orange juice?” she repeated back to him and he nodded.

She turned and walked off without even looking at me which was a little odd. I mean part of me was relieved she hadn’t asked me what I’d wanted because I wouldn’t have known, but still... I smirked in spite of myself and decided to chalk it up to finally accruing some good karma. I’d been spared an opportunity to humiliate myself in front of Luc even further.

I mean, after this meeting, I was going to go to another town stat, but I still didn’t like embarrassing myself if I could help it. I wasn’t sure why since most of my people tended to shrug it off when they did things they weren’t supposed to around normal people, but it’d always bugged me, like something deep inside knew I was behaving incorrectly.



"I took the liberty of ordering for you. I hope you don't mind," he said, and when I looked at him, I must have had a strange look on my face because he hastily added. "I didn't know if you'd know what you wanted and..."

"Thanks," I said, feeling my cheeks heat up. "I appreciate it, but I don't have enough money to eat here." I swallowed, about to say more when he held up one hand. I spoke anyway. "I can't pay for this."

"You can work it off. How's that sound?" He smiled at me, showing a mouthful of white teeth. "Then I wouldn't be helping you per se, it would be you getting payment for a job. You know, freelancing."

"I already told you I can't help you." I sighed, letting my breath out slowly as I scooted toward the edge of the booth so I could make a run for it if I needed to do so. "I can't use my magic down here... if I did..." I stopped, trailing off as I realized I was blabbering to this guy. I barely knew him. I didn't need to tell him anything, let alone spill my life story to him. Besides, he'd known Dirge. If that wasn't a strike against him, I didn't know what would be. Then again, he couldn't have known her very well since I didn't know a thing about him...

"I don't need you to do any magic, Lillim," he replied, pouring the dark liquid into each of the mugs before stirring a bunch of white powder and what looked like milk into one of the cups. Then he slid the mug with the new mixture toward me. "I just need you to give me some information, like a consultant."

"I don't know what that is," I said, glancing at the cup full of steaming brown liquid.

"It's coffee. It's the nectar of the gods. It's pretty much as close to magic as us humans can get." He smirked at me and picked up the first cup which was black as coal and took a sip. "It has the ability to turn near-corpses into functioning humans with a single sip."

"I meant, I don't know what a consultant would do in this circumstance," I replied, hesitantly lifting the cup and sniffing it. Just the smell was enough to wake me up. Was it some kind of stimulant? "Why did you put stuff in mine and not yours?"

"It takes a while to get used to drinking it black. You'll like it better that way." He grinned at me. "And you would just consult on a problem I have."

"Well, that's real helpful." I glowered at him before sipping the drink. It was strangely sweet and acrid at the same time. I plastered a polite smile on my face before setting it down. "Yum," I added for effect even though I was pretty sure he was trying to poison me.

He watched me set the cup down with his large brown eyes, but something told me he didn't buy my reaction. "Basically, I need you to teach me about vampires so I can kill the ones who have taken over this town." He took a swig of his coffee. "Every time it seems like I learn something it turns out to be wrong. That's why when I saw you, and realized what you were, I decided to follow you."

"You know following young girls around is not usually an endearing trait," I muttered and he had the good sense to look sheepish. His mouth opened and closed for a second, trying to assimilate my words into his brain. "Besides, your story doesn't make a lot of sense. Surely, my people have kept your entire town from being overrun by vampires. We're magic-wilding demon hunters tasked with keeping Earth safe. That's our job."

“If you guys were the only ones fighting monsters, why do I have a writ?” he asked, completely serious, but something about the way he looked at me told me he was having a hard time not yelling at me. Not that it would do him much good. Was that why he didn’t? Points for him. My mother still hadn’t learned yelling at me got her somewhere between nowhere and zilch.

“Fair enough,” I replied. My stomach gurgled, and I glanced back at the coffee so hungry, I was about to down the stuff regardless of the fact it tasted like battery acid. One more sip wouldn’t hurt... but if I started accepting his stuff, I’d be obligated to help him. Still, what harm would a little information do? Besides, I was starving. “What do you want to know?”

The words had barely left my mouth when he reached into his jacket and pulled out a pad of paper with a ratty green cover half torn from its metal spirals. He pulled a blue pen from between the spirals and flipped a few pages over, scanning them before stopping on a specific page.

When he caught me watching him, his cheeks flushed slightly. “Sorry, I’ve been writing down questions for a while. When us hunters meet in the field we trade information, half of which is usually bogus, but I write it all down anyway.”

I waved him off because I already knew generic human monster hunters shared notes. It was a little sad because if we prepared them better, they wouldn’t die as much. Some of the other Dioscuri had argued for better training for hunters with writs because it’d lead to fewer monsters, but we simply didn’t have the resources for that any more. Not since the last civil war had taken the lives of so many Dioscuri, including his sponsor Dirge Meilan. Besides, who wants to teach a monster hunting class? I sure didn’t.

“You know, I haven’t actually agreed to help you yet,” I said even though I was leaning toward it. If what I said got spread out among a lot of hunters, it might save lives both by keeping hunters from getting killed and by helping them stop monsters from harming innocents. I ought to do it, but what if someone found him and asked how he found out what he did?

“You know you want to help me,” he replied. “I can see it in your eyes, Lillim. You’re a good person. Good people don’t let others get killed when all they have to do is eat a nice breakfast for free and share some information.”

I glared at him. How did he know I was a nice person? I wasn’t. None of the Dioscuri were nice people. We were demon hunters, trained from birth to kill. It sounded high and mighty, but I’d done some dark things. No, he had no right to call me good. Still, maybe sharing my knowledge him would help, maybe not a lot, maybe just the barest sliver, but if it did, shouldn’t I try?

“Go ahead and ask your questions, but if anyone asks, tell them you learned it from Dirge,” I said as the waitress came over and slid several plates onto the table before leaving in a huff of annoyance. I got the distinct feeling she wasn’t especially pleased with her job, although I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t like she had to contend with werewolves trying to eat her liver on a monthly basis.

The smell of the food made my stomach rumble again, and it was all I could do to keep from tearing into the meal. “But you may need more food.”

He nodded at me as I grabbed a handful of crinkled meat from my plate and shoved it into my mouth. It was like heaven. “What is this?” I asked around the mouthful as he made a note in his book.

“Bacon,” he replied, smirking at me. “Good, eh?”

“Bacon, where have you been all my life?” I said, picking up another piece and chewing on it.

He laughed and shifted in his seat. “Anyway, maybe this would be easier if you could just give me a rundown of very basic supernatural knowledge.”

I shrugged as I stabbed something that looked like an egg with my fork and shoved it into my mouth. I chewed and swallowed before taking a sip of my coffee. The beverage seemed a lot better with food.

“Um... okay.” I shrugged, trying to think of the best way to start. “Let’s begin with vampires since that’s what you claim has invaded your town. There are a couple of kinds, the ones who drink blood and the ones your kind refer to as succubae.”

“How do you kill them?” he asked, staring at me intently. Ah, the million dollar question.

“Cut off their head or light them on fire. That will kill most things. When in doubt, cut off its head and light it on fire.” I was about to say more when a tall, thin man in a green jacket that reminded me of the pictures I’d seen of American military sauntered and casually set one hand on the edge of the table. He had a scraggly beard I was pretty sure had never been combed and long greasy black hair. He sort of reminded me of the homeless people that used to live around the Dioscuri city before the war.

“Jean Luc, why are you here? The master said you weren’t allowed within the city anymore,” the man in green growled, his teeth flashing in the low light of the restaurant as I stared at him, trying to figure out what it was about him that was off. That’s when I realized what it was. He was a vampire. He wasn’t very old, not old enough to have lost his human quirks and gestures like the really old ones had.

I sniffed, and the creature glanced at me before turning back to Luc who had a weird smile on his face. The vampire smelled of death, but not enough for me to think he was even a year old. Usually vampires didn’t come out in the open like this, so what was a young vampire doing here? Was he just too new to know any better? And why did he dislike Luc so much? He seemed nice enough...

“Ralph, I’d like you to meet my friend—” Luc was cut off when the vampire slammed his hand down on the table hard enough to crack the cheap wood. The coffee pot bounced, and my water glass fell over and spilled its contents into my lap. It was cold enough, it almost stifled the rage boiling up inside me.

“Leave,” Ralph the vampire said as he turned and pointed one slender pale finger toward the door. “And take your friend.”

“I’m still eating,” I replied, my voice low and annoyed as cold water soaked into my crotch, making the urge to kill him rise to totally on my sliding scale of death. “I’ve barely eaten a third of my food and there is no way I am leaving it behind. I’ve never eaten anything like it before—”

“I. Don’t. Care,” the vampire snapped, glancing at me and narrowing his eyes. They had a scarlet sheen around the edges. So he’d just fed. Swell. Vampires were always so much more difficult to deal with when they had a belly full of fresh blood.

I sighed. This was exactly the kind of thing I'd wanted to avoid. Somehow, I'd run away from my life as a monster hunter only to wind up trapped in a diner with a vampire within a couple hours of being on my own. It was like karma hated me. Then again, it was always like karma hated me.

"If you keep being a jerk, you'll ruin my breakfast, and I'll be forced to kill you," I said softly and took another bite of my eggs. "As it stands now, it will already be very hard for you to stay alive." I chewed slowly as I watched his muscles tense beneath his skin.

Ralph snarled like an angry dog, but before he could do more, I drove my fork through his hand and pinned it to the table. He screamed, his inhuman shriek tearing out through the diner and forcing everyone in the immediate vicinity to look over at us. This was a problem for two reasons. One, it would attract attention, which was understandably bad, and two, most people couldn't actually see monsters as such. They would just see me accosting a normal looking guy because their eyes would glaze over the fact he had fangs and red eyes. Then one of them would get the bright idea to call the police. We needed to be gone before that could happen.

I stood, throwing one last glance at my food before moving past the vampire as he tore his hand free in a spray of blood and gore. He turned his eyes on me and opened his mouth to reveal a fanged maw. Already, the damage I'd done was beginning to heal, and if I gave him enough time, he'd heal the wound entirely.

"Look, Ralph. I don't want to kill you in front of all these people, but I'll do it." I shrugged as he swung at me, and I stepped backward, easily dodging his swipe. He was about fifty years too young to hit me with an attack like that. "I'm not sure why, but it seems like you want me to do just that."

Instead of responding with words, the vampire's legs tensed like he was going to spring at me. I let out a sigh and called upon my magic. Energy swirled around me, filling my muscles with strength and speed. As Ralph's feet left the cheap linoleum, my left fist lashed out, catching him square in the nose. He flopped backward on his butt, clutching his face as dark viscous blood dripped through his fingers.

I took a step toward him and sighed. "Attacking a Dioscuri is punishable by death. You do realize that, right?" I asked, and though I'd been expecting some kind of reaction, I got nothing but hostility from the vampire. Didn't he know who the Dioscuri were? He should have. The Dioscuri were the monster's proverbial boogiemans. We were what scratched outside their windows in the dark of night, the monster hidden beneath their beds, the shadow creeping across their walls.

"So what!" the vampire snarled as it scrambled to its feet, fangs distending from his mouth in a way that always reminded me of a snake.

"You wanted a lesson on vampires, right? Looks like you've found a volunteer," I whispered, glancing at Jean Luc who stood transfixed on the vampire, his hands gripping the table. "Usually, they don't want to draw attention to themselves. This one doesn't seem to be worried about that. He must be some kind of dumbass." I sighed and muttered a spell under my breath to keep the people inside from freaking out, well, more than they already were given the scene.

A strange calm melted over the denizens of the diner, and they stared off into space in a sort of slack-jawed stupor. It would only last a few moments, so I had to

make this quick. As far as they would be concerned, we would just be normal people having a normal argument, which still wasn't super low key, but better than the whole vampire thing.

The creature lunged at me, and just as its fist was about to make contact with my face, I stepped in past the blow, dodging under it and kicking the inside of his knee. A horrible snap filled the air as the joint broke, and the creature crumpled to the ground. His eyes flashed, the red in his eyes dimming as he started to get back up.

"The first thing to note is their eyes. The redder they are, the more recently they've fed." I reached over and grabbed the steak knife from the table. "I'm not sure how they do it exactly, but blood is used like a fuel source. The more they have, the more magic they can do, like heal and make themselves strong and fast." I drove the knife into the creature's gut as it rose, tearing his stomach open. Blood exploded from the wound like I'd popped a water balloon. The creature deflated, his eyes fading to black in an instant as he tripped and fell on his back, clutching his stomach.

"So when you see eyes like that." I pointed at the creature's glowing red eyes. "You always try to puncture the stomach, then all the blood they've swallowed spills out of them, and they can't use it." People were standing now as I gave my lesson, and I wondered what they were seeing. Still, I didn't hear anyone screaming which was good. I always hated when people screamed during jobs. It made everything so much more difficult. "Are you following?"

"Yeah," Luc said, glancing around the room for a second before putting his eyes back on me. "Maybe we should continue this outside?"

"It's your lesson." I shrugged and reached down, grabbing the vampire by the ankle. I dragged his struggling body toward the door.

"Please," the creature squealed as his fingers ground into the tile, carving grooves into the soft material. "I didn't know what you were."

"Do you know how often I hear that? And yet, somehow, your kind always uses that as an excuse. Like I'm going to forgive you for trying to kill me because you didn't know you shouldn't attack me. News flash, fang face, you shouldn't attack anyone." I pushed the door open and flung him into the parking lot like a bag of laundry. He hit with a wet smack and lay there unmoving as I stepped out to confront him.

Already the spell I had cast in the diner was starting to thaw. I probably had thirty more seconds at best before people came out to help, called the cops, or worse. Good thing I had magic on my side or that might be a problem. I'd just have to make sure I got the hell out of dodge before the other Dioscuri could find me. On the bright side, I was leaving anyway.

The door behind me chimed as Luc stepped followed me outside, watching me with amused eyes. When he saw me looking at him, he smirked. "Don't let me stop you."

"I wasn't going to let you stop me," I said as the vampire got slowly to his feet and turned like he was going to run away. Not that it mattered, he wouldn't get far. "So as I said before, the best way to kill them is decapitation."

I reached over my shoulder and pulled my magical wakazashi, Set, free from its hidden sling down the center of my back. It was designed to aid me in my monster

hunting by acting as both a focus for my spells and a backup battery. With the blade in hand, I could call on more power and wield it better than I could without it. All Dioscuri crafted their weapons as part of their graduation from the academy.

My wakazashi was actually part of a paired set. Its sister was a katana named Isis, but she was way too long to keep on my body without someone noticing, so it was safely stowed away. Yeah, I know, it was dumb to have Japanese swords with Egyptian names, but I hadn't picked the weapons, Dirge had, and she'd been Japanese. Blame her. I did.

The vampire glanced over his shoulder, probably wondering why I hadn't chased him down. When he saw my weapon, he tripped and fell to his knees, bloody tears dripping down his cheeks as he held his hands out to me. "Please... I didn't know," he repeated like it made any difference at all.

"You were going to kill me for wanting to finish my breakfast. Since I was pretty hungry, that makes you pretty much the worst thing on the planet." I pointed the magical blade at the creature. "Goodbye."

An arc of crimson lightning leapt from the tip of the sword and smacked into the creature. It threw him several feet into the air before he hit the ground with a hard thud. Acrid smoke rose from his body as I sprinted over to him and with the same deft movement I'd done a million times before, took his head from his shoulders. I was always a little surprised at how little force it took.

The body began to dissolve into smoke as the symbols etched into the length of my sword glowed with red light. I sighed, turning away from the body because even though he was a vampire, I wasn't especially fond of killing. The moment his blood had evaporated from my sword, I stuck the wakazashi back into its hidden spine sheath and approached Luc, not super worried about the monster's remains because anything killed with a Dioscuri weapon would dissolve into the ether within moments.

"That was amazing," Luc said, wide-eyed. "How did you call lightning, and how did you make the body dissolve? I've never seen a monster dissolve before."

"Being a Dioscuri has a few perks," I said, grabbing his hand and leading him back toward his car, an old black van that was more rust than metal. "Like being able to cast spells and use magic weapons for instance."

He nodded dumbly at me, not getting into the vehicle as people started to exit the door and stare at us. "I suppose so..."

"Let's get out of here before police show up," I added, already hearing the shrill cry of sirens in the background, though I could have been imagining it for all I knew.

## Chapter 3

"So why exactly was that vampire out in the open like that?" I asked, gesturing back at the diner as it receded into the distance. "Usually they stick to the shadows and dark alleys if they come out during the day at all, but that guy was acting like he owned the place, and he was just a newbie. I bet he hadn't even joined a caste yet."

Jean Luc stopped in front of a big red sign with the word “stop” written on it before turning left down a street and gunning his engine. Our van made a half-hearted groan and things inside it sounded like they were grinding together before we lurched forward, and I wondered if it was about to die.

“Do we need to take your van out back and shoot her?” I asked as he shifted a knob with his right hand, the grinding noise stopped, and we drove normally, weaving into traffic as the strobing red and blue lights of law enforcement appeared in front of us. Thankfully, they were going in the opposite direction, but it wouldn’t be long before someone identified our black van.

Then again, with no body to find, I sort of doubted they’d actually look for us anytime soon. More than likely, the cops would just write down a few notes and move along. That’s what they normally did on the occasions I’d stuck around to watch them work. It was one of the reasons why Dioscuri weapons were designed to make corpses dissolve.

The other reason was because it made it easier to kill things if there was no carcass to stare at afterward. I wasn’t quite sure why that was true, but all of our research had shown it to be. Still, I didn’t exactly enjoy killing things even if they evaporated when killed with one of our weapons. It was more of an occupational hazard I’d come to terms with, albeit uncomfortably. And besides, I wasn’t always lucky enough to strike the deathblow with one of my swords. When that didn’t happen, the corpses remained behind, a stunningly horrible reminder of the horrors of our war on the monsters. Let’s just say, killing a werewolf who reverted back into a ten-year-old girl upon death was not one of my fondest memories.

“I told you already,” Luc said, ignoring my comment about shooting his precious van. “The vampires run this town. That’s why I need to kill them.” He smacked his palms hard against the steering wheel, and the suddenness of it made me jump, though I didn’t know why. It wasn’t like I was super worried about him attacking me, after all. I could call upon my magic and throw him from the vehicle with ease if need be. Still, something about his sudden rage was a little unsettling, and I was glad it didn’t seem to be directed at me.

“That’s impossible. While the Dioscuri don’t monitor this area very closely, they observe it enough to keep vampires from taking over the town.” Then again, maybe they didn’t. One of the reasons I’d picked Orange County was because my people barely paid attention to it. Maybe the reports showing it lacking activity were just pencil whipped? A bad feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. Maybe lots of places were infested, and the reports were doctored to make it look like it was better than it was?

The Dioscuri were already stretched thin... and report writing wasn’t exactly high priority since almost every able-bodied warrior was in the field ninety-plus percent of the time.

“Believe what you want, Lillim. I haven’t seen a Dioscuri set foot in the city since Dirge last came here.” Luc glanced at me before turning his eyes back to the road.

“But that would have been years ago,” I said before I could help it.

“Yeah, that’s my point. I’ve even tried to petition for assistance the way she showed me, but my hails have gone unanswered.” He glanced at me. “Then you show up out of the blue and I think, ‘hey, there’s a Dioscuri who can help us,’ and you won’t even do it.”

"I am showing you things right now, aren't I? Or do you want me to stop?" I asked even though his words made me feel like the worst person in the world. He had a point after all. I hadn't wanted to help him. I'd been more concerned with staying hidden from my people even though I knew they needed me right now. With me gone, others would have to take up the slack left in my absence... and sadly, there weren't very many of them. More than likely, it'd mean the monsters would kill more people. I tried not to think about it, tried to hold onto my justification for leaving, but as I did, I suddenly felt responsible for everything happening. The weight of this town's infestation fell upon my shoulders like a leaden weight. My job was to keep this type of thing from happening. By running away, I was going to cause this to get worse.

"No, I don't want you to stop." He sighed. "I just want you, and by you, I mean the Dioscuri, to do more than you are." He gestured back behind us in the direction of the diner even though it was far out of sight. "That shouldn't be happening."

"And that somehow makes this my problem?" I crossed my arms over my chest and looked out the window. "You don't understand what it's like. You don't know what I've seen. You don't know what I've done on a daily basis. You're looking at a very tiny sliver of the world!"

"Is this where you imply my friends and family getting killed off by monsters doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things?" he asked in a voice so low and cold, it almost made me shiver. I'd just pissed him off because that was exactly what I was implying. In fact, it was the main reason I'd run away. Yes, I was tired of going out on missions to fight things so scary they gave me nightmares, but I could have gotten past that. But when every single day someone didn't come home, and we got smaller and smaller in number... no, I couldn't stay and watch that happen. I just couldn't. Call me a coward, it'd fit.

"I was going to say just that, yes." I hoped he could hear the apology in my words. "I'm sorry for that, Luc. I know you said something about your friend's parents..."

Luc glanced at me even though he should have been watching the road. Every time he did it, my heart hammered just a little faster than it should have. "It's fine. Just teach me how to get rid of these vamps, and I'll forgive you for implying it's not important for me to lose friends and family to the monsters." He turned back to the road and slammed hard on the brakes, sending me hurtling into my seatbelt. The force of it hurt my chest as I smacked back into the dirty brown seat.

The black car ahead of us was stopped, though I couldn't understand why. Another black car pulled up behind us, boxing us in. A bad feeling came over me as I looked around, suddenly claustrophobic. There were tall houses on all sides of us, and judging by the time of day and lack of vehicles in the driveways, I was guessing the people who lived there wouldn't be home. They'd be out doing whatever things they did. No one would see us if something happened.

"What's going on?" I asked as the doors to the cars opened and men clad in very nice suits stepped out of the vehicles. They all looked eerily similar though that could have been due to the shaved heads and dark aviator sunglasses.



“We’re about to get paid a visit by our ‘protection,’” Luc said, unbuckling his seatbelt and reaching casually into the spot between the door and his seat and clutching something. “You may want to cover your ears. This may get loud.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked just as one of the suits rapped against the glass, and Jean Luc rolled the window down a couple inches. The guy peered inside, barely glancing at me. It was kind of nice. Normally, people always focused on me, especially back home. With Jean Luc here, I wasn’t noteworthy. Awesome.

“What can I do for you, Dimitri?” Luc said, his voice calm and surprisingly even.

“News is you killed Ralph. You know what the rules are Luc. You aren’t allowed to kill vampires within the city,” Dimitri said, laughter on the edge of his lilting voice.

“But he has a writ. That makes his kills valid anywhere,” I piped up before I could stop myself.

The man’s gaze swiveled to me. He lowered his glasses to peer closer at me, and as he stared at me, I realized the truth. Dimitri was a vampire too. “Writs are not valid here.” He turned back to Luc, about to say something else when I started laughing.

“That’s a joke right?” I said only no one else was even smiling.

“I think we might need to teach you just who is in charge here, girly,” Dimitri said as my door opened, and I felt hands on my shoulders.

I was jerked roughly out of the seat, which took some doing since I’d been seatbelted inside. Pain ripped across my body as I hit the pavement in a heap. Another of the suits stood over me, hands clenched into fists as he placed one leather loafer covered foot onto my chest and pressed. Agony exploded through my ribs.

“You really shouldn’t do that to her,” Luc said from within the car.

“Or what? What will you do, Luc? Use the Vulcan death grip on me?”

Rage filled me as the suit pinning me to the ground started laughing like his friend had made some kind of really funny joke. I wasn’t sure what was so funny. I wouldn’t want any kind of death grip used on me. Still, as the guy stepped off me, I was sort of happy they’d turned most of their attention back to the hunter. Evidently, they didn’t expect me to do much, which was fine by me. You know, since I was planning on killing them.

“Anyway, I think we can make a deal. Ralph wasn’t especially well liked or anything, so I’m willing to let you off easy. Let’s say, \$20,000?” Dimitri said, and I heard Luc’s door start to open.

“Dollars?” Luc gasped, the shock in his voice clear.

“No bicycles. Of course dollars.” Dimitri shrugged. “That’s the weekly buy in for my poker games.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” Luc said as I started to get to my feet. No one seemed to notice me.

Dimitri shoved Luc against the wall of the van. “That’s right. I forget how poor you humans are. Good for only one thing.” Dimitri leaned in and licked Luc’s neck. “Blood money it is.”

A shudder ran through me at the prospect of fighting them all by myself. Six vampires seemed like a lot, even if they didn’t seem very old. For there to be this many newbies around, there had to be a nest nearby, but how could that be? The only masters still alive were old enough to know they should play by the rules. But

what if Luc was right? What if there was a breakdown between the information I got back home and what was really happening? If that was true... No, I didn't want to think about that. If I did, I was going to feel responsible, and I wasn't. I just wasn't.

"Who is your master?" I asked, brushing myself off and turning toward the vamp who had pinned me, but even through his sunglasses I could tell he wasn't quite sure what I was asking him.

"What are you talking about?" Dimitri asked, stopping short of Luc and looking over at me with confusion evident on his features.

"Who is the vampire who created you?" I smiled as best I could as I held up one hand. "You're clearly just a baby, so I'm guessing you didn't make all these guys yourself." I gestured to his compadres. "Unless you have a thing for guys who look just like you." I smirked. "That's cool if you do, I don't judge."

"What's she babbling about?" the vampire closest to me asked as he leaned down and smelled me, actually smelled me. Even though lots of supernatural creatures did that, it was always a little unnerving. "She doesn't smell like food either."

Dimitri took a step away from Luc and rounded the car in an instant. He was pretty fast for a young vampire, much faster than Ralph had been, and by the look of it, I was guessing he was two, maybe three years old... about how long it'd been since the Dioscuri civil war.

The vampire grabbed me by the collar, his hand twisting my sweatshirt in his fist as he pulled off his sunglasses and gazed into my eyes. As a rule, you weren't supposed to meet the eyes of a vampire, especially an older one because it could lead to some crazy mind games. Thankfully, this guy was just a baby by vampire standards.

The force of his stare slammed into me, and I smiled back at him as sweetly as I could. "Oh, that sort of tingles. You're pretty strong..." I shook my head. "For a baby. The one's we use during our training to withstand a vampire's gaze are at least ten times your age."

"What are you?" he asked, letting me go and taking a step backward, horror etched across his features. "When I looked in your eyes... it felt wrong..." I tried not to take his words personally. I'd heard it from vampires before, and like always, it shook me. I wasn't sure what the vampires saw when they met my gaze, but let's be real here, a vampire had just looked into my eyes and gotten scared. How could I not shiver at that?

"I am Lillim Callina, Hyas Tyee of the Dioscuri." I reached up, straightening my sweatshirt. "Hyas Tyee is our highest rank, in case you wondered."

"Dioscuri..." the one next to me said, rolling the word over in his mouth. He pulled off his glasses, revealing his blood-colored eyes and looked at me like I was some sort of mythological creature. "We've heard of you... but our creator said you were all wiped out a few years ago."

"Well, your creator lied to you." I turned back toward Luc, ignoring the two vampires. "Get back in the car, Luc. Let's get out of here. The Owls have a chateau a few cities from here. Let's pay them a visit. If there's a bunch of mooks like this," I jerked my thumb at Dimitri and his counterparts, "doing things like this in broad

daylight where they could get discovered by the humans, they will definitely put a stop to it.”

Luc gave me a strange smile before opening his door, presumably to get back inside, when Dimitri put his fist through the hood and tore something important looking free in a shriek of tortured steel. Green fluid spurted into the air as he dropped the hunk of twisted metal to the ground with a thud.

“No one’s going anywhere. We have a right to be here. We have an agreement with the Owls. We keep the wolves, the spooks, and the others out of here, and they let us do what we want.” He grinned at me, baring his fangs. “If you expect them to help you, you’re wrong.”

I believed him because vampires couldn’t flat out lie. They could twist the truth like hell, and for all I knew, what he said wasn’t true, but this guy believed it was. Still, what he’d said made no sense. Why would the Owls, one of the most powerful vampire castes, align themselves with these scrubs?

“Is that so?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at him. “I find it incredibly hard to believe the Owls would make a deal with you or your creator. Most of them would find you less valuable than the gum stuck to the bottom of my shoe.” I looked at him, trying to suck understanding from his eyes and failing. Mostly because there was nothing there. Clearly, intelligence was a mostly foreign concept. “Unless your creator is a member of the Owls?”

