



Lynx Clan: Forgiven

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Forgiven

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Dedication

A special thanks to my brother, Brian, who was drafted as my military weapons and ordinance advisor. Without you, I wouldn't know the difference between an MP5 and an MP3. Thanks bro! Now, will you promise not to tear gas Mom any more?

Another thank you goes out to friend from the MP list, Valerie Bongards who helped me with the German used in this series. Any mistakes that may remain are surely mine, not hers.

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Chapter One

Washington, D.C. 2005

"Blurry walls. Nothing but stinking, blurry walls."

Kelly Greene shook her head, clearing it of the confusing, useless images. The mental connection sometimes gave her clues to where a kidnapped child was hidden. Unfortunately, what she saw through Sarah's mind did nothing to help find the missing toddler. Attempting to hold the connection and sort through the images surged her already raging headache up another level. She pushed aside the pain and fought to regain her focus. The child's life depended on her psychic talents, which were currently failing them both.

Her instincts told her she was close, but she couldn't get an exact location. She'd circle the block again, *for the twentieth time*.

She might be psychic, but there were limits to her abilities, and this case was pushing every one of them. The police had dropped her from the case an hour ago when she wasn't able to give any specifics, but she'd tracked this child for the past twenty-four hours, and there was no way she'd give up now.

While her eyes watched the road, she let her other senses relax and accept the connection that bound her to Sarah.

Sarah was tired, hungry, and very scared.

Everything was blurry and confusing through the toddler's mind. *Probably tears*. There was no way to gain any information from her this way. Kelly only knew of one other way to find her. A really yuck-tastic

way, as her son would say.

Through the mind of the kidnapper.

She pulled the car out of the thin traffic. Why, oh why, could it never be easy? She'd have to do it. There was no other choice. She had a feeling that time was running out for little Sarah, that death or worse was approaching fast.

This case had a bad feeling to it from the beginning. Some perception of natural and unnatural. Several times, she had completely lost the connection to Sarah as if something prevented her from reaching the toddler's mind. Darn it, she was good at tracking and didn't just lose the thread that bound her to the individual. So why did it keep happening with Sarah? Why was this case different? Wasn't natural...

Ridiculous. What was natural about anything she did? Not one blasted thing. Her own abilities had been called unnatural or supernatural more than once. Natural, unnatural or whatever, it changed nothing.

She still had a chance, admittedly a slim one, to save this child, and she was darn sure going to try. If it were her son, Patrick, she'd never give up. This time, the grieving mother was a stranger named Sally, but it made no difference. She remembered the terror of losing her child, and she'd never let another mother go through that. For Sally's sake, she would climb into the mind of the devil himself. She'd found Patrick. She'd find Sarah.

That left crawling into a sick mind. Each kidnapper might be different, but every one of them was dangerous and unpredictable. And each one had a mind that she had no interest in entering.

Kelly rolled her head, trying to loosen knotted neck muscles and ease the pounding headache that using her abilities always caused. Nothing would help but deep sleep, what Patrick called her reboot time. That wouldn't happen until she had little Sarah back in her mother's arms.

She shut out the sound of traffic as it buzzed past, turning her senses inward. She reached out for Sarah's immature mind and strengthened the link between them. Sorting through her mind revealed a single new detail; *he called her 'baby, nice baby'*. That was all the connection she needed to grasp at the ominous presence so close to little Sarah.

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There. A man. She slipped into the man's mind and was stricken by what she found.

Scared, no he was terrified. He hated and he hurt. A burning, ripping agony of hurt. Images of needles. Blood. Chains. Bars. Pills. Weapons. Fighting.

The pain and terror rushed through her, knocking the breath out of her chest. His emotions were so powerful they hammered into her mind. Kelly panted through the confusing thoughts and overwhelming pain, ripping herself free from the kidnapper's mind enough to allow her to at least function.

None of it made sense. The images were fragmented and had little connection to thoughts or memories. A kaleidoscope with no way to focus the direction. She pulled back to her own mind, holding onto only a thread of the contact. He hadn't given a single clue as to their location. It was as if he wasn't able to sense his own surroundings through his pain.

His terrible pain.

She could use his pain, track its psychic trail to the source. She threw the Jeep into gear, then roared back into traffic, cutting off a dark colored sedan before taking the first right to swing into an empty lot behind an industrial building. Abandoned, of course. She'd been so close, and the kidnapper's cracked mind was like a beacon to this place. They were inside this building. She'd found Sarah.

With the Jeep parked and silent, she dug through the clutter on her passenger seat, grabbing her cell phone. Her unofficial partner, Captain Rook, was on speed dial, and he'd back her up even when the rest doubted her.

He answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Rook, it's Kelly. Listen, I'm at 32nd and Long, the empty red brick building. Get here as fast as you can. I need you."

"You found her?" Although said as a question, she heard the confidence in his voice.

"Almost. Just get here. This one could be messy." She snapped the phone shut, dropping it in favor of the thirty-eight caliber pistol which she put under her denim jacket in its shoulder holster. Good thing she wasn't

a size two. Her natural curves hid any bulge that might be seen otherwise.

On second thought, she slid the phone into her jacket pocket and picked up a picture of Sarah cradled lovingly in Sally's ample arms. It was another possible tool to negotiate with the kidnapper. She'd use anything she could to get the child to safety. Playing on a kidnapper's conscience worked sometimes; at least it did when they had one. The thirty-eight worked with the rest. Either way, Sarah was leaving here with her.

She closed the door quietly and moved toward the source of wild emotions through a broken door and into the empty lobby.

Muffled crying came from a back room. She moved that way while using all her senses to home in on the man whose thoughts were no more than an incoherent jumble of negative emotions. He wasn't sane, that much she knew.

She'd stall as long as she could to give Rook time to get here and take control. Otherwise, she might have to kill the kidnapper. No one in that much pain could be rational. She tucked the useless picture into her back pocket and drew the thirty-eight. She moved to just outside the door where she could hear Sarah's reaction to what was going on in the room. If any sound signaled a change, she'd be close enough to get to her, hopefully.

The minutes crawled by as her heart beat louder. Each beat thundered through her pounding skull. Sarah's cries subdued into baby whimpers. Then the whimpers stopped, leaving only silence.

Ominous silence.

Kelly glanced at the gun in her hands and offered a short prayer to any god that would listen. Crossing the entrance, she scanned right and left before moving forward.

"Sarah? Where are you?" she whispered. A short whimper answered from the far corner where Sarah sat in a bundle of blankets.

The room was empty of kidnappers, but was still filled to the point of choking with the man's pain. Wherever he was, he hadn't gone far.

She crossed the room and stooped to pick Sarah up, which left her back exposed for a second too long. A huge arm dragged her back against a rock-like body, crushing the gun and one of her arms to her own chest.

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"Who are you?" His voice huffed over her ear as he spoke, dry and panting.

"I just came for Sarah." She tried for soothing, but barely managed to gag out the words past his tight grip.

"Did they send you? I won't go back. I'll never go back." He was terrified. The emotions rolled from him into her, causing her stomach to clench and lurch wildly.

"No one sent me. I just want to take Sarah to her mother." She gasped the words out. She had to get out of here, get herself and the child to safety before he lost whatever restraint kept him from snapping her in two.

"You're n-not one of them?" His confused words stuttered out. "Sarah who? Where am I?"

"I don't want anything but the baby. Just the baby." He was hurting so bad, and the pain filled her to the point she wanted to curl up and die. Or was that his wish?

"Baby? God help me. What have I done?" He sobbed out the words and dropped his arms, releasing her.

In one motion, she grabbed up Sarah and bolted for the door. That was when she heard the scream. That anguished scream would fill her nightmares for an eternity. She tripped at the stabbing pain that shot through the mental connection, numbing her legs, locking up her muscles.

Kelly fell and covered the baby with her own body. The slight roll left her looking at the room behind her. The bulky, muscled kidnapper was on hands and knees before another man. Lean and light, the new man gripped a huge needle, withdrawing it from the big guy's neck.

Whatever was in the syringe was powerful. His eyes glazed over, and he fell forward to the floor. "Help me, brother. Please, don't take me back." The whispered words hurt. Everything hurt.

The connection burned out, and she was left watching the scene though a hazy numbness.

The lean, blond man stared down at the kidnapper. He did nothing but watch until the childlike brute remained motionless on the floor. Then he turned her way.

His obsidian stare was empty of any humanity. The terrible, empty eyes that were found only in someone who'd long ago lost that part that made them human.

A siren wailed close by.

The blond returned the syringe to a small case and pushed it into the pocket of his black fatigues. Then he lifted the unconscious man, who was probably twice his size, with seemingly no effort, settling him over his shoulder and walking out without a word. He looked back once from the darkened hallway. Those blank orbs shone back at her from the dark.

* * * * *

Agent 027, Sergeant Samuel, carried the target out of the building. Mission priority one: complete. Target acquired. Mission priority two: return target to retrieval point.

Brother, help me. The words filled his mind, briefly blocking out the mission priorities. Then they faded away once again.

Did those words have meaning? Were they necessary for mission success?

The police blocked access to his vehicle and the exit routes. Covert motion was stopped. He would wait. Observe.

The woman came out of the building carrying the child. She was armed, but had shot nothing. *Why?*

Two of the officers took the child and left in one car. The woman stayed. She spoke with one of the officers, a suited, dark haired human. Together they went into the building. *She is debriefing the man.* How much did she understand? Did her knowledge make her a threat?

Brother, help me, the thought whispered again.

Brother? He had a brother. No, he had two brothers. Two brothers who were now gone. *Gone where?* Once he'd had more family. Now he had no one.

Mission directive was of all importance. Or was it? Dosage must be maintained. He had missed his dose. The pill helped him think. He was overdue. With a flick he dropped two pills into his palm. *Brother?* The pills fell into the debris under the hedges where he and the target were

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concealed.

The still flashing police lights hurt his eyes, distracting him. The light was the pain. Always with light came pain. But success made the pain go away. Failure brought light and pain.

"No more pain." The words were raspy and quiet. The target was waking. He nudged Daniel with a toe. "Please, no more," came the pitiful response.

He reached into his fatigue pocket for a second syringe and vial. One should have been enough, but he believed in being prepared. A second dose could kill the target. But the mission required containment and secrecy above survival.

"I'll be g-good." The broken promise connected to some memory from his own past. He had said those words. He had begged for pity and been denied.

He put the syringe and vial away. There was time yet. He could wait before administering another dose.

"Thank you, my brother. Thank you."

Irrelevant to the mission. Only the mission mattered. Brothers... Once it had meant something, hadn't it? No, only the mission mattered. "Silence." He punctuated the command with a shake. Optimum success included the target's survival. Success was all that mattered.

Another police car left the scene. Only two officers remained on the scene. One was outside with the woman's battered Jeep. The woman was still within the building. The man in the suit returned from the building. After he spoke to the uniformed officer, the uniformed one left the scene.

Had Daniel left anything behind that could endanger the operation? He should go closer to sweep the area for possible evidence. With the target still immobilized, he could return for up to ten more minutes without risking his escape. Paralysis lasted from forty to sixty minutes with this dosage of liquid Silvertide.

"Do not make a sound or you'll be punished." He left Daniel hidden in the shadows as he moved to the back of the building to see where the woman was.

Moving without making a sound came easily. He crept forward

and found the woman inside Daniel's hidden den. She gathered the blankets and searched through the items that had been with the child.

A sweep of the room showed it was empty of any evidence. There was nothing here to expose them to the world. Daniel's deranged state hadn't endangered them. He could return without punishment.

The woman froze. Her stillness betrayed her awareness of his presence.