“That’s none of your damned business, Dioscuri. Now back the hell off,” Dimitri snapped before turning his attention back to Luc and ignoring me like I didn’t even matter. It was irksome to say the least. I was a Hyas Tyee of the Dioscuri dammit. Did he know how hard it was to climb to that rank? And he was ignoring me? The jerk would pay for that.

“Are you seriously ignoring me?” I asked, and the next thing I knew, a hand was on my shoulder, squeezing hard enough for it to hurt, but not hard enough to break anything.

“I say we find out what happens when we drink a Dioscuri. Remember when we caught that werewolf? That was intense...” the vampire gripping my shoulder trailed off, savoring the memory.

“You die when you drink from a Dioscuri,” I replied, spinning as fast as my magic-fueled muscles would let me. I grabbed the vampire by the back of his shaved head and slammed him face first into the van hard enough to dent the metal. “I mean it isn’t instant or anything. See you drink my blood. I get pissed off and tear your undead heart from your chest and set it on fire.” I shrugged as I let the vampire’s stunned body slump to the floor. “That kind of thing. It’s more cause and effect, I’ll admit.”

The rest of them were upon me in a heartbeat, but I’d sort of expected it after smashing one into the vehicle. I pulled Set from its sheath in one smooth motion and drove it straight through the heart of the closest vampire. He collapsed onto his knees gripping the weapon as it flared with red light. The smell of electrified flesh filled the air.

The creature fell backward in a smoking heap as one of his friends came at me. I ducked the vampire’s swing and drove my elbow into his stomach with as much force as my muscles could generate. It was enough to fling the monster backward and send him skidding across the pavement.

Dimitri leapt, landing on the hood of the van and denting the front, which probably didn't matter since the vehicle was probably useless. Then he came at me. I was instantly thankful his three friends were still back by their car.

He crashed into me, tackling me to the ground, and my skull smacked against the pavement with a wet thud. His jaws came snapping at my neck, and I instinctively threw my arm up to block. His teeth clamped down on my wrist, and the moment his fangs pierced my flesh, a strange sense of euphoria clouded the edge of my consciousness. He wasn't old enough for me to totally succumb to his bite, but it was enough to take the edge off my concentration.

Then his head detached from his body, teeth still wrapped around my arm. Luc stood over me, holding my wakazashi. Blue light flared up his hands and arms as he grabbed the still bleeding headless vampire and flung it at the three oncoming creatures. The body hit them like a sack of wet cement, and they all went down in a heap.

How had he done that? And, more importantly, why was his skin glowing like a goddamned sapphire torch? I was about to ask him when he jerked me to my feet and tore the vampire's head from my arm, ripping my flesh in the process and spattering himself with my blood.

His eyes went golden for a second, and it was then I realized they were ringed with red and silver. How could that be? What was he?

"Get down," he said, shoving by me and taking the head off the vampire behind me with one swing of my wakazashi. As it hit the ground, Luc spun and actually leapt ten or so feet, landing next to the downed vampires as they flung their headless companion to the side.

Not that it mattered because he pulled a bottle from his pocket and flung its contents on the creatures. The smell of gasoline hit my nose as he flicked open a lighter and tossed it on the vampires. Flame swarmed over them as they fell back to the ground, thrashing and clawing at the fire like they could somehow put it out.

"What are you?" I asked as he walked toward me, the light around his body making him seem like some kind of blue angel.

Instead of replying, he held out my wakazashi to me. "My name is Jean Luc. I thought we were past this part?"

## Chapter 4

"Yeah, so that's when we decided to steal Dimitri's car because, well, he doesn't need it anymore," Luc said into his silver cellphone as he weaved through traffic. There was noise on the line I couldn't understand. "Well, I've always wanted a Mercedes. Anyway, we're on our way over. The Dioscuri needs some medical attention." He shrugged as though the gesture would be visible through the phone. I didn't think it would be, but then again, what did I know? He pulled the phone from his ear a moment later and tossed it in the cup holder as the screen faded to black.

“Who was that?” I asked, not because I cared exactly, but I’d been sitting in the car bleeding as he drove yammering for the last ten minutes. He hadn’t even asked if I’d minded if he made a phone call. I wasn’t sure if he was supposed to do that, but it seemed like he should have.

Part of me was still pissed off about the fight, but only part of me. I couldn’t believe one of them had bitten me. Granted, it was on my wrist where I’d stupidly blocked his lunge, but it was the principle of the thing. It wasn’t very deep and didn’t even really hurt, but thanks to the anti-coagulant in their blood, it hadn’t actually stopped bleeding yet. It would eventually so I wasn’t *that* worried. My body was more than strong enough to fight off the effects of their venom.

No, I was angrier about Jean Luc. Apparently, he was some kind of vampire fighting superhero. So why the hell had he been playing dumb and asking me for help? He clearly hadn’t needed it. And furthermore, if he was so strong, why hadn’t the vamps shown him more respect? Something was definitely off with the whole situation. I just didn’t know what. That should have made me curious to find out more, but instead, it just made me want to get as far away from here as possible. Hey, a girl has to have priorities, right? Survival was high on my list.

“Remember my friend with the dead parents? That was her,” he said, face going from cheery to solemn in the space of a moment. “She worries when I’m out working. She’s a nurse though. She’ll have you fixed up in a jiffy.”

“Oh,” I swallowed, suddenly embarrassed though I didn’t know why. “Are you two, like, together?”

He laughed then, glancing at me as the sound bubbled out of him. “Oh, heavens no. She’s like twice my age. She used to watch me when my mom went to nursing school.”

“Ah,” I said because I had no idea what nursing school was. He had also called the lady a nurse and said she could help with my arm. Maybe that meant she was some type of healer?

“Sorry to keep you in the dark about my abilities by the way,” he said as he drove around a girl in a silver car who was too busy putting on lipstick to drive in only one lane. “I’m normally not quite that strong. Most vamps don’t have the power to give me that kind of pick me up unless they’re really old. But just one drop of yours...” He shook his head. “You must be really strong, Lillim.”

“Not so much,” I said a moment later as I stared out at the passing cars. So he was some sort of power absorber, and he did it via blood? I knew some of the Owls could do that, but I didn’t get the impression Luc was a vampire. No, he was most definitely human. “I’ve never seen someone absorb power from blood like that.” I shivered as the memory of his glowing body flitted into my mind. He had dropped those vampires way easier than I could have.

“When we get back to my apartment, I’ll explain everything. I promise,” Luc said, and as I turned to look at him, I realized he was holding the steering wheel so tightly, his knuckles were white with strain.

“Okay,” I said because I wasn’t sure what else to say. “So why do you need me at all?”

“You’ve never come up against a threat so big you needed a partner?” he asked, and I got the impression he was really worried about something in particular.

Then again, he had said the city was infested... maybe there really were just that many of them?

"Sometimes," I replied. "But not for normal run-of-the-mill vampires, at least not for a long time. Werewolves, sure, but vampires?" I shook my head. "There's something you're not telling me. Let's just put this on the table right now. I'm not a fan of surprises."

"They control the police," Luc said. "It's simple. All the hunters who come here to help get thrown in jail."

"Even still..." I shrugged, but I could see how that would be a problem for someone who, you know, actually lived within the city. If the vampires controlled the police, they could route hunters fairly easily. I shifted uncomfortably. Killing that first vampire had been riskier than I'd known. "What are you hiding? It's something more, isn't it?"

Luc didn't say anything, but the silence between us grew tense. I was determined to wait him out, but even still, I was pretty sure he wasn't going to tell me, which meant it was bad. If it was *that* bad, I wanted no part of it. No, I was going to disappear given the first opportunity, but maybe I'd throw a hail up first and get some Dioscuri boots on the ground. They could clean this place up in a day, you know, provided they could find time to actually do it. Which they probably couldn't...

"You should just tell me. Not everything that goes bump in the night is easy to kill, and there're a lot more of them than there are of us." I let out a slow breath. "Not all of us are looking forward to dying at the hands of a horde of undead monsters." I didn't add the next part of my sentence even though I should have. "Like Dirge had done..."

"I'm not asking you to die for my cause, Lillim," Luc replied, voice annoyed. "I'm just asking you to do your damned job and help me."

I glared at him as heat filled my cheeks. He was right after all. It was my job to stop monsters from taking over, and I had tried to abandon it. The thought made me sick to my stomach. I had tried to shirk my duty and foist it on a guy like Luc. It was stupid because at the end of the day, he was just a normal guy with a neat trick up his sleeve. Thinking he could do this without me getting my hands dirty was a laugh.

"I might consider helping you if you told me what the problem really was. Going against an unknown threat is suicide!" I snapped. "If you won't tell me, I'll be gone so fast, you'll see a dust cloud sitting where I am now."

"So you would just let me die down here? By myself?" he asked, suddenly angry. He smacked the steering wheel again and nearly swerved into a blue jeep on our right. "You're supposed to be a hero, not some scared little girl."

I tried my best to ignore the barb, which was really hard, let me tell you, and instead said, "It's not supposed to be this bad down here," like it meant anything at all because it clearly was *that* bad down here.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Lillim Callina of the Dioscuri." He shook his head. "Where is Dirge Meilan when you need her? She would have just gone and killed all those vampires before teleporting back to her cloud city." He gestured at me with one hand. "And here I have you, who won't do anything at all."

"Don't compare me to Dirge," I said, the heat in my voice surprising even me.

“And why shouldn’t I?” he yelled. “She was my friend. She trained me under the table. Helped me hunt down that werewolf who tore up the high school a few years ago...”

“Dirge is dead,” I replied, and my voice was shakier than I’d expected. I thought I’d come to terms with her death, but evidently, I’d been wrong. So very wrong. Tears clouded my vision as Luc turned toward me, and I looked away from him. “She can’t help you. She’s not back from the grave. Sorry I’m not good enough.” The words tumbled out of me before I could stop them. “I’m sorry.”

“Um, what’s going on?” he asked, confusion filling his voice. The car slowed, and I realized he’d pulled off the road.

“Nothing,” I said, pulling off my seatbelt and flinging the door open. I was on the street a moment later, walking away from him and his stupid stolen Mercedes. “I shouldn’t have tried to help.”

“Something is clearly wrong,” Luc said, feet crunching on gravel as he jogged toward me.

I whirled around as he was about to touch me and grabbed his wrist. I squeezed, and he winced. “You keep talking about Dirge being so awesome, but you didn’t mean a damned thing to her,” I snarled, releasing him. He tugged his hand back and rubbed it. “Don’t you get that?”

“We were friends,” he said, looking from his wrist to me and back again. “I don’t understand what just happened.”

“You know how I know you meant nothing to her?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Because I don’t remember you. Not even a little bit.”

“Um, so what? We’ve never met before,” Luc replied, bewilderment filling his face.

“After Dirge died, well, she got reincarnated.” I poked my chest with my thumb. “Into me. Into little Miss Lillim who can’t do anything right and is always told about how awesome Dirge was. So thank you for letting me know once again that I’m not good enough. It’s awesome. I’d almost forgotten for a moment.”

“Even assuming I believe that for a second, how can that even be possible?” he asked, staring at me, pouring over each and every one of my features like people always did when they found out. I didn’t look exactly like Dirge had, but if you’d stood us together, we’d look very closely related. “Dirge only died a few years ago.”

“After I was born, my growth was magically accelerated until I was a teenager.” I waved my hand through the air. “It’s overly complicated to be honest, but suffice to say, I’ve got a whole mess of her memories too. That’s how I know you didn’t matter one bit. I’d remember you.” I wasn’t sure why I was saying what I was. Was it to hurt him? No... no, that wasn’t it, not really. I was just so sick and tired of being compared to Dirge the hero. Couldn’t he understand that?

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “But you should still just go kill the vampires.”

“I told you I’d help you if you just told me what the problem really was!” I snapped. “Even though I’m running away, and it’s against the rules.”

“Sorry...” He moved forward, pulling me into a hug I didn’t understand at all. “The real problem is the Owls have claimed this city like Dimitri said earlier. Every single time we off one of their overseers, well, they kill a hundred people. We need someone like you to step in and tell them that if they don’t stop, the whole might

of the Dioscuri will rain down on them like an olden days plague.” He released me and stood back, staring at me with his big brown puppy eyes.

I sighed because he was right. He was one hundred percent right. If the Owls were doing that, the Dioscuri did need to step in... only I wasn't technically with them anymore. Still, they probably didn't know that.

“Look,” he added, slowly leading me back to the car by one hand. “If you help, I won't mention Dirge again. Hell, I'll tell everyone how much more awesome you are than her.” He winked at me.

“No one cares what you think,” I replied, smiling in spite of myself. It sort of annoyed me because I was going to help him even though it was a bad idea. I sighed. I wasn't the type of person that could leave an entire city under the yoke of some vampires. I guess in that one tiny aspect, my momma raised me right.

“I get that a lot,” Luc said, opening the door for me. “Now let's go kill some vampires.”

I stared at him for a moment. Was I really going to help him? It wouldn't matter much in the end. This was just one man and one city, not much in the grand scope of things, but for him, it would be something, and besides, he'd known Dirge. Maybe... maybe if I helped him, he'd stop comparing me to her? Maybe, maybe he'd think I was better than her. I tried to shove that thought away the moment it entered my brain, but it lingered anyway. Was I really going to help him just to prove I was better than Dirge? And while I hoped not, deep down, I knew it was true.

“Fine,” I grumbled, getting into the seat. “But you need to buy me lunch first. Preferably somewhere the meal doesn't get interrupted just as I've gotten my food.”

“Deal,” he said, slamming my door shut and moving around to the other side of the car. “Then you can share with me why your wrist isn't bleeding anymore.”

I glanced down at it. He was right. Well, that was neat...

## Chapter 5

“So how was your burger?” Luc asked, tossing a sidelong glance at me as I swallowed the last bite of my cheeseburger and crumpled the wrapper into a ball.

“I'm lovin' it,” I said, tossing the wrapper at him and hitting him on the side of the head.

“I told you to stop doing that three burgers ago,” he growled, turning his eyes back toward the road. “Hang on!” he screamed, slamming on the brakes and jerking the wheel to the side. The car went into a skid as its tires squealed along the pavement. I was thrown against the seatbelt so hard, my breath whooshed out of me as a shadow filled the sky above us.

The blue Civic slammed into our hood like a metal comet. The back end of our Mercedes lifted from the street in a shriek of twisted metal as the wheels left the pavement before smacking back down. Our car fishtailed as the vampires inside the upside down vehicle punched out the windows and began crawling out of the vehicle, their fingers gouging into the metal like it was tinfoil.



Luc's hands were a blur of motion as he slammed his foot down on the gas pedal. Our tires skidded, fighting the weight of the vehicle lying across the completely smashed front of our car, and I marveled how it still worked even as the smell of gasoline filled my nostrils. My chest hurt from where the seatbelt had stopped me with a jerk, but it probably didn't hurt as much as it would have if we'd had, say, a head on collision.

I concentrated on letting my power fuel my strength as the monsters came closer. Luc was still trying to reverse away, but the only thing that seemed to produce was the acrid smell of burning rubber. If the vampires caught us in close confines, it'd be hard for me to fight them all off, there wasn't enough room to dodge and maneuver. Besides, for all I knew, one of the cars was about to explode.

"We need to get out of here!" I screamed, tearing my seatbelt free and throwing my shoulder against the door. It budged, but not enough. Pain shot through my shoulder as the closest vampire reared back and put his fist through our windshield. The glass didn't shatter so much as it spider webbed outward, radiating from the hold, but still held in place somehow.

Luc let off the gas, throwing his own seatbelt off as the creature swiped across the entirety of the windshield, sweeping away most of the safety glass. His partner reached in, grabbing Luc by his collar and hauling him out while the first one threw a look at me.

He grinned, his pale face distorted by his extended fangs. As he reached for me, I grabbed his arm and tugged him forward. My spell-enhanced strength was enough to pull him bodily into the car. He shrieked as I drove my elbow into his chest hard enough to snap his ribs. The sound was so loud it rang in my ears even after it faded. He clutched at his chest as I got my feet under me on the seat and launched myself out of the windshield.

The vampire holding Luc tossed him to a couple other vampires. They were sitting by one of those vans used to move prisoners. Only this one was filled with heavy bars instead of screen. I was guessing it was made to house incredibly strong people, which I supposed made sense if the vampires were using it. Maybe they used it on each other? The vampire standing on the flattened remains of our hood turned just as my front kick caught him full on, launching him off the car and onto the pavement below. His back collided with enough force to make the others turn toward me and take notice.

I jerked my wakazashi free from its sheath and glared at the creatures before a screech of steel made me go cold and afraid in the core of my being. The Civic that had landed on our hood lifted into the air.

An enormous vampire with muscles that would make the Hulk jealous hefted the vehicle like it was as light as a kitten. His red eyes glinted as he reared back and hurled it straight at me. I flung myself to the side as the vehicle hit the Mercedes with a sound that made me think horrible car accident. Which, I guess it sort of was.

My shoulder smashed into the concrete, but even as agony electrified my senses, I rolled to my feet. I whirled, pointing my sword at the vampire and muttering under my breath. Red lightning flashed through the air, striking the musclebound behemoth in the center of his black Gold's Gym tank top and tossing him backward into the street.

I spun, looking for Jean Luc as two vampires struggled to wrestle him into the back of the van. Well, that wasn't going to happen. I ran toward them, gathering my power up inside me. Normally when I called upon my power, it was in controlled burst to make it last longer, but this time I threw the spigot wide open for extra oomph because I didn't want him getting back up afterward.

As I reached the closer of the two vampires, I smacked him in the side with my free hand. He tossed a confused look at me and reached toward me. I released everything I had in one titanic burst of energy, crying the name of the spell I used most often in training. "White sparrow!"

A white cylinder of light exploded from the sky, slamming down around the creature. Flames roiled inside the death tube, charring the vampire into ash in the space of a heartbeat, but I was already moving past the spell I'd unleashed.

The remaining vampire dropped Luc and came at me, hands twisted into horrific claws. He hit me with all his weight, knocking me from my feet, but as we fell, I used our momentum to fling him behind myself. It was a good thing too because he hit the muscled vampire with a heavy thwack.

I scrambled to my feet, but I barely made it two steps before 'Muscles' tossed his friend at me, which I guess wasn't that surprising since he'd thrown a car at me. I took a step forward, planting my feet as I swung my wakazashi in an upward arc with all the strength I could muster. The razor sharp edge of Set caught the flying vampire dead center and sliced through his thrashing body with ease. Blood splattered across my face and clothing as the creature hit the ground behind me in two distinct pieces.

"Don't see that every day, do you?" I called as the blood on my face turned to crimson smoke.

The vampire shrugged at me. "You obviously have not seen my founder in a fight." He cracked his neck. "Every single time he swings his famous blades, someone dies." I barely had time to contemplate what he'd said when the vampire charged at me, bringing his head down in a way that reminded me of a bull. I tried to sidestep, but he was surprisingly fast for a big man. His arm broadsided me. My breath whooshed from my body as I hit the ground hard and little stars flashed across my eyes.

Thankfully, he kept going, moving past me in a rush like a locomotive, and I was glad for the moment to recover. I got slowly to my feet, wishing I hadn't hidden my katana because it'd been too large to keep on my person. If I had the weapon, I'd have access to even more power. My wakazashi was strong, but what's that saying, two is better than one?

The big vampire skidded to a halt, his boots throwing up a spray of gravel as I held my sword in front of me with both hands. The symbols along its edge flared, shrouding me in crimson light as he spun and took an angry step toward me, cracking his knuckles in one big hand.

"It's been a while since I've had the opportunity to suck the blood from a Dioscuri," he said, gesturing at my weapon. The knowing grin that split across his face made my blood run cold. Had this vampire killed Dioscuri before? From his strength and speed, it sort of didn't surprise me, but still, he seemed too young... unless... no, it couldn't be.

My eyes widened in shock as I noticed the tattoo of a bear on his right forearm. He saw me looking at it and nodded like it explained everything. Because it did. That meant... that meant when he talked about his founder, he was talking about Bob, the founder of the Bear caste. That wasn't the millennia old vampire's actual name, but that's what my teacher had called him because no one knew his real name. He was that old. Besides, Bob was his name in the song we'd learned about him.

“Bob the Bear  
With strength like a beast  
The swords Frost and Melt glinting in his fists,  
Gifts from the dragons he defeated in contest.  
When he steps onto the field all must run,  
For this vampire's strength can blot out the sun.”

“You're a Bear?” I asked, trying to stop the fear from making my voice squeak. I almost succeeded.

“Yeah,” he said, grinning and revealing a mouth of shark-like teeth. “Didn't the muscles tip you off? You think this is natural?”

“To be honest, you're a little small,” I replied, gripping my wakazashi harder as I tried to keep the fear inside me from rising up. Even the weakest vampires in the Bear caste were strong enough to punch a hole in me. If I'd realized what he was earlier, I'd have pressed my advantage and killed him before he could ready himself for a fight. By aligning himself with Bob the Bear, this vampire had gained a small fraction of the founder's strength. It was why vampires joined castes after all. “And you guys usually don't leave Europe, what gives?”

“The Owls offered some of us lucrative contracts as enforcers.” He shrugged his shoulder as if to say, “Everyone has to get paid.” Which, I supposed, was a fair point. “Besides, the vampires run this city. Why would I want to leave? More of us show up by the day, Dioscuri. In another couple years, we'll *own* the humans.”

“And it doesn't scare you that the Dioscuri are here?” I asked, stalling for time as I tried to gather more power. Unfortunately, I'd used so much during the fight already what with the fire and super strength, I didn't have much left. If I over exerted myself, I'd run the risk of fainting or worse. It probably goes without saying, but things tend to get really bad when you fall unconscious fighting a vampire.

“I'll tell you what I told the last guy before I broke him over my knee and sucked out his juices.” The vampire's grin widened obscenely. “For a vampire, Dioscuri blood is like the breakfast of champions.”

“The last guy?” I asked, worry filling me as I tried to think back to who this guy could have killed. Then it hit me. We'd lost a Dioscuri named Calvin in Bakersfield a few weeks ago. Had it been to this guy?

“Yeah. Asian fellow, about this high?” he said, putting his hand at about the five foot six mark.

That was Calvin alright. This bastard had killed Calvin. Well, I'd make him pay for that! Without thinking, I charged, calling on everything in me as I crossed the distance between us. My sword flashed through the air, and the vampire blocked it

with his wrist. The force of it reverberated down my arm. It felt like I'd just struck solid iron. His flesh had been split open and where there should have been bone, there was a metal rod. Had he replaced his bones with steel somehow? The thought made my blood run cold. The amount of pain involved for something like that would be insane. If this guy had done that, he would probably just keep coming at me until one of us was dead.

Before I got the chance to ask him about his steel bones, Muscles grabbed me by the throat. He exhaled even though he didn't need to breathe, and the smell of decay nearly made me gag as he hauled me up into the air and flung me into the side of the Mercedes. I hit the car so hard I was pretty sure everything inside me broke. That was the problem with the vampires of the Bear caste. Even the babies were ridiculously strong. This guy seemed to be no exception.

My body slumped to the ground as the vampire laughed and took a step forward. My world went hazy and dark around the edges as I forced myself to stand. The taste of blood filled my mouth as I tried to grip my wakazashi, but I found I could barely make a fist. That seemed bad. Very bad. So what did I do? I lied.

"Come on," I snapped, raising my empty hand and curling my fingers toward my body. "I've had pixies hit me harder than that."

The vampire smirked at me and took a step forward. His boots crunched on the gravel as he moved toward me. It'd take him a moment to get here, which bought me time. To do what? I wasn't sure. Then, from the corner of my vision, I saw a halo of blue light.

The vampire must have seen it too because he turned his head in time to catch Luc's glowing fist with his face. The creature cartwheeled backward across the pavement like he'd been hit by a wrecking ball. Luc stood there, covered in vampire blood and shining like a goddamned star.

As the vampire got to his feet, Luc pulled what looked like a piece of paper from his pocket and drew a symbol on it with one bloody finger. The sheet began to glow violently, throwing off color in every shade of the rainbow. He balled his fist around the sheet as the vampire charged him, fangs bared.

Luc ducked the first swing, but the second one caught him in the stomach, actually lifting him from the air. Spittle exploded from his mouth as he careened backward, the paper slipping from his hands. It fluttered slowly toward the ground as the vampire turned back toward me and licked his lips.

"Ready to die, Dioscuri?" he asked, running his tongue over his oversized fangs. I was about to reply with something snappy like "not really" or "come over here and find out jackass" when the vamp stepped on the crumpled, bloody note.

Silver fire exploded up his leg, reducing it to ash in the space of a second. He screamed, reaching down toward his leg, but as he touched it, the limb actually crumbled to the ground as his fingers swept through it. The motion sent him toppling to the ground, howling.

I wasn't quite sure what Luc had done to the paper, but I was going to have to find out after this was over. He had way too many secrets for it to be good. I gripped my wakazashi and moved toward the creature, but I'd barely taken a step when Luc waved me off. He was kneeling on the street a little ways away, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

“No,” he wheezed, getting to his feet and wincing as he spat a mouthful of bloody saliva onto the ground. The blue glow had mostly faded from his body, but being that he’d just blown the leg off a vampire with paper, I was inclined to listen to him, for now.

“Why?” I asked, sucking in one wheezing breath. Everything hurt. That wasn’t good. If I was injured badly enough, my body would try and repair itself, and since I didn’t have any energy left, it would start cannibalizing itself to make the needed repairs. The only way I could stop that from happening was by eating, soon.

“If you touch him, it might spread to you,” he replied, leaning against the prison van for support. My gaze swung back to the vampire, and sure enough, the silver flame had spread to the hand that had touched the ash and was traveling down the screaming creature’s arm. I watched in amazement as the vampire was consumed inch by inch until nothing but dust remained. It was the single most horrible thing I’d seen in quite a while. Calvin would be proud.

## Chapter 6

“Don’t take another step,” I screamed, pointing my sword at Luc and wishing I had something more long range like a shotgun or a rocket launcher. He was still leaning against the vampires’ modified prison van, but he’d looked like he was going to start walking toward me at any second. The blue light had faded from his body, but I didn’t much care. He’d just burned a vampire to death with a piece of paper. I wasn’t sure what the hell he was, but it wasn’t normal.

“Lillim, it’s okay. I’m one of the good guys,” he said, trying to smile at me but wound up wincing. No doubt, the Bear’s punch had hurt something inside of him.

“News flash, bad guys think they’re the good guys too,” I snarled, wishing I hadn’t come to this town at all. I’d just wanted somewhere with nice weather and no monsters. Was that too much to ask for?

Luc chuckled, shaking his head. “You make an excellent point, but I did just save you from him.” He gestured vaguely at the pile of ash that had been the vampire.

“Maybe that’s just part of your plan?” I said as a horrible realization came over me. Where had the vampire I’d kicked from the car gone? I looked around, frantically, confident I could ignore Luc for a moment.

“I got him. He’s the one I used to power the spell,” Luc said as my eyes swept over the surroundings. He nodded toward the back of the prison van.

“Okay, you stay there. Just give me a second.” I stumbled toward the spot he’d indicated, walking on limbs that didn’t work quite right. I’d heal from the damage soon enough, especially if I got some food in my stomach, so I wasn’t too worried about it. Even the pain didn’t bother me that much. You don’t become a Hyas Tyee in the Dioscuri without getting the crap kicked out of you once or twice.

Luc moved like he was going to show me something, but I slashed through the air in front of him so the tip of my blade passed within an inch of his throat. “I said don’t move,” I repeated, and the heat in my words sort of scared me. It was

the same sort of voice my mother often used around me, and I hadn't known I could make it.

He nodded, eyes wide at the sight of the wakazashi gripped in my hand which was a little strange since he'd just blown a vampire to ash, but then again, he'd said the spell wore off. I guess that made sense. Most spells used to augment a person's strength or speed didn't last terribly long. Still, I didn't want him near me.

The dismembered vampire, if you could still call it that, was lying in a puddle of blood at the back of the van, mostly hidden by the open doors, which was probably why I hadn't seen him earlier. He must have tried to get Luc in the back when the others had come at me, but evidently, things had gone wrong.

For one thing, he looked flayed open and his heart had been torn out of his chest. Blood covered the inside of the van's doors. Was that where all the blood covering Luc had come from? Wait a second...

I spun back around and stared at Luc wide-eyed. "Why aren't you still covered in blood?" I gestured from him to the corpse and back again.