He should remove her. *But she is no threat.* Mission secrecy. *But secrecy is not compromised.* He slipped back further into the shadows.

One hand brushed a strand of brown hair behind one ear. She knew he was here. Why didn't she face him? She waited. Non-threatening. Her body was tense, but not rigid. She was prepared, but not panicked. *Interesting.*

Finally, she spoke, breaking the silence. "I know you're there, but I don't know what you want." Her honey warm voice slid through him.

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. He had no response to offer.

Slowly, she turned to face his corner of darkness. Her jacket bulged, barely noticeably, with a concealed firearm. Her hands were clearly visible, making no effort to reach for the weapon. "He called you 'brother'."

Some puzzle clicked, triggering a question from the confused muddle of thoughts that filled him and fought for control against the mission parameters. "What is a brother?" Deep down he knew that he had brothers, but when he tried to force his mind to understand what it meant, he came back to the mission parameters.

Her gaze flicked to his in surprise.

Was his question wrong? Would he be punished? He clenched his jaw to keep his begging pleas silent. He needed to know. Would she answer? "What is a brother?"

"A brother is family. Family gives you strength."

Strength was good. "A brother gives you strength?" Was that the connection?

"Yes. Is he your brother? Will you help him?" She sounded

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concerned for Daniel.

How could that be? When he'd found Daniel, he had been attacking the woman. Why would she want to help him now? Would he help Daniel? "He... No. They will take him." He could only do as he was told. They would bring the light, the pain and the punishment, if he failed in his mission.

"He needs help. I know a place where you can take him." She made the offer and he sensed no trick to it.

But it didn't matter. Only the success of the mission kept the pain away. "He must go back. I—"

"Kelly, are you in here?" The man's voice broke into the room only a moment before the suited policeman walked in.

The moment was long enough to be gone. He moved silently back to the target. To Daniel. To his...brother. *Mission priorities...*

He shook his head, trying in vain to push back the insistent voice that commanded he obey the mission directives. *No mission, no mission, no mission.*

His brother wasn't named Daniel. They'd named him that. His brother was named Dain. He moved quickly to where Dain lay, just as he had left him, the same and yet different. He knelt next to his brother to check his vital signs.

Dain lurched upward, slamming a fist into his ribs. The powerful blow knocked him from his feet. Landing hard, he scrambled, but not fast enough.

Hit after hit came, and then Dain broke free. "Nooo..." Dain's voice began as a low wail and fell to a whimper of pain. He dropped to his knees, tearing at his clothing, while tiny flashing sparks erupted from his body. In seconds, he was in nothing but rags, his panting breaths turned to growls.

He was pain-shifting. His natural wolf body was reclaiming the space that Dain held, reclaiming it by force.

This wasn't good for either of them or the mission. He backed a few more feet from Dain even as some part of him wanted to help his brother.

Dain lost his control in a shower of hazy gold sparkles. Then there

was only the enormous wolf glaring with cold, black eyes, lips raised in snarled hatred. The wolf pounced, tearing into any part it could reach, rending clothing and flesh alike.

Then the wolf ran, leaving behind more wounds than man. He would die here by his brother's fangs. Perhaps this was right, perhaps he deserved this. *Brother, help me...die.*

But no answer came to his plea. He might lie here and bleed, but he probably wasn't going to die.

And when he lived, they would come for him. And he would be punished for his failure. He had to find a place to heal. When he recovered, he would be able to complete the mission.

He had to succeed, or he would suffer. He would not return with another failure.

He breathed in shallowly. With one hand, he pressured the freely bleeding wound where his neck met his shoulder. His jacket was soaked down that side. From where he lay, he could see the woman's vehicle.

She'd offered to help. He wasn't sure why, but he wanted her to be as good as she seemed. No other had ever offered to help one like him. 'Kelly' was what the human had called her. She'd offered. Kelly knew of a place. He gasped in the thick air and struggled to his knees and then to his feet.

If he could reach her Jeep... If she would help...

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Chapter Two

"Do you need me to go over it again?" Kelly asked. Surely by now Rook had the information tattooed into his well-ordered brain.

"No, Kelly, I've got it." His searching hazel eyes reminded her briefly of a scientist with a favorite lab rat. "Are you okay to drive home? You look like shit."

"Gee, Rook, don't lie just to make me feel better." Despite their long history of complete honesty, his remark chafed, but also pigeon-holed their relationship pretty well. It was all business with them and you didn't sugarcoat business. His need for regulations and her tendency to break them made for a good team. Together they'd found fifteen lost or stolen children within the D.C. city limits, and he'd helped her with a high number of the cases outside his jurisdiction too.

"Are you sure about what you saw in there?" he repeated. He'd never questioned her explanations before, but this time the strangeness refused to fit into his neat mental files.

"So you are going to make me repeat it." Kelly would if he wanted, but the details would still irritate Rook. The terror that giant had felt and the odd, confused way his brother had acted would all be the same.

"No. You just seem tired, and with what you told me, I thought maybe..."

"Maybe what I felt wasn't what happened?" she asked. "You will look for the kidnapper and his brother, right?" Maybe if they were found, the brothers could be helped. The situation bothered her. She wished she

could do more, but she couldn't even track them. She closed her eyes and sensed for the connection to the kidnapper, but there was nothing. Well, nothing except a blinding white surge to her headache.

Rook shook her shoulder in his form of rough affection. "Yeah, I'm sorry I doubted you."

"I told you exactly what I perceived. I know as well as you do that the mind can play tricks when under pressure, but that's not what happened tonight. I'm sure of it."

"Okay. I'll follow up on the descriptions and see what I can find." Rook gave her shoulder a brief squeeze. He pulled his big hand back with a final awkward pat, which could have knocked a lesser woman from her feet.

"Thank you. Now unless there's anything else, I need to get home." Kelly blinked hard in a vain attempt to clear away the pain that was bursting in her head. This was the price she paid for using her psychic abilities, but this headache might be the worst she'd ever had. This time when she stopped pressuring her mind, the pain remained as intense as ever instead of fading into an annoyance.

"Be careful." Rook shot another worried look her way before he turned and climbed into his unmarked Crown Victoria.

"Good night, Rook."

He gave a slight wave, but waited until she climbed into her Jeep before starting his own engine. Kelly sighed as she started the Jeep and pulled out just ahead of Rook. As usual, he waited for her like the perfect gentleman, even though they went different directions once out of the lot.

What a night, or should she call it morning now. A glance at the clock told her it was almost two a.m. No wonder she was dead tired. She'd give just about anything to be able to teleport home and hug her son tight. She hated leaving Patrick, but it was something she'd done all too often during the last eight years that she'd dedicated to tracking lost children. He was the reason she did it. The thought of any mother suffering, as she had when Patrick had been taken by her ex-husband, drove her on even in times like this when her head was fit to shatter.

Patrick would be waking up in a few hours for school. At ten, her

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son thought he was old enough to be left alone. He wasn't, though thank goodness she didn't have to worry about him. Since she and Patrick lived with her mother, babysitting wasn't a concern.

Patrick never complained, but she knew he wished she were more like the other PTA mothers. His happiness was one of the few reasons that she agreed to keep her talents away from the news.

Her head throbbed. With each blink, tiny white flashes made focusing on the road difficult, to say the least. Fortunately, the streets were empty, so she was in little danger. She took a drink of her cold coffee, which wasn't quite to the chewable point, but disgustingly close.

A traffic light flashed to red. With a gasp, she flattened the brakes, narrowly avoiding running through it. *Shoot*. The coffee splashed over her hand and sleeve. *Good thing it's cold*.

A moan rose from the backseat.

What the heck! She twisted around in surprise and saw mangled, bloody fatigues. The familiar clothes drove a shiver of fear through her. That cloth belonged to the man who'd asked about brothers and could carry twice his weight without effort. What was he doing here? What did he want? How had he been hurt? How deep in trouble was she?

Kelly took a steadying breath and caught the coppery scent of blood. How had she missed that before? She must be even more tired than she'd guessed, but then who could have guessed the crazy guy would wind up bleeding in her car? "You're bleeding on my seat." She carefully kept her voice neutral, non-threatening. Any man desperate enough to climb into the backseat of a stranger's car could be very dangerous. The fact that he was obviously "not quite right" made him desperate and unpredictable on top of dangerous.

Oh, joy.

The light turned green, so she eased the Jeep into the turn lane. There was absolutely no way he was going near her child. Kelly could cope with danger out here on her own, but put her son in danger and her brain would be useless. She adjusted the rearview mirror to show the backseat. The man wasn't moving.

"Why are you in my car?" She made another turn, this time toward

the nearest police department, which just happened to be where Rook would be doing paperwork. Once on another deserted straight stretch, she unbuttoned her jacket and unsnapped the holster safety.

Finally, the man answered, "Nowhere else." His quiet voice slid into her and did something weird, easing her headache ever so slightly.

"You have nowhere else to go? Okay. What do you want from me?" What had happened to the other one? Had he gotten away and maybe hurt this guy in the escape? *Nice brothers.*

"Help." The single word held a hopeless note as if he expected to be turned down.

Well, shoot. That was exactly why she'd have to help him. This was just what she needed on top of her already long night. "I can take you to a hospital—"

"No. No hospital." He cut her off.

Interesting. Why would he want to avoid the hospital? The man certainly would benefit from a visit to the ER. Maybe the police had caught him and somehow he'd been hurt that way. No, there hadn't been time, and Rook would have told her immediately.

"You look like you need to see a doctor. Why not go to a hospital?" She opened up her senses and tried to feel his thoughts to get some clue as to what to expect. Her head throbbed, but all she sensed was a vast, static filled emptiness in the backseat. She slowed to a crawl while her vision spotted.

"They'll find me." For a second, his fear jumped through her mind, and then the emptiness returned.

She stopped trying to read him. The pain wasn't worth the effort. "They? Who are they?" she asked. So far he seemed willing enough to talk.

There was no response. A glance showed that he was huddled into himself in fear. Whoever "they" were, they were very bad. Or he was lying. The level of fear in his body language didn't match the single flash of his emotions.

"What's your name?" She fell back on her experience of talking to traumatized children. Start simple and work up to the big questions.

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"Samuel." He shifted with a short groan. "No... They named me Samuel."

Hmm. Perhaps she was taking exactly the right approach. Taking a child's name away was one way to take away their sense of self, their personal identity. Giving it back was the first step out from the darkness. "What was your name before they renamed you?"

The complete stillness of his body on the backseat was unnerving. "Saxxon. I was Saxxon."

"Would you like me to call you Samuel or Saxxon?" If he chose the name given by his tormentors, it signaled a longer, harder path back to independence. She wanted him to choose Saxxon. She wanted this stranger to have his identity back and be willing to go against "them" to reclaim it. No one should have their lives taken away like he seemed to have had done to him.

"Saxxon." His voice was barely a whisper. The fear and yearning in that one word justified her taking the chance on helping him. She was a sucker for a soul in need.

"Okay Saxxon, how can I help you?" He wouldn't be like the others she helped. Usually, she helped children get back to their families and in touch with a good therapist, often one of those who worked in her mental health clinic. Part of her wanted to comfort him like she had little Sarah, but she tamped that urge down. No matter how damaged he was mentally, this was a grown man. She should keep her distance and maintain the role of a professional.

"I don't...I don't want to go back."

Thank goodness. Many victims couldn't even express such a desire. Was he ready to understand the difference between his past and what his future could hold? "Go back where, Saxxon?"

The silence stretched as they moved along a more brightly lit street. Kelly used the mirror to check his reaction. Had he fallen unconscious? No, he was still hunched over, the uneven light showing his bloodstained face. His dark eyes stared, meeting her gaze in the mirror.

"Back to them," Saxxon whispered. He only referred to the place and the people as "them" or "they".

She often saw that kind of disassociation in young children who couldn't identify specifics or in older ones who were afraid to do so. If it was fear, then she needed to let him build on strength and tear down the fear. "So don't go back." She made the suggestion as if it were that simple, even though it never was.

"They will come for me."

Good grief, he was a grown man, probably in his mid to late twenties, and yet his answer could have come from any five year old speaking of the boogie man. "They don't own you. Who are they? What do they want?"

Her impatient questions only made him huddle more into himself. His torn clothing pulled tight to offer what protection it could. "I need to try to hide and heal." His desolate voice lacked any hope of success. He already accepted that "they" would find him and return him to whatever he and his brother had escaped.

"Saxxon, what happened to your brother?" Please let him still be alive. Please don't let this man have killed him.

"Daniel is free."

Free, not dead. She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Daniel, is that his name?" Daniel and Samuel. Had they taken the brother's name away too? If so, "they" weren't very imaginative.

"Yes." He bit down on his lip in hesitation, while struggling to answer. "No, his name was Dain."

"They named him Daniel?" She'd already guessed, but wanted him to keep talking.

"Yes." His voice strengthened and held a quiet growl. It was a moment of clarity among all the confusion. Then he sank down onto the seat. "I'm so tired."

Not to mention probably bleeding to death on the upholstery. She had to get him somewhere to treat his injuries. She should take him to the hospital. There he could get medical and psychological help. Kelly knew it, yet her gut tightened at the thought of leaving him with strangers, even though she was little more than a stranger herself.

Whoever his abusers were in reality, she knew they had somehow

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turned two grown men into violent, mindless children. What she didn't know was how or why.

Her more immediate concern was where to take him. The man would need a safe place to heal and collect his thoughts. Once he'd done that, he might be able to deal with his future and the choices he would have to make.

There was a tiny motel not far from here that might be just what they needed. Kelly shifted her aimless driving to take them to it, then and pulled into the parking lot less than five minutes later.

She jumped out, and then opened the back door to help Saxxon out. Geez, the man was badly hurt, even worse than she'd thought. His jacket was little more than a tattered rag, soaking up all the blood. He was either soundly asleep or unconscious, with one arm thrown over his pale face, showing only his raggedly cropped blond hair.

She touched his arm gently. "Saxxon, wake up."

He shot upright and wrenched his body backwards to the opposite side of the bench. His eyes widened with fear, as he froze in place.

"It's all right. I won't hurt you. I found a place where you can stay. Wait here while I go in and get a room."

The dim light danced over his chiseled expression. His tongue slipped out to catch a drop of blood from the corner of his mouth. His eyes darted back and forth as he processed that there was no danger to him here. Tense and motionless, he seemed to be waiting for whatever pain was to come.

"It'll be okay. Just wait for me." She'd rush. He needed more than rest to recover.

Striking snake quick, Saxxon grabbed her hand. The contact was gentle, but asked so much of her. His eyes begged her to not hurt him. Emotions and thoughts that he couldn't yet express flowed into her. He expected pain, deserved it, but wanted something else. He wanted to trust her, but that ability was gone. He trusted no one. He would be hurt. His gaze dropped. He released her hand.

"Just wait here," she repeated, while blinking away the mental contact. She'd seen that look on the faces of rescued teenagers before. The

ones who had been abused and beaten until they expected nothing else. He would run, but what choice did she have? None. He needed the safe haven the room could provide.

She hurried in to speak with Joanie, the manager and owner. Joanie was once a client and understood what she did to help people. In minutes she'd have a room reserved under a false name. But would it be fast enough to keep Saxxon from bolting?

* * * * *

Saxxon watched Kelly walk away. He ached to follow her. A tremor started low in his stomach at the thought of her leaving his sight. The woman's voice did something to him, changed and tamed him. Her presence eased his pain and bolstered his courage.

I have to leave.

Careful to not make any sound, Saxxon crawled from the vehicle. He tested his body as he moved and was pleased to feel the tingle of energy that signaled his magic was attempting to heal his mangled flesh.

The splatters of blood across the back seat remained as evidence of the extent of his injuries. That much blood loss could be a danger. Only his magic made it possible for him to stand without becoming lightheaded. By now it would have stopped the worst of the bleeding and begun rebuilding the lost blood and torn flesh from the inside out.

Saxxon concealed himself in the shrubs near the parking lot. There he could watch for the woman to return without being seen.

What is it about her? Why would she offer to help him? Or was she even now calling the institute to betray him? Kelly wouldn't turn on him. She'd offered to help Daniel. No, she'd offered to help Dain. Saxxon sank lower to the ground. Memories flashed over him of his brother. The images were fractured with confusing voices, which forced him to call the agent Daniel. Dain was dead. Saxxon never was. *No, I won't let them take our identities.* Then the light and pain hit him again. The mission was all that mattered. Successful missions kept away the light and pain. Successful missions meant survival for at least another day.

The woman, Kelly, left the motel office and walked past him

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without noticing him in the darkness. Like so many of his targets in the past, she was no match for his training.

Kelly was not a target. She offered him help and hope. She offered him so much more than that. A tiny, battered part of his soul still held a child's optimistic dream that she may actually be offering him a chance at freedom. Kelly had said he didn't have to go back.

But there was always a cost for any kindness. What would this chance at freedom cost him?

Chapter Three

As Kelly had expected, the backseat of the Jeep was empty. "Saxxon?" she called out, but not loudly. He wouldn't have gone far. "Saxxon, I'm moving the Jeep to the room in the back on the end. It's safe to come out."

There was no response except for the hair tingling at the base of her neck. He was watching. He heard her. She did as promised and moved the Jeep to the tree shrouded corner of the one floor motel. Once there, Kelly took out the supplies she kept in the back, including spare blankets, a first aid kit, and a small bag of toiletries. She carried it all into the room and set it on the bed.

"I'm sorry." Her heart jumped at Saxxon's quiet, deep voice. He leaned in the doorway. Even with his body barely standing, she felt his desire to flee.

"It's okay. I understand." Helping children and young adults cope in a non-abusive environment was the biggest part of what she did. The irony was that finding them usually only took a few days; healing them took years. Her counseling clinic specialized in that recovery process.

"You don't know me. Why are you doing this?" His face remained blank, but his voice was suspicious.

"It's what I do."

"You pick up injured men and take them to motels?" His deadpan expression gave nothing away when the words might have been

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humorous.

She smiled. "No, not usually." She actually spent most of her time helping families deal with the loss of all the children that she couldn't help. When she wasn't using psychics to track lost persons, she organized several therapy groups for both grieving and recovery.

"Why now, then?" He waited in the doorway of the dark room, still afraid to accept help that he didn't understand.

"I help people who've been hurt." She'd put it all on the line for anyone who needed help. Stupid as it was, she just couldn't walk away when she saw someone in need.

"I guess I qualify." He stepped away from the possible escape offered by the exit. Even in the pale light filtering in from the parking lot, she saw the clothing almost torn apart and the blood covered wounds on his neck and exposed shoulder.

"I guess you do." She swallowed over her closing throat and smiled up at him, surprised to see a flicker of a smile back. Like a spark in the darkness, it was gone, but that flicker had changed the hard planes of his face. "Sit down, Saxxon, and I'll clean up your injuries as best I can."

He hesitated and then sat on the bed next to her things. It was a clear sign of trust.

She flipped on a light.

His hand rose, shielding his eyes from the dirty, yellowish light. Saxxon's face tensed, full of terror. "Please not the light."

She turned off the overhead light and turned on the small bedside one. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were photosensitive." He was obviously more than just sensitive to the light. What could cause his reaction? She moved before him and tried to see the extent of his injuries through the tattered clothing. "Will you take off your jacket so I can get a better look?"

He shrugged painfully out of the fatigue jacket. Despite all the blood, his injuries weren't as bad as she'd expected. The worst were to his neck and shoulder. The man's chest was hard and well toned under his torn, black T-shirt.

"These are like military clothing, but not exactly. Are you in the

army or something like that?"

His hands stopped with his jacket still partway on. "I don't know. I don't remember." He seemed puzzled by that lack of knowledge. He shook his head and finished removing the jacket.

She'd thought he might simply be denying information from his past with the vague responses so far, but perhaps he had a form of amnesia. She went to the bathroom and returned with an ice bucket filled with warm water and a washcloth. "What do you remember?"

His eyes closed. His body remained frozen except for a muscle clenching, rippling the part of his exposed shoulder that was still in mostly one piece.

She started to gently wash the blood away. Her fingers ached to drop the cloth and comfort him, but instead, she lowered her voice and said, "Take your time. Don't worry about everything at once. What was the last thing you remember?"

Four or five agonizingly slow heartbeats passed before he answered with a blankness that sent a shiver into her soul. "The mission."

Kelly stilled her nervousness. "What was the mission?" Saxxon needed to get as much out as he could, and she wanted to know what he'd been through. She swallowed back more questions and continued to clean the blood away as if his answer had little importance.

He hesitated, and she thought he might not answer. Then the words came in a hard pattern from memory. "Acquire and retrieve target."

Were those the exact key words and tone as they'd been given to him? "What was the target?" Her hands stilled over the gash that cut across the upper left side of his smooth chest. His expression was blank and empty, programmed.

"A man, an AWOL operative, Daniel." There was something so tragic about his automated answers. He had been turned into an unfeeling machine and then set loose to capture his own brother. How was that even possible? The man within wasn't even visible now. She needed to get him to refocus on who he was.

Perhaps his brother was the link. "Saxxon, do you mean Dain?"

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He blinked. "Yes, Dain. Dain is Daniel." His eyes flicked toward the light, then lost focus again.

"Dain and you worked for the same people, and he ran away?" What had they done to them? What was so awful that it drove Dain to break with reality?

"Yes. His retrieval is imperative." He was still on autopilot and it was past time to remind him how to think for himself once again.

"Why?"

"That is the mission. Failure is not acceptable, never permissible. Only mission success keeps away the pain." Although his body remained stiff throughout his answer, a tear slipped from his left eye.

She couldn't help but feel his ragged emotions. They were so powerful that her heart sped with his fear and her own muscles tensed, expecting the pain that was to come. She took a deep breath, then another, vainly trying to clear his emotions from her mind. Letting him remain trapped in this loop was abuse in itself. She needed to pull him from his thoughts and get him to focus on the present. "Saxxon? Look at me, Saxxon. You need to look at me."

His head turned, and slowly his dark blue eyes focused.

"They do not own you. They have no right to hurt you. You don't have to go back."

His eyes pinned hers. They were filled with accusation as if she were tricking him into another session of pain. "But... The mission?" Despite his accusing stare, his words held a touch of something close to hope.

Kelly cupped his lightly stubbled cheek and firmed her resolve. "You don't have to complete the mission. You don't have to do what they say."

"But, what about the pain?"

His question tore through her. His fear and remembered pain were almost tangible in the air and more than real within her mind. No person should ever have their dignity taken away like this. This man was forced to relive a nightmare existence and unable to accept there might be a life without the torture. "Damn them! Just what did they do to you?"

He flinched from her anger.

She rarely swore, and it was worse because of its effect on Saxxon.

"I—," he swallowed hard, but when he spoke his voice was almost steady. "They hurt me."

Kelly met his gaze. Her hand tightened over his in an attempt to comfort him. Suddenly, images of metal tables and long needles assaulted her, blocking out her view of the sparse motel room. Even worse were the images of two young men chained naked to a stone wall, so emaciated their bones almost poked through their pale, dirty skin. The thick dog collars around their necks were nothing compared to the horrible bloody stripes marking their bodies.