"I told you already, Lillim. I used up his blood to power the spells." Luc sighed and began to unbutton the cuff on his black dress shirt.

"Don't," I said, narrowing my eyes at him and moving away from the heartless vampire. For all I knew, it was rigged to explode. "I don't know what you are, and I sure as hell don't want you undressing in front of me."

"It's not like that at all," he exclaimed, pulling the sleeve of his shirt up to reveal a series of scars on his flesh. Only... only they didn't look normal. They looked more like someone had carved designs into his skin, but that was impossible. Getting a tattoo was one thing, but carving symbols into your arm so deeply that your skin became a puckered mass of scar tissue? That was crazy!

"What the hell did that to you?" I exclaimed, my mouth going dry as he showed me his other arm. It had more symbols written along it.

"I did it to myself a long time ago." He reached up and began to unbutton his shirt before pulling it open to reveal a well-muscled chest covered in even more scar tissue. It was way worse than his arms. It was a little weird because there were a couple spots that looked like they'd been done with ink originally. Had he started with tattoos? Why?

My eyes played over the designs. They looked vaguely magical, but unlike anything I'd seen before. Still, when I saw the huge series of concentric circles on his chest, I realized what he had on his skin. Magical symbols.

"You're covered in magical wards, and they actually work." I shook my head in amazement. "That shouldn't be possible... wait, wait. You're using vampire blood to power them?"

He nodded at me. "We stumbled upon it a few years ago. This vampire had cut me up pretty bad, and after I killed it, I was covered with its blood. My friend tried to staunch the wound by using a healing ward even though it almost never worked."

"And the ward touched some of the vampire blood and blazed to life..." I finished, and he nodded at me again. "But you'd don't understand why it worked, do you? You just got lucky and tried it a few times before deciding to carve them into your skin like a crazy person." I let out a breath. "You don't have to admit it."

The look in your eyes tells me it's true." He didn't respond as I shook my head at him. "A ward is a magical symbol that does something, usually keep bad things away. It's mostly expulsion magic, but I wouldn't be surprised if there are others," I murmured, moving closer to him and running one finger over the markings on his chest. There wasn't even a faint zing of power to it. "But most people don't have the power to, well, power up a ward. You certainly don't have any innate magic of your own, so how's it work?"

"The vampire blood makes it work," Luc said, watching me trail my fingers over the muscles on his chest which was pretty much when I realized what I was doing. I backed away from him so quickly I stumbled and fell on my butt. I sat there, unable to look at him as my cheeks blazed from embarrassment. Had I seriously just felt him up? Seriously?

I turned my eyes toward him. He wasn't watching me. Instead, he was buttoning his shirt back up.

"I know it's a lot to take in," he said, and the embarrassment in his voice was obvious. Had he thought I'd gotten freaked out by all the scars? Well if he did, he hadn't seen my father. Imagine having the flesh flayed from your bones by a ravenous pack of demons, and you'd get some idea of the scars my father had. And those were just the ones on the surface. Watching him break down under the strain of fighting more and more each and every day was one of the main reasons I'd left.

"It's not your scars," I said, getting slowly to my feet. "I just don't understand why you'd do it."

"Tattoos didn't work. We tried that at first, but the wards lost power for some reason. On a lark, I cut one into my skin, but that didn't work either." He pointed at a symbol on the underside of his wrist that looked like a winged scorpion. "During my next vamp hunt, the wound got torn open and the ward blazed to life the second vampire blood touched the open wound."

"Holy crap," I said, taking a step backward because he obviously had no idea what that meant. I didn't either, but it didn't seem good. That was for sure. "You got vampire blood in a wound?"

"Yeah. It's how we realized how to make the wards work. I had to cut them into my flesh and douse the fresh wounds with vampire blood. After that, getting a little blood on any of the wards powered all of them." He shrugged like it made perfect sense even though it didn't. At least not to me.

"Okay," I said, swallowing back the desire to murder him where he stood. I wasn't sure why, but something told me this knowledge could not get out. I wasn't really worried about normal humans doing it, but there were things far worse than humans. Thing with access to blood way stronger than a vampire's and with magical knowledge so scary, it made the spells needed to start the apocalypse seem like a good idea.

"So, we're good?" he asked, staring at me. The look in his eyes reminded me of a puppy who had just destroyed your entire house, knew that you were upset with it, but couldn't figure out why.

The problem was, I wasn't sure why either. Part of it was his story, but it was something else. It was more that he *shouldn't* have needed to do that. He was just some guy, some human. We were supposed to protect people like him, not make

them do this to themselves. It almost made me want to go back home and start yelling at people. It wouldn't do any good. It never did. I'd just get buried in reams of paperwork while someone took Luc back to base for study before finding him an indiscriminate unmarked grave somewhere.

No... no, the better thing to do was to clean this place up, to ensure people didn't have to do this. Maybe I couldn't save the world, but I could sure as hell help with one tiny city. In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't be very much at all, but to the people here it would be everything. That had to be worth something, right?

"We're good," I replied, glancing around the street, surprised no one had come to help or had called the cops. Another car whizzed by us on the street. It'd happened a few times now. Not super often or anything, but often enough that I'd have expected someone to stop at the scene of an accident. No one had even slowed to gawk.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Lillim, how come sometimes the vampires dissolve when you kill them and sometimes they don't?" Luc asked, staring at the body of one of the creatures.

"They only dissolve if the death blow is struck from my swords. If they die in another way, they don't disappear. It's kind of lame." I shrugged.

"Too bad you can't make 'em dissolve before they die." Luc smiled at me, and I just shrugged at him. It wasn't like I had designed the weapons. I just used them. Still, it'd be awesome if they could do that. Monster hunting would be way easier if all I had to do was nick an opponent.

"I'll make sure I bring up your thoughts on my weaponry with Dioscuri management," I replied with a smirk and Luc shook his head at me.

"Let's get out of here before someone sees the bodies you've so carelessly left behind." Luc pulled open the door to the prison van and laughed a hearty chuckle that made me feel better. "No wonder no one's come to help."

I glanced inside the door as he stood back and smirked. There was a ward drawn onto the van's dashboard that positively glowed with purple light. It was the ward for hiding in plain sight. It was one I knew well because Dioscuri used it all the time to keep humans from finding out about monsters. It was way easier to paint a ward on a door that made everything inside seem normal and take your time killing the monsters within, than having to do it before the cops showed up.

"Looks like lady luck *is* on our side," Luc said, moving to close the back doors before sliding into the driver's seat and pointing at the keys. "Even the keys are in the ignition."

"Swell," I muttered, getting into the passenger seat and buckling my seat belt. "So what's the plan from here?"

"There's a hive not too far from here. I say we go there, blow them away, and then meet up with my friend for dinner." He shrugged as he started the van and rolled onto the street. "Unless you'd like to wait until nightfall. You know, when the vampires will be stronger."

"I'm starting to think you planned this from the start," I muttered as I watched the corpses of the vampires fade into the distance. "That does not endear me to you. In case you wondered."



Yet, even as I said the words, I realized it sort of did endear him to me. Okay, he'd tricked me into helping him, but it had been for the right reasons. He wanted to save his town. I could respect that.

## Chapter 7

By the time we pulled up in front of the hive, I'd decided I was a fan of French fries and not because I'd eaten six orders of them. It was more because the combination of salt, carbs, and fat had helped me replenish my magical reserves almost as fast as some of the special concoctions we used back home. Only those tasted way worse.

"Thanks for the fries," I said, tossing the empty bag on the floor of the van and taking a sip of my soda. It was a little bubbly for my tastes, but it sure was yummy.

"No problem," Luc said, eyeing me as he backed the van into a parking space beneath a faded white, metal covering. He slipped the vehicle in park. "But I'm starting to get worried that if you keep eating like that—"

"If you're about to tell me I'll get fat," I stated, letting the emotion drain from my voice as I fixed him with the coldest stare I could muster. "I'm going to tell you this right now. I shot the last guy who said something similar in the chest with a shotgun. He was half-demon so it didn't kill him." I gestured at Luc with my greasy fingers. "I'm going to go out on a limb and assume you're less than bulletproof." I smiled at him.

He threw himself back in his seat like he was trying to get away from me in a hurry and raised his hands in supplication. "I wasn't going to say anything like that," he said, and I could tell he was a little worried, like he actually thought I'd shoot him over it.

Truthfully, the guy I'd shot had been my ex-boyfriend. Calling me fat had been one of the least horrible things he'd done. Let's just say that by the time I'd had the nerve to walk away from that failed relationship, a shotgun blast to the chest was letting him off easy.

I turned away from Luc and stared out the windshield toward what looked like an innocuous office building. Pine trees grew out on either side of the walkway leading to the main entrance which was sort of funny looking because the rest of the perimeter was lined with shrubbery, making it appear like someone had grown a forest green gate.

The building itself was only a couple stories tall and had a lot fewer windows than I'd have expected. Nearly all of them were covered with those thick metal hurricane shutters even though I was reasonably sure there weren't hurricanes in California. It was a little weird, but then again, it made sense if it was occupied by vampires.

While sunlight didn't bother them per se, the younger they were, the more sunlight seemed to diminish their innate vampire powers. Even though I'd killed my fair share of the undead at night, I always liked to take them on during the day if at all possible. It was just easier that way since they were weaker.

“You ready to go?” I asked, unbuckling my seatbelt and reaching behind the seat to pull out my swords. This time I wasn’t taking any chances. I’d had Luc stop, and in addition to picking me up a snack, I’d grabbed my katana, Isis from its hiding place.

Now, reunited with her brother, Set, I could feel the twin blades throbbing with energy. Among my people, these weapons were famous, but I never quite trusted them. In fact, the only reason I used them at all was because they had belonged to Dirge Meilan. It made using their mystical powers way easier because whatever connection they’d shared with her had, at least partially, transferred to me.

I’d tried to find my own blade a couple times before, to forge something for myself, but so far, I hadn’t gained the level of connection with other weapons. Part of me suspected it was because I was already connected to Set and Isis. Yes, the rumors were true. This weapon was inhabited by *the* Set and *the* Isis. And no, I’d never learned how Dirge managed to get them to aid her. It was one of the memories I couldn’t access.

“Bringing out the big guns, eh?” Luc said as he got out of the car and moved around to my door, opening it for me even though I wasn’t sure why he did it. In fact, now that I thought about it, he almost always opened the door for me. Did he think I couldn’t do it myself?

“Yeah, this time if I find some powerful vampires, I don’t want to be at half strength,” I replied, belting their sheathes around my waist, slightly annoyed the weapons slid low on my hips like they always did. I’d tried tugging the belt tighter, but it never seemed to work. My mother said I just had one of those shapes and to go with it. She didn’t understand because with a body like hers, she had probably never worn anything that didn’t make her look like a goddess. My weapons, on the other hand, made my butt look huge.

“Shirajirashii should do the trick then,” Luc said, gesturing at the weapons, and for a moment, I was surprised he knew the name Dirge had called them. It was mostly because of their color since, loosely translated, Shirajirashii meant pure white in Japanese and their blades were the color of freshly fallen snow. Even still, it seemed like a silly name to give weapons inhabited by Egyptian Gods so I mostly just called them Isis and Set.

“Yeah, I don’t call them that,” I muttered, touching the pommels of the blades with my palms and feeling the familiar energy of the spirits within adding to my confidence. “They seem to like it better when I call them by their names. Besides, it tends to scare people when they know I’m wielding swords powered by Egyptian Gods.” I shrugged. Most other Dioscuri liked to hide who their spirits were, but ever since Dirge had died, everyone knew who hers were anyway. “It was a tip I picked up from my old mentor.”

“What was his spirit called?” Luc asked, moving around the back of the van and swinging the doors open.

“Ymir. You know, the original giant Odin slew? His body was used to create the world,” I said, but the blank look on his face told me he had no idea what I was talking about. “There’s a song…”

“I must have missed that one. I’m more of a classic rock guy myself.” He shook his head at me and pulled a shotgun from the back of the van. While guns weren’t as effective as I’d have liked them to be on vampires, the undead still had to

expend energy to heal the damage, and you know, contend with having their bodies ripped to shreds by bullets. I'd seen him load other weapons, but I wasn't sure where they were hidden since he was wearing a dark blue leather trench coat, presumably to hide all his weaponry.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. "I'm guessing you don't take classes in Norse history?"

"We call it mythology and... wait. Are you telling me all of that is real?" He paled, which was a little funny because I could see the wheels spinning behind his eyes. Evidently, I'd just thrown his world into a tailspin.

"More or less." I shrugged. "It's all real, more or less." He looked like he was going to ask more, but I held up my hand to silence him before gesturing at the sky. The sun was already getting low in the horizon. It wouldn't be long before it started to fade completely from the sky. I didn't want to be inside the building when that happened for obvious reasons. "Now let's get going. We're burning daylight."

Luc cocked his shotgun in response as we headed toward the building. Every step felt sort of foreboding, making the hair stand up on the back of my neck and my teeth chatter. It was always like this when I got ready for a mission. I never really got ahold of myself until I was in the thick of things. Then my training would take over, and I'd be fine, more or less, but the walking in part... well, that always sucked.

"So why haven't you just burned the building to the ground?" I asked as we approached the twin pine trees. Something about them was even more unnerving on foot, though I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like they were ents and would pull themselves from the ground and try to beat me into oblivion. I mean, that'd happened before, but they tended not to leave the black forest along the border of Germany.

"I'd thought about it originally, but even though that looks like a pretty normal building, most of it is underground. It has these weird hatches inside that seal off and suck the air from rooms to smother fire in addition to a state of the art sprinkler system. That and most of the walls are solid concrete, so well, unless I have a nuclear device, I'm not going to kill much with explosives or fire. I can't just fling a Molotov cocktail at it and tear away in my low-rider." Luc shrugged.

"I don't know what half of the things you just said mean, but I'm going to assume it won't work," I replied, giving him a thin smile.

Before he could respond, a branch shot out of the pine tree next to him and wrapped its wooden fingers around his throat. It hoisted him into the air like he was a toothpick. The sound of cracking wood and rustling leaves filled my ears as I threw myself backward, thankful I'd been a few steps behind Luc. A branch flew through the spot I'd just occupied as I landed hard on my shoulders, rolling across the pavement in a way that let me know I'd have bruises in the morning.

I came to my feet and drew my weapons. The pure white blades of Shirajirashii glinted in the sunlight as the tree pulled itself free of the ground and began moving toward me. Its bark was as black as soot and yellow orbs glowed inside its green pine needles. The orbs focused on me, and the giant tree monster took a lumbering step forward, spraying soil across the concrete.

“Why the hell are you here?” I screamed at the ent because they almost never left the forest. Its appearance here was odd to say the least. Instead of replying, the tree monster whipped its body around in a way that made me think of a willow being hit by a heavy gale. Pinecones exploded from its branches, their razor sharp edges more than enough to cut me into twain, you know, provided the poison didn’t kill me first.

I darted to the side, but there was no way I’d get free of the deluge in time. Muttering, I held Isis out in front of me. Blue light filled the space around the katana as a wall of force slammed down in front of me and solidified into an invisible shield. The pinecones hit it with so much strength, I was forced backward along the parking lot, my shoes skidding along the surface.

Sweat trickled down my face as I reached out toward Set, willing it to lend its sister some power. Then the pinecones exploded. The blast threw me backward, shattering my shield as my feet left the ground. I crashed to the ground, but kept a grip on my weapons as the ent shambled forward. It wasn’t fast, thank God, but it was still a living tree. It’d hurt like hell if it hit me.

I crawled to my feet as something exploded behind the creature, throwing bark and other debris into the air and distilling my hearing into an angry whine. The ent coming toward me, turned, shuffling its immense bulk as I ran at the creature. It didn’t even notice me until I landed amid its branches and drove my wakazashi deep into its trunk. Black sap that sort of smelled like fresh maple syrup exploded from the wound, coating me in a sheen of sticky liquid.

A howl tore through the air as it tried to shake me off. I ducked an oncoming branch and focused my will. The smell of pine was overwhelming as I reached out and called upon my magic. Lightning shot from the sky and slammed straight down on the spot where Set was embedded into the creature. The blast tore the living tree asunder in a flash that threw me backward.

Air whooshed out of my lungs as I smacked into the shrubbery. I threw my arms up to cover myself as sticks and other debris pelted me in the face and body. The ent leaned to the side, half blackened. Flames crawled up out of its center as it whirled, evidently not knowing it should stop, drop, and roll.

I ignored the thrashing creature and got to my feet, glad the lightning thing had worked. Set was a storm god after all, but I’d never really been good at storm magic even though both of my parents were masters of the art. It was a little weird since things like that were normally hereditary, but someone had told me Dirge had sucked at it too. Either way, I was more than happy to blame it on her.

“Timber!” Luc called, and as I glanced around for him, I saw the other ent toppling over like someone had sliced it in half. It fell, branches snapping against the pavement as a howl of anguish tore through the air. Black fluid spewed from its bottom in a wave that left the ground covered in sticky sap. Luc stood behind it, brandishing some kind of whirring chain weapon. He gestured at the creature with it and smirked. “That’s why I always carry a chainsaw,” he said, before raising it over his head in triumph.

“Remind me to get one of those things,” I said, making my way toward him.

“They’re on aisle six.” He smirked and did something to the weapon. The blade stopped whirring, and as he watched it slow, he glanced from me to the trees still thrashing in their death throes. “What are those?”

“Ents. Living tree monsters. I’ll be honest, whatever brought them here must be really powerful since they almost never come out of the forest.” I shrugged because I didn’t know what else to do. It was either that or retreat screaming. I wasn’t about to do that because not only would it not help the situation, but I was supposed to be tough. Running away would sort of hurt that image.

Still, the idea of tangling with something strong enough to drag ents out of hiding and use them as perimeter defense scared the bejesus out of me, especially since we were dealing with vampires. It meant the culprit was likely to be really old, and not only that, but whatever was inside that compound would likely be way, way worse than ents. I didn’t even want to think of what would be on the bottom floor.

“Well, let’s go,” Luc said, moving toward the door probably because he didn’t know enough to be scared. Before I could do anything, he rapped on the metal doors at the entrance. “Special delivery!”

## Chapter 8

The door creaked open and a gust of frigid air swept out, making gooseflesh sprout across my skin even though I was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. Luc turned to me and exhaled a breath of foggy air before shining his flashlight into the depths.

It was so dark inside, I couldn’t make out anything aside from white marble floors and what looked like a receptionist’s desk. Only there was no receptionist. As the beam crawled upward along the desk’s sleek metal finish, it revealed an empty chair. Behind it was a painting of the moon shining over a lonely desert, only instead of the night sky being blue, it was crimson.

A bad feeling settled over me because the scene looked strangely familiar though I couldn’t quite place it. Luc took a step forward, and his boots squeaked on the marble. I was glad nothing had blown him to smithereens or tried to eat him, which would have put an end to this adventure right quick. Still, I needed to stop him before he triggered a trap that did just that.

“Let me go first,” I said even though he was the hulking black man with the shotgun and the chainsaw. He gave me a look that told me he’d thought the same thing, and I had to fight the urge to be offended because honestly, I sort of wanted him to go in front of me. Not because he was male, but because the idea of anyone between me and the monsters was appealing.

“Why?” he asked, his light sweeping over the room and revealing nothing more menacing than a kitten calendar.

“Because I’ll probably be able to tell if there’s magic in the air, while your dumbass is likely to just set it off and blow us to kingdom come or get us trapped in a pocket dimension.” I shook my head. “You’re so far out of your league, you might as well be playing on another planet.”

Instead of arguing, he merely nodded and stepped to the side, allowing me to pass in front of him. The darkness was oppressive and overwhelming. The frigid air wasn’t helping matters. It made everything feel cold and dead. Then again, if

this place was filled with vampires, that wouldn't be too far from the truth. Why had I wanted to go first, again?

I muttered a magic word and with a small effort of will sent power thrumming along the lengths of my swords. Red and blue light crept along their respective surfaces, lighting them up like I was using glow sticks at a rave. And yes, I've actually been to a rave before. You'd be surprised how many creepy crawlies like to prey on people under the cover of electronic music.

The air had that clean, disinfectant smell that reminded me of hospitals as I moved forward toward one of the doors. I wasn't sure which door to take so I just picked one at random. I'd asked Luc for building plans before we'd gotten here, but he hadn't managed to acquire them. Apparently, they weren't readily available which was par for the course I supposed.

Still, the smell bothered me. It was like they were trying to cover something up, but what could that be? Blood? Maybe, but I was worried it was something worse. I shoved the thought from my brain as I made a sweep of the door, and feeling no magical defenses, pushed on the metal panel inlaid into the door with my elbow. There was resistance at first then something inside it clicked, and the door swung inward.

I shined my sword on the wall just inside the door, looking for some kind of light switch, but as soon as I saw it, something pinged off my senses. I flung myself backward out of the doorway, colliding with Luc in the process. We went down in a heap as the door shuddered closed under the impact of something. The room around us shook and dust fell from the ceiling as I struggled to disentangle myself from the hunter.

"What is it?" Luc asked as the door was torn off its hinges and flung off into the distance. A crash filled my ears as I scrambled to my feet, my blazing swords held in front of me. They'd gotten brighter with my fear, which meant I'd accidentally dumped more power into the twin blades. Great, I was sure I was going to regret that later when I needed the energy for something actually useful like lighting a vampire on fire with my magic.

Still, I was pretty sure nothing had come through the door. I craned my head toward it, listening. Luc was crouched to the side, his shotgun trained on the entrance. His flashlight had spun off behind us, leaving us shrouded in darkness. I'd like to say my swords managed to light the room up like a spotlight, but unfortunately, that just wasn't the case. It was more like the flickering of a candle in the darkness of a cave.

A low rumbling escaped the doorway, setting my nerves on edge and making my heart thud in my chest. Instead of letting it get to me, I tightened my grip on my swords and took a tentative step forward. Something flew out of the darkness, and the boom of the shotgun tore my hearing asunder. Thick wet fluid splattered across me as something disappeared into a bloody cloud. I blinked, wiping the goop from my eyes as Luc racked another shell into place and stood, still watching the door.

I wasn't sure what had come out, but I doubted it was whatever had torn the door off. I craned my head forward, trying to peer inside when something grabbed me around the ankle and hoisted me backward into the air. I dangled there for a split second before whatever it was flung me across the room like I was a ragdoll.

My back slammed into the desk and pain shot through me. My swords slipped from my grip, hitting the ground with a lifeless clatter. Their glow went out, pitching us into complete and utter darkness.

The swish of the wind filled my ears as I found my feet, but no sooner had I gotten them under me when my breath was driven from my lungs. It felt like I'd been hit in the chest by a baseball bat. Sadly, I knew what that felt like.

Luc's shotgun roared again, making it impossible to hear, which was lame. It was one thing to fight without sight, but without hearing as well? That was crap. Still, I'd been in tougher spots thanks to my mother. One time, we had played hide and go seek in a swamp while blindfolded and wearing earplugs. Let me say this right now, I hate frogmen.

My body crashed to the ground, but instead of trying to scramble away, I laid there as still as possible. Just as the barest glimmer of something touched me, I lashed out with everything I had, slamming my palm into whatever it was. "White Sparrow!" I screamed.

The white cylinder of flame burst into being, sealing whatever was attacking me inside. I staggered backward, chest heaving as fire crackled out of my spell, spilling across the ceiling and engulfing it in super-heated flames.

The light of the fire illuminated the room, but it was almost blinding since it'd been so dark. I blinked, trying to see what I'd caught in my spell as I recovered Shirajirashii. Sure, fire killed most things, but this was magical fire. Some things could shake that off. If it could, I wanted to be ready.

When nothing burst from my spell, I grabbed my swords while doing my best to ignore the flames and looked for Luc. He was on his back, his shotgun in front of him. A werewolf had its jaws around the barrel, trying to bite its way through the weapon as the studs in Luc's coat flared with blue light. So they were made of silver. That was smart.

I got to my feet as water exploded from the ceiling, dousing me in a deluge that extinguished the fire and my spell in an instant. The air whipped around me as I spun in the water in time to duck a swipe from a charbroiled werewolf.

"Hey, Fido, why are you helping vampires?" I asked, lashing out with my blades and spilling its entrails across the floor. Not that it mattered. The creature kept slashing at me like I hadn't just lit it on fire and disemboweled it. That was the problem with werewolves. In addition to being strong, fast, and having fangs and claws, they healed nearly instantly. Thus, they were used to taking on incredible amounts of damage without stopping, even from magically enchanted swords.

Still, it was weird that they were helping vampires. While they weren't enemies per se, they didn't exactly get along. In fact, most werewolves were pretty damned aggressive toward, well, non-werewolves in general.

The werewolf, unsurprisingly, didn't answer my question. Instead, it lunged, teeth bared. I stepped to the side, driving my knee into the underside of its jaw, snapping its mouth closed and flinging it across the room. It crashed into the wall and slumped to the marble floor dazed.

I spun back toward Luc and leapt. My shoulder crashed into the creature pinning him to the floor. We slid across the slick marble as it whirled on me, feet scrabbling on the surface like a dog on linoleum as I tried to keep my face from getting torn off.

“Down!” Luc screamed, and I dropped just before his shotgun went off. The blast hit the werewolf full in the chest as it struggled for balance. It screamed, a horrible inhuman sound I was sure I’d never forget as silver fire exploded from its wounds. The creature thrashed, falling to its back as it tried to tear the silver pellets from its body. I wasn’t sure why Luc had silver ammunition, but I was sure glad he did. Maybe he was more prepared than I’d given him credit for.

Luc spun as he cocked the shotgun and put a round into the other werewolf as it was getting to its feet. The howl of anguish was enough to almost make me feel bad for it. Almost.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, making my way through the door and out of the deluge of water. Luc nodded to me, and I was suddenly glad I’d brought the hunter along with me. Most Dioscuri didn’t take on werewolves alone. Two might have been a death sentence, especially without silver weapons. Then again, if I’d had my gear, I’d have had silver. The thought made me grumble.

“Why are there werewolves?” Luc asked, coming up next to me and shining his flashlight into the empty concrete room. Evidently, he had recovered it. “Don’t they normally hate vampires?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” I replied, staring at the room as a horrible thought filled my brain. The walls were absolutely covered with scratches. They filled nearly every square inch of the twenty by twenty space. Had the creatures just been captured? Had they just been attacking us because we were the first people they saw when we opened their prison door? I certainly hoped not. That would make me feel bad, and I really didn’t like feeling bad.

So what did I do? I pushed it out of my mind and made my way across the room toward the only other door. It looked a lot heavier than the one we’d come through originally. Something told me if they’d gone through the trouble of filling this room with hungry, angry werewolves, our target was through that door. Then again, it could just be a trap to trick us. Stranger things had happened.

## Chapter 9

The first thing I noticed upon opening the door was the smell of blood and despair. I shivered as it washed over me like a warm breath and tossed a look back at Luc. I wasn’t sure how he’d managed to pick the lock with his weird little kit, but I was glad he had. Otherwise, I wasn’t sure how we were going to get through a steel-reinforced door set into a concrete wall, especially when it was built to withstand werewolves.

He swallowed hard enough for me to hear the sound, and I tossed another look back at him to see him reloading his shotgun. He gave me a sheepish grin, which seemed ominous in the relative darkness of the room.

“Smells like a bucket of awesome down there,” Luc said sarcastically, glancing over his shoulder toward where the entrance to the room was. “Now, let’s get going before the werewolves come back to eat me.”



“Good plan,” I mumbled, sucking in a deep breath to calm myself but found it doing anything but. “Though I bet those werewolves have already escaped out the front door, otherwise they’d be in here already. I think they were captives.”

“I wonder if the ents were captured too?” Luc said as I stepped through the door and found myself on a small landing above a spiral staircase. The stairwell was so small it bordered on making me claustrophobic. I’d have liked to think being locked in tiny rooms for days at a time had cured me of that, but well, it hadn’t, despite my mother’s instance that I simply needed more practice at it.

“I hope not. If we’re dealing with something powerful enough to capture both ents and werewolves to use as guards we’re probably screwed.” As the words left my mouth, I had to suppress a shiver because I was pretty sure Luc was correct even though I hoped he wasn’t. Normally, I’d have called for backup when the first group of vampires attacked. After the ents and werewolves? Well, I should have a whole platoon with me, and even if it turned out to be coincidence, no one would fault me for wanting the extra resources. But no, here I was with only an in-over-his-head hunter for backup. This was not going to end well.

Still, I’d been in worse spots. Like the time I’d broken my leg on that ogre hunting ground. Now *that* was a most dangerous game.

I pushed my fears away and shined the light of my weapons down at the steps before making my way as carefully as I could, ears straining to listen for strange sounds. Off in the distance, I could have sworn I heard wailing, but that may have just been my mind playing tricks on me. Either way, it was unnerving.

The steps, thankfully, were pretty sturdy and appeared to have been made from concrete which wasn’t surprising. Vampires tended not to live in places with lots of wood. While stabbing them through the heart with a wooden stake wouldn’t kill them, it’d paralyze them until the stake was removed. Still, since I was more of a cut their heads off kind of girl, I tended not to carry stakes with me. Why bother? If I could get that close, I was all about the slicing and dicing.

I swept Set’s glowing red blade out in front of me and was surprised to find the stairs ended just a few feet down. It had only been about a single story.

“Phew, I was worried we’d have to travel fifty stories underground,” I murmured as I stepped out onto the concrete floor and made my way forward. It was too dark to see much, but the wailing was way louder down here.

“What is that sound?” Luc asked, stepping past me even though I’d asked him to let me lead. He made his way toward the noise because, you know, going toward the horrible moaning was *always* a good idea. In the Dioscuri, we had a rule. If it wasn’t trying to kill you, ignore it. The rule may have seemed heartless, but I’d heard enough stories about Dioscuri lured to their doom trying to save people from monsters. Somehow, it never dawned on rescuers that the victims in question could be bait, or worse, monsters themselves.

“Stay away, it could be a trap,” I said as Luc put his hand on a steel door with one of those windows with the wire that made it nearly impossible to break if you weren’t packing super strength.

“I’m not going to leave innocent people here to suffer,” he growled over his shoulder before turning the knob. It turned. I wasn’t sure if it was a good or bad thing. Though I was sure I’d find out in a minute.

"The word 'trap' means nothing to you, huh?" I said as Luc pushed the door open, evidently ignoring my concerns. What a jerk. Well, the next time something tried to eat him, maybe I'd let it.

"Lillim..." Luc called, glancing back at me, his face pale and his lips trembling. "You need to come here..."

"What's wrong?" I asked as apprehension flooded my senses. Every step I took toward him weighed on me because while I wasn't sure what I was going to find in that room, I was pretty sure it was going to be really freaking horrible.

I was right. Inside the room was a hole about six feet across. It was too dark to see into its depths, but I knew what it was anyway. A shiver racked my body as I stumbled backward out of the room, trying to catch my breath.

"What is it?" Luc asked, peering over to the edge of the hole as the screams grew louder and more distressed. "I've never seen anything like it..."

"A feeding hole," I whispered, my voice so quiet I wasn't sure I'd actually said the words aloud.

"What's a feeding hole?" Luc asked, turning and taking a step toward me.

"It's what the vampires use when a bunch of them are in an area and trying to stay under the radar. They'll capture a family all at once and throw them in a hole for safe keeping. It makes the humans last longer since the vampires only take a little blood at a time from each of the people and has the added bonus of not requiring them to go out and hunt as often, reducing the chance they'll get caught." I shook my head. "A whole family is a lot less noticeable because most neighbors or whatever, just assume the family went on vacation or something."

"You mean to tell me there are humans in that hole, and the vampires have been feeding on them for who knows how long?" Luc asked, his voice cold and angry. When I nodded, his eyes blazed, and he spun on his heel and made his way back inside.

Without another word, he pulled some thin cord out of his pocket and tied one end to the door before making his way toward the hole and shining his light into its depths.

"What are you doing?" I asked, walking up next to him.

"Rescuing them," he replied, shooting me a glance that suggested he wasn't going to listen to a word I said.

"Don't..." I swallowed before saying the words that'd been drilled into me. "Even if you take them out of the hole, they're already dead inside. Very few people can come back from that and be normal. It's not like there's anyone for them to talk to about what happened. Hell, some of them might turn into vampires."

"What are you suggesting we do then, Lillim? Leave them here?" he asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Drop a grenade in the hole and move on." He narrowed his eyes at me as I spoke. "It's a kindness, I promise." Just saying the words turned my stomach, but I'd seen those people, hell I had been just like Luc a long time ago. Every Dioscuri I'd talked to said the same thing. No one has ever gone on to be normal afterward. Then again, maybe this would be the time where everyone would be wrong? Was it worth the risk?

Luc turned his back on me without another word and knelt down by the edge before dropping inside. The cord went taught as he shimmied down it. I sighed

and turned to watch the door, hoping no vampire showed up looking for a snack, though part of me sort of hoped one did. Seeing things like this always pissed me off. The Dioscuri were supposed to keep monsters from harming innocent people, and we were doing a piss poor job.

Lately though, it seemed like the monsters had gotten bolder and bolder. Hell, there was a veritable hive filled with captured werewolves and who knows what else right in the middle of a city in California. How had that not gotten picked up by the sensors back at the base?

A few minutes later, Luc pulled himself out of the hole carrying a little girl who looked no older than ten. She had greasy black hair and bags under her eyes. Her white dress was covered in grime, filth, and blood. And, of course, her eyes had that vacant far off stare I'd seen across a million battlefields. The one that told me this child had seen too many horrors to count.

"Tell her what you told me," Luc said to the girl as he walked her up to me and shoved her into me.

"There were five of us originally." She whispered, voice so quiet, I could barely hear her speak. "The vampires took my whole family, and they pulled us out of one by one. Sometimes, one of us wouldn't come back, but that wasn't so bad."

"Why not?" Luc asked as revulsion rippled up my throat because I knew the horrible answer already.

"Because..." the girl swallowed and looked away, tears filling her eyes. "Because then there'd be more to eat."

Luc glared at me so hard, it physically hurt. "And you still think you people are doing a good job protecting the innocents, Lillim?" he asked, but it wasn't so much a question as an accusation. The sad thing was, I didn't really disagree with him. We weren't doing a good job, not by a long shot. There were a million things we could be doing, but so far, all we'd done was try to rebuild our own ranks from the civil war. Anger flared inside me as I thought about the girl's family and what had happened to them. Someone was going to pay for this. It might not mean anything in the long run, but it didn't have to mean anything in the long run. Sometimes you did the right thing because it was the right thing. This was one of those times.

Instead of saying anything, I turned on my heel and walked out of the room. Luc followed me a few minutes later, one hand gripping the child's hand. I sighed. "You can't take her with us, Luc. You have two options, you bring her back outside or you leave her here. I'll admit, neither is ideal, but you can't take her with us."

"Or I'll take her with us, and if you argue with me about it, I'll shoot you in the face, Lillim," he said, eyes narrowed.

"Do what you want. It's not like I've been doing this for my past two lives..." I glared at him for a moment before deciding to let it go. He was right after all. We couldn't just leave the girl alone. Besides, I wasn't keen on getting shot in the face. "Just make sure she doesn't give away our position."

"Whatever," he said and tightened his grip on the girl's hand. The look in his eyes told me exactly what he thought of me. He no longer liked me, even a little. My reaction to the situation had told him all he thought he needed to know about the Dioscuri, told him that what he thought was important wasn't important to me. It made me realize he wasn't looking at the big picture, but not just that, he

didn't care about the big picture because little girls were getting hurt. And sadly, I sort of agreed with him.

"You don't have to make me feel heartless," I said, making my way across the room toward the far wall. There were more doors set into the concrete, and while I was pretty sure some of them probably contained more feeding holes, I was hoping at least one didn't. The only problem was, I wasn't sure which one would lead us toward the vampires. "I'm just worried about what happens when something tries to eat her and you're forced to choose between saving her and stopping the monster." I took a deep breath, leaving the, "Or if she winds up being a monster..." part of my sentence unsaid.

"That's not going to happen," Luc said, voice just a touch softer than it had been a moment before.

"That's what everyone who ever sacrificed themselves said," I replied, turning away from him and reaching out with my magic, hoping I could find something that would let me know which door we should open. "And you know what the problem with that is? Not only does no one actually want to get sacrificed for, but you're dead afterward."

Luc opened his mouth to say something, but I held up my hand to silence him as power flowed out of me. The smells in the room became more intense as the scene lit up bright scarlet in my mind's eye, but all I was getting were vague impressions of the place. Damn.

I swiveled my gaze around the room, regretting what I knew I'd have to do. No, there was no other way. It was either open every single door and risk finding something way worse than a feeding hole or use my ethereal sight to narrow down the nature of each door in a blink. The only problem was, I'd have the vision burned into my brain, and I didn't need more nightmares. I wasn't quite sure what the true representation of the feeding hole room would be in my ethereal sight, but I wasn't excited to find out.

"Just put on your big girl pants and do it," I muttered to myself. My eyes snapped open, and I fought the urge to scream. Blood poured from several of the doors, gushing forth like they were obsidian fountains and surging along the ground like crimson rivers. The door farthest to the left was different though. It looked like the maw of a great beast, reminding me of a yawning dragon with huge jagged fangs.

I shut my eyes, banishing my sight and stood like that for a moment longer as my heartbeat slowly returned to normal. Without even opening them, I pointed toward the dragon door with one shaking finger. "That's the door we need." I swallowed and shook my head. "And judging by how it looks like we're going to be walking into the mouth of a dragon, I'm pretty sure it's not going to be filled with kitties and cotton candy."

## Chapter 10

The door opened to reveal a hallway with plush carpet the color of freshly spilled blood. As I stepped foot onto it, I actually sank about half an inch which was a

little weird. The white walls were filled with LED torches spaced every few feet to give the appearance of firelight without actually being, you know, fire.

Paintings of old men with strangely birdlike features were displayed prominently between each set of torches, and as I trudged forward, their owlish eyes seemed to follow me. A chill rippled down my spine as I clutched my swords a little tighter. It was creepy in this room, and the paintings weren't helping any. It was especially unnerving because the rest of the compound looked like it had been designed to get hosed off and sanitized at a moment's notice. I doubted anyone would be doing that down here, what with the carpet and all.

I barely made it three steps when the little girl gasped. I spun, my swords at the ready to see her practically wrapped around Luc's leg. He had his shotgun at the ready, but I doubted it would do anything to stop the door from shutting behind us.

It didn't slam shut of anything, rather it closed with a soft click that seemed to echo within the soundless hallway, reverberating within my brain and making my stomach clench in fear. We were trapped in the dragon room, and while I wasn't sure what that meant, it didn't seem good.

"I'm guessing that's not good," Luc said, still watching the door.

"Oh no, it's all part of the plan. You know, get locked in the dragon room with a little girl... That's like step one." I shrugged, trying to conceal my fear with snark. "Besides, I've never met a dragon before, maybe it'll be fun. Everything I'd read makes me think they were pretty goddamned horrible, but hopefully this one will be more like the one from Honalee."

"Like Puff?" he asked, giving me a strange look, and I realized he thought I might be serious.

"Yeah, you know, completely fictional." A shiver racked me as I spun back around and stared down the hallway, wondering if it was too late to go back. The idea of fighting a dragon filled me with more dread than I could properly explain. It was even more unnerving because the hallway had to be almost fifty feet long. While it was four feet wide, the torches sticking out from the wall made it feel oppressive and narrower than it was.

What looked like a carved marble banister was at the far end, so I was pretty sure we'd be heading downward again. Great, so this place was going to be subterranean after all. I took a deep breath to steel myself and crept forward as carefully as I could. My hands throbbed from clutching the twin blades of Shirajirashii so tightly, but I was reluctant to loosen my grip. Something told me that if I did, they'd be knocked from my hands. Then again, there didn't appear to be anything down here, and well, I could call them back to me if I needed to do so.

As I neared the banister, the room opened up, flaring outward to reveal a chamber on either side I hadn't noticed before. A silver grizzly bear statue so lifelike, I could feel the hunger and rage coming off of it stood on our right. Its mouth was open in a snarl and one arm was raised overhead, sharpened claws glittering under a spotlight of crimson light.

The left alcove was no better. An immense gold owl hung suspended from the ceiling, claws extended outward like it was about to snatch an unsuspecting mouse from the earth. Its ruby eyes glinted in the sanguine light. Standing

between them was unnerving. I took a deep breath, trying not to freak out and let my mind play tricks on me. While scary, they were just statues.

“What do you make of those?” Luc asked, pointing at the owl with his shotgun. His breath was low, like he was trying to keep the fear out of it. He mostly succeeded.

“I’m guessing some kind of shrine to the two biggest vampire castes. The Owls and the Bears.” I shrugged and took a step toward the stairs. They were as black as soot. Even though I could see more of the LED torches going down, their flickering light made the stairwell seem dark and foreboding. Shadows leapt back and forth in the darkness, and I had the sudden urge to turn back around and run the hell away.

“You’ve mentioned them before,” Luc said, peering closely at the bear. “I didn’t even know there were castes of vampires.”

“There’s more than the two, but the Bears and the Owls are the biggest by far. They have the oldest founders.” I shrugged. “Basically, they were founded so long ago, they’ve pretty much always been there. Others rise from time to time, but they tend to die out...”

“Why is that?” he asked, scooching up next to me and peering down the stairwell. The little girl hung back just a hair, so she was standing behind him. Her eyes looked scared and sort of vacant, like what was present was afraid, but beyond the fear there was nothing.

“The Bears are basically big, strong and fast. You’ve heard the stories about vampires throwing trucks around? Those vamps were probably Bears. It makes sense why they’ve been around forever. There isn’t a lot you can’t kill when you can toss a fire engine at someone.” I smirked. “The Owls though, they’re like magicians. Masters of blood magic. I’ve seen them snap their fingers and open wounds that had been healed for decades. You can see why that’d be particularly devastating among vampires. Imagine a vampire ripping the blood out of another vamp, or worse yet, a victim with a snap of his fingers.”

“It sounds horrible,” Luc replied, glancing at the owl statue and shivering.

“It is horrible,” I said, taking my first step onto the stairs and out of the statues’ combined gazes. “Thankfully, the two clans don’t work together much, but this?” I gestured at the statues. “This seems like they *are* working together, but what would make them do that?” I shuddered. “And what are they working on?”

“Nothing good, I’m guessing,” Luc sighed before following me down into the darkness below. He was right of course, whatever the two most powerful vampire castes were doing together wasn’t good. I’d seen other, smaller castes work together in the past, but that usually ended when the Dioscuri stepped in and put down the leaders. Dealing with vampires was sort of like dealing with cultists in that way. When you took out the leader, the caste usually fell apart, and the ones that didn’t were typically neutered.

I still wasn’t quite sure why we had let the Bears and the Owls get so powerful. I’d been told it was because they did a good job policing their own kind, and the anarchy caused by the power vacuum would be worse for everyone, especially since the founders of those castes didn’t do much. They were so ancient, nearly everything bored them. I suppose that by the time you’re a few thousand years old, you’ve done virtually everything you ever wanted to do.

That's what scared me about this. It seemed like the castes were working together, and I doubted that would happen if the founders weren't involved. Something had drawn the attention of Bob the Bear founder *and* Ariel the Owl founder. I wasn't sure what it was, but I was pretty sure we were screwed. If both of them were involved, the only chance we'd have would be to call in the Dioscuri for backup and hope they had enough juice left to stand up to the most powerful vampires on the planet. Sadly, I didn't like those odds.

"Well, no use wondering," I grumbled as shadows flittered over the walls. "We should find out for sure what's going on, you know, before we burn this place to the ground."

"I can live with that plan," Luc replied, his footsteps loud on the steps behind me.

The air grew colder and wetter as we moved downward, like we were walking into a deep dark cave filled with chilly ocean water. I shivered despite myself, half-tempted to draw upon some of my power to ward off the chill. I wasn't going to do that because I might need the power later, but I wanted to do it.

After what felt like miles of stairway, we came to a landing with what looked like horizontal black sliding glass doors. The head of an enormous dragon was etched into the center so if the door opened it would be like entering the maw of the creature's mouth.

The sight unnerved me because this symbol was out in the open. Before I'd seen it, I could have assumed the dragon was just some kind of ethereal representation of something and didn't actually refer to anything to do with an actual dragon. This symbol changed everything, and I immediately tried to recall if there were any castes with a dragon as their symbol. I couldn't think of any, but that didn't mean there wasn't one. Still, I doubted some tiny clan of vampires was going to have a place in a building with both the Bears and the Owls. Then again, tiny didn't necessarily mean weak. Maybe a really old vampire had awoken? One who could make Bob and Ariel do his bidding? I sure as hell hoped not.

"I really hope this dragon imagery doesn't mean there's a real dragon here," Luc whispered.

"I doubt it," I said, hoping I was right. "After the greatest, read most evil, of the dragons was slain by his offspring when the earth was young, the dragon wars began. All but one of the remaining dragons had been banished to the farthest magical realms. Since then, only one dragon had ever been present on the earth at a time."

"What happens if one of them comes back?" Luc asked. "Maybe that's what has happened here?"

"The moment a new one comes, he or she will fight with the resident dragon for dominance. The loser will be cast back into the magical realms." I shook my head. "I doubt that's happened though. If one was around, my old mentor would know about it. After the last usurper was defeated, he swore an oath to protect the dragon currently living here."

"That doesn't actually assure me of anything," Luc replied. "What if he just didn't tell you about it?"

"Trust me, he'd have mentioned it when I saw him a few days ago. Dragons are a big deal." As the words left my mouth, a bad feeling settled over me. I was really,

really sure there wasn't a new dragon around, so what was going on here? Why was I getting so much dragon imagery here? It didn't make any sense. Then again, maybe it was some weird kind of symbolism? Or maybe the vampires had chosen a dragon to represent the combined efforts of both the Owl and Bear castes? I didn't want to think about the damage they could do as allies.

The Dioscuri had barely survived the last civil war. I doubted they had the strength to hold off the combined forces of the vampires, especially if the Bears and the Owls rallied the other, smaller castes under their war banner. No, part of the reason the Dioscuri had kept the vampires under control was by letting them bicker among themselves. They did not need a common enemy, especially when that common enemy would be my people. And after we fell, who would keep humanity safe?

"Lillim, is everything okay?" Luc asked, and I realized I hadn't moved in a while. I was just standing there staring at the glass dragon like an idiot.

"Yeah," I said, exhaling slowly. "I was thinking about how the vampires may be planning on taking over the world and enslaving humanity. You know, vampire politics."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of vampire politics." Luc's face paled. "Real politicians already want to bleed you dry."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Unfortunately, my laughter sounded foreign in the emptiness of the dark alcove. It made me pretty sure no one had ever laughed down here, at least not without maniacally stroking a cat.

"Let's find out what's through door number one," Luc said, pointing past me with his shotgun.

"Okay," I muttered, stepping off the last step and reaching out toward it to feel for any magical traps. I found one, mostly because the floor opened up, and I fell into the darkness below. The irony of having wanted to lead in order to find traps was not lost on me either.

## Chapter 11

"Are you okay?" Luc called from above. He seemed far away and blurry.

I lay on my back struggling to breathe. So I was still alive, that was good. It was a good thing they hadn't filled the pit with spikes or acid or something.

"Yeah," I called as the taste of blood filled my mouth. Already, I could feel my magic working within my body, burning my reserves to pull me back into fighting shape. "The concrete broke my fall."

I didn't hear Luc's reply as I sat up and looked around. It wasn't so dark that I couldn't see, but there just wasn't much inside the twenty square foot room. Bones littered the ground, reminding me of the time my mother had taken me into a hyena den. Only this time, I didn't see any hyenas.

"I'm going to tie the rope off to the banister and lower it down for you," Luc yelled from above.

"Okay!" I replied, getting to my feet and my ankle twinged like I'd sprained it. Not enough that I wouldn't be able to walk on it, but it hurt enough to make me



think I'd burn a lot of energy healing it. I sighed and let out a low breath. At least it wasn't broken.

"*Oh, a present,*" whispered a voice from behind me which was weird because my back was to the wall. I spun around, examining the cinderblocks for clues but wound up finding nothing. Fear rushed through me. What had spoken?

"*And she's jumpy,*" hissed another voice. I jumped, whirling around again in fright. My heart hammered in my chest. What the hell was going on here? Where were the voices coming from?

"Luc, hurry with that rope please!" I cried barely keeping the tremor out of my voice. Either he didn't respond, or I didn't hear him. I tried to keep from freaking out. Surely he was just tying his rope off, right?

Something brushed against my leg, and I shrieked before I could stop myself. I swung Set at it, casting crimson light across the room and making shadowy forms leap across the mostly unlit room. There wasn't anything there.

I took a hesitant step forward and my ankle screamed in pain. I bit my lip, focusing on driving the pain deep down inside myself. Warm, wet hair slithered across the back of my neck, making me feel like something was breathing on me. I whirled again, lashing out with my blades at the unseen attacker. Only there wasn't anything there. My katana struck the wall, throwing up a cascade of blue sparks.

"*Feisty ones always taste chewy,*" the first voice said from below me. I leapt backward, landing lightly on the ball of my good foot before setting my other one down. I didn't see anything there, but something had to be. If not, what was talking?

"*Maybe we can dip her in chocolate?*" the second voice asked, and the temperature in the room fell ten degrees. Gooseflesh sprouted on my arms as I wiped my face with the back of my hand. Despite the chill, I was sweating like crazy.

I shut my eyes and listened, trying to pick out the sounds of movement from where the voice came from, but the only thing I heard was my own frantic heartbeat.

"Lillim, grab the rope!" Luc called from above, and my eyes snapped open to see his paracord dangling there. I let out a little squeak of relief and sheathed my weapons so I could get the hell out of here.

The ground rumbled under me, writhing like I was standing on a wriggling serpent. My legs went out from under me, and I toppled forward onto the hard ground. My vision went a little blurry around the edges as I clung to the ground to keep from slipping off.

The rope swayed above me, and as I tried to reach out for it, a blood curdling scream filled my ears. I dropped to the ground just as a thousand flapping bats came bursting through the room in a flurry of wings, fangs, and claws.

I shut my eyes against the din, hoping with all my might none would get stuck in my hair as I buried my face in my arms. It felt like it lasted forever, but their flight eventually stopped. I opened one hesitant eye to see the space above me clear of bats. It wasn't that I was afraid of them or anything, but I'd been left alone in one too many dark caves to actually like the creatures. They tended to get tangled in my hair and getting them out was a pain in the ass.

The rope still hung there, drifting along the side, and I took a hesitant step toward it, careful to keep one hand out for balance. My fingers closed around the cord and a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding exploded from me. Relief washed over me as I wrapped it around my hands and braced myself for Luc to pull me up.

"Okay, Luc. I'm ready," I called up the hole. No response. Not even a tug on the other end.

I focused on keeping the panic inside my stomach from rising up and overwhelming me even as the hair stood on the back of my neck. No... no, he was up there. He was going to pull me up... any second now.

The rope tightened like someone was yanking on it. My heart sang in relief just before the other end came falling toward me. Horror exploded through me as my lifeline smacked emptily to the ground next to me.

"No... no, no, no," I mumbled, staring at the rope in disbelief as hysteria threatened to overwhelm me. Then I remembered I was supposed to be badass. It helped. A little.

I called upon my magic, forcing it to fill me with strength. It was too high for me to jump straight up, but I could do this another way. I pulled my swords from their sheaths and with one focused effort, leapt as far into the air as I could before driving my wakazashi straight into the stone. The magic-infused blade stabbed into the rock like it was made of soft cheese. I jerked to a stop, hanging there by one arm as my shoulder strained.

With one concentrated effort, I swung my body like it was a pendulum, and as I reached the top of my arc, I drove my katana into the stone. It sank in like my wakazashi had, and for a moment, I hung there, trying to catch my breath as sweat poured down my body. Then a small head poked over the side and grinned at me. It was the same girl Luc had saved, but she looked different now, and not just because her hair had changed from black to blonde. Still, I knew it was her, and the smile on her face told me one thing. She was a vampire, and we should never have saved her.

She dropped Luc's unconscious body over the edge. I had about half a second to think about what to do before he slammed into me like a sack of wet laundry. My grip slipped from my swords and we both tumbled to the ground. He landed first, and I toppled on top of him which was good for me since he broke my fall. I lay there, staring up at the hole as the lid slowly closed, leaving me shrouded in darkness.

"See, this was why I never save anyone. Or help people. Or am generally a nice person," I told Luc's unconscious body with annoyance. I'd been feeling bad about wanting to drop a grenade down the feeding hole, but if we had, that vampire would be dead now. Probably.

He responded with a moan as I shoved myself off of him and tried to see through pitch black darkness. "If I had a nickel for every time I helped someone who wound up betraying me..."

I got up and looked around, not that it did any good. My swords were wedged into the stone above me, but I wasn't quite sure where exactly in the wall they were and something about leaping up and trying to grab a pair of razor sharp samurai swords in the dark seemed like a recipe for disaster.

Instead, I extended my hand out in front of me and focused my will. I exhaled, breathing into my palm, and as I did so, I willed light to exist. A small sphere of light sprang to life in my palm, casting a soft, effervescent glow around the tiny chamber. I wasn't sure how, maybe it was the encroaching darkness, but the room seemed much smaller now.

Either way, I had to hurry. While I could use magic without a focus, doing so would drain my energy faster than if I was using an object designed to let me focus my magic through it, you know, like my swords. I held my glowing hand up toward the wall and spied my blades, still stuck there. I made my way over to the wall and jumped with everything I had.

My fingers wrapped around Set's hilt, and I dangled there for a moment. I shut my eyes, willing the small sphere of light into my weapon, and as I did so, a small strain eased off my mind. When I opened my eyes, my wakazashi was glowing with soft red light, and from up here, it was enough to cast the whole room in reddish haze. There was still nothing here but bones, but unlike before, something about the darkness felt hungry and oppressive.

I needed to find a way out of here. I swung myself around and grabbed my katana before jerking both weapons out of the wall. I landed hard on the ground and agony ripped through my hurt ankle. This time, I didn't bother to stifle my cry. Who was going to hear anyway?

"Lillim, I think you should look at this," said a familiar ghostly voice from across the room.

I glanced in its direction to see a man standing there with short, spiked black hair. He was kneeling in front of a grate I hadn't noticed. His back was to me, but even from here I could tell he was muscular beneath his thin white t-shirt and jeans. The sight of him came as a relief. This particular ghost almost never showed his face when other people were nearby. For him to appear to me now meant we were well and truly alone. And also that Luc was good and truly unconscious, but hey, everything can't be all lemonade and sunshine.

"Nice of you to show yourself, Mattoc," I said, ambling toward my ghost, and as I did so, a spot above my left breast throbbed with cold. Yeah, that's right. I have my own ghostly charge. Hisen Mattoc had been a tough as nails assassin like fifty years ago, and somehow, he had grown rather attached to Dirge. Then, when I was reborn, he came along for the ride.

Now he was anchored to me, and it was just awesome. Especially because since he never really came out around other people, I almost always forgot he was around. When I remembered, it was usually while I was doing something I wouldn't want him to see me doing. Like showering.

Still, having a ghost around was useful at times, like when you needed someone incorporeal to look through a wall and tell you what was on the other side or to distract a room full of bad guys with machineguns. It went without saying that bullets didn't hurt him.

Mattoc tossed me a look that told me to 'deal with it,' and went back to running his insubstantial fingers along the grate so the tips vanished into the metal. "I think there's a way out through here," he said, poking his entire head through the grating so all I could see were his shoulders. His head popped back into view. "It looks like some kind of banquet hall down there." He glanced around the room

and stood up, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he strode over to me.

“What makes you so sure?” I asked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“I think you might be where they keep the entrees,” he replied, ignoring me and pointing at the floor. “See how the floor slopes down toward the grate? I bet it’s so they can bleed people out in here, and the blood flows into the grate. It looks like there’s a funnel on the other side for the blood to flow down into one of those fountain things.” He crossed his arms over his chest, and it was then I realized there was writing on his shirt. It read, *I’m with stupid*.

I growled and trudged past him toward the grate. “So instead of a champagne fountain, the vampires have a blood fountain? Next you’ll be telling me there’s a whole bunch of empty glasses next to it.”

“You know, when you guess what’s down there before I tell you, it sort of sucks the joy out of it,” Mattoc replied before snapping his fingers at me. “Now get with the manhandling of the grate so we can escape. I’m not fond of the idea of my only anchor to the mortal world being consumed like a hors d’oeuvre.”