She sucked in her breath and tried to close out the images. "You're not going back. Not ever." They'd made him hurt and had made her swear. He wasn't going back. Not if she had anything to do about it.

"They will come for me," his voice echoed, hollow of optimism.

All her momma bear instincts flared to life. "Let them come. You are not going back." If "they" walked in right now, she'd tear "them" apart and fry "them" for breakfast.

"I don't want to go back. I don't want them to take me."

Her palm caressed his jaw line before reluctantly leaving it to continue cleaning his wounds. "Then you don't have to." She waited while he seemed to think about that. She'd seen so many people hurt over the years, but none had affected her this way. She felt almost compelled to protect him. Why was he different? "I won't let them have you," she said quietly.

His tense muscles slowly relaxed, and he seemed to accept that he might not be hurt for even wanting something different.

And on that hopeful note, she now had to cause him more pain. The cuts and slashes that had turned his shoulder into hamburger needed considerably more than a band-aid. "Saxxon, I have to stitch some of these gashes."

He nodded, but still seemed to be mulling over their conversation. His thoughts turned inwards.

She used gauze and iodine to disinfect the small cuts. She began the

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same way with the deeper ones. The slashes and punctures were deep and should have the attention of a doctor, but they really weren't as bad as she'd expected given the amount of blood. "How did you get hurt anyhow? I thought maybe Dain did this to escape, but these on your shoulder look like bite punctures."

"Dain bit me." His eyes followed her hands as she worked.

She must have heard him wrong. "He bit you?" The punctures were deep, much deeper than human teeth could cause.

Saxxon nodded. "I didn't think he could attack. I wasn't prepared." His eyes narrowed as he watched her open the package of sterile sutures.

So Dain really had done this to him, and now the psycho brother was running loose in D.C. She focused on closing the worst of the wounds for several minutes. She applied Nu-skin to some, but had to stitch two of the more severe ones.

Saxxon held still even during the stitching, which must have been horribly painful. His stoic nature was impressive. She flinched with each needle pull while all he did was watch the needle's progress. Although she'd had the sutures in her kit for many years, she'd never needed to use them. Her unsteady hands must be causing him pain. With each stitch, she bit down on her lip to force her fingers to keep moving though the task until she finished the last knot with a sigh.

"Saxxon, do you think Dain will take another child?" Maybe it would have been better for the city of D.C. if Saxxon had succeeded in his mission and recaptured Dain.

"I don't know."

"He didn't hurt Sarah. Do you think he would ever hurt a child?"

"I don't know." Saxxon blinked as if trying to find a thought he'd lost. "I don't think he'd hurt a child."

"Do you know why he took her in the first place?" The brutish psycho hadn't felt like the typical pedophile. His mind had been almost as immature as the child he'd taken.

"I don't know. Tactically, it was not expected. A child would be loud and draw attention. He was certain to be caught."

Certain to be caught... The idea curiously drew Kelly's attention. She

had a sneaking suspicion that at least some part of Dain may have been controlling his actions. Had he taken the child so that he would be caught? So he would be taken away from those who had tortured him so badly? "Okay, why don't you rest, and I'll make some calls to find out what I can." Kelly went back to the Jeep and moved it slightly out of sight behind a pair of pine trees. Then she got her laptop and cell phone and returned to the room.

He hadn't moved. His bandage covered body was completely still, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Go ahead and stretch out and get some sleep. I'll be here for a while. I'll keep watch."

A flicker of suspicion crossed his face then disappeared. He dug through his torn fatigues. He pulled out a small pill bottle, popped the cap, and then dropped two tiny, grey pills into his palm.

She caught his wrist before he could swallow them. "What are these?" The letter 'S' was on one of the pills.

"Silvertide."

She'd never heard of the drug. "What does Silvertide do?"

"Silvertide allows sleep and keeps the nightmares away," he answered in the programmed voice she was quickly growing to hate.

"Did 'they' give the Silvertide to you, Saxxon?" She'd already guessed the answer, but asked to help him process it himself.

His brow pinched in thought. "Yes. They said I have to take it." Saxxon's hand opened, and he stared down at the two pills.

"What happens if you don't take the Silvertide?"

"I'm punished and given the needles with liquid Silvertide." He turned the bottle over in his hand. A spark of well justified anger rose in his eyes.

"What? They make you take it, and you don't even know what it does." She remembered the images of needles that had filled Dain's mind. And the one that Saxxon had used to subdue Dain. "Was that what you gave Dain?" Kelly sat on the bed next to Saxxon.

"Yes. That was liquid Silvertide."

"It hurt him." She had been connected to Dain. She'd felt his pain.

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"Yes. It controlled him."

"They use it to control you both. Do you want it to control you?"

She really hoped she wouldn't be forced to watch him go through that kind of pain, or worse, feel it.

"No, I don't want them to control me."

"Then try to sleep without it. You can choose to take it if you want to, or you can choose to not take it. No one will force you to do anything." Kelly patted his arm and stop up, giving him the space to make his own decision.

He looked stunned. "I can choose?"

"You can choose." *Let him have the strength to give up the drugs.*

Maybe it was the mother in Kelly, but she hated to see any life wasted under the influence of drugs of any kind.

He stared at the bottle in his hands. "I've already missed two doses. I want to try sleeping without the drug."

She smiled at the pleasure Saxxon received by making his own decision. This man must have been an abused slave, but how could such a thing happen in modern times? And how could she leave him here to fend for himself? No, she'd have to stay a little longer to be sure he would be okay on his own.

She had to see to one last thing before she could relax. There was the very real possibility that Dain would attack others while in the throes of his mental illness. It wasn't something she was willing to dump on the city police. She knew they were a talented group of professionals, but her instincts were demanding she call in a different kind of help. Somehow she was sure Dain was beyond the department's abilities. She knew of another group, one she'd never had reason to ask for help from before.

She set up her laptop and hooked up the phone to it. Two years before, she had been invited to a conference for people with extrasensory abilities. Her mother had joked about it, but what she'd really hoped to find was a partner to work with so she could help more children.

She typed into the search engine "Totally Loki" and waited for the results. The conference had been held at a casino in Niagara Falls, New York. Its name was Totally Loki: Unnatural Wonders of the World.

The search engine pulled up the link to a blog site which she selected. She hadn't found a partner at the conference, not exactly. She had, however, met some admittedly exceptional people and been accepted by them as an equal, as normal. Well, normal among the abnormal anyhow.

She opened the blog and searched through member posts. Rath au Julf, who owned the casino, had offered his help at any time. He'd given her his card and told her to call, but of course that card was at home. She'd never had reason to ask for help before, but now she needed it badly. Her pesky instincts were rarely wrong. With them crying for backup, she was willing to ask Rath if he could lend her that favor. And with more than a little luck, he or a couple of his gorgeous brothers would come down to offer the kind of paranormal muscle she had in mind.

Rath had some teasing comment on the site about someone's children who were real demons. She clicked to e-mail him, quickly explained the situation, and then hit send.

Seconds later, a reply popped up.

Hey girlie,

Rath's not here. I told him to call. He said he's busy. I told his boss to call you. He will. Soon. If not, write back and we'll come help. Dying of boredom here. (Some kids left to watch the casino, lol)

That wasn't reassuring. She thought Rath and his wife owned the casino. Just who was Rath's boss, and why were kids the ones answering the e-mails? She clicked the phone off the internet connection. It immediately began vibrating.

She stepped into the bathroom and answered, "Hello?"

"This is Dàn speaking. Rath is busy. What's going on, Kelly?" Rath's boss had a voice made of dark silk, and despite sounding short and tense, his tone inspired trust. It flowed over her, calmed her, and made everything seem possible. She was aware of his irritation and internal tension, but somehow knew it was his problem and he'd never let it hurt anyone else.

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She explained how she was suddenly watching over a man and needed help to find his brother before anyone was hurt.

Dàn interrupted her. "Wait. I need you to check something."

"Okay." Kelly peered out to see that Saxxon was lying on the bed as she'd suggested. He appeared to be asleep.

"Look on his hands. Tell me if you see any rings or ring-like tattoos." His voice became muffled as he spoke to someone on his side of the line.

"Okay." She went to Saxxon's side and studied his hands, careful not to touch him after his fearful reaction in the Jeep. On one hand, he had markings around his middle finger. She went back to the bathroom. "Has a marking on his right hand, middle finger."

"What does it look like?" Dàn asked in a distracted tone.

"A cat's face, growling, with claws to either side."

"Lynx." His voice held a note of surprise, and she had the feeling that Dàn had very few surprises, especially nice ones.

But why did he think "lynx" instead of lion, bobcat, or house cat? "It could be, or any kind of cat, I suppose."

"Listen. I can't come now, but I'll send someone to help you keep him safe. He may be the last of his kind if we can't save his brother."

Kelly sighed. It felt so good to let someone else share this burden. "So you know what's going on?"

"Not yet." The weary resignation in his tone made Kelly wonder who shared Dàn's burdens. "Just watch over the boy until help arrives. Don't let him leave if you can safely stop him."

Who was this guy to think of Saxxon as a boy? Maybe she should explain that he was a grown man. The words "safely stop him" shot her thoughts off in another direction. "Is he dangerous?" she whispered.

"Yes, he could be, especially if his sanity has been compromised."

She nearly snorted into the phone. "I think it has been." With all that Saxxon must have been through, he would be lucky to ever be normal again.

"Treat him gently and you should be fine. His kind will only respond to force with greater force."

"What about his brother?" She'd be happy to watch over Saxxon. It was Dain that she was worried would snap and put a dent in the metro population.

"I will send people after him directly. You needn't worry about Dain anymore. He'll be found and helped as much as possible." And as simple as the soft voice sounded, Kelly accepted that it would be just like he said. If he said it was, then it was. Dain would be okay.

Her only concern was for Saxxon. "Um, okay. So who are you sending here?"

"The best I can get free. She'll be there by late morning. If you have to move, call me at this number." There was more talking in the background that she couldn't make out.

"Okay, I have it."

The phone clicked off. She shut it with a sigh. Backup was coming, now what?

Now for her son. She called home and woke her mother up with a message for Patrick. Neither would worry much, but she wanted to be sure to follow her own house rules, and that meant checking in if she'd be out longer than expected.

After hanging up, she went back to the bedroom to check on her dangerous, possibly endangered man. The cat tattoo pointedly refused to divulge its secrets, and exactly what did the "last of his kind" comment mean?

Kelly looked down at Saxxon. He tensed under her gaze, but didn't flee as she'd expected. Instead, he opened his dark eyes and met her questioning look with one of his own.

"Who did you call?" The suspicion was back in his voice.

"I called someone to help us." She sat down on the bed beside him as he struggled to sit up. This close, she saw the slight tremor in his hands. She ached to comfort him and gave into the urge. Her fingers brushed over his, then settled on his forearm.

"Who?" he asked with less challenge and more curiosity.

His arm was warm and strong under her hand. Even mostly relaxed as he was now, the muscles tightened slightly, making her wonder

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what he would feel like when he was healthy and in action. "Some friends of mine who have special talents."

"Talents like yours?"

Her gaze flew to his face. How did he know she was psychic? How would he react? Would he reject her help because of her differences?

"How did you know I have any talents of my own?"

"I felt you touch me." His hand lifted to his temple. "Here." He seemed to accept the ability as normal. The fact that he'd felt her might even mean he had some psychic abilities of his own. "Are these people like you?" His lips pulled into a frown.

"I can tell you don't like the idea, but only you know how dangerous the ones after you are. Do you think we can get away from them on our own?"

His frown fell away, leaving a desolate emptiness. "No."

She slid her hand down his arm and folded her fingers over his. "But you don't want to trust anyone." Trust was such a delicate thing. That's why his next words were so astonishing.

"I think...I trust you."

Chapter Four

Saxxon was shocked at his words. It was true. He did trust Kelly and for little reason. So far, everything she had done had been out of kindness. But he was a stranger to that type of treatment. Experience had taught him to be suspicious.

Her explanation for the call made sense, and he couldn't fault her logic in any way. Had she learned anything helpful? Perhaps she would tell him. "What else did you find out?"

"What do you know about the tattoo on you hand?"

"Lynx." That was what he'd always called the marking, but he didn't know anything else about it.

"Yes, that's what Dàn called it too. To me it looks like any cat. What does the lynx mean?"

"I don't know." He pushed at the barrier that kept him from those memories and was beaten back by a wave of painful light. Kelly released his hand to massage her temples. Could she feel his pain? She certainly responded as if she could.

"Have you seen the tattoo anywhere else?"

So much was missing or lost in confusion and pain, but at least that answer he knew. "Dain has one like mine. So does...Caspian." *But once the Lynx had been carried on many hands. Now only on three.*

"Caspian? Who's he?"

"One of them." The thought of Cas being one of them filled him with loathing, but the connection was still missing. Cas was the enemy,

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but he was so much more. He was...

"Oh." Kelly's warm hand reclaimed his fingers, and the friendly contact was an unexpected pleasure. The urge to cling to her hand like a lifeline was pushed back by memories of rejection. Instead he remained passive, letting her fingers weave between his own, before closing his hand over them. He was filled with a sense of connection that was nice.

More than nice, it was the comfort that felt alien and yet welcome. He let his fingers curl into hers, his animal instincts accepting what she offered even while his mind begged to hold back. Maybe she could help him piece the information together. "So what does it mean?"

"I don't know for sure. From what Dàn said, I thought it was some kind of identification. I guess I was thinking it might be a sign of your family or something, but if one of them has the lynx marking, then maybe I'm wrong."

He closed his eyes, pulling away from her and fisting his hands against the way the pieces fell painfully together. "Or maybe you're right and one from my family betrayed us." Somehow, even without memories, that felt true. More than that, he had the feeling of a bond with Caspian, like a brother. The sense of connection was like the one he felt with Dain. The same way he tracked Dain. The way Cas would track him. "He can track me."

"Who can?" Kelly asked.

He almost smiled at her puzzled question. Her keen mind had missed what his muddled one had found. But she didn't have all the information either. "Caspian can."

"Through your tattoo?"

"Because he's my brother. That's how I found Dain." He'd simply opened himself to the connection and followed it directly to Dain.

"You remember that Caspian's your brother?"

"Not exactly, but it feels...true." *Brothers give you strength.* But they could also be your weakness. Cas would be a big weakness.

"Oh. That's bad."

"Yeah." Hiding was useless. Cas would lead them here or to wherever he hid. They would find him and take him back, and then he

would be punished.

"How long do you think we have before he can track you here?"

"I don't know." Did it even matter? Would it make any difference? Freedom was a cruel illusion. He would be punished for his failure and his illusions.

Kelly knelt before him. "Can you do anything to stop him from tracking you?"

The futility of it filled him. "Nothing I know of."

She jumped up. Her brown hair flared out as she spun to stare at the door. "So he could be right behind us? Wait, how long did it take you to find Dain?"

"Two days."

"Okay, so we might have two days before he finds us here." Her fear filled him, or was it his own? She paced restlessly across the room. Her motion raised the dust and shifted the subtle, musty smell of the room.

"Probably less. He knows what city to start in." In less than two days, he would be caught and punished. Maybe he could go after Daniel. Maybe if he caught Daniel, he wouldn't be punished. Not Daniel. Dain, his brother. He wouldn't do that to Dain. Dain was free of them, and he wouldn't be the one to drag him back to the institute. Not this time. But they would catch him. They would end up back at that hell for punishment and retraining.

"Oh."

He reached for the pills sitting on the nightstand.

"Are you sure you want to take those? I think that might be the biggest way they control you."

"I hurt and they help." He lifted the pills and looked at them. They looked so innocent. Could they really be the key to getting free? "Do you think there is any chance...?"

"The choice is yours." She caught his hand. "But I think you have a better chance without their drugs."

Was she right? Or would Caspian find him again regardless? His muscles felt stretched, and his body ached all over. It was always this way

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between doses. He knew it would get worse, much worse. Why did they make him take them? She said he had a choice. Today, at least, he had a choice. Even if he was caught tomorrow, today he *chose* not to take them. He set the pills back on the nightstand.

Kelly sighed.

So it did matter to her whether he took the pills or not. Yet she hadn't said anything. She had left the decision to him. What would she have done if he'd taken them? Would she have punished him? Did he really have a choice, or was it all another trick?

The muddled images in his mind blurred between the past and present. The voice of his superiors rang with promises of punishment and retraining. Taking the pills, following orders, completing missions...

He picked up the bottle, opening it to see the pills. They were the same. She hadn't tampered with them. He waited for her to comment on his actions, but she said nothing. She looked worried, but turned away and went to her bag of toiletries.

"Do you need the bathroom? I think I want to shower while we have some time."

He shook his head and waited for her to leave before setting the bottle back. She hadn't said anything. Why? He'd said he trusted her, and he wanted to. But did he? Could she be different from the others?

Too much was happening. The more he thought about it, the more confused he became. Without a mission, he was without purpose, lost. With her guiding him, he wasn't lost. When he focused on Kelly, he could block out most of the barrage of foreign thoughts that were so confusing. Only Kelly helped him make sense of everything.

He rubbed his hands to ease the aching joints. His injuries were healing faster than he'd expected. Already he could use his shoulders and raise his arms without pain. He lifted the biggest bandage to examine the wounds, which proved to be mostly closed, leaving thick, reddened, puckered flesh where it pulled against the stitches Kelly had used. The aching, itchy feeling that plagued his bones was from the Silvertide. And the longer he went without, the worse it would become. Would these few hours of freedom be worth the pain?

L. Shannon

Saxxon looked at his tattoo to distract himself. What did it mean? A family symbol? No, not family, clan. It was a clan symbol. It identified his clan among other clans. Like the Native American totems.

He stood and slowly paced the room. How many of the clans could he think of? Lynx, wolf, bear, fox, falcon, eagle. They were all predators. Did that mean something? Were there more? Were those really names of clans?

He heard the shower turn on and found himself standing in front of the door. The sound of her movements comforted him, slowed down his panicked thoughts. He leaned against the bathroom wall and slid down to sit there. The shower was opposite his back, and he could feel the vibration from the water as it pelted the shower stall.

He rested his head against the wall and soaked in the knowledge that it was her movements that changed the water's pattern. That pattern relaxed him.

* * * * *

Kelly stood in the spray of the shower until the water went cold. Still she had no relief from her pounding headache. The pressure made thinking impossible and her concentration nonexistent.

How was she supposed to help him and keep them safe when she couldn't even think straight?

She needed sleep.

But how was she going to get any sleep with the thought of wackos out to get them and psychos running crazy in the city? Not to mention being alone in a room with a possibly dangerous hunk of man and only one bed? She'd brought the extra blankets in to make a pallet, but the thought of the hard floor made her cringe. There was no way she'd be able to reboot that way.

She towed off and pulled on her spare clothes, which happened to be a very unflattering pair of green sweats. Well, she had no worries about him not being able to resist her charms.

She frowned at the mirror and briefly wished she were a few sizes smaller than sixteen. Her weight rarely bothered her. After all, she had no

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one to impress, and her health was good, so why worry about it.

But maybe a certain gorgeous hunk would do more than trust her if she were a size two. Already she sensed there was some chemistry that connected them, making the most innocent touch seem like more.

Whoa, was she really beating her self-esteem because of what Mr. Elevator-doesn't-reach-the-top might think?

No way. She wasn't going to worry about her looks when there was a good chance they had a covert, evil group plotting their deaths at this very moment. Still, he did have a wonderful — if currently battered — body. The image of that hard body sent tingles of warmth through her, helping to block out the headache for a few seconds of relief. The years of going without a man's touch must be sneaking up on her. No matter how much she wanted to stay professional, her body had a different idea of what she needed. *Time to quit daydreaming and go get some sleep.*

She opened the bathroom door and grabbed the doorframe to keep from tripping.

Saxxon lay on the floor, pressed against the bathroom wall and door. He must have fallen asleep while waiting for her. He lay on one side with his bent elbow tucked under his blond head as a makeshift pillow. The little boy position did not take away from his very masculine appearance.

Well, his taking the floor would make the sleeping arrangements easier. She stepped over him and softly clicked the door closed.

Suddenly, his still form became a blur of motion beneath her. His legs swept hers, and he caught her in his arms, spinning her beneath him before she could even scream.

His weight crushed the air from her lungs. Something sharp pressed against her throat.

Saxxon's dark eyes stared down at her coldly.

Then he blinked. The confused look flashed once again before he threw himself away from her.

She gasped in air and watched warily as he slid a narrow knife into a sheath she hadn't seen before. He moved to the opposite side of the room as far from her as he could get. She was bereft of his warm weight,

but more than happy to be without a knife to her throat.

He was so fast! And strong. She was like nothing to him. She could have been dead before he'd even realized what he'd done. What had she gotten herself into?

With slow, cautious movements, she stood up.

Her headache clenched, and even without trying, she felt his fear and self loathing. His body shook with the overwhelming, negative emotions. He hated what he'd done and was terrified he would hurt her.

"Saxxon?" she asked. She wasn't about to rush across the room, but did wish there were some way she could offer him comfort and reassurance. Despite scaring her, he hadn't hurt her.

"I'm sorry. I...I didn't mean to. I'll go." He picked up the tattered fatigue jacket. He was leaving.

"No, wait." She had to stop him, get him to stay. Some indefinable instinct told her, if he left, they would both suffer from the loss.

He froze, but she still felt his need to put space and safety between them.

"I know that wasn't you. That was what they did to you. I want you to stay. Please, I want to help you." *Let him choose to stay. Let him choose to stay with me.*

"But..." Longing, fierce and hot, shot through her connection with him. Then it was overshadowed by fear.

"I know the risk." He wasn't stable. If he snapped, shards might crack off and hurt her at any moment. Whether he meant to or not would be meaningless if he ended up killing her. Dàn's words replayed through her mind about how his kind responded to violence. If the advice was worth anything, Saxxon had certainly been shown enough violence to last a lifetime. If only she could show him a life without the abuse...

He finally looked at her, met her gaze. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." The reassurance was out before her brain caught it as the lie the words might yet prove to be.

Still, in this one moment, Saxxon was the one to offer rational clarity. "You can't know that. I didn't mean to do what just happened. I can't be sure what will happen when..."

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His cut off words sent a shiver of fear down her back. "When what?" What on earth could be worse than all they already had to face? When they came for him? When they both turned into monkeys? When she raped him in a moment of sexual desperation? *WHAT?*

"When the craving comes."

"The craving?" she prompted him. Cravings sounded bad, real bad. The way he said it implied something terrible and out of control.

"For the Silvertide. I've never gone so long without it before."

Well, at least it wasn't cravings for blood or sex. "It's addictive?" Actually, cravings for sex didn't sound so awful. She definitely needed to get some sleep before any of her silly thoughts slipped past her lips. This wasn't a good time to be thinking about sex. Bigger, scarier things took precedence.

"Yes." He walked to the bed and got out a vial and syringe from a pocket of the jacket. "I want you to use this if you need to."

"No." She recognized that huge needle and could guess what was in the vial.