“I love you too, Mattoc,” I replied, fixing him with my best acidic stare before sheathing my swords and kneeling down next to the grate. As soon as I touched it, a chill washed through me. I snatched my hand back. “It’s cold...”

“Cold?” Mattoc asked, but before he could say more, the hatch above us opened, and he vanished from sight. I looked up to see the little girl standing there with a wry grin on her face. Next to her were a couple vampires that looked like they’d rather be anywhere else. Great, so she’d brought reinforcements. Here I was trapped in a hole, and she had brought friends. It didn’t seem fair.

The male vampire was barrel-chested with a girlish face. His fat, pudgy fingers played with the red and black beaded necklace around his throat. He clasped and unclasped an object hanging in the center, though I couldn’t quite make out what it was.

The other vampire was a shorter woman with hair so dark it was nearly black and skin the color of milk. Her ruby-red lips were quirked into a disinterested smile as she absently buttoned and unbuttoned the top button on her white button down shirt. So, they both had nervous tics. That wasn’t good since both of them seemed old and powerful. It meant someone was making them uncomfortable, and I was willing to bet it was the little girl vampire. Was she stronger than the two of them?

“See,” the short blonde Luc had rescued cooed, pointing at me like I was exhibit A. “I told you we caught a Dioscuri.” The way she said the words made me think of a little kid catching an insect and wanting to keep it as a pet. An icy shiver crawled down my spine as I stared up at them, hoping she wouldn’t actually try it because something about the look on her face made me think she could do just that if she wanted.

Her companions nodded in unison. “Seems you were right, Ariel.” The voice boomed through the tiny corridor, and before I could do anything, something seized me by the scruff of the neck and hauled me into the air.

“The sooner you realize I’m always right, Bob, the sooner we’ll be done with this business,” the little girl said, and a horrible feeling settled over me. Surely it couldn’t be them. Surely this was two random vampires who shared the names of

the two most powerful vampires on the planet. Surely this couldn't be *the* Bob and *the* Ariel. No, there was no way the founders of both castes were here and in the flesh. That was just silliness.

It was the last thought I had before my consciousness faded into inky blackness, and I'll admit, it was a little naive.

## Chapter 12

I woke up flat on my back with the weight of the world on my chest. I tried to crane my eyes downward to see what was holding me down, but found I couldn't move at all. Not even an inch. The only thing I could see besides a rather innocuous cement ceiling with a single light embedded into it was a vague outline of glowing purple light.

"Well, this is awesome," I muttered, somewhat surprised I could speak when I couldn't even turn my head.

"So you're awake," a husky, melodious female voice whispered in my ear. Warmth rippled along my skin as she spoke, and I suddenly had some very uncomfortable thoughts enter my mind. I tried to swallow as my heart started pounding in my chest. I normally wasn't attracted to girls, especially when I hadn't so much as seen them so that meant one thing. The woman in here with me was a succubus, and if she was in full charm mode, I was in real trouble here.

"Yes," I replied, putting as much bite into the words as I could, which admittedly, wasn't all that much. Normally, I could fend off succubian advances with my magic, but for whatever reason, I couldn't call upon my powers. I suspected it had to do with whatever was keeping me immobile. Even still, I tried to take a deep breath and concentrate. Sure, I was trapped with a succubus and unable to move or fight back, but things could be worse, right?

"How interesting," she cooed, and I felt a finger trail along my cheek and settle on my collarbone. "You weren't out for long. You must be strong." Her face loomed over mine. It was the same female vampire from earlier. She pursed her ruby-red lips as she studied me with her dark eyes. "I bet you taste delicious." She licked her lips and a little tremor went through me.

My cheeks burst into flames as I tried to look away, but couldn't. She grinned at me and shook out her hair so it fell about her shoulders in a dark wave. "I'm going to ask you this once," she purred, leaning down toward me so her lips were just above my own. "Would you be a doll and answer for me?" Her tongue flicked out of her mouth and touched my lips. Electricity shot through my body, tightening things low in my body.

"Maybe," I whispered, unable to take my eyes off her lips. The brief touch of her tongue had felt so good, nearly everything in me wanted her to do more. Intellectually, I knew I shouldn't want that, knew she was using her magic to charm me, but that was the thing with succubae. They could make you do things you didn't want to do and be happy about it, and when it was over, you'd beg for more.

Even worse, I got the feeling this one was particularly powerful. So what was such a strong vampire doing here?

“Why are you here?” she asked, breathing the words into my slightly parted lips. Her magic rolled over my skin like silk and made me shiver. “What is your objective, Dioscuri? Why do you interfere in our plans?”

I swallowed and shut my eyes. As soon as I did, some of her power over me seemed to diminish. A little shocked gasp exited her throat. Was she surprised? Why? Was I not supposed to be able to shut my eyes? Either way, I was glad because it let me think, at least a little bit.

“The vampires in this city are being too open about their existence. The humans cannot know about the supernatural. That is the *first* law.” I swallowed again, and as I did so, some of the pressure in the room eased. Well, that was good. If they were less concerned, maybe they wouldn’t try to eat me. “Your kind knows this, but they are not complying. I need to know why.”

“Interesting,” she said, and her voice was very near my ear lobe. “If we agree to stay hidden, to rein in those who would seek to reveal us to the humans, will that be sufficient?” Her words seemed strange to me. Was she using vampire speak and trickery to get me into agreeing with her? It sure seemed like it, but why? Was she trying to get me to sanction what they were doing? Why would she care? Unless... unless they weren’t supposed to be doing whatever it was they were doing?

Was that why they hadn’t just killed me? Were they worried I was just scouting them out? That I was the first in a long line of Dioscuri coming to crush them? If that was true, they were definitely up to no good, and I needed to stop them.

“When I bring my report to the Dioscuri high council, they will have to decide,” I said, and the succubus huffed in frustration. She was so powerful even that tiny sound made me ache with the need to console her.

I slowly opened one eye, risking a glance at her, but she wasn’t looking at me. The vampire was looking beyond me at someone else and part of me was disappointed. She shrugged her shoulders, and her tiny movement made me realize just how sheer her top was. If she’d move just a little to the left...

The male vampire from earlier stepped forward, distracting me from the thoughts I really shouldn’t have been having. His sudden presence was even more unnerving because I hadn’t known he was there.

“Look,” he said, voice strangely scratchy and high-pitched. “By the time your people come here to stop us, we’ll be done.” He waved his hand dismissively. “As for the newbies, we’ll relocate them to Alaska or something. They like it there. It’s cold and dark. All you have to do is let us finish.” He gave me a look that made me realize it was the best deal I was probably going to get.

“I don’t have the authority to make a deal like that,” I replied, hoping the lie wouldn’t make them think I was useless and kill me outright, but would buy me time to think of a plan.

“When you lie to us, it makes me unhappy. Do you want to make me unhappy, Lillim?” the female asked, leaning down and grabbing my chin. She squished my cheeks together so my lips puffed out. “We know who you are Lillim Callina, Hyas Tyee of the Dioscuri. You have more than enough rank to agree to our terms.” Her words sent a chill running through me. So they did know who I was, and if they

did and were still holding me here, trying to make an agreement, what they were up to was likely very, very bad.

“Because you’re up to something, and I don’t know what it is.” I tried to nod toward the weight on my chest. “You have me trapped here, and I get the distinct impression you want to drown me like a bag of unwanted kittens.” I exhaled sharply. “Those things make me think I shouldn’t help you. Not even a little. You know, ignoring the fact that you’re monsters.”

“What if we showed you what we were doing?” the male asked, arching one dark eyebrow at me. “Would that be better?”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure. On one hand, they were vampires, but on the other, if they were willing to show me what they were up to, how bad could it be? Maybe not that bad since the Dioscuri had a very low tolerance level for shenanigans. Then again, it could be a trap. They were evil after all.

“It’d be a start—” I started to say when the succubus cut me off.

“We’re not authorized to do that, Logan,” she said, looking up from me and glaring daggers at her compatriot.

“Danae, we don’t have a choice. Ariel wants a signed and delivered contract.” Logan the vampire gestured at me like I was exhibit A. “We have to do what Ariel says, or well, I don’t want to think about what she’ll do.”

“There’s no way...” Danae trailed off and shook her head. “If she gets free, it’s on you.”

Logan gritted his teeth but didn’t say anything else. Instead, he reached down and pulled something off my chest. The weight of the world eased. The necklace he’d been wearing earlier was in his hands, and without another word, he fastened it around his neck and tucked it under the collar of his black button up. Watching him put it away made me uncomfortable. Not just because he’d used his magic to bind me to the table really easily, but because he was making a point of keeping it hidden. What was it?

“Let’s go, Dioscuri.” Logan crooked a smile at me. “Time’s a wasting, and before you get any bright ideas, yes, when I said Ariel, I meant *the* Ariel.”

I know a name shouldn’t make me shudder and my knees tremble, but that one did. It was stupid. I know. But Ariel was one of the scariest vampires on the planet. She was the founder of a caste of vampires specializing in blood magic, and I’d been out of commission for more than enough time for her to have gotten her hands on some of my blood. If she had, she could turn my blood into acid, or worse. I didn’t even want to think about what the worse would be. Use the blood in my veins to walk me around like a puppet?

“Well, at least she recognizes who is here.” Danae scowled at me and turned away, her fingers playing over her top button again. It was weird because she seemed too old and powerful to still have nervous gestures. Time tended to strip away all human gestures from the creatures, leaving the older ones more like statues than not. Then again, she was a succubus. Maybe having human tics helped her seduce her victims.

“It’s one of the perks of working with the Dioscuri,” Logan replied, taking my hand in his and pulling me into a sitting position. It was weird because his flesh felt cold and clammy even though I was pretty sure vampires didn’t sweat. “They’re all so well educated. It makes it easy to impress upon them the importance of the

situation. Imagine how much more difficult this would be if she didn't know who Ariel was?"

Danae tsked, letting out the sound through clenched teeth. She definitely didn't like whatever was going on. I wasn't sure that was a bad thing. If there was strife between the vampires, maybe I could use that to my advantage.

The room they had me in wasn't much to look at. Aside from the steel table I'd been laying on, it was empty save for a couple of metal folding chairs. There was a doorway to our right, but it didn't even have a door. I wasn't quite sure where we were, but the cobblestone walls and floor made me think dungeon. Still, this place was built beneath a modern looking building, so how old could it have really been? Unless, of course, whoever built it had a thing for old fashioned dungeons, but if that was the case, where were the bars?

I was about to ask when Logan pulled me to my feet and led me toward the doorway. The tips of my shoes caught on the cobbles, and I almost slipped, but the vampire held me upright with ease. He smirked at me, and I got the distinct impression he was enjoying himself.

Danae followed behind us, muttering in a language I couldn't understand though it sounded sort of like French. Near as I could tell, she didn't actually like me at all, let alone in that way. It made me wonder how far she would have been willing to go with her 'interrogation.' The thought made me shiver and not in a good way. She'd probably interrogated lots of people she didn't particularly care for.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, glancing over my shoulder at her instead of watching where I was going.

She looked up at me, her dark eyes a mixture between curiosity and annoyance. "For what?"

"For you having to pretend to like me." My cheeks heated up as she quirked one well-manicured eyebrow at me. "You know, in that way..."

"Apology accepted," she stated mechanically, voice even as she stared at me. For a second, I thought I saw a thought swim through her eyes. Then she shook her head and strode past us, disappearing through the door, her short black skirt swishing around her hips in a way designed to catch the eye. I tried not to watch, but even without effort, the succubus was so strong, I couldn't keep darker thoughts from running through my mind.

Beside me, Logan chuckled. It was a weird sound because it seemed amused rather than cold and maniacal. "I'm not sure if you pissed her off or impressed her," Logan said, turning to shrug at me, his lips spread into a wide grin. "She doesn't actually like..." he waved his hand at me, "you know."

"Girls?" I asked as we exited the room and found ourselves in the hallway. There appeared to be other rooms like ours every few feet, but otherwise it was just a long hallway for several feet in either direction. Like the room I'd been in earlier, lights were embedded into the ceiling, so instead of feeling dark and dingy, it felt cold and unfeeling.

"Dioscuri," he replied and the tone of his voice made me incredibly uncomfortable, like he was picturing me and her in his mind. "She doesn't mind girls so much."



“Good to know, I guess,” I said, looking around for some clue as to where we were going, but finding none. I had half a mind to try to escape, but what would be the point? Logan had said he’d show me what was up. If that was the case, I ought to let him lead me to it. If it wasn’t, well, I could try to escape then. It was a bad plan because, for all I knew, he could be leading me toward a pit filled with monsters, but I’d ridden that particular rodeo a few times now. The only problem was that I was without my swords. Still, I could tell they were close by.

“It’s not your fault.” Logan shrugged. “Her mate was killed by a Dioscuri.” The way he said the words made me feel a little sad which was crazy because she was a vampire. That meant her mate was probably a vampire too. I was not about to feel bad for killing creatures that literally sucked the life from people. You know, unless it was a really sad story. I had a heart after all.

“What happened?” I asked even though I probably shouldn’t have. I didn’t want to go forming attachments to a creature I might have to kill. We passed by another room, but it was empty inside save for a table and chairs similar to the ones that had been in my own cell.

“She was a human girl hung in Boston a little before the Salem Witch Trials,” Logan said, staring off into space like he was trying to remember something. “A Dioscuri accused her of being a witch, and it worked because people weren’t quite so forgiving of the whole lesbian thing back then. He was trying to use her as bait to lure Danae out of hiding, but she wasn’t even in the state at the time. Needless to say, she was quite enraged when she returned.”

I squinted at him, trying to decide whether or not I believed him. “You’re telling me a Dioscuri accused an innocent person of being a witch to lure out Danae, but she wasn’t even there?”

“Pretty much,” Logan replied, and I suddenly felt sick. The Salem Witch Trials were the example of why it was important to keep the supernatural world secret from the humans because they tended to overreact, and well, kill everything in their path until they felt safe again. To think that the event may have been perpetrated by a Dioscuri was even more unnerving. “I wouldn’t feel too bad about it though. Time heals all wounds...” Logan shrugged.

“You seem like such a caring friend,” I grumbled as he placed his hand on a door at the end of the room. It was shiny and metallic. I got the distinct impression it might actually be made from silver or at least coated with the substance.

“Oh, make no mistake,” Logan replied, glancing at me and narrowing his eyes. “We’re not friends.” With that, he shoved me through the doorway. The threshold felt heavy and warm, sliding over my skin like I was being shoved through a vat of warm raspberry jam. Magic zipped over my skin, and for a moment, it was all I could do to stand there and not feel overwhelmed. Wards flared to life all around me, blue flame bursting from their edges as we stood there, unmoving.

The wards lifted up in the darkness in front of me until they coalesced into a seething mass of light before exploding into a million scintillating shards that cascaded across the ceiling, illuminating the room before me.

We were standing on a marble balcony overlooking a room about the size of a basketball court. The stone floor was made up of darkening shades of red rock so

it started off as bright as blood in the far corner of the room and flowed into a sort of black morass beneath where we stood.

A marble altar stood in the center of the room surrounded by acolytes dressed in purple robes with gilded owls embroidered onto their backs. The altar looked like it was big enough to sacrifice a bull on top of it. Only there wasn't a bull on it at all. Jean Luc lay in its center. He had been stripped down to his underwear and tied to the dais with his hands splayed out to the sides.

One of the acolytes lifted a copper bowl encrusted with glittering gemstones and gestured toward Luc with it. Foul smelling pink liquid sloshed inside as another acolyte produced a jeweled bronze dagger and raised it in the air before sweeping her hood off her head to reveal her blonde hair. The little girl Luc had saved earlier turned and looked up to us, her lips twisted into a smile.

"Hello, Lillim," she said, eyes twinkling as she gestured at Luc with the dagger. "You're just in time to watch the show." The way she spoke made me think she wasn't worried I'd try to stop her. But why? If she was misbehaving, I'd have to stop her. Then again, it'd be really easy for her to use the blood in my body to turn my brain into mush. Was that why she wasn't worried, or was it something more?

Logan's grip tightened on my wrist, and my heart pounded in my chest as she turned back around and raised the dagger over Luc's chest. I'd been a fool. These vampires were planning on sacrificing Luc, and I'd been almost feeling sorry for them and chatting?

Words in a language I didn't understand spilled out of the girl's mouth as Logan removed his necklace and leaned near to me so his lips were nearly touching my ear. "If you want to save your friend from Ariel, now is your chance. Her speech will be almost a full minute long." Before I could even ask what he was doing, he fastened his necklace around my neck and took half a step to the side.

I glanced from him to Ariel and back again. I wasn't sure what Logan's necklace did exactly, but as it rested against my skin, I could feel power emanating from it. So why had he given it to me? And what sort of game was he playing?

He leaned forward on the balcony and clasped the marble like he was enjoying the show and made a shoing motion with his hand. "Move along, little Dioscuri. Times a wasting."

I glared at him before turning my gaze on the scene below. I didn't have my weapons, there was an immeasurably strong vampire down there about to sacrifice Luc, and worse still, she was surrounded by several other goons. The odds didn't look good. But I was Lillim Callina, and I didn't let little things like impending doom stop me from being stupid.

As she raised her dagger into the air, I leapt over the balcony.

## Chapter 13

The air rushed around me as I fell with my hands outstretched. I gathered as much power as I could in the time it took me to fall from the second story balcony down to the ground. It probably would have hurt, but thankfully, I had a vampire

to break my fall. He crumpled against the stone altar as the impact traveled up my body, but I'd been planning for it. The vampire beneath me? Not so much.

Ariel's eyes opened wide in shock as she turned toward me, but bless her heart, she kept chanting. It made me wonder what would happen if she was interrupted. It was time to find out.

My blood pounded in my ears from the thrum of energy next to the altar as I threw my hands outward, slamming my palms into her pint-sized body. I released all the magic I'd been gathering at once. The surge flung her backward across the floor, slamming her haphazardly into the stone wall at the far end of the room. The wet smack of it was so violent, it almost made me cringe away, but as she slid to the floor, the vampire narrowed her eyes and glared daggers at me. She slowly got to her feet, acting like I'd barely hurt her. That wasn't good. Not at all.

The closest vampire came at me, but I managed to dodge his clumsy swing and drive my foot into the side of a knee. A horrible crack filled the air as he toppled into the dais, but I was already moving past him. A swipe of claws tore through my sweatshirt and pain shot through me. Scarlet flames leapt from the wound, drowning me in agony as I staggered.

That misstep was all it took for another vampire to wrap his unnaturally strong hands around my throat and hoist me into the air. My legs kicked outward, connecting with something soft and squishy. I fell, slamming backward onto the stone. I lay there, trying to remember how to breathe as my hand instinctively went to my wounded side.

It no longer burned, but there were still four more vampires surrounding me. Their eyes blazed from beneath their hoods as they lunged for me, undead fingers wrapping around my limbs and pulling at me. My sweatshirt tore as I struggled, and for a second, my hands were free. I drew upon my magic and smashed my fist into the vampire with the copper bowl's face. The blow flung him backward like a ragdoll, and he hit the ground a few feet away. The bowl slipped from his hand and crashed to the ground, spilling the pink goop onto the stone.

The smell of burning rubber filled my nose as the stone began to bubble and crack. I leapt off the dais, landing in the place the vampire had occupied and used one well-placed sidekick to shatter the hip of the vampire who had been standing next to him. He flopped to the side as Ariel's chanting reached a crescendo. Thunder cracked within the cloudless room, splintering my hearing as her words reverberated through the air and pounded in my ears like bass drums. My stomach clenched in horror as I spun in time to see her striding toward Luc, ritual dagger in hand.

"No!" I screamed, knowing I couldn't leave Luc tied to the altar. I shifted and brought my elbow down onto the altar with all the force my magic-infused body could muster.

Pain exploded through my limb as power flared across the surface of the stone. Purple light exploded from the spot I'd struck, rippling outward along the surface of the altar and everything went totally silent for a moment. The altar shattered into powder. Luc's body hit the ground just as Ariel reached us, dagger slashing through where he had been a second before.

"You're ruining everything!" Ariel cursed, whirling on me and extending her free hand toward me. Everything went sort of black and hazy around the edges as the

taste of blood filled my mouth. I toppled forward, falling to my knees across Luc's body as pain racked me, distilling everything down into indescribable agony. Then all at once, the necklace around my neck went as cold as ice, chilling me to the bone. "We were supposed to have an agreement!" Her voice was an erupting volcano of rage.

Instead of replying, I tried to breathe. Only it felt like my lungs had filled with fluid. Try as I might, I couldn't draw in any air. Bloody foam sprayed from my lips as the necklace froze my flesh. It was like someone had filled my veins with ice as the necklace throbbed and pulsed, and then, like magic, I could breathe again. How the hell had that happened? Had Logan's necklace protected me from Ariel's magic somehow? I was pretty sure it had, but why? Why would he help me stop her? What was in it for him?

Luc twitched beneath me, his body spasming hard enough to knock me off of him. I hit the ground hard, but wasn't able to do anything more than lay there and bleed. His body was smeared with my blood. Only... only, he was glowing.

I tried to move, tried to get out of the way as every ward on his body burst into silvery flames. Ariel cried out, her shrill voice tearing my hearing asunder, but I could breathe again. I sucked in a merciful breath as I struggled to do more than watch Luc slowly rise. The vampire backed up, her blade held before her, fear plastered across her face. It was weird because I bet she hadn't felt fear in a very long time. Still, why was she so afraid of Luc? Sure he had magic wards covering his body, but she was Ariel, the millennia old founder of the Owls. That didn't make any sense at all.

"I thought you needed help," Luc told the vampire, his voice strained and broken as he rose to his feet and stood there like a living pillar of silver flame. "But it turns out you're just a very bad girl."

His hand shot out, and he grabbed the vampire by the throat. He lifted her into the air like she weighed nothing, and she struggled, grasping her throat even though I knew she didn't need to breathe. Silver fire leapt between them, crawling over her skin and consuming her as she thrashed in Luc's iron grip.

It was almost enough to make me miss her lashing out with her dagger. The blade slashed open Luc's chest, filleting him down to the bone. The wards along his torso winked out as his blood poured from the wound. Luc grunted and flung the vampire before she could strike again. She smacked into the wall hard enough to crack it and fell forward onto the stone still burning.

The other vampires were on the move, rushing toward their founder as Luc slumped to his knees, clutching his chest as his silver glow surrounding his body dimmed. I was on my feet in an instant, but as I reached out toward him, he held up one bloody hand.

"Blood," he said, collapsing to the ground as the glow went out and crimson began to gush between his fingers. "I can heal with more blood."

I looked toward the vampires and swallowed. Did he want me to pour vampire blood onto his open wound? That was insane, but then again, everything was insane. I hate to say it, but instead of trying to staunch his bleeding, I left him on the ground and sprinted toward the vampires. I grabbed the nearest one by the back of his cowl and jerked him off his feet. He hit the stone with a crash, and

before he could recover, I drove my fist into his cloaked face hard enough to shatter his bone beneath my fist.

The other vampires turned toward me, and for a moment, I'd wondered if they would attack me, but Ariel took that moment to grab the closest of her minions and tear into his throat with her teeth. Her face was charred to the point I couldn't even make out her features, but I wasn't going to waste time watching her suck her vampires dry because afterward, she'd be coming for me.

Her minions stood there, unsure of what to do as I tightened my grip on my captured vampire and dragged him across the floor toward Luc. He stretched one hand out toward me, and I shoved the broken vampire toward him. He grabbed hold of the creature and pressed the vampire's still bleeding face into his own torso.

The wards across his body flared with sapphire light, and his wound began to close. An inhuman shriek filled my ears, and I spun to see Ariel reaching out toward us. I felt her power slide off me and strike the vampire Luc was holding. The creature exploded into a cloud of red fog, flinging body parts in every direction. A leg hit me in the side of the head, and I stumbled backward, little tweety birds flapping around my skull.

"How are you avoiding my powers?!" Ariel howled in rage and frustration. Her flesh still had that mottled, burned look like a ham that had fallen into the fire, but it didn't seem to hinder her movement much as she crossed the distance between her before I could draw a single breath.

"Oh you know, magic," I said, throwing a punch at her face.

She dodged my blow with ease before slapping me across the face hard enough to rattle my teeth. "No matter, Dioscuri. I am no stranger to fisticuffs. I shall enjoy beating you to death with my bare hands."

Ariel grabbed me by the hair and slammed my head backward into the stone wall. "Do you know how hard I have worked to catch the Wardbreaker? Now that I have him, I will not let you take him away from me. Not when I am so very close to victory! It's too bad. I would have let you go if you hadn't interfered, little Dioscuri. But now... now you will pay for this disruption with blood." She sank her teeth into my throat. The feeling was indescribable. First there was pain as she tore my flesh open with her teeth, but after that it felt so good, I couldn't even think beyond the pleasure.

It was a good thing Luc chose that moment to kick her in the face. Her fangs tore free of my body with a spray of her blood. I lay there, unable to move. The only thoughts I had were "why had she stopped biting me?" and "how could I make her do it again?"

Luc stepped over me and grabbed the vampire by the hair before tossing her into the wall. She hit with a sound that made me think broken bones and internal injuries before slumping to the ground amidst the dried up husks of her minions. Had she drained them all?

"Are you okay?" Luc asked, glancing at me as he knelt down and picked something up. The ritual dagger gleamed in his hands.

"Yeah," I replied, forcing myself to get up. Now that the euphoria of Ariel's bite had passed, I was left feeling groggy, but otherwise unfazed. "Takes more than a vampire bite to put me down."

“Good to know,” He turned back toward Ariel as she rose to her feet.

The vampire smiled, her lips twisted into a horrific grin as she raised one hand in front of her face and snapped her fingers. The sound echoed within the room, so loud I was forced to cover my ears. The walls began to bleed. Crimson ichor flooded out from between the stones and splattered across the ground. All of her minions simply dissolved into ooze as her lips quirked into a smile.

“Rise,” Ariel said, and the words thrummed with power. Blood rose up around us as she evaporated into red mist. The room shook as the blood around us coalesced into a huge writhing mass. I swallowed, staggering backward as a winged serpent stepped forth from the slime and wrung its head, splattering us with goo. Luc’s wards flared with blue light for a split second before winking out completely.

Terror filled me as I staggered backward and fell on my butt. How the hell was I supposed to stop a blood dragon? Much less one controlled by the most powerful vampire in existence? It was impossible. There was just no way.

“What’s the matter, Wardbreaker? Dragon got your magic?” Ariel’s laughter filled the air as the creature opened its jaws and roared loud enough to shake the room.

## Chapter 14

A lot of thoughts went through my mind as I stared at the gigantic blood dragon, but none of them were particularly helpful. I mean where exactly was I supposed to hide in an empty room?

I had no idea how to beat something like this because it wasn’t even alive. It was a construct held together by Ariel’s iron will, and she had millennia of practice. Even if I beat it up, it wasn’t like I could stop the thing. The only way to take it down would be to break Ariel’s control over it. The only problem was, I had no idea how to do that either.

The dragon lumbered toward us, its heavy footfalls splattering red liquid across the cobbles as it moved forward, ichor dripping from its jaws.

“So what’s the plan?” I asked, backing away from the creature until my shoulders touched the stone behind me. I instantly wondered if I could somehow phase through the wall. Not that I would because that’d be running away... Oh, who am I kidding, I’d have totally run away from a giant blood dragon with teeth like glittering ruby daggers because it was scary as hell.

“Buy me some time,” Luc whispered, eyes narrowing at the beast. “I think I know what’s going wrong with my wards, why they stopped working despite all the blood and magic.”

Above us, Ariel cackled. It sounded like her voice was everywhere in the room and I shuddered uncontrollably, my knees quaking as I stared at the massive beast. I wasn’t quite sure how she’d managed to create the creature before us, but I was betting it took tremendous focus to keep it manifested. Controlling creations like her dragon was an all consuming task, even if you were a several-thousand-

year-old vampire. Maybe I could blast it into ribbons and force her to spend time reforming it? I had to try, right?

“Sure, no problem. I’ll fight the monster while you meditate,” I said, ducking out of the way as a bloody claw cleaved through the air, forcing Luc and I onto opposite sides of the monster. The air was thick and heavy with magic, making it hard to breathe as I whirled around and faced the dragon with my fists clenched.

It turned its head toward Luc, ignoring me as the hunter knelt in the blood and placed his hand on the floor. I wasn’t quite sure why his wards had faded when there was so much blood on the ground, but I hoped he would figure it out soon.