"Do you know how to fill the syringe?"

"Yes, but I won't use it." Despite her answer, he set the vial and needle on the bedside table.

"Use it to stay safe. You've seen how quickly it works. It's the only dose I have."

"I won't use it. I felt what it did to Dain." She couldn't do that to Saxxon.

"Please." He ran his fingers through his short blond hair in agitation.

"Saxxon..."

He advanced on her. His lean hands caught her shoulders in a gentle grip. "Please say you will." His expression hardened, but his dark eyes pleaded with her to give in.

"No." Still she refused while aching to comfort him.

His fingers caressed her cheek. "I only ask it so you'll have some defense if you need to save yourself. It won't kill me. It paralyzes the body, making it impossible to fight."

"Saxxon..." She wouldn't use it, no matter what happened. But she could stretch the truth this once to give him peace of mind. "Thank you for giving me an alternative to stop you if I have to." Not exactly a lie, anyway.

"Thank you."

Another thought occurred to her. "This would work on the ones coming after you, wouldn't it?" If so, it could be useful after all. She didn't think she would feel bad at all if she had to use it on one of them.

"On Cas, I think so."

"What about on the others?" Why would it work on him and his brothers, but not the others?

"It wouldn't just stop them. It would kill them." His voice dropped to almost a growl as if killing them wasn't such a bad idea. Finally he was showing some emotion other than fear in reaction.

Though perhaps homicidal rage wasn't the best reaction to hope for. "Why would it kill them, but not you or Cas? Is it the built up tolerance?" Just how much had they given him over the years that the lethal levels now only paralyzed him?

"No. It is the opium level. The amount in the syringe would cause an overdose."

He must have misunderstood about tolerance. That must be the difference. At least he was able to give some information now. "You remember. That's great. Do you know what else is in Silvertide?"

"Silver flakes."

"Excuse me? As in silver, the metal?" What did they think the silver would do? Once she'd heard of silver being used in medicine, but she couldn't remember how or for what. That seemed like a waste of a precious metal to her. "Why would they put silver into the drug?"

"Yes." Saxxon shifted uneasily. His brows drew together in thought. "The silver hurts. The opium numbs and drugs. There might be more, but I don't know."

"That's okay. It's more than you remembered even an hour ago." He seemed much less confused and more able to think for himself. And by his speed and strength when slinging her around, his injuries must not be

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nearly as bad as she'd thought. Part of her enjoyed taking care of him, but at this rate, he wouldn't need her much longer.

He seemed startled by the memory improvement. "Do you think I might remember more?"

"I don't know. If it's the Silvertide that keeps you from remembering, and I think maybe it is, then as it works out of your system, you might remember more." She watched his reaction to the idea and wasn't disappointed. A flash of pleasure and then gratitude crossed his face.

"Oh." His eyes pleaded for help with restoring the lost memories. "I want to remember if I can."

Part of her hesitated, because from what she'd seen so far, he might be better off starting fresh. She couldn't deny the wishful look, so she asked, "Do you remember your childhood? Or your parents?"

He sat on the edge of the bed. "I don't think so. When I think of my parents, I see a group of people, but I don't recognize any of them as family or by name."

She fell back on her training once again. She'd only helped a few teenagers who'd suffered memory loss, but in those cases it had worked best to start with the memories they had and expand from there. "What about Dain? You seem closest to him. Can you picture him as a child?"

Saxxon's eyes closed as he searched for a memory. For a second, his lips softened into a gentle smile. Some part of a happy memory perhaps. "Yes. He's young. So am I."

"What do you see around him? Where are you in the memory?" She wanted to reach out to him, but caught her hands together to give him time to work through this on his own.

He trembled. The smile tightened into a look of despair. "Stone blocks. It's cold and we're locked in and scared." His hands rubbed at his arms as if to warm himself.

She shuddered with sympathetic chills as she remembered the image of the two boys earlier. Was this the same people he'd escaped from, or had his life been filled with cruel people? "Is there anything in the room with you?"

"A bucket. That's all. Dain's crying. So am I." His pain filled her, closing off her throat on a sob.

She tried to shake free of his emotions, but they lingered painfully. "That's enough for now." Kelly had never connected so strongly with another person, not even her own son. And feeling Saxxon didn't seem to strain her psychic abilities as much now as they had. Although she still had a headache, it wasn't really any worse for the nearly constant contact with his mind. Her heart was taking a beating, though. Already she ached for him with every remembered terror. The change in her abilities tickled at her nerves. As if she needed something else to worry about.

"I hurt." He rubbed his arms again, and then reached over for the pill bottle. After a single look of longing, Saxxon handed it to her. "I don't know how long I will be able to resist."

She took the pills. "Should I throw them away? Maybe flush them?"

"No." His eyelids pinched closed as he fought some internal battle. "Yeah, that might be the best thing to do."

"Okay. You look kind of pale. Why don't you lie down again? This time on the bed."

She picked up her makeup case and went into the bathroom again. After closing the door, she took out her used compact and emptied the little bit of pale powder into the toilet. Then she put the eight tiny, grey pills into the compact and returned it to the makeup case. She wanted to have someone look at those pills when they got out of this. For all she knew, the Silvertide might have some nasty long term effect that Saxxon should be prepared for.

Letting him think she'd flushed the drugs might be easier on him when withdrawal got worse. How much worse would it get? He was already shaking like a leaf and starting to sweat.

She flushed the toilet and decided to take the time to brush out her slowly drying hair. Then she went back to find Saxxon had done as she'd suggested. He lay on his back on the bed, and his eyes were closed.

He was not, however, asleep. He shook so much the bed quivered with his motion.

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"Saxxon, how are you doing now?" she asked just so she wouldn't startle him again.

His eyes opened, and he blinked her direction. "I'm hot and cold... How can I be both?" His lost, little boy voice was back.

She stepped closer and reached slowly for his forehead. She yanked her hand back at once. He was burning up with fever. She didn't remember fever as a symptom of withdrawal. All she remembered was one teen who had stomach cramps and hallucinations. Was the fever maybe related to his injuries? Either way, she'd have to bring the fever down, or he could suffer brain damage. "You're burning up. Get out of that torn shirt, and I'll get some cool cloths to help bring the fever down."

He sat up and slowly took off the tattered shirt. His chest and shoulder were covered in greenish yellow bruising surrounding the bandages. She'd expected the bruising, but how could it be that settled, yellow color already? He must have an extremely fast metabolism for his body to be struggling to heal so soon. What would that mean for the withdrawal?

She retrieved the ice bucket, and then went to the bathroom to fill it with cold water. Then she rinsed out two washcloths and returned to his side.

He shook and shivered while the sweat poured off of him.

"I'm back, Saxxon." She sat beside him and placed the bucket on the stand beside the bed. He'd loaded the syringe and set it there as well. Saxxon must have thought it would get bad enough to put her at risk. Or had he considered taking the injection since the pills had been, supposedly, flushed? She dropped the syringe into the drawer of the stand and slid it closed. Out of sight was out of mind.

She dunked and wrung out one of the cloths, then wiped his face the same as she had when her son was sick. Not that Patrick had ever been this sick, but he'd had a few childhood fevers, and the tending and mothering seemed to have helped as much as anything else.

Saxxon's eyes met hers. "Thank you." His voice was dry.

"Want some water?"

He nodded, and she got some in one of the motel plastic cups.

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When he shook too badly to hold the cup without sloshing the water, Kelly held it for him while he drank the water down. But only moments after finishing the drink, Saxxon heaved to his feet and staggered into the bathroom. The nausea and stomach cramping began with a vengeance. Fortunately, that seemed to pass quickly, and Saxxon settled back onto the bed with his temperature higher than ever.

That was how the next hour went. She tried to cool his raging fever with wet cloths and plied him often with water. Eventually, he fell into a restless sleep.

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Chapter Five

With a lurch and a crash, Kelly landed on the floor.

"No, we can't. No, Dain." Saxxon thrashed on the bed. His motion had dumped her onto her butt.

At least her headache was gone. A glance at her watch showed that she'd been asleep for more than an hour. It was almost six in the morning.

"Don't do it, Dain. Don't." His words were muffled, but still understandable. Saxxon wasn't awake. Whatever he didn't want Dain to do wasn't real, or at least not in the present.

"It's okay, Saxxon," she tried to reassure him.

"It's not okay. They'll make us kill for them. Like last time."

She thought about waking him up, but also about letting it play out so he might remember more. So that she might know what they'd forced him to become. "It's not like last time," she encouraged.

"It is. I don't want to kill any more. Neither do you."

That is a relief.

"No. Dain, don't take it."

He settled once more, not thrashing. She used his quiet moment to check his temperature, which was maybe just a little cooler.

Less than a minute later, his eyes shot open and his body grew rigid.

"Saxxon?" Was he awake? Was he having a seizure?

"Target acquired." His eyes closed and his hands clenched in the blankets underneath him. "Target destroyed." His voice was neutral and

empty. His breathing was calm despite the life and death nature of his words. "I'm taking fire. Engine damaged. ME 262, SS17 losing altitude. Swallow SS027 going down."

As in a plane? He had flown a plane in one of his missions?

"Operative down in hostile area. Unable to conceal location. Enemy closing." His voice had already been quiet and dropped even lower to a raspy whisper. "God help them."

A shiver of terror filled Kelly at the desperate words. She knew in her heart that what Saxxon was reliving was a memory. He had been shot down during a mission, and he'd killed all those who would have stopped him. And he hated what he'd done, what he had become.

Just what had he been forced to do?

She reconnected the laptop to the internet. Once back into the search engine, she entered the plane identification, ME 262, SS027 Swallow. All together she got no response, but by leaving off the zero-two-seven, she pulled up plenty of results. Those that weren't related to online or role playing games all referred to the first turbojet planes used in World War Two, developed in about 1943 for Hitler.

That couldn't be. Saxxon wasn't old enough to be in WWII. She spent a few more fruitless minutes searching for any other wars that might have used the German jet. Then she wandered back to his side and considered what to do next.

Saxxon spoke English. He did have a twinge of an accent, but not strong enough to be foreign, not even strong enough to identify.

But what if... "*Wurde das Ziel erworben?*" She asked him if the target was acquired in very rusty German that she rarely had reason to use.

"*Nien, Ziel entgangen.*" He answered that the target had escaped.

Saxxon spoke German and had memories of crashing a German WWII plane into enemy territory. Maybe it was just a dream, but if not, what did it mean? There was no way he could have been in WWII. Absolutely no way...

Unless, of course, she explored possible science fiction options. Maybe he had been frozen in cryogenic suspension or traveled through time to be deposited in twenty-first century D.C. What about black holes?

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She'd always been a fan of black holes. Okay, so that was all silly. What if it wasn't actually WWII, but instead some battle that wasn't listed in history lessons? If this evil group had been waging private wars in some more secluded area, maybe they still used the otherwise outdated planes. That might explain the plane but not his speaking German. Then again, a lot of people spoke German.

Saxxon turned over onto his side, and she flinched at the scarring that covered his back. He'd been whipped. Whatever he'd done, he wasn't to blame for it. He was no more than an abused victim of whoever these people were that he feared. It seemed Saxxon, Dain, and possibly the third brother had been victimized from a very early age.

She couldn't stop her hand from crossing the distance to touch his back. The hot skin was scarred so thickly in some places that the ridges were more than a quarter inch thick. In others, the scars were no more than fine white lines.

He rolled and caught her hand in his own. His hand was hard and tight, but not painfully so. His eyes were glazed over. He probably didn't even recognize her.

Still his fingers twisted through her own, one stroking down over her palm, raising a firestorm of feeling inside her. The contact sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

Goodness, the man could do things to her even when he was out of it. She was in such trouble once he recovered. At least, she hoped so.