Before the creature could amble its bulk around and smash Luc into twain, I slammed one open hand into its side. The necklace Logan had given me flared like fire against my skin, so hot I knew it was going to leave burns behind. I shrieked as my hand plunged through the dragon’s weird flesh with way less effort than I’d expected. I sank up to my elbow in the crimson goop of its skin. It sort of felt like cold pea soup. Power exploded up my arm, flowing into the necklace as it got hotter and hotter.

“White Sparrow!” I cried, doing my best to redirect all the energy flowing from the dragon and into my necklace. I was never really very good at sucking magic out of the air, let alone redirecting it, but in this particular situation, I didn’t have to be because there was so much of it. Power rampaged through my body, burning inside my veins like molten lead before surging out of my submerged hand.

A column of white fire exploded into being, slamming down inside the creature and cleaving a huge hole out of its center. The dragon snarled and thrashed as the fiery cylinder held it pinned in place. The smell of charred blood filled my nose as Ariel screamed in outrage.

The dragon collapsed into a puddle of goo, and I fell backward onto the stones, my spell winking out in an instant as I sucked a breath into my heaving lungs. I’d killed it. I wasn’t quite sure how or why Logan’s necklace had helped me, but I wasn’t going to question it right now. Instead, I tried to get up and move toward Luc, but before I could, something seized me by the scruff of the neck and hauled me to my feet.

“I’m not sure how you knew to rip the power from the heart of my blood golem,” Ariel hissed in my ears. “But I’ll make you pay for it, Lillim.” She said my name like it was a particularly offensive curse. What can I say? I have an effect on people and monsters. Still, I had half a mind to tell her it was Logan’s necklace and redirect her anger toward him. Something told me that even if she believed me, she wouldn’t do anything about it until after I was dead.

“Well, you know what they say,” I growled, trying to swipe at her with my hands but catching only air. “If at first you don’t succeed, kill it with fire.”

Instead of replying, Ariel flung me across the room. I hit the ground and bounced a couple times as pain ripped through my body and made things hazy and red around the edges. Ariel stalked toward me, eyes narrowed as she raised one hand and gestured at me.

The blood beneath me surged around my limbs, wrapping around my ankles and wrists and locking me to the floor. “You’re just a distraction, Dioscuri. An annoying one, I’ll admit, but a distraction nonetheless. Keep it up and I just may decide the ransom your mother will pay for your safe return isn’t worth it.” The

vampire turned toward Luc who was still kneeling there, eyes far off and vacant looking. "You probably don't even realize who he is."

What did she mean by that? Luc was just a hunter right? Albeit a weird one with magic scars, but I never got the impression he was anything other than human. If he wasn't, well, I'd have felt it right? So why was she so insistent seeming. Why had she been about to sacrifice him? And why was she here at all? This was Ariel, the founder of the Owls, after all. Surely, she had better things to do than deal with Luc and me.

Ariel smirked and took a step toward Luc. "I can see from your eyes that I am right." She shook her head. "How very disappointing. I thought your kind was better informed, but in the end, you're just like every other monster. Concerned with your own politics and missing the big picture." Her words made me feel very small and embarrassed. Hadn't I just accused Luc of the same thing earlier when we were dealing with the feeding holes?

Luc stood, and as he did so, the markings across his chest glowed every color of the rainbow, making the room light up like a disco ball. And yes, I knew what that was. Disco was pretty damned popular where I came from. Don't ask me why.

"That's enough, Ariel," Luc said, his voice cold and even. "Say another word, and I'll tear your tongue from your mouth." He cracked his knuckles. "Though I'll probably do that anyway. You know. For fun." I'll be honest, the sight of him standing there like an avenging angel filled me with the hope that maybe, just maybe, we wouldn't die in the next few moments.

"Whatever," Ariel said and blood surged around her, engulfing her body in an instant before coalescing into spiked, crimson knight's armor. She held a bloody two-handed sword in one hand and gestured at Luc with her other. One by one, his wards winked out as a thin, nearly-translucent rivulet of scarlet spun out of his body toward her outstretched hand. "You forget who you are dealing with."

Luc smirked, fingers tightening around the bronze dagger. "Then I'll just have to make this quick." He charged forward, moving so quickly, I saw little more than a blur. He slammed into Ariel hard enough for the reverberation to shake the room. The vampire stumbled backward, mouth twisted in pain as she swung the huge sword at Luc. He blocked the blade with one arm, and it shattered into a thousand droplets of blood that splattered across the room like warm rain.

The bindings around my arms and legs loosened, only a little, but it was enough for me to realize Luc had broken her concentration, at least a little. I squirmed, my muscles cording as I tried to wrench myself free of the bindings. Another titanic blow rocked the vampire and my hands slipped free.

I sat up, watching in amazement as Luc's hammer blows slammed into the vampire's exposed torso, mashing her insides into jelly as the wall behind her cracked. But why was he using his fists? What had happened to his dagger? I glanced around, looking for it. He must have lost the weapon because the blade glinted only a few feet away from me. I held my hand out toward it and concentrated.

"Come," I murmured, pouring magic into the word. The blade jiggled on the ground before flying toward me. I caught it in my outstretched hand, and a surge of energy ran down the length of my body. My eyes opened in shock as I stared open-mouthed at the blade. It sure felt powerful. What was it? I lashed out at the



bindings holding my legs. The dagger didn't cut through the blood so much as dissolve it into scarlet smoke.

Ariel yelled something in what sounded like French, and Luc's body flew backward through the air. He slammed down hard on the cobbles, and the last of his wards winked out completely. He lay there unmoving, and I got the distinct impression he was unconscious.

The vampire didn't look very happy. Her face had been busted open, and her bloody armor was cracked and broken which was weird because it looked like it was made from liquid. As she limped toward the fallen hunter, her injuries healed before my eyes. From the look of things, we didn't have a lot of time before she was back to full strength.

"Stop!" I screamed, hurling the dagger at her with all the force I could muster.

She turned toward me, confusion evident on her face. The blade punctured her left eye, and she screamed. The sound was enough to wake the damned, you know, if she hadn't already drunk them all dry earlier. Black smoke poured from the socket, filling the air with the scent of rotten eggs as she reached up, clawing at the dagger. She jerked the weapon free in a spray of black ichor and stared at me with her good eye. The wound pulsed, black veins worming outward from the hole in her head, contorting her face into a mask of rage and agony.

I didn't give her a chance to do more. I tackled her to the ground and unleashed everything I had left. Fire leapt from my fists, lashing her in down with writhing flames as I slammed them into her body over and over again. My chest heaved with exertion as the spell consumed everything inside me. And the sad thing was, I knew it wouldn't be enough.

Ariel drove the bronze dagger into the fiery bonds. The blade cut through my magic like butter. Heat exploded outward, washing over me and evaporating the blood and sweat clinging to my body. My binding spell shattered completely, and the smoking vampire stood before me, flesh charred almost beyond all recognition.

"I've changed my mind," she said, glaring at me with her good eye. "Ransom or not, I'm going to kill you. First." She grabbed me by the hair and hoisted me into the air. The movement was too quick for me to even try to defend against it. Had she been going easy on me before? Her remaining eye met mine, and I felt myself falling. Usually, I could shrug off a vampire's gaze, but come on, this was Ariel, the veritable queen of the damned. And besides, she was pissed at me. Fighting her off was like trying to bail out the Titanic with a Dixie cup.

My hands fell to my sides, suddenly leaden and unmovable as her mouth opened wide to reveal fangs too large for her mouth. They glinted in the low light of the room as she leaned forward and sank them into my throat. Only this time, instead of feeling good, it felt like someone had stabbed me with fire. I tried to scream, tried to do anything, but my lips wouldn't move. That's when I realized I wasn't even breathing. Panic surged up inside me as I fought to do anything at all.

The twin blades of Shirajirashii burst through the vampire's stomach and tore outward, cutting Ariel in two and spilling the blood in her stomach across the cobbles. She screamed into my throat as her grip on me faltered, and she collapsed onto the floor, but instead of striking in two separate pieces, the moment her body struck the stone, it burst like a water balloon filled with red paint. There was no trace of her flesh at all. Somehow, it had all turned into goo.

Logan reached out, catching me in his arms as Ariel's blood surged together and began to reform back into a vaguely humanoid shape. Well, that was a neat trick. I hadn't known the blood queen could turn herself into liquid and reform. No wonder she'd been around for so long. With a power like that, she'd be nearly impossible to kill.

"Let's get out of here before she recovers," he hissed, pressing Set and Isis into my hands. As soon as my fingers closed around their hilts, their magic surged through me, breaking through the cobwebs of my mind and pulling me back to reality. "We don't have a lot of time."

"What are you doing?" I asked as he hurriedly pulled me across the room toward Luc's fallen body.

"Saving you, obviously," he growled, grabbing the fallen hunter and slinging him over one shoulder like Luc didn't weigh a couple hundred pounds. Normally, vampire super strength annoyed me, but in this case, I was willing to make an exception... for now.

"Why?" I asked as a chill swept through the room, setting my teeth chattering and standing the hair on the back of my neck straight up. "Why are you helping me? Why did you give me the necklace?"

"Because I want you to kill crazy pants over there," Logan said, glancing back over his shoulder. He looked like he'd been about to say more, but instead of doing so, he stopped and stared wide eyed. "That should be obvious."

I glanced at what he was looking at but wished I hadn't. Ariel was striding toward us. Her features hadn't quite solidified, so she sort of looked like a moving statue of molten lead. She reached one hand out toward us, fingers splayed. Logan faltered, clutching his chest with his fingers.

"Leave us alone!" I screamed, drawing upon Set's power and letting loose a blast of red lightning from my wakazashi. It struck Ariel in the chest and hurled her backward across the floor.

Logan sucked in a breath which was weird because he didn't need to breathe and surged across the room toward one of the walls. I didn't quite see what he did exactly, but the next thing I knew, the stone in front of him slid away to reveal stairs. He gestured for me to follow and darted inside.

I did as he suggested and followed. What else was I going to do? Stay here with the blood queen? Screw that. Even though I had Shirajirashii now, I still didn't want to tangle with her. I mean she'd survived being sliced in half and getting lit on fire after all. Those were my two default methods of dealing with vampires, and I wasn't quite sure what to try next.

As soon as I stepped into the stairway, Logan looked back at me, already several steps up, and waved his hand at me. The door behind us closed with a thud, and I wondered if it would even hold Ariel back for long. I somehow doubted it, so I double timed it up toward Logan even though he was damned near sprinting up the stairs.

By the time I reached him, I was breathing so hard, I thought my lungs would explode. "Slow down," I wheezed, not sure if I actually wanted him to because something slammed against the doorway below us and the entire stairwell shook. "You know what, never mind."

Logan shook his head and moved even faster. The hallway shuddered again and cold flowed up toward us. Was she through? It seemed impossible, but she'd already demonstrated she could turn her body into mist. Maybe she'd just slipped under the door? I sure hoped not.

"We're here," Logan said from above and pushed a hatch open above his head, spilling bright light into the room. Another crash echoed below us as Logan turned toward me, silhouetted by the sunlight above and gestured toward me with one hand. "Let's go," he called and stepped out into the light.

The street was pretty normal. It even had traffic which wasn't surprising since by the look of the sun's position, it was well past noon. How long had I been unconscious? It had to have been a while since we'd gone down before dusk. The thought made my blood run cold as I realized a horrible truth. We had been fighting Ariel during the day... when she was at her weakest. A shudder ran through me.

Logan pulled open the back door to a black town car and shoved Luc inside before shutting it. He swung the passenger door wide, gestured for me to get in, and went around to the driver's side door. I climbed in as he was buckling his seatbelt.

"Buckle up. It's about to get fast." He stepped on the gas, sending us flying down the road before I'd even shut my door which seemed pretty dangerous, but probably less so than getting caught by a vampire strong enough to boil the blood in his body with a thought. "And furious!"

"So why'd you save me?" I asked, rolling my eyes at him as we sped away, Logan using his superhuman vampire reflexes to weave through traffic like he was some kind of racecar driver. Then again, maybe he was. Lots of the more normal looking monsters played professional sports because they tended to be both stronger and faster than the average human. Then again, I wasn't sure racecar driving even qualified as a sport.

"If I said vampire politics would you drop it?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow at me as he came up on the sidewalk and swerved around a blue minivan, narrowly missing a woman pushing a stroller.

"Unlikely," I replied, pretty sure his driving wouldn't make my hammering heart actually burst through my chest. It would be just my luck to survive a fight with Ariel only to die in a car accident. "You just assaulted your founder. That's like a death sentence, right?"

"Yes." He was silent for a moment as if chewing over his words. "But Ariel won't be around much longer if my plans are a success."

"And what plan is that, exactly?" I asked, hoping I wasn't an integral part of said plan, while at the same time also hoping it wasn't also worse than whatever Ariel was up to. I mean, she'd been in charge for a couple millennia and nothing *that* bad had ever happened. It was one of the reasons we hadn't sent a squad of Hyas Tyees in to carve her into twain, well that and we didn't exactly have *that* many Hyas Tyees anymore.

"Succession, obviously." Logan stared at the road for a moment before huffing in a decidedly human way. "And even if you don't want me in charge, you don't want her plan to succeed, either. You just don't."

“What are her plans?” I asked just before the manhole cover in front of us shot from the center of the street and came crashing down onto the hood of our car. Logan tried to maneuver the vehicle, but it was too late. Our tire caught the hole, and we jerked to a stop in a squeal of shrieking metal. Then it began to rain. Blood.

## Chapter 15

The acrid smell of melting paint filled my nose as the car began to sizzle. Ariel came flying out of the manhole in a wave of crimson that crashed down on the street in front of us. Her hair had turned scarlet as she surged toward us, one hand clutching a ruby trident. Not only was her eye still a burned out hole, the entire side of her face was covered in black decay. Even from here, the stink of putrefaction was strong enough to make nausea rise in the back of my throat. That dagger had certainly hurt her.

Only now, seeing the look on her face I wasn't sure if that was a good thing. Next time I attacked a founder, I'd make sure I put them down for the count. Assuming, of course, there was a next time.

Ariel held her free hand out toward us, fingers splayed. Power washed over the car, and the ceiling tore backward like someone was rolling up the lid on a sardine tin.

“Oh hell,” Logan muttered under his breath as his entire seat was torn from the frame. With an absent gesture, the blood queen sent him flying off behind her. He struck the ground hard enough to make me think everything inside his body had broken. Still, the vampire tried to move, but he shouldn't have bothered. Ariel snapped her fingers and blood poured from his mouth, eyes, ears, and every other hole he had. I fought the urge to throw up as he collapsed into a desiccated heap. So much for him helping me. The jerk. Why'd he have to go and get all the blood sucked out of him by the blood queen?

“Get out,” Ariel called, her good eye fixing on me. I averted my gaze at the last second even as her command reverberated through me. Even without direct eye contact, it was enough to make me unbuckle my seat belt and start to open the door.

People were screaming all around us, and the cry of sirens filled my ears. Ariel had to hear it too because vampires had way better hearing than I did. Still, she didn't seem worried which was odd. Ariel didn't get to be as old and as powerful as she was by drawing unnecessary attention to herself. No, this was decidedly odd behavior for the founder. She should have let us escape and sent her minions after us. Not come out here in the sunlight to take us on herself. So why was she here?

“Fine, but not because you told me to!” I gripped the hilts of my swords, drawing them as I shoved the passenger door open. Their white blades glinted in the sunlight as I took a step toward Ariel, trying desperately to keep my teeth from chattering and the fear writhing in my belly from rising up to strangle me.

“This is your last chance, Lillim,” Ariel said, nodding at my swords. “Let me have the Wardbreaker, and I will let you live. Not only that, I will remove every vampire from the entire state. It’s a good deal. Take it.”

“No,” I said, tightening my grip on my swords. I knew it was a good deal. No matter who Luc was, he wasn’t worth an entire state’s worth of vampires. For her to offer a trade like that was too much. It made me know deep inside myself I couldn’t let her take him. If I did, something bad was bound to happen. I did not want to be responsible for that, you know, unless she killed me and took him. I could live with that.

“I’d offer more, but I can see from your eyes it won’t matter.” She exhaled sharply as her lips set into a hard line. “Very well then. I shall make you an offer you can’t refuse.” Her lips quirked into a smile. “Death.”

As she raised her hand, I screamed, “*Kongounonikutai!*” as loud as I could and raised the twin blades of Shirajirashii high in the air, calling upon all the power Set and Isis could give me.

It was another technique Dirge had come up with and loosely translated, meant body of adamantite in Japanese. As soon as I said the words, the spell caused all the color to drain from my body, leaving me as white as alabaster. I took a step forward as power surged over my flesh, forming a thick shield of magic along every square inch of my skin. It was a good thing too because a second later, Ariel’s power slammed into me and flung me backward across the road. I skidded along the pavement, sure I’d have been ripped to shreds if it hadn’t been for my spell. That said, it still hurt like hell.

I gritted my teeth and popped to my feet. I wouldn’t be able to keep *Kongounonikutai* going for long, so I needed to stop her now. I charged at Ariel who had a strange look on her face.

“Interesting,” she murmured as I lashed out with my swords, swinging one at her neck and the other at her knees. She didn’t even bother to move. Just as the blades were about to cut into her, bloody liquid surged from the ground beneath her feet and coated my swords. My once razor sharp weapons did little more than smack into her.

She grunted, stepping through the blows that should have sliced her into pieces and cracked me across the face with her trident. The blow made my vision blurry even through the shield of *Kongounonikutai*. I didn’t even want to think it would have done if I hadn’t had my spell up.

“Not as interesting as I’m about to make your face!” I lashed out, battering her body with my edgeless weapons, but it didn’t seem to bother her as she grabbed my right wrist and with a shift of her weight, sent me tumbling behind her. I hit the ground in a roll, but as I came to my feet, a lance of blood struck me in the forehead. My head snapped backward with the impact, and I crashed onto my back.

“You’re way too young to even consider challenging me.” Ariel wasn’t even looking at me anymore. She just twirled her hand in my general direction and made her way toward the car. No, I couldn’t let her get to Luc. I struggled to my feet as the lance shattered into a million shards of bloody glass. They hit me, but my spell was more than enough to ward off some cuts. Or so I thought. Instead of slicing into me, the glass congealed along my flesh like it had done to my weapons.

It writhed up my body as I sprinted toward Ariel. I drove Isis forward as I reached her, stabbing the blade into her spine with all the strength I could muster. And it bounced off. The pain of it reverberated up my arm and into my bones as all of the weird glass blood coating my body swarmed onto my face and covered my mouth and nose. Ariel glanced back at me as I slumped to my knees unable to breathe.

“That’s right, you need to breathe. I almost forgot.” She grinned at me as everything started to go dark. She plucked Luc’s unconscious body from the backseat and tossed him to the ground next to me. “Pity.” She stepped on my chest with one dainty foot and pressed on my ribs. Even through my magic, it felt like she was about to break my ribs which wasn’t good for obvious reasons.

Still, I’ve never let little things like suffocation and being crushed stop me. So what did I do? I blasted the gas tank of the car with lightning. The car exploded violently, flinging all of us across the street.

I slammed backward through the window of a dry cleaner’s shop boasting really good Christmas specials and landed hard on the checkered tile floor with Luc’s body resting on top of me. I sucked in a breath that felt so good, I decided to take another one before I realized how surprised I was to be able to breathe. Evidently, blowing up a car on top of Ariel had broken her concentration. Who would have thought?

I started to crawl to my feet when the sounds of sirens split the air and jackbooted men with guns leapt out of their cars. They came rushing toward me, guns drawn and pointed at me of all things. What the hell? Didn’t they see the vampire?

“She did it. She blew up car!” An older Asian man screamed at the top of his lungs. He gestured at me from behind his cheap countertop. I hadn’t seen him a moment ago. Had he been hiding?

“Put your swords down!” commanded one of the cops, and as I tried to decide if I was going to let them capture me, one of them held up a device I was very familiar with.

“Don’t taze me,” I said, setting down my swords because it was either that or beat them all to pulp, and I was pretty sure they were more or less innocent. Besides, getting arrested had to be better than dealing with the vampires, especially since the vampires probably wouldn’t attack with so many armed humans around. Probably.

“Lay on the ground and put your hands behind your head!” one of them barked, and as I complied, they swarmed over me like ants. A moment later, I was cuffed and being pushed out the door. Paramedics were wheeling Luc’s stretchered body toward an ambulance. Well, at least they were prepared.

Ariel smiled at me from the crowd, waving at me with one red-nailed hand. Then she blew me a kiss. I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to break free of my cuffs and leap across the space between us. I didn’t because, you know, breaking handcuffs was actually pretty hard. Instead, I glowered at her as they shoved me in the back of the police car. It would have to do. For now.

## Chapter 16

“Get up, Callina. We’re letting you go,” the guard said, walking toward my cage. He was a big guy, with bulging biceps and legs large enough to make me think he never skipped leg day. His short blond hair was trimmed close to his head, but then again, all the guards had haircuts like that. Maybe it was a guard thing?

The door slowly unlocked with a weird whoosh of air and disengaged from the magnetic lock. He gripped the bars with one hand and slid it open, staring at me with bitter blue eyes. “You must have some friends in very high places since we’re supposed to be holding you for a long time after the stunt you pulled.” He looked down at me like he was used to being intimidating. I guess he would have been if I hadn’t fought vampires all night. “Instead, I got a call from the goddamned governor. He told me to release your sorry ass, and not only that, I’m supposed to give you your weapons back and pretend like this never happened.” He smiled at me, but it was really more a baring of his teeth. “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, but I wasn’t about to argue. If he was going to let me out of here, I was more than willing to let him. He ushered me out of the room and into a hallway. Everything here was metal and concrete, and for a moment, I almost wondered if it had been built by vampires. Then again, steel and stone kept most things inside. Even I’d have had a hard time escaping since I couldn’t bend iron with my bare hands. Well, not very much at least.

“And I was really looking forward to leaping the wall outside and sprinting to freedom,” I said, glancing at the guard. He seemed to seethe with rage as he turned his stone cold eyes upon me.

“Is that supposed to be funny?” he asked before shaking his head. “I’d like to see you try it.” He leaned down close to me so his lips were very near my ear, which was some feat because he was almost two feet taller than my five foot nothing. It was sort of creepy, but not as much as the feel of his warm breath on my skin. “We had a werewolf try once. He made it six steps.” He stood up and grinned mercilessly at me. “You’d be surprised how few things survive a belt fed machinegun spitting hundreds of silver rounds at them.” He shrugged. “Then again, we’ve never actually had your kind here before. Maybe you’re tougher than a werewolf.”

A shiver ran through me as he spoke. The way this guy was talking, it sure seemed like he knew not only what I was, but how to take out a werewolf. But, but that was impossible. There was no way there would be a supernatural prison, right?

“You’re starting to get it, aren’t you, Hyas Tyee?” The guard spat my title as he pressed his thumb to a keypad beside the door. It flashed with a variety of colors before flashing green. The door hissed open revealing a solid steel room about six feet across. He stepped inside and gestured for me to follow. No sooner had I done so when the door behind me slammed closed and sealed shut.

The guard strode across the room and pressed his thumb to yet another keypad. This one seemed to take a while before flashing green.

“Good. We won’t get gassed.” The guard replied, hissing. “I hate when that happens. Always have to get new lungs afterward.”

“Why would we get gassed?” I asked as the door in front of him opened to reveal a beam of pure sunlight.

“Sometimes, things try to sneak through. When that happens, the room fills with poison gas. And yes, it does kill people, but at the same time, you don’t want anything in here getting out there.” He jerked his thumb toward the sunlight. “Trust me.”

“What the hell is this place?” I asked as I stepped into the sunlight and was forced to shield my eyes.

“Sweetie, you’re on Alcatraz,” the guard said, glancing back at me.

“In San Francisco?” I asked, following him down a long narrow corridor filled with laser beams. They didn’t do anything as he passed through each beam, but then again, maybe that would change. Maybe it would trigger some sort of crazy alarm that would fill the room with fire.

“No. This is the *real* one.” He shrugged in front of me. “No one escapes from here. Not even demons like yourself.”

“I’m not a demon,” I replied, giving his huge back my angriest stare.

“Whatever you say,” he replied, moving toward what looked like a plain whitewashed wooden door and swinging it open. He gestured for me to leave. “You can claim your things at the front. Good luck and don’t let the door hit you on the ass.”

I grumbled as I moved past him. As soon as I stepped through the door, there was a horrible wrenching sound and my brain physically hurt. My stomach lurched into my throat and nausea swelled up inside me. I fell to my knees, clawing for breath as tears streamed down my face and clouded my vision.

“What was that?” I choked, glancing back toward the guard. He wasn’t there. The door wasn’t there. Nothing but a solid cinderblock wall was there. What the hell?

I turned back toward the room ahead of me, but it seemed perfectly normal. How the hell was that possible? Where had I been? I remembered walking into the police station and being shoved into an empty room to await questioning. I must have fallen asleep in that waiting room because when I’d woken up I’d been in the cell. Had I somehow been transported to a weird interdimensional prison? Sadly, I sort of hoped so. If I hadn’t been, I was going crazy and that wouldn’t be good for anyone, especially me.

“What are you doing on the floor?” Danae asked, and I looked back to see her standing in front of me glaring. She tapped the toe of one black high heel against the ground a few times before shifting her hands onto her hips. She was wearing a modest black suit jacket with a tasteful white blouse and a black skirt that fell to just past her knees. It made me think lawyer.

“I... um...” I muttered, my cheeks heating up as I realized everyone in the room was staring at me. It was only three other people, but it was still weird.

Danae shook her head, stepping back half a step and looking down her pixie nose at me. “We don’t have time for whatever this is.” She gestured at me with one hand. “I’ve already gotten your stuff. It’s in the car.”

“Why are you helping me?” I asked, hoping curiosity wouldn’t kill me. It wasn’t like I had nine lives after all.



“Because I don’t want Ariel to succeed in tapping into the power of the blood moon and turning day into permanent darkness.” Danae shrugged like what she said even made sense. “I may be a vampire, but it’s no fun jogging down the beach at night. There’s not enough people to look. I can’t feed if no one looks.”

“Um... okay,” I said, getting to my feet, and as I did so, she spun on her heel and walked away. “I’m a little confused as to what the hell is going on.”

“You and Logan got yourselves captured by the police. They took your friend, the Wardbreaker to the hospital. That’s where we are going now.” Danae sighed and turned around to glare at me. “What’s not to understand?”

“Okay, firstly where the hell was I because that wasn’t a normal police station. Two, why did they just let me go? Three, how is Logan even still alive? Four, why is Luc still at the hospital? Shouldn’t Ariel have captured him already?” I asked.

Danae narrowed her dark eyes at me, threw her hair over her shoulder and walked out into the parking lot without saying a word. “I dislike you,” she said, approaching a lime green sports car and gesturing at it with a small black box with red buttons on it. It roared to life as she opened the door and got inside. The upholstery appeared to be made of leather, and as I slid inside, I felt the presence of Shirajirashii nearby. I turned and saw the twin blades lying across the backseat.

“To answer your questions. I’m not sure how you got transferred into the supernatural lockup. They let you out because I asked the governor very, very nicely to get you out. It wasn’t super fun, let me tell you. Logan is alive because Ariel hasn’t deigned to kill him yet. Luc is still in the hospital because Ariel has been using the staff to keep him sedated.” Danae wasn’t looking at me as she spoke, rather she seemed to be concentrating on the road which was good enough for me.

“Thanks,” I said, grabbing my swords. Their familiar weight made me feel better.

“Don’t thank me. Just stop Ariel and we’ll be square.”

“Okay,” I replied. “I was going to do that anyway.”

“You have no idea how little that means to me,” Danae said, and tapped a button on her steering wheel. Music began blaring in the cabin, so loud, I could barely think, let alone talk to her, which I suspect might have been the idea.

I sighed and looked out the window as we drove down the crowded street. There was so much traffic. This place was really crowded, and it was sort of unnerving. Where I came from there weren’t many people, and most of them were always gone on a mission of some kind. Let’s just say, I was used to eating in a mess hall designed to fit a thousand people by myself.

“So what’s it like being a succubus?” I called over the music, and if I hadn’t seen her fingers clench around the steering wheel, I’d have assumed she hadn’t heard me.