He moaned and rolled flat once more. A sheen of sweat soaked his face; his eyes blinked once, but didn't focus.

"Saxxon?" She reached for him and found his temperature had flared higher than before. He hadn't responded to her voice. "Saxxon, can you hear me?" Still no response.

His face turned her way, but his eyes remained empty of comprehension. This was worse than she'd expected.

"Saxxon, I think we have to go to extremes to deal with this fever of yours." A cool bath was all she could think of that might help him at this point. "Wake up, Saxxon. We need to get you into the tub for a nice soak. Come on, wake up." And if the tub didn't help, then she was taking him

to the hospital, whether he wanted to or not. Escape wouldn't be worth much if it was by way of the morgue.

She left him to start the water and then hurried back. Kelly shook his shoulder to try to wake him. "Saxxon, you need to get out of your pants. Can you do that?"

Still no response. "I guess I'm going to have to help you, aren't I?" *Goodness, this is an interesting turn of events.* She unfastened his belt and pants. He had on grey boxers underneath. Good thing he didn't go commando.

Or was it a good thing that he wouldn't be completely exposed while she cared for him?

Good, it's good. She had to keep her mind professional or this was just sick.

She tugged off his boots and socks, and then pulled his pants down and off his feet.

Okay, she was sick. She'd just have to accept the fact and move on. He was darn good scenery even when close to unconscious. He didn't have an ounce of fat anywhere. His trim body was well filled out and all his muscles clearly defined.

Not that it would matter once he dropped into a fever induced coma. *Guilt, the great motivator.* She shook him hard enough to jar her own bones. "Saxxon, wake up. I can't carry you." A light slap produced the attention she needed from him.

He grabbed her wrist and blinked at her in surprise. "Whah?"

"Come on. Stand up. You are going to soak in the tub." She said this while pulling his arm over her shoulders and helping to support his weight. Even with him slightly helping, they barely staggered to the tub. The heat from his arm and side singed her through her sweatshirt. She helped him to sit down in the four inches of water, and then folded a towel for him to lean back against.

She resumed bathing him with the washcloth as the cool water trickled into the tub at his feet.

His blond hair darkened to gold as she wet it thoroughly. The water trailed rivulets down to his chest, then lower. His chest was a work

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of art. It was ideal, not counting the wounded areas, of course. The water beaded over his flat nipples, and his perfectly formed pecs tightened with contact from the cool water.

And lower... *oh my!*

His abdomen was a tempting eight pack even when relaxed. The golden hair peeking above the boxers enticed her fingers into a caress more than once.

Her own temperature flew higher as she thought about following the tawny hair lower to what lay under those soaked, almost see through boxers. His thighs were long and gorgeous and below them... *Darn it, he even has sexy toes.*

It had been a long time since she'd let herself be with a man, obviously too long. She marveled in touching his body, and his every reaction spurred her on, making the next hour of care pass easily for her.

His temperature dropped once again, and she swore he slipped into a comfortable sleep right there in the tub. Blessedly it was either dreamless or filled with pleasant dreams.

Her own lack of sleep caught up with her, and she dropped her head onto her arms on the side of the tub. She'd just close her eyes for a minute while he was doing well...

* * * * *

Saxxon stared down at the head of dark, honey colored hair where Kelly had fallen asleep. The dreams made sense now.

He'd dreamed of them sharing a huge bath, and she had bathed him from bow to stern in the most pleasant and sensuous ways. Surely that wasn't what had really happened, but his mind had twisted her caring actions into much more than they were. He wished she had meant to do more than save his life, but he didn't even deserve that much.

He still ached from the withdrawal, but now there was also a new ache. Could a person become addicted to the touch from another? He wanted her to touch him, to explore his body with more than the hand of a healer.

His body stirred at the thought of her in a different role as his lover.

He wanted her, but he lacked the will to reach out for her.

With her pure soul and loving heart, she deserved more than he could ever offer.

Was there any chance at all that she could ever love him after all he'd done, after all he'd become?

Perhaps it was the Silvertide working out of his system, but with his mind relaxed, the memories came easier. It was no blessing. He'd done so much to be ashamed of. They'd pointed him like a weapon, and he had killed. How could he look her in the eye when she, with her pure soul, would only hate him for all the death he'd caused? He could never dare to touch Kelly with hands that had shed such a river of blood. Nor could he ask her to find any goodness within his heart after having committed so much evil.

Not that it mattered.

Cas would find him and take him back. The best he could hope for was that she wouldn't be endangered by what would come. He was responsible for enough death. Her death would be too much to bear.

Maybe he was strong enough to go now while she slept. He shifted his legs, causing the water to slosh slightly.

Not much, but enough so that Kelly woke at the sound and reached for him. Her hand came to rest on his chest before her head finished rising. Her warm touch cascaded over him. Unsure what else to do, he closed his eyes and feigned sleep.

Her hand moved to his forehead to check his temperature. She sighed, shifting to drain the water, replacing some with warmer water. As the water slowly warmed, he listened to her movements.

She ran the cloth over his chest and arms. It was now slippery and smelled of the cheap motel soap. Her smooth motions were slow and decadent, warming him much faster than the water could. Her hand strayed to his waist and then skipped to his thighs, but markedly missed his scantily covered groin. The overlooked area reacted completely without his permission and demanded her attention.

"Well, hello there." She chuckled quietly. "Either you are having some very naughty dreams, or you aren't nearly as asleep as you were."

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He was caught. He opened his eyes and met her gaze, her very tired gaze. He felt the hot flush of guilt. She'd been caring for him with no regard for herself, and he couldn't even control his rampant body. "I'm sorry, Kelly."

"Me too." A blush crept up her throat, pinkening her cheeks. "How do you feel?"

He swallowed back all he wanted to say and instead answered her question. "Better. Thanks to you."

"It was no problem." She stood, then stuck a hand out to help him stand.

When back on his feet, he stopped and listened to an odd sound coming from the main room. "I think your phone is ringing." It was the same almost silent vibration he'd heard earlier while she was making her calls.

"Oh." She left the room, and he used a towel to dry off before wrapping it around his waist.

He entered the bedroom and found his pants before returning to the bathroom to change into them. By the bed, he found his T-shirt and pulled it on as she hung up the phone.

"We've got a problem." Kelly said.

"Only one?" His chest tightened at the thought of some new threat, but it loosened immediately when Kelly smiled at his almost joke.

"A new problem. Some guys were at the front desk asking who was staying here. I think it might be the ones after you. Big guys in dark suits. Joanie said they flashed FBI credentials. Are they FBI?"

He scented her fear. "No, not FBI. They're fakes." Dr. Jon made sure they had a multitude of identification in the field. Missions went more smoothly and doors opened much more quickly when a badge of authority was flashed.

"You're sure they're not part of some government group?"

"I'm sure." He pulled out his wallet and flipped it open to his own forged credentials. FBI named Samuel Higgins and CIA named Samuel Johnson. And a few others that he didn't show her.

"Oh." She sat onto the bed and some of the tension drained away.

"So is your memory working better now?"

"Some, but I remember the more recent events the most clearly."

He remembered ruthlessly attacking Dain to take him back to the institute. He remembered Dain's pleading and his own disregard. He had betrayed his own brother, just as Cas had betrayed them both.

"You look better. Your fever seems gone, and those wounds on your shoulder are healing quickly."

He was healing much more quickly than he usually did. Something in the Silvertide must act as a depressant, suppressing his healing abilities and who knew what else. "I guess so. My hands are still pretty shaky though." His stomach let out a loud growl.

Kelly chuckled. "Taking care of that will have to be next on our list. Actually, a meal sounds pretty good to me too."

"What about them? What did the manager tell them? How much longer do you think we'll be safe here if they are already asking at the office?" One way or the other, he'd keep them from hurting Kelly. They would try to retaliate for her part in his temporary escape.

"Yeah, we're safe for now. Joanie said we came here, but she turned us away and sent us to the local hospital."

"It won't take them long to check on that and come back." Not long at all. It could be a matter of hours until he was taken back there, maybe even less than that.

"Especially if that one can track you." She frowned.

"If he was with them, they would have found us." Why wasn't Cas with them? It was curious that they would come here and leave without finding him.

"True." Just then, a roaring motorcycle pulled up outside the room.

He looked out the window to see a female biker dismount and turn to stare at their door. Kelly peeked through as well, then retrieved her gun and stepped toward the door.

"Wait." He didn't recognize the woman. "Do you know her?" She was skinny with pale skin and dressed in black leather.

"It might be the one my friends sent. I hope not, but if so, I'll go out first. You stay here."

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She was protecting him, putting her life before his own. He'd be right here watching in case she needed him. "Okay." He leaned over and brushed his lips across her temple. "Be careful."

She looked like she wanted to say something, but instead Kelly nodded and stepped outside.

He moved back to the window where he could watch over what was happening.

The strange woman pulled the bandana from her head, revealing a mass of black curls. After tossing the bandana over the bike, she walked toward Kelly with her hands relaxed and an easy smile on her wide lips. Saxxon continued to listen and watch.

"Hi, I'm Angel. The big boss sent me."

"Angel as in Charlie's?"

She frowned and planted her hands on her narrow hips. "Angel as in Angel Powers. Trust me, the guy I work for is much badder than Charlie. And no, I don't hang out with Buffy either. I believe you know my papa and that's why I was sent down here."

"Who is your papa?"

"Rath au Julf. You do know him, right?" The woman's voice turned suspicious. She shifted her weight to a fighting stance and unzipped her leather jacket. Saxxon could make out the handle of a weapon under the edge of the coat.

"Rath is your father?" Kelly had stepped closer to the door and out of Saxxon's line of sight. Her voice was steady, so he held his position for a moment longer, trusting her to know if this woman was a danger.

"Stepfather if you want to be technical. He married my mom about twenty years ago. So are we going to stand out here all day, or are you going to introduce me to the lynx?" The woman pulled out a cigarette pack, fidgeted with it for a moment, and then put it back.

"Tell me what you know first."

The woman growled in obvious impatience. "That could take decades that we don't have. Look, you called for help. I'm just here to make sure your kitty doesn't go extinct."

"Fine." Kelly stepped back and opened the door, but even as she

moved inside, she managed to stay between him and the new woman.

Strange, the woman was small, but she seemed to fill the room to overcrowded. She wore some powerful perfume that made him yearn for clean air, and something about her was threatening like a hunter. He tensed under her gaze. His fingers touched his knife reassuringly. Then Kelly was there, unwrapping his fingers from the handle and clasping his hand in hers.

"Saxxon, this is Angel Powers. She's the one my friend, Rath, sent to help us."

He nodded without taking his eyes from the stranger. She was different from anyone he'd ever met. That much he was sure of. He wasn't sure what it was about her that set off all his alarms, but whatever it was, he'd be happy if she carried her skinny ass back out the door.

Angel chuckled. "He's not very friendly, is he?"

Kelly's hand tightened over his. "He's been through a lot and has no reason to trust you yet."

"Does he understand English? *Sprechen sie Deutsche?*"

Kelly gaped at the woman. "How did you know he speaks German?"

Saxxon had to wonder the same thing. How did either woman know he spoke German? And just what else did this stranger know about him?

"He is of the Lynx Clan; they're German. I believe from around Munich. At least they were. They've been thought extinct for over fifty years." She still stared at him with a calculating way that made him want to strike out or run. "He does speak though?"

Before he could growl, Kelly answered, "Yes, when he wants to."