“It’s not super fun. Usually, I get to seduce gross people for things I don’t really care about.” She waved at me with one hand like I was an example.

“I thought most of you, um... liked your jobs?” I said, feeling the blush rise on my cheeks.

“Some of us do. Those ones mostly work in massage parlors and strip clubs.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“And I’m guessing you don’t do those things?” I asked, worried that this conversation was about to take a train straight into uncomfortable station.

Danae quirked one perfectly sculpted eyebrow at me. “No. I don’t.”

“Okay,” I replied, looking away from her so I could stare out the window.

“It’s not like I have anything against those that do,” she continued, and I groaned inside my head. I had no idea where this discussion was about to go or what my part in it would be, but my desire to have a heart to heart with a vampire about her life choices wasn’t exactly large. “It’s just, I mean okay, sex is awesome, and I feed on it, so you might think I was all sorts of slutty, but really...” She glanced at me. “We’re not all that way.”

“I believe you.” I smiled at her, and she nodded.

“Thanks,” she let out a breath. “It’s just weird to explain that I’m a succubus but don’t like sleeping with random people.” She blushed a little bit and looked back out the windshield, which was good because she was driving and there was traffic.

“It is a little odd, but not out of the realm of possibility.” I rubbed my temples with my hand. “I know lots of people who sleep around and lots who don’t. I’m not sure why it would be different for vampires.”

“Most people wouldn’t see it like that. They’re always like, ‘oh, you’re a sex demon? Well feed off this,’ then they whip it out...”

“I feel like you’re going into way more detail than required,” I said as delicately as I could because I did not want to discuss sex with a succubus because, well, it was embarrassing. I hadn’t even had sex and here she was talking about people whipping it out in front of her, which come to think of it... “Who willingly has sex with a succubus?”

“You’d be surprised what people are into,” she said before lowering her voice to a whisper. “I know this one guy... Let’s just say I don’t think his hair has turned back to its normal color ever since he found out about us.”

“You fed on someone enough to drain the color from his hair?” I asked, incredulous. “And not only did he live, but he came back for more?”

“Like I said, some people are into weird stuff.” She flipped on her blinker and pulled onto a side street. Up ahead, a huge hospital stared at me through the window, and even though I hated hospitals with every ounce of my being largely due to the ginormous amount of time I’d spent inside them, I was happy to see it.

“I’m glad we had this talk,” I said as politely as I could when she pulled up in front of the massive building.

“Me too,” she replied. “I know you’re lying and uninterested because I can tell exactly how interested people are in what I’m saying, but it was nice of you to try. I’ll remember that.” A look of horror must have slipped across my face as I looked at her. I’d been trying to be polite, and she’d known I wasn’t concerned in the slightest. It was so embarrassing. “Now get out of my car and go save your friend.”

“And what will you be doing?” I asked as I opened the door and stepped into the brisk air. It always surprised me how cold it was outside when the sun was shining. It was one of the reasons I’d picked Southern California over say Northern Minnesota. I’d have died from the cold in three seconds there.

“I’ll keep the car running for your inevitable escape.” Danae patted her steering wheel. “Try to hurry though. I get bored easily.” With that, she leaned over and

pulled a paperback book out of her glove compartment. I wasn't sure what I was expecting her to read, but it wasn't a book about sparkly vampires, that's for sure.

She looked up, catching me staring at her book and grinned. "It was either this or the one about a young girl murdering other teenagers in a game of death. It's a sad day when the story about fictional vampires has the happy ending."

## Chapter 17

The hospital smelled like bleach and disinfectant, which I guess was par for the course. Then again that could have been because I was currently hiding in a janitorial closet. I cracked the door an inch to make sure the nurse who had nearly seen me sneak in was gone. Not seeing him, I crept outward.

"You there!" a gruff male voice called, and I spun on my heel, heart hammering. The nurse I'd been trying to avoid stared at me with annoyed grey eyes, his nostrils flaring in annoyance. He took a couple steps toward me, his tight green scrubs pressed against his body as he moved, making it pretty damn obvious he was well built beneath the garments. "What are you doing up here?"

"Visiting a friend?" I offered, sheepishly looking at my feet. It was actually sort of hard because I was wearing Luc's trench coat. It was so long, it nearly covered my feet completely. I was using it because it was the only thing large enough to hide my swords. I always had half a mind to ward them with symbols that would make them invisible to the casual observer, but I hadn't. Mostly because those symbols would slowly drain the power from me and my weapons. It would suck to need them at full strength and find them half empty. So I was stuck to hiding them the old fashioned way.

It made me glad she'd had Luc's coat even though I wasn't quite sure how Danae had managed to snag it. Then again, she had gotten the governor to let me out of supernatural jail, and I hadn't even known the governor knew about the supernatural, let alone had a prison for its denizens. This would be exactly the kind of thing I'd have written in a report, you know, if I hadn't run away.

"If you're visiting a friend, why did you come out of the janitor's closet?" he asked, gesturing at the door behind me. He rubbed his stubble covered chin as he watched me carefully. "People don't usually do that when they're just visiting a friend. Just saying..."

"Wait," I said, waving my hand in front of me as I felt my cheeks flush. "We're allowed to see patients in here?"

"Uh, yeah," he replied, confusion filling his face as he stared at me. "It's visiting hours after all. Who are you looking for?"

"Um..." I said because I was a little thrown off by not having needed to sneak around. "I've been trying to sneak in here for the better part of an hour, and now I find out I could have just asked to see my friend?"

He gave me a weird look and shrugged his massive shoulders. "That's how visiting hours work. I should probably turn you in, but I'm inclined not to do that. Besides, what sort of trouble a teenage girl could get into sneaking into a hospital

to see her friend?" The words he said sounded ridiculous even to me, which was probably why he gave me a weak smile. If only he knew.

"Yeah, okay," I replied, trying to figure out what his deal was. "I'm trying to find my friend, Luc. He's supposed to be here somewhere."

The nurse pulled a strange gadget from his back pocket and poked at it with one slender finger. "Luc what?"

"Luc what?" I repeated, dumbly.

"What's his last name?" the nurse asked, staring at me over the top of his device so all I could see of his face were his eyes and salt and pepper hair.

"I have no idea. We just met a couple days ago. We were in a car accident together," I said, totally realizing how bizarre I sounded. "You know what, I'll just find him on my own." And yes, that's when I began whistling and trying to walk off.

"You expect to find someone here when you don't know his last name? You're aware we have quite a lot of rooms, right?" he asked, walking up beside me. Even from here, I could feel the heat coming off his body. He had to be really hot for me to feel his warmth almost a foot away.

"What are you?" I asked, glancing at him as my right hand curled into a fist. I could smash him with a magically infused punch and be down the hall before he pulled himself up from the ground. Probably. Depending on what he was.

"I'm a nurse," he replied, looking at me like I was totally crazy.

"Yeah, fine, whatever." I waved my non-clenched hand dismissively. "What type of shifter are you? Wolf? Cocker spaniel?"

He stopped so suddenly, I actually made it several paces past him before he cleared his throat. "How did you know? I'm pretty good at hiding what I am," he said in a low voice. "Wait, are you a Dioscuri?" His jaw clenched.

"Yes," I said because what was the point of hiding it?

"Bear," he said, jogging over to me like it was the most natural thing in the world to admit you were a werebear. It wasn't like there were only thirty-six of them on the whole planet. "And if you're a Dioscuri, I'm guessing you're looking for Jean Luc. What'd he do this time?"

"Wait, you know who he is?" I asked, stopping at staring at the shifter.

"Yeah, I was hired to keep him safe," the werebear replied, giving me a thin-lipped smile.

"Is that why you're off the werebear preserve?" I asked, wondering who hired him. "I hear it's nice there."

"I'm not going back there," he growled. His voice had changed to a low rumble as yellow spilled around the edges of his eyes. Great, so he was thinking about shifting. That was exactly what I needed. "You can't make me."

"I don't give a rat's ass about taking you back," I said. "Ariel's in this goddamned city and you shouldn't be. I don't care how much you feel like you owe it to Luc to protect him, you need to be gone. Now." Normally, I'd be more than willing to let a werebear help me since they were like hell with claws in a fight, but I was not about to be responsible for getting one of the only creatures of his kind left on the planet killed.

He visibly shook at my words like he hadn't realized one of the most powerful vampires in the world was in town. "Room 237," he said before spinning on his

heel and making his way back down the hallway as quickly as he could. "Make sure you keep Luc safe."

Well, that was weird. I mean I knew some shifters had integrated into society and all, but it was still a little strange to see a werebear providing guard duty. They were endangered after all. Why had he left the preserve? Why didn't he want to go back?

Most of them seemed happy to live in what amounted to an all-inclusive Caribbean resort. It had been set up because they had been hunted to near extinction. Besides, what better way to increase the population than with copious amounts of free alcohol?

Many of the Dioscuri had long suspected the reason werebears in particular were nearly gone was because they were solitary. Werewolves tended to form packs, even within the city, but werebears were almost always solo creatures. Sometimes, survival was a numbers game after all.

I watched the werebear disappear down the hallway before glancing at the closest room number. 215. So I was close. I grinned, reached under my borrowed trench coat, and felt the familiar weight of Shirajirashii. Just touching the weapons gave me a surge of confidence as I moved down the hallway toward Luc's room. I wasn't sure what would be waiting for me in there, but something told me it wouldn't be good. If Ariel really was watching Luc, then she'd have guards around here somewhere. Just because I couldn't see them, wouldn't mean they weren't there. Then again, there had been that werebear here. Maybe Luc was all alone inside the room?

Still, the thought of engaging a bunch of vampires inside the hospital wasn't exactly appealing because magic didn't exactly play nice with most modern technology. If I started throwing spells around, I'd short out equipment. I most certainly did not want to cause someone's mechanical lung or dialysis machine to give out.

Which was why instead of using my magic to check for traps or hidden assassins, I held my breath and reached toward the knob on Luc's door, hoping it wasn't rigged to blow me to smithereens. As soon as my fingers touched the brass, something smashed into me like a goddamned freight train, flinging me across the cheap laminate floor like I was a broken doll. I bounced, once, twice, three times before smacking into a metal cart filled with towels and other miscellaneous objects. The cart fell over with a horrific crash as I laid there dazed and confused.

"I forgot something," growled a creature that sort of looked like a fifteen-foot-tall panda, you know, if that panda was hewn from a nightmare realm of indescribable fear, fangs gleaming in the light as its jowls curved into a smile. "I'm supposed to kill you first." His yellowed toe claws carved gouges in the tile as he raised a paw the size of a tennis racket into the air. "Good bye."

"Pandemonium," I murmured, and he seemed ever so pleased that I knew who he was. That was why he hadn't been on the reservation. Pandemonium was a werebear assassin. He was said to be older than dirt itself because a witch had placed a curse upon him that stopped him from aging until he found true love or something stupid like that. Only he was a soulless killing machine who enjoyed ripping the hearts from people before they died because they tasted better when they were still beating. I wasn't sure who his true love was supposed to be, but

she'd have to be a hell of a beauty to tame this beast. "Let me guess, you're working for Ariel?"

I flung myself to the side as his claws tore through the cart in a shriek of steel and gouged inch deep holes into the floor where I'd been.

"Yes," he growled, whirling around and swinging with all his bulk. I scrambled out of the way as his claws cleaved gashes into the wall beside me. The hallway was so narrow it was sort of to my advantage because he couldn't move that well, but I wasn't exactly keen on close combat with a freaking bear. I may have been magical and all, but so was he. At the end of the day, it was still me fighting a goddamned bear and that was pretty scary.

Even still, I pushed down my fear before it could bubble over and paralyze me. With a battle cry, I threw myself at the enormous creature and drove my knee into the two-ton monster's gut. He looked down at me like he had barely even felt the blow. Which was probably because he hadn't felt it. At all.

Pandemonium tried to wrap his giant arms around me, but I dropped beneath them and slid between his tree-trunk-like legs. I came up behind him as the creature tried to whirl around, but he was too bulky to do it quickly, even with his supernatural speed.

"You know, I always wanted a bear skin rug," I said, ripping my swords from their sheaths and driving the blades into the backs of the werebear's knees with authority. The creature howled in agony as I tore them sideways in a spray of blood and cartilage. Pandemonium toppled beneath his own immense weight and hit the floor with a crash.

I knew I didn't have long before he healed the damage and got back up, so I leapt upon the evil panda's back and hacked at his spine, trying my best to separate his vertebrae. It wouldn't paralyze the monster, but it'd sure take a while to get all those nerves back in order, or so I hoped.

Pandemonium screamed in pain as I leapt off his ruined back and sprinted toward the door to Luc's room. I wasn't sure how much time I had left, but I was sure it wouldn't be a lot if the werepanda was working with the vampires. For all I knew, he'd already alerted Ariel to my presence, and her people had already evacuated him through the window or something. There was a thud as I grabbed the knob. I turned in horror to see the werepanda pick itself back up and pop his neck. All the damage I'd just done to him was gone. Just gone. It wasn't fair.

"That tickled, little girl," he said and licked his lips with his overly large tongue before rushing straight at me. So much for needing his spine to, you know, do whatever a spine did. Pandemonium was upon me a second later, batting me across the hallway. My teeth snapped together with so much force, I was pretty sure I'd have to see a dentist to repair the damage. I cartwheeled across the floor before crashing into the elevator all the way down the hallway.

The werebear came barreling toward me as I got slowly to my feet. There was a ding, and the elevator doors opened behind me. One quick glance was enough to reveal a woman in crisp pink scrubs. She took one look at the creature and started screaming. I reached in, hit the door closed button, and sprinted toward the Pandemonium, hoping I could reach him before he slammed through the still closing doors and killed the lady inside by accident.

“I’ll see you in hell!” I said, sheathing my katana and pulling Luc’s shotgun from beneath my coat in one smooth motion. I hadn’t been sure how his trench coat seemed to be able to hide so much gear, but I wasn’t about to argue, though I was going to make a point of asking him about it later.

I blasted Pandemonium full in the face from half a foot away, obliterating his snout in a hail of silver buckshot. I cocked the shotgun again as fast as I could, unleashing another five shots into the creature from point blank range. Silver fire erupted from the werebear’s wounds as he staggered backward, roaring in pain.

“You should have stayed on the reservation,” I growled, smashing the superheated barrel of the empty weapon into his groin as hard as I could. I probably shouldn’t have bothered since the werebear was wobbling backward with half of his flesh gone and the other half consumed by silver flames, but it felt right so I did it. Besides, he’d just healed having his spine hacked to pieces. I wasn’t taking any chances.

The creature crashed to the ground with enough force to shake the building. I let out a little whoop of victory, you know, before the door to Luc’s room opened and vampires started shooting at me with machineguns. Which was pretty lame of them, let me tell you.

## Chapter 18

Here’s the thing about bullets. They’re fast. As much as I’d have liked to fling a magic shield in front of myself, it was hard to do with bullets already flying down the hallway toward me. I tried to throw my body out of the way, instinctively covering my head with my hands and bracing myself for the impact.

Agony ripped through my body as bullets slammed into me... and bounced off. I lay there, pain radiating through me from each shot as I crawled the rest of the way into the alcove on my hands and knees. Bullets continued to chew up the wall for a moment before stopping. My ears rang in the sudden silence of it.

I wouldn’t have long before they were down the hallway and blasting me with even more lead. Still, why was I alive? I’d been hit more than enough times to have been turned into Swiss cheese. I looked down at my borrowed trench coat and gasped. It was flaring with light from a billion wards etched into the blue leather. I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed it before, but evidently Luc’s trench coat was somehow spelled to overcome bullets. It still hurt, but not nearly as much as it would have if I’d been shot. Well, that was cool.

“Well, that changes things,” I said, dropping the empty shotgun to the floor. I stood and gripped the twin blades of Shirajirashii. It was time to take this fight to the vampires, and while the trench coat was nice, it wouldn’t exactly keep a bullet from splitting my head like a cassava melon. If I was going to face vampires with machineguns I wanted to be one hundred percent bullet proof.

“Kongounonikutai,” I murmured, unleashing the power of my swords. Like before, my body became sheathed in alabaster. I was still a little worried about my magic short circuiting things, but at the same time, of all my spells, this one was

pretty compact, if powerful. The magic was only a few millimeters from my skin. I'd just have to make sure I didn't bear hug some sensitive equipment.

The vampires came around the corner and fired as soon as they saw me. Bullets pinged off my chest of my trench coat like I was Superman. Evidently, it wasn't what the creatures expected because fear flashed across their features as I crossed the distance between us and calmly removed the head from the one in front. His body collapsed in a spray of blood as I surged into their group, slashing outward like a deadly ballerina as I spun through them.

Crimson splattered across the walls as I dropped the last vampire and stepped back into the hallway. I sheathed my katana because it was too long to be super effective in the close confines of the room and scooped up one of the vampire's machineguns. I wasn't sure what kind it was, but I'd been trained with various weapons so I was pretty certain I could point it at a target and fire.

I sprinted toward Luc's room, keeping my guard up, but not seeing anyone at the same time, which was a little weird because Pandemonium had been laid out on the floor before. Where was he?

A howl tore through the air as the werebear assassin leapt from the open doorway in front of Luc's room and slammed into me with bone crushing force. My head smacked against the far wall as my wakazashi slipped from my hand and clattered to the floor.

Pandemonium batted my head like it was a softball, his claws scratching against the magic of my shield. I tumbled across the linoleum before skidding to a stop. Ichor and blood dripped from his flesh as he ran at me, jaws bared. My heart hammered in my chest as I unloaded the machinegun in his direction. It didn't even slow him. He just kept coming as bullets tore into his flesh. It'd be hard for him to heal the damage around the metal embedded inside him. His flesh would have to push out the bits of metal first. That was something, right?

He leapt the last several feet, intent on bringing his two-ton frame down on my small body. I may have been encased with a magical shield, but I still didn't want to get pinned if I could help it. Besides, assuming I wasn't driven through the floor, it would hurt like hell, shield or not.

I rolled to the side as he crashed into the spot where I'd been. The linoleum cracked, and his left foot plunged through the floor. I got to my feet, pulled my katana from my sheath, and set myself into a two-handed fighting stance. The creature roared, tearing himself free of the punctured cement, evidently not caring about the flesh he left behind. Blood ran down his black and white panda fur, but as he turned to face me, the last of the bullet holes puckered and healed over. Great.

"Look, if you leave right now, I won't kill you," I said in my best tough girl voice. I was actually impressed because I even kept the tremor out of it.

The giant werepanda regarded me for a moment, head cocked to the side before booming laughter rippled out of its throat. It was loud enough to hurt my ears.

"You'll spare me?" Pandemonium asked incredulously. "You have sliced me open, shot me with silver, riddled me with bullets. None of that has mattered, and you still think you can kill me?"



“Well, I was barely trying before.” I grinned, tightening my grip on my katana and reaching out toward the blade with my mind, begging it to lend me its power. “You haven’t even seen me use my serious face. It’s a real bear.”

“You think you’re funny?” The werebear snorted. “How about this deal? I eat your heart and mail the rest of you back to your mother in a box.” His lips curled into a strange grin. “I’ll leave your face alone so your parents can enjoy an open casket funeral.” Instead of waiting for a reply, the massive creature came at me, crossing the distance between us in a heartbeat.

I shut my eyes and concentrated on letting Isis do her thing. Air rushed by me as I felt the goddess’s hands on mine, guiding my strike. My katana leapt through the air like it had a mind of its own, blue energy cascading off the blade as I stepped beneath Pandemonium’s first strike, allowing his momentum to carry him into the weapon’s deadly edge. My magic infused muscles screamed as I shifted my hips and swung upward. Blood sprayed across the walls. He moved a few steps past me before collapsing to the ground, a sapphire slash of light burning across his body from crotch to shoulder.

A breath exploded from my throat as it happened. My arms fell to my sides as my magic fled me, and my skin turned back to its normal color. The light on Isis’s edge faded, and the werebear’s eyes grew opaque and glassy. I hadn’t actually dealt him a deathblow, hell, I hadn’t even cut him. I’d just called upon Isis’s power to play a trick on the gargantuan monster. You know, to make him think he’d gotten sliced in half.

Pandemonium laid there, trying to pull himself back together, even though if he thought about it for a second, he’d probably realize all the damage was an illusion. Still, Isis was the goddess of magic, when she cast a spell, it tended to stay cast, at least for a while. That was good because trying to take on a two-ton monster inside a hospital had not been going well at all. It made me wish I had some gasoline and a box of matches to finish the job while I had the chance. Then again, setting a hospital on fire was probably a bad idea. I barely wanted to use my magic in here, so using a fire spell was out too.

“You should have taken my deal,” I said, whipping my katana outward to fling the blood from the blade before collecting my wakazashi. “Now you’re just a sad panda.”

The werebear didn’t even respond as I spoke but that may have been due to the shock of thinking he’d been cut in half. Instead of chopping off his head like I should have, I spun on my heel and left as quickly as I could. Part of me wondered if I should risk it. No... if my next attack didn’t kill him outright, he’d probably realize he wasn’t as hurt as he thought he was.

It was too risky. I’d just have to hope the creature escaped before he realized what happened. With any luck, I’d be long gone by the time he figured it out. Besides, he had to have burned a lot of calories during the fight. He’d have to eat something soon anyway or risk his body metabolizing itself. If I got out of here quickly enough, he’d definitely stop to raid a McDonalds before coming back, no matter how angry he was about being made the fool.

As I stood before the door to Luc’s room, I smirked. I’d been standing in this very spot only a few minutes ago, but it felt like it’d been a lifetime ago. Hopefully, Luc was still inside. I thought about asking my ghost to see what was on the other

side, but I didn't want to spend a ton of time here, what with a monster I'd tricked into thinking he was dying lying on the floor a few yards away. I was cheeky, but not that cheeky.

I kicked the door as hard as my magic-fueled strength would let me. The thin particleboard shattered under my assault, ripping off the hinges before buckling. It crashed against the far wall, knocking over the vampire who had been standing behind it with a machinegun.

His weapon clattered across the floor as I drove Set through his chest, pinning him to the ground like a butterfly. My first inclination had been to kill him, but since Luc wasn't in the room I wanted to ask him a few questions first.

Yeah, that's right, not only was Luc not in the room, there wasn't anything in here at all. It was just bare walls. I gritted my teeth as I realized I'd been set up by Pandemonium. He'd been the one to tell me where Luc was, and I'd been too stupid to realize it was a trick.

"You're going to tell me where Jean Luc is right now, Mr. Vampire, or I'm going to start cutting off body parts. Unlike the shifter out there," I jerked my thumb out the door, "I'm not sure how well you heal, so I'll make sure I cauterize the wounds when I'm done so you won't be able to repair the damage. How's that sound?" I asked, smiling sweetly at him as his face contorted in pain. "I'm going to ask you exactly one time. Where is Luc?"

He didn't respond. Instead, he tried to tear my wakazashi out of his chest by the blade, cutting his hands open in the process and spilling his blood along its edge. I snapped my fingers and sent a small surge of will toward the weapon. Set lit up with a crimson glow as the sigils flared like tiny stars. The vampire screamed in pain and dropped his smoking hands to his sides.

"Okay," I shrugged. "I guess you'll be spending the next, oh, forever with no legs or arms." I lifted my katana and aimed at his left arm, touching the crook of his elbow with the edge before raising it above my head. "I'll be honest, I have bad aim so this might take a couple tries. That's okay, right?"

"No!" He squealed just before I was going to swing. "I'll tell you, Dioscuri."

"Excellent." I grinned at him and knelt by his side. "I knew we'd see things eye to eye."

"When Pandemonium gave us the signal, I told my men to move Luc out of here. They're probably still loading him into the helicopter on the roof. If you hurry, you might be able to catch him." I stared at him for a moment, trying to decide whether or not I believed him. I really didn't have much of a choice, which really pissed me off.

"Okay," I growled, sheathing Isis and tearing Set out of his body. I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet as gore dripped down the front of his white t-shirt. "Show me. That way if you're lying, I can throw you off the building. I know it won't kill you, but it'll sure make me feel better." I gave him my best crazy smile, and he shrank away from me before I shoved him into the hallway.

The werebear was gone, but there was a ginormous trail of blood leading toward the elevators. Good, so he still thought he was hurt, and was no doubt frantic about why he hadn't healed the wound yet. I sure hoped that letting him live didn't come back to bite me in the ass. Then again, maybe he'd crawled off into an elevator and died. It was possible, right?

We moved toward the elevators as fast as I could reasonably make the vampire go while still keeping my grip on him. Thankfully, he didn't even try to run. As we reached the elevator, he pressed the up button with his thumb, leaving behind a bloody thumbprint.

"Oh no," I said, shoving him past the metal deathtraps and toward the stairs. "There is exactly zero chance of me getting into an elevator with you. Assuming it didn't malfunction and kill us, it is way too enclosed of a space for me to risk it. For all I know, you have the shaft filled with explosives or snake demons. Who knows?"

"And they say I'm paranoid," the vampire muttered.

"Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they aren't out to get you," I replied, pushing open the door to the stairwell with his face, smudging the little glass window in the center of the wood in the process. "Go on, tell me I'm being cliché. I dare you."

He shut his damned trap. Which was good since it took longer than I'd have liked to make it up the stairs, but even though my chest was heaving from dragging the vampire up six floors, I still was calling it a win because I hadn't died in an elevator. It wasn't that I didn't like the giant metal demon boxes, but I didn't exactly like the idea of someone potentially breaking a few cables and sending me plummeting to my death. Besides, for all I knew, there was a really pissed off werebear inside one of them just waiting for his next meal.

I threw the vampire at the door marked helipad. Instead of breaking through it, he bounced off and collapsed to the ground yowling. "Next time, try turning the knob first, jerk," the vampire said, reaching up and twisting the silver handle. The door swung open to reveal a helicopter, its rotors already spinning. I caught a glimpse of Ariel standing in the compartment with Luc just before the door closed, leaving me staring at the red cross painted on the white metal.

"No!" I screamed as the helicopter started to leave the ground. I charged forward as fast as I could and leapt. My free hand grabbed onto the skids as we surged high up into the air. As I dangled several hundred feet above the ground, I tried desperately to keep the panic swelling inside me from taking over.

I took a deep breath, finding my center and calming myself before sheathing my wakazashi. I wrapped both of my arms around the skid and with my muscles screaming, pulled myself into a less precarious position. I wasn't sure if the vampires inside the vehicle had noticed me leap onto their helicopter, but I had a feeling that even if they hadn't, the vampire I'd left alive on the rooftop would let them know. For all I knew, he'd already radioed them about my position. That thought made my blood run cold as the wind rushed by me.

Still, it was nothing compared to the panic I felt as crimson light exploded from within the helicopter. The smell of blood, like a bucket of rusty nails filled my nose. The surrounding sky darkened as the sun turned sanguine, casting the entire earth in blood.

## Chapter 19

So what did I do? I took a deep breath, grabbed the door, and jerked it open with all the strength I could muster. Its internal mechanisms held for a second before ripping free and sliding backward into the skin of the helicopter. Ariel was nowhere to be found, which was good.

Unfortunately, four vampires surrounded a metal gurney with Luc's unconscious body strapped to it. Tubes were stuck in his body, feeding some kind of viscous green sludge into him as his wards glowed with faint red light.

While the vampires didn't look like they had expected me to burst into their helicopter in midflight, they were already starting to come at me with preternatural speed. Before they could throw me from the vehicle, I launched myself inside, screaming incoherently.

My fist lashed out, catching the closest vampire under the chin and snapping his head backward. I spun on the balls of my feet and drove my knee into another's side, knocking him into his female companion as she tried to grab me from behind. They went down in a heap as I dropped to my knees, avoiding another female vampire's kick as it whooshed by so close to my head, the wind coming off of it ruffled my hair.

I grabbed onto her leg and jerked her off balance as I came up, slamming her onto her back and making the floor beneath us shudder. The vampire I'd slugged originally came at me fangs wide and glinting as blood streamed from his torn lips. His fist caught me on the shoulder, and my left arm fell numbly to my side. His fingers curled around my trench coat, pulling me toward him. I stumbled as another one grabbed onto my ankle with its vice-like grip.

My body toppled forward into the vampire, throwing him off balance and making him trip over the female I'd body slammed earlier. His hand released me, shooting out to try to catch himself on the door before he fell. He missed the helicopter's thin wall completely and plummeted through the door. Well, that was one less vampire to worry about.

I crashed to the ground on top of the vampire he'd tripped over as the first female got to her feet and came at me, long nails splayed like talons. I reared back and mule kicked her as hard as I could. My boot connected with her knee. The crack of the shattered joint filled the air. Her scream pierced my ears, loud even over the roar of the helicopter blades. I scrambled forward on my hands and knees, pausing only momentarily to drive my elbow into the vampire beneath me, shattering her nose in a spray of blood. Her eyes went glassy, and her hands fell limply to her sides.

The only male left in the cabin was back up and racing toward me, but there wasn't anywhere to go. I threw myself to my feet, grabbing onto the metal gurney holding Luc's body and called upon my magic, summoning everything I had. In an aircraft. Full of sensitive equipment. High above the ground.

An explosion ripped through the air and smoke filled the cabin as magic surged around us. The rotors stalled with a shriek of tortured steel, and the lights on panels all around me caught fire or winked out entirely. The door to the pilot's chamber swung open, and Ariel stood there, annoyance playing across her delicate features. At first, it looked like she'd been about to scream at her companions, but as soon as she saw me, her face twisted into rage. Behind her, I could see

lightning bolts leaping across the pilot's console as smoke poured from it. His hands scrambled over it, fighting for control against the crippled machine.

"You!" she howled, pointing one red-nailed finger at me and baring her fangs.

"Me," I replied and threw all my magic outward at her. The spell leapt across the space between us as a bolt of purple energy slammed into her and threw her backward into the cockpit. Her body slammed against the windshield, shattering it beneath her. She drove one hand into the metal skin of the helicopter, her fingers piercing it as she fought to keep from being flung into the distance. I had half a mind to throw another blast at her, but my heaving chest told me I didn't have much left in me. Damn.

"Are you insane?" she screamed as another explosion ripped through the air above me. Our vehicle plummeted like a stone as bits of metal flew off in every direction. Had we lost the rotor? Oh, that was definitely bad.

"Only according to my ex-boyfriend," I replied just before the floor slid out from under me, and I was saved from being flung into the abyss by grabbing onto one of the straps lashing Luc to the gurney. The leather snapped tight in my grip, cutting into the callused flesh of my palm.

"Time to go," I said and reached over with my other hand, unsnapping three of the four straps holding him in place. I grabbed onto him with both arms, unsnapped the strap I'd been using for balance, and kicked off the metal death trap with all the force my tired leg muscles could muster.

We flew backward out the door, leaving the relative safety of the cabin as the helicopter started spinning like a broken top, spiraling toward the ground below in a stream of fire and smoke. I fought the urge to look down and instead concentrated on focusing my will. I'd never done this before, but I'd heard of Dioscuri using magic like a parachute. Maybe it would work?

Before I could gather my magic, the pilot leapt out of the helicopter, a pack on his back. He pulled a strap free, and his parachute exploded behind him, jerking him upward as it caught the wind. I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to turn and threw my hand out toward him. "Come!" I screamed.

Power poured out of me as sweat covered my body in an instant. Spots danced across my eyes as my spell ripped across the distance between us and grabbed onto the vampire. My body jerked to a stop, and I nearly lost my grip on Luc as his dead weight threatened to dislocate my arm and rip him from my grasp. My shoulder shrieked in pain, still aching from where the vampire had struck me earlier.

We fell like that, our bodies slowing as my spell tried to pull the parachuting pilot to me, buoying us both. He stared at me wide-eyed as he fell, like he couldn't believe what was happening. That made two of us. We jerked in the air, and I felt us fall for a split second before my spell snapped taught again. Spots danced across my vision as I struggled to fight off the exhaustion threatening to overwhelm me. I tossed a look below me, and instead of being totally scared out of my mind, I was relieved to see a high rise building not too far away. If I could make it there...

I threw myself into action, swinging myself into an arc as I released my spell and sent Luc and I careening toward the rooftop. The helicopter slammed into the street below me as I fell and the force of it reverberated through my stomach even

from here. A feeling of dread filled me as I realized we weren't going to hit the roof. I pulled in every last ounce of power I had left as we came careening toward the glass walls of the building.

Just as we were about to hit it, I released everything, not shattering the glass so much as disintegrating it entirely. My vision distilled down into a tiny pinprick of light as I tried vainly to absorb our impact with Luc's magic trench coat. My breath exploded from my lips in a violent whoosh as we slammed into the well-decorated office hard enough to shatter not only the table in the middle of the room, but the bookshelf on the far wall as well. Orange basketballs fell from the glass cases atop the bookshelf, bouncing all over the room as I lay there staring at the ceiling, not believing I wasn't dead. Still, I hurt so much, I had to be alive. Death wouldn't hurt this much.

I wasn't sure how long it took for me to be able to look around, but I heard the woman screaming before I'd so much as turned my head. She was wearing a cream-colored suit and looked to be in her mid-forties with ginger-colored hair. She backpedaled out of the room, one hand to her mouth. Her high heel caught on a rolling basketball, and she stumbled, falling on her butt.

Luc groaned beneath me, wards no longer glowing sickly red. His body was slick with sweat, but he seemed relatively unscathed for having been flung from a moving helicopter. His eyes fluttered open as I tried to sit up, but even that tiny effort made stars flash in front of my eyes. I felt myself falling, but didn't feel the impact of my head hitting the carpet. Not good.

"Lillim?" Luc asked, but his voice sounded weak and far away. I tried to respond, tried to make my mouth make words, but as I tried, I found I could barely even think. It was like someone had filled my brain with cotton. "Lillim?" He shook me, like it would do any good. My vision faded to black.

I lost consciousness.

## Chapter 20

I woke up to find myself being dragged out of the office. Luc's chest was heaving as my feet slid across the carpet, one of my arms draped over his shoulder as his other encircled my waist, holding me against his feverishly warm body. His skin was slick with sweat that stunk of blood and fear.

He must have noticed I was awake because he shot me a look, lips quirked into a strained smile. "You okay?" His words sliced into my brain like a battle axe, and I cringed away. I felt drained of everything, and to be honest, I wasn't even sure how I was still awake.

I shook my head, and he let loose a loud breath. The moment it touched my skin I felt a little jolt of power. Was he feeding energy into me? If so, how? I tried to ask him, but words failed me as he turned back toward the woman. She was still sitting there gaping at us. Evidently, I hadn't been out for long, but that was weird. I'd used almost everything in me to escape the helicopter and rescue Luc. I should be unconscious for a lot longer.

“Can you walk?” he asked as my feet found the ground, and surprisingly, they held my weight. “I’m lending you some energy so you ought to be okay as long as you hold my hand.” He squeezed my fingers, and I felt a surge of power flow through me. How the hell was he doing that?

I nodded even though it was one of the hardest things I’d ever done. My vision swayed, and my teeth started chattering before I toppled uselessly against him. He was so warm, I never wanted to let go. That should have scared me. It didn’t. That should have scared me even more.

He gripped me tighter, pulling me toward the exit, and I found myself nuzzling into the warmth of his body. He smelled like pine trees and roses, and as I inhaled his scent, I felt strangely energized by it.

“You know, you don’t have to be tough all the time,” he whispered, his breath kissing my cheek as he spoke. “I’ll get us out of here. Just relax.”

I wanted to argue with him, to tell him I didn’t need his help, but instead, my eyelids started dropping shut. “Okay,” I whispered right before shrieking made my eyes snap open and my heart race.

A giant scarlet tentacle slapped into the side of the building with a wet sounding thwack, its bulbous suckers latching onto the glass and pulsating as it strained to hold something up. Another one smacked into the building, and the glass beneath it shattered, spraying inward across the carpet as the tentacles wrapped around the girders.

“Oh, I wouldn’t make any plans, Wardbreaker,” Ariel said as she stepped daintily through one of the shattered windows. Her octopus-like tentacles writhed around her as she strode toward us. “You’ll be sticking around for quite a while.” One of her blood red appendages lashed out at us, and Luc dropped me in time for it to sail over my head and smack him on the chest. He stumbled backward into the hallway, collapsing onto the ground next to the woman. Why was she still there? Why hadn’t she run? I sure as hell would have if I’d just seen people crash through my window.

I hit the ground, and my whole world swayed, shaking violently as two of her tentacles lashed out, wrapping around my wrists and hoisting me into the air like a broken puppet. They felt slimy and warm, like someone had covered my flesh in snot. Yes, it was that gross.

“But you can go,” she said, discarding me behind her like a piece of garbage. I careened through the broken window and found myself staring down at the ground as it came flying toward me. Fear ripped through me as I started to panic. I was going to die by smashing into the pavement after all. I had nothing left, no more strength.

“You can do it,” the voice of my soulbound ghost Mattoc whispered in my ears. I felt his ghostly hands on mine, guiding them into my trench coat. My fingers wrapped around the hilts of my swords, tightening on the weapons before I pulled them free in a surge of strength. Even that tiny effort made stars flash before my eyes, but it was quickly chased away by adrenaline racing through my body. “I believe in you.”

I stabbed outward, slicing into the glass walled building and praying the windows didn’t just shatter. They didn’t, thank God. The smell of burning plastic filled my nose as my swords sliced through them before driving themselves into

the floor. The shock of my sudden stop jolted through my entire body, and it was all I could do to hang there and not let go.

A crash filled my ears, and I looked up to see a desk fly out the window above me with Ariel pinned to one side. She came careening down toward me with the huge antique wooden desk on top of her. Her tentacles lashed outward, slapping against the glass and pulling her out of the way just after she passed me. The desk kept going and slammed down into the parking lot below, crushing a red car flat and causing alarms to blare.

I stared down at the vampire. She didn't seem like she had noticed me yet. This was my chance. I gritted my teeth, and even though it was officially the worst idea I'd ever had, kicked myself free of the building, spinning my body around until I was facing her. She looked up just as I smashed into her, driving the twin blades of Shirajirashii into her chest with all the force my gravity fueled drop could muster.

Her tentacles came free with a snap, and we plummeted downward like a bloody comet. She lashed out with her bloody appendages, trying to arrest her fall as I released my swords and slugged her in her stupid nose. The crunch beneath my fist was strangely satisfying. We jerked to a stop as her tentacles caught hold of the building once again, and I flopped forward on top of the hilts of my weapons.

A shrill scream exploded from her lips as I wrapped my arms around her body and bear hugged her as hard as I could, pressing the blades deep into her with my own body. My hands were covered in her blood as I smiled at her.

"White sparrow," I whispered, drawing on her magically infused vampire blood and letting loose the spell with all the power I could pull free of her. Fire exploded from my hands, rippling around us as we were encased in a tube of burning flame that severed the ends of her tentacles.

Flame licked up over my flesh and agony screamed through me as the vampire thrashed and burned beneath me. One of her fists caught my chin, snapping my head backward. I lost my grip on her, and she shoved me backward.

My back smacked against the back of the super-heated tube, and I was instantly glad to realize my spell wasn't burning me to a crisp even though I was inside with her. Instead, it smoldered against the trench coat, the ward stitched onto the back flaring like a blue sun. Ariel was covered in fire, flames writhing over the entirety of her body as we fell. Even still, I reached in, grabbed the hilts of my swords, and tore them sideways out of her, spilling the contents of her belly as she tried to shove me through the wall of my spell.

The temperature leapt a million degrees as my spell absorbed the power of her blood just before we slammed into the ground. The force of our impact drove my swords through her body, pinning her to the ground as her arms shattered along with my enchantment. I landed on top of her hard enough to break everything inside me, but somehow I didn't die. We laid there smoking, her broken form pancaked beneath me.

I couldn't tell you how Ariel did it because I had a hard time believing she could still move at all, but one scorched tentacle wrapped around my throat and slowly pulled me toward her mouth. Her jaws gaped open, and from the look of it, her jawbone was broken along with pretty much all of her other bones. She'd heal from being thrown from a building, but she'd need blood to do it. Unfortunately, I



was the only blood bag anywhere near her, and I could barely breathe, let alone escape.

“Oh hell no,” I gasped. My words came out like a dying whisper as I tried to move my arms. They screamed in pain. My vision went dark and hazy around the edges as I flopped uselessly on top of her like a broken fish.

“Yes,” she cooed, the wet sound of her voice washing over me and making my thoughts flee as she tugged me closer. Her lips wrapped around my throat, and the burn of her fangs hurt for a second before euphoria wrapped me up, banishing all of my pain and anger beneath a sea of pleasure. Her throat convulsed, sucking in my blood, and as she did so, her mouth reformed against my flesh. Her lips latched on tighter, and she sucked harder still, drawing my essence out of me one gulp at a time.

The shotgun blast obliterated my hearing, snapping me out of my happy place and filling me with agony. The top of Ariel’s head exploded into a wash of crimson, spraying out across the pavement as she twitched and writhed. Something pushed me off of her, and I flopped onto the pavement staring up at the sun. The sky throbbed, pulsating like a beating heart as crimson clouds gathered and began to swirl toward us like a tornado. Was she trying to absorb the power of the ritual she’d been using Luc’s warded body for? How was that possible given her state? Or had it gone on the entire time and I hadn’t noticed?

Another shotgun blast boomed next to me. The sky bucked as the tornado dissipated just a tiny bit. I tried to roll over, to look and see what was happening, but all I could do was make my head flop uselessly to the side. Still, it was enough for me to make out Logan’s shadowy, hazy form.

The way he clutched the shotgun in his hands gave me the distinct impression he didn’t usually use guns. He blasted the founder of his caste one last time before tossing the gun away and reaching into his sport’s jacket. He pulled out a long wooden stake with symbols etched along its length. Though I couldn’t read them, I could sense the magic in them.

“Time for you to take a long nap, Ariel,” he said and drove the stake straight into her heart. The sky above us shattered, and the clouds ripped open. Bloody rain fell to earth, dousing the land like the tears of a baleful maiden. As they struck me, magic washed over me. My bones straightened, pulling back together, and my wounds closed up. My burns healed. It was amazing.

Ariel’s body lay there, a look of hatred etched onto what was left of her statuesque face. The stake had paralyzed her entirely. Logan reached down and jerked my swords from her body.

“Not bad for Dioscuri craftsmanship.” He smirked, eyeing them casually before offering them to me, bloody rain running down their edges. “But when you want a real weapon, come see me. I’ve been working on something out of this world.” He grinned, and something about the way he said it sent a chill scampering down my spine. Had he really found something stronger than a sword inhabited by an Egyptian deity? I sure as hell hoped not.

“Thanks.” I took my swords, amazed that not only could I move, but I felt freaking fantastic.

“No problem,” Logan replied, bending down and picking up his founder and tossing her broken body over his shoulder. “Do you need a ride?” he asked,

glancing back at me as he flung Ariel's frozen form into the back of a blue pickup truck that looked like it had never been driven before. "I'm going to lock her in a safe and drop her in the ocean." He glanced at his wrist watch and shrugged. "But I can spare a few moments for the Dioscuri who just made me King of the Owls."

"What?" I asked, my mouth dropping open as he moved to the driver's side and grinned at me, revealing his fangs.

"What? You didn't know I was second in command? I told you succession was my goal." Logan the vampire shook his head and made a tsking sound as he got inside the pickup. "You Dioscuri always amaze me. Always knowing about the founder but never moving even one step down the line." His words made me shiver. I'd just participated in a coup, and I didn't even realize it. Now that I thought about how he'd helped me earlier, it certainly made his actions make sense. He had wanted me to take out Ariel so he could assume control of the clan. The bastard. "Don't worry though, Lillim. I'll move all the newbie vampires out of the state. You know, as a good faith gesture."

"I should kill you where you stand!" I growled, taking a step toward him. "You know for being a devious slime bucket."

"I do not think slime buckets would enjoy your comparison," Logan replied, and without another word, slammed his door shut and took off in a squeal of rubber, giving me the distinct impression he wasn't going to drive me anywhere. The jerk.

Then again, where would I ask Logan to take me? The Dioscuri would be here soon. Even if they hadn't been watching the area closely, blood rain falling from the sky would merit an investigation, if not more. Once they got down here, there would be no way I'd be able to hide from them. They'd begin sniffing out magic and would zero in on me immediately. Even if they bought that I'd come down here to investigate, the best case scenario was that they'd drag me back home... at worst, well, I didn't want to think about that.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, trying to figure out what to do, when Jean Luc clapped me on the shoulder. I spun, staring at him, somewhat surprised he was standing there, and I had half a mind to yell at him for tricking me and lying to me to get me to help him save his city. Still, Logan had used me to usurp his caste and defeat his founder. Jean Luc, by comparison, was downright noble. He'd only been trying to stop the vampires.

"Do you need a place to stay? Or a meal?" he asked, smiling at me in his puppy dog way. It told me he didn't even realize why I was mad at him. Luc had guilted me into helping save the town from the vampires, and I'd wound up participating in a coup. For all I knew, he was in league with Logan.

Still, as I stared at him, I somehow doubted it. Something about Luc told me he was, at his core, a good guy and everything he had done was for the right reasons. Even still, I was about to refuse his invitation, partially because I wasn't sure I could trust him and partially because I needed to get the hell out of here when my stomach grumbled loud enough for us to both hear it. He smirked.

"I'll take that as a yes. Come on. Let's get something to eat. You know before we get arrested again." He grabbed my hand, squeezing my fingers and leading me off toward the street as the sounds of sirens filled the air. We made it about two steps when I looked at him and because I couldn't help myself, gazed upon him with my magical sight. His body was outlined in gold, and he shimmered with light so

bright, I could barely make out his features. My heart hammered in my chest and my breath caught in my throat. I wasn't sure what he was, but whatever it was... was good.

The sirens shrieked, definitely close now as I shutdown my sight, the vision of Luc burned into my mind for all eternity. Luc grinned, his dark eyes shining mischievously as he wrapped his arm around me, pulling me against the warmth of his body, and I couldn't stop myself from letting him. What the hell was wrong with me?

"Besides," he added, still smiling at me like a fool. "I'm much too pretty to go to jail."

## Chapter 21

I'd been living with him for a week. It seemed like forever and only a moment at the same time. I stared at the steam covered mirror and wiped my hand over it one last time so I could see the reflection of my eyes staring back at me. I was clean and freshly showered after a long night's rest. Luc had lived up to his word and taken me in. I shut my eyes, remembering the conversation we'd had as we left the fast food restaurant following Ariel's defeat, greasy bags of cheeseburgery goodness clutched in our hands.

"You know, you can stay with me for as long as you'd like," he said as we approached his truck, a beat up black Nissan pickup. It was worn and torn enough to make me think he used it for more than driving around town. He set his bag on the roof of the cab and opened the passenger door for me before gesturing for me to enter.

"That's a great offer," I said, slipping by him onto the seat and biting my lip as he shut the door. He was being so nice to me, and I didn't know why. Did he want something from me? But if so, what? I had nothing to give him.

I watched him walk around the front of the vehicle as thunder boomed in the heavens above. Thick drops of rain spattered against the roof as Jean Luc opened the driver's door and got inside. Fortunately, this was normal rain and not magical rain. It wasn't that surprising. Rain had a way of coming to wash away magical spells, though I wasn't sure why.

"It's a great offer, but?" he asked, putting his key into the ignition and turning. The engine roared to life before he shoved the truck into gear and turned toward me, his dark eyes full of thoughts but spilling none of them.

"But the Dioscuri will find me if I stay here." I gestured outside to where the smoke was still rising from the downed helicopter. "Someone will come to check on that."

"They won't find you with me," he said, a smile peeling back his lips to reveal his perfect teeth and something inside my chest thawed just a touch.

"You're wrong—" I started to protest as he cut me off by pressing his finger to my lips.

"My apartment is warded. Even the Dioscuri won't be able to find you there. You could stay as long as you like and no one will find you." He pulled his finger away

and still smiling, placed his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel. He began driving as I stared at him. He seemed so confident about it, I was almost willing to believe him. It made me hope he was right, but I couldn't, could I? That would just make it hurt more when he was wrong.

I supposed I could spare a peek, you know, just to see if he was telling the truth. But if he was wrong? I wouldn't have much time... and if he was right, what was I supposed to do? Play house? With him? And as I had the thought, I realized it didn't sound as bad as I'd thought it would.

How had that only been a week ago?

I shook my head. Luc had been right about being able to hide me, at least as far as I could tell. The wards lining every inch of his apartment were more than enough to keep even the most ambitious Dioscuri from finding me. So I hadn't left. For a week. It made me cringe as I stared at myself in the mirror and finger brushed my lavender hair out so it fell around my shoulders. It was longer than it had ever been.

Still, I wasn't sure why he had been so nice to me. Maybe it was because he felt guilty about tricking me in the beginning? Then again, I still wasn't sure why he was so special. Every time I'd asked him about why Ariel had needed him specifically or why she called him the Wardbreaker, he'd countered my questions, evading effortlessly.

Staying with him was starting to make me feel uncomfortable. I was starting to, well, to actually like him. I shook the thought away the moment it popped into my head. I mean, I didn't like him that way. I was more getting used to having him there. I'd even learned to cook, granted I'd burned everything, set off a smoke alarm, and forced us to order Chinese food more than once, but I still counted it as cooking.

No, I was getting too close, too used to him being around. I adjusted my towel and bit my lip, remembering the night before when an old movie made me realize my problem. We'd been sitting on the couch, going through yet another movie marathon because Luc had wanted to show me all the cinematic genius the human world had to offer.

"How can you protect something you don't understand?" he'd asked me when he'd learned I hadn't even seen a movie before. The words still reverberated in my ears as the scene from last night's movie replayed itself in my mind.

The woman on the screen came flying down the stairs, no longer the picture of poise and elegance. "Where shall I go?" she howled as I snuggled against Luc, his arm wrapped around me. "What shall I do?"

The man in the movie turned, a smile playing across his face as he eyed her. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

The words had struck a chord in me because I could see Luc doing the same thing to me. I could see him throwing me out and leaving me on my own. Why shouldn't he? What did I have to offer him? What could I do to make him keep me? Nothing. I was existing solely because of his kindness. A shudder had run through me. I was depending on the kindness of a stranger.

Luc had gotten up then, leaning forward to grab the remote and move to the next movie like we'd done every night for the whole week. "Classic or action?" he

asked, glancing at the half-empty popcorn bowl, probably trying to decide if he wanted to make another batch now or if he could wait for later.

“Um, is it okay if I go to bed?” I asked, extricating myself from the couch and leaping to my feet before he could respond. The sudden lack of his heat made me shiver, and I shut my eyes, making my way away from him. It was harder than it should have been. Damn.

“If you want,” he replied, sitting back down on the couch, and I could feel his gaze on me as I reached the little door that led to the only bedroom in the tiny apartment. His place really wasn’t very big, especially since the kitchen attached to the living room, and the bedroom was really little more than a closet.

He had given me his bed and slept on the couch despite my insistence that the couch was more than I’d ever had back home. It wasn’t true per se, but his couch was infinitely more comfortable than the hard as cement bunks back at base. According to the Dioscuri, soft beds made you, well, soft.

“Action it is,” he said to himself, and I spared a glance over my shoulder to see him settling against the couch to watch the television. His muscles stretched against the confines of his t-shirt as the lights from the parking lot outside shined through the blinds and illuminated him in gold so he looked like a well-muscled angel. My breath caught in my throat as I spun on my heel and flung myself inside the bedroom and slammed the door shut, chest hammering. What was wrong with me? What was I thinking?

I slumped to the ground with my back to the door as I sucked in a deep breath that smelled like pine trees and roses. It was his scent, and instead of comforting me like normal, it made my heart sink into my toes.

This was all going to go away and soon. Even if he didn’t leave me or kick me out, something was going to come and cause problems for us. This life, after all, was a lie. I mean, I was a Dioscuri, trained from birth to stop the preternatural forces of evil from taking over the planet. Every minute I spent with Luc was at best a lie and at worst the cause of untold deaths.

“So was it wrong of me for wanting to stay?” I asked the mirror, shaking away my memories. Everything about him was too good to be true, and as I turned toward the bathroom door, the smell of bacon wafted through the air, making my stomach rumble. He’d fed me, let me stay here, shielded me from the Dioscuri and hadn’t asked for anything in return.

Well... well, this might be wrong, but I had one thing I could give him in return, one thing I could share with him. I swallowed and dropped the towel as I reached out and gripped the door knob with one trembling hand. I stepped out into the cold air. My naked body reacted to the chill instantly. I looked out into the kitchen for him. Only he wasn’t there.

My gaze moved to the couch, but he wasn’t there either. He must be getting dressed. He must have put breakfast on the table and changed while I was showering. He had impeccable timing like that.

Good, that would be a better place anyway. I turned toward the bedroom and ran my fingers through my hair one last time. What if he didn’t like me? I swallowed, perishing the thought before more could spin up into my brain and make my resolve shatter. No, this was decided. I was going to go through with it... if he would have me.

I threw open the door to the bedroom.

He wasn't there.

Panic leapt up inside me as I looked around furiously. He had to be here somewhere, but where? It wasn't like this place was very big.

Maybe he stepped out to get the mail or something?

I moved out of the bedroom and ambled into the main room. The television was off and a plate sat on the tiny kitchen table. A single plate. Heaped with bacon and eggs. There was a note next to it. Relief started to wash through me. He'd just gone out. He'd left a note. He'd be back. A smile played across my lips as I sat down on the chair and grabbed the piece of paper. Well, I'd have time to set up a proper surprise then. A grin played at my lips.

"Dear Lillim,

I'm sorry. So very sorry. I can't stay. I would love to stay with you, but it isn't part of the plan. Something has come up *that* I must attend to. I'll be back, but not for a while. I'm sorry. I should have said something, but you were sleeping so peacefully and then you were in the shower. I know this note is all sorts of cowardly.

Still, I want you to stay here. It's protected. You'll be safe. I've already shown you all my secret hiding places, where all my artifacts and weapons are hidden. The rent is paid up through the end of the year.

Love,

Luc

P.S. I want you to have my overcoat. I've modified it so it's about your size. Its wards will keep you safe."

Water splattered against the paper as I held it in my shaking hand. That was weird. I tried to wipe it away but more fell. It was then I realized I was crying. Tears ran down my cheeks and splattered across the page. A cry tore from my throat as I popped to my feet and moved toward the window, pushing the blinds apart. His truck was gone. An empty parking space stared back at me.

He'd left. He'd left me when all I wanted was for him to stay. How... how would I repay him now? No, no, how could he do this to me? Didn't he realize... didn't he realize what he'd meant to me?

"He knew," the ethereal voice of my soulbound ghost, Mattoc said. "I overheard him talking on the phone to someone. If it makes you feel any better, Lillim. If it does, even though I know it doesn't, he didn't want to leave. Someone made him go. Someone he couldn't refuse."

"It doesn't make me feel any better," I said, turning toward the ghost who didn't so much as look me up and down even though I made no effort to cover myself. What did it matter, he'd probably seen me naked lots of times. "Enjoying the show?" I snapped because I was hurt and angry. I walked through him toward the bedroom so I could grab my things and get the hell out of here.

I don't know how I had missed it before, but his blue trench coat lay across the bed. It had been one of his most prized possessions, and he'd given it to me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Mattoc asked as I grabbed my thrift store clothes off the floor and pulled them on.

“Leaving,” I snapped, tears still running down my face. “I can’t stay here.”

“Don’t,” he said, reaching out to me like he wanted to comfort me, but his ghostly fingers just passed through my cheek. “Or if you do, give it a few days to make sure you really want to leave.”

“Why would I even consider that?” I asked as I looked around at all Luc’s stuff. Just seeing it hurt in a way I had never expected. My cheeks flushed in embarrassment as I stared at my ghost, knowing he probably knew what I had been planning on doing with Jean Luc. Somehow, that made everything worse.

“Jean Luc wanted you to have this.” He gestured at the apartment. “It’s safe. It’s what you wanted. You can’t even ‘pay’ him for it.” His lips quirked upward for a second before he turned his back on me and made his way into the kitchen. He sat on the table. “We both know that if you leave this place, the Dioscuri will find you, and I *know* you don’t want that.” He pointed to the still warm food Luc had left for me. “Now eat, and we can spend the rest of the day eating ice cream and watching cartoons. We can watch whatever you want as long as it’s the one with the sparkly ponies.”

I stared at him for a long time, and he kept smiling at me like a dumbass, and somehow, it made me relax. This could be my home, and it was safe... and maybe one day, Luc would come back... I didn’t have high hopes, and his betrayal hurt in a way I knew it’d take a long time to recover from, but well, thanks to him, I had time.

I had all the time in the world.

If I stayed.