"Good. Well, Saxxon, I need some information from you." When he made no sound, she gave a dramatic sigh. "Look, the more you can tell me about that brother of yours, the more likely we can bring him in alive and maybe help him. And if you can share anything about this group of jerk wads, then just maybe we can even do something about stopping them."

Her words cut deep into him. What had Kelly done? "You've sent someone after Dain?" he asked Kelly.

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She took a deep breath, and then met his gaze. "Yes. I had to make sure Dain wouldn't hurt anyone. I'm hoping my friends can find him before the other ones can recapture him. I'm sorry, Saxxon, but he has to be stopped. At least this way he has a better chance."

That might be for the best then. He wasn't sure if Dain would survive more retraining. And if he had been driven past sanity, perhaps her friends would put him down without torturing him. Dr. Jon wouldn't be so kind.

"So you will answer a few questions then?"

"His memory is spotty. He may not be much help." She smiled up at him with a wink. Was this her way of giving him permission to avoid any questions he wished?

Kelly was helping him in the best ways she knew. He should trust that she wasn't putting them in any more danger. "I'll answer what I can."

The woman pulled out a small notepad and stub of a pencil. "Good. When Dain got loose, was he able to shift forms? Could he turn into a wolf? Did he have any control over his magic?"

Well, she did jump right to the big questions. "Yes. He shifted forms before he attacked me, but I don't think he had control. He will likely be thinking more like a wolf than a man at this point." Kelly's hand tightened over his, and he clearly felt her rising panic.

"Dàn said something about drugs. Do you know what drugs he was given?"

"Silvertide. It's a compound with an opium base cut with silver flakes." He looked down at Kelly, who stared back at him with eyes wide. Without her, he would have died, or worse, been caught. She deserved to hear as much as he knew, as much as she could deal with.

Angel's pencil scratched to a stop. "Oh, shit. That would be very nasty. How long—"

"Whoa! Back up." Kelly cut in with a trembling laugh. "What the heck was that about a wolf and magic?"

"She doesn't know?" Angel asked him.

"I don't know or remember much myself. Maybe you can share what you know in the abridged version." *Please let Kelly accept who and*

what I am. He was even willing to listen to this strange woman if it would help Kelly understand.

"Oh my. Well, um...Saxxon, you are, from what we can tell, one of the last of the Lynx Clan of Valàfrn werewolves. That means that when you're healthy, you can control a certain amount of magic and change form into a wolf."

"Okay." That much he had put together. On the lower doses of Silvertide, he and Dain had been able to change forms and do a few other small magic tricks.

"The drugs they gave you would have inhibited your magic as well as caused a great deal of pain and been addictive. Silver acts as a suppressant to almost all magical species, Valàfrn especially. I'm sure the bastards used the drug to control you and keep your magic from maturing."

"Who are they?" Kelly asked.

"Third Reich. They're Nazis. At least, we are almost sure about that. There were records that supported the theory that a pre-Hitler group, and then eventually Hitler, enslaved a dwindling clan and used them for some of his more heinous medical experiments."

Saxxon remembered some of the experiments. They were the things of nightmares.

"But Hitler was killed..." Kelly trembled as she tried to piece the information together.

"Yes, but some of his trusted fled," Angel told her.

"To South America." He remembered the private flight that had brought him north after Dain from the institute hidden in Brazil.

"That was the strongest possibility." Angel wrote down a few more notes.

Having faced the easy part, Kelly turned her focus onto the rest. "You did *not* say werewolf. I did not just hear you say that word..." Kelly pulled free of his hand and sank onto the bed. "No, no... Look, Saxxon, she's got to be crazy, crazier than you. You're not a werewolf. You don't have any more magic than I do."

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Chapter Six

Saxxon squatted down before her, placed a hand to each side of her, but was careful not to touch her. When she met his gaze, he held it steady, hoping she would see how much he needed her strength. "Kelly, I need to hear this, and I want you to know as much as I do."

She nodded at his words, but her eyes were wide with something very close to fear. *Please not that. Please don't ever let her fear me.* Even though she probably should fear him, the sight of fear in her eyes drove pain through him.

"Please, will you help me with this?" If this proved too hard for her, he would leave. He couldn't ask any more of her.

"I don't know if I can believe in this."

"But you believe in a group who uses drugs and torture to force me to kill..." His words faltered as her hands found his and held them tight on her lap. Even now, despite her fear, her strength filled him. "You believe in your own talents. As strange as this sounds, it feels true to me."

"But it can't be true. It would mean that you're over sixty years old, and men don't look like you at sixty."

What a wonderful woman! She was told that he wasn't human and turned into a wolf, and she commented on his age.

"Most men don't, but he's not exactly human," Angel said from too close. He glared her direction in time to see her step back out of his reach.

Kelly tightened her grip on him. "What are you saying? You're saying they don't age then?" she said this to Angel, but her gaze was

bound to him.

"The Valàfrn age, but not like humans."

"Then how?"

"If Saxxon is under a hundred, then he's barely more than a pup. Physically, they mature like humans. They look adult at about twenty, but emotionally and magically, they mature more slowly. Most don't choose to settle down until they are three or four hundred years old."

"What? Just how long do they live?" Her words felt like an accusation. He was different from her, and neither liked that information.

"That isn't exactly known," Angel answered.

Kelly sucked in her breath. Her hands froze in his. "So they're immortal?"

"No, not exactly. If they don't find a mate to bond with by the time they reach about a thousand, then their magic deteriorates and they begin to age and weaken."

"And if they do find a mate?" Kelly asked.

Angel chuckled. "Then the magic that keeps them young is maintained, but I don't know for how long."

"How old is the oldest you know?"

"Let me think... I met a couple from the Bear Clan who had been bonded for two thousand years. I don't know how old they were, but probably some of the council members are older than that."

"That is so weird." Kelly squeezed his hands once more.

Angel moved around the room, studying their things. If not for the fact that Kelly held him in place, he might have objected. She lifted his torn jacket and looked at it from every angle, even sniffing at it. "How old are you, Saxxon?"

He sighed. "I don't know. I believe I was a child when they caught us."

"You really did fight in World War Two." Kelly said this not as a question but a statement of awe.

"That would have you probably born around the nineteen twenties for you to be old enough to be used in the war. My guess is that you are likely in your eighties, maybe nineties."

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"How can it be true?" Kelly asked in a whisper.

"I'm sorry." He didn't want anything to upset Kelly, and this was certainly a big one. And even this she was handling well.

Kelly patted his hand. "It's hardly your fault."

"Are you Valàfrn?" he asked Angel.

Kelly answered, "No, she's not. She kept saying 'you' and 'they', never 'us' or 'we'."

Still, there was something about her that made him nervous. "Then what are you?" He should have known she wasn't Valàfrn. Angel's scent was acidic, not earthy.

Angel moved to the window and shifted the curtain to look out. "I'm human, mostly."

Saxxon noticed that she didn't specify what she was, if not all human. His only fear regarding Angel was if she might be a threat to Kelly. "How do you know so much then?"

Angel continued to watch out the window. "Rath is Valàfrn of the Eagle Clan. Through him I've gotten to know quite a lot."

"I met Rath. He's not a werewolf," Kelly argued.

"Oh, yeah, he is and always has been. Even though he's only a little over four hundred, he is the fourth eldest of the Eagle Clan and very proud of his position."

"But you said Rath is your stepfather. How can that be?" Kelly's voice lost some of its bite. She met his gaze evenly and seemed to be relaxing with the idea.

"He married my mother. She's human like you."

He was having some trouble understanding all the little details. "So if you're human, how will you be able to help us against this group, then?"

"I said I'm mostly human. I'm hardly helpless. Besides, I've already helped you just by sharing some of what I know. As for the rest, I didn't grow up surrounded by shifters, elves, demons and the like without learning a few things."

Saxxon's stomach let out a loud growl, neatly stopping any more discussion over what Angel could or couldn't do. "Pardon me," he said

sheepishly.

"Geez, wolf, how long's it been since you ate?" Angel stared at him in surprise.

He thought back, but couldn't remember eating anything. "I don't know."

"How can you not know? Oh, your memory problems. Well, what do you plan to do for food? I could go for some grub myself."

Kelly interrupted. "We need to keep a low profile."

Angel snorted. "Obviously. Speaking of which, we should probably be on the move soon."

Saxxon wasn't quite ready to trust this stranger. He caught Kelly's gaze, and she seemed to agree. She said, "I think we will be safe here for a little longer."

"Why here? What makes this hole safe?" Angel took out her pack of cigarettes to fidget with them again.

"I'm friends with the owner."

"Friends can be bought." She shook out a cigarette and lit it with a small lighter.

"I helped her find her daughter a couple years ago when she got lost hiking. It's what I do. I find children, and believe me, parents who get to hold their children again are loyal in their gratitude."

Angel drew a long slow breath. "You hunt?"

"Yes."

"So do I. That kind of work can build loyalty." Angel turned her back on them and stared out the window. "You are sure that you have this woman's?"

"Yes. Short of mind control, she won't betray me."

"Well, that's not completely out of the question. After all, we don't know what these people are capable of doing or what lengths they're willing to go to get their pet wolf back." With a short nod toward Saxxon, she continued, "How does Chinese takeout sound?"

"Is it food?" he asked.

Kelly nodded. "Yes, that would be fine. Which one of us will go get it? Saxxon can't be seen."

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"Seeing as he is still barely letting me stay in the room, I guess I'd better let you baby sit while I run for the food." She didn't wait for an answer. She didn't even ask what they wanted, just jogged back to her bike and roared out of the small lot.

Kelly stood up and peered out the window at the departing bike. "That was interesting."

"Do you trust her?" He joined her at the window, but left the watching for her. The only sight he wanted was Kelly.

"Mostly. Do you?"

"No," he growled.

She dropped the drapes back into place and turned to face him. "Why not?"

"I have no reason. I just feel violated by her presence. She could turn against us. She could help them to find this place." How could he explain? Angel just felt...wrong. Like whatever her non-human part was, it didn't belong in their world.

"She could betray us, but I don't think she will." She moved closer to him, her hand brushing over his worried frown. "What choice do we have? We can't face them alone."

He liked that she used "us" and "we" as if they were a team. Catching her hand, he pressed it against his lips. "We could run." Even as he said the word "we", guilt rushed through him. He should run on his own to keep her safe. He should, but he didn't have that much strength.

"Would they ever stop looking for you?"

The leaders at the institute wouldn't stop. Even with help, the chance of their escaping seemed improbable at best. "No."

She sighed. "Have you ever gotten free of them before?"

"I don't think I've tried. Dain has run several times." And always he was returned for retraining.

Her fingers slid away from him as sadness crept into her expression. "Is your memory improving? Soon you won't need me."

He needed her now more than ever. She had all the strength that he lacked, and maybe it was something he could learn. "Some, but many things don't make sense. There are times when I don't know what was

real and what they convinced me of.”

“Do you mean like brainwashing? What else did they do to you?”

He nodded. “When I think about all that Dain and I went through, I wish I didn’t remember it.” He sank onto the bed. His hands still ached and shook badly. He rubbed them together as if to ward off the memories.

She stilled his fingers with her own, holding them tight within her grip until he met her gaze.

“They tortured us all. I remember the screams and howls of pain. I can still feel the fear, knowing they would take me next.” His entire body shook. His hands curled into fists. “I remember there were five of us, not three. I had two sisters that they killed. Dain told me they’d killed the rest of our clan before that.”

She pulled him into her arms. His larger frame cradled in her arms like any injured animal, seeking protection from the harsh world. Her arms became his den, his safe haven against the nightmares. “Oh, Saxxon, I am so sorry. I wish you didn’t remember those horrible things.”

Safe in her arms, he let the memories continue. “Cas. I remember him holding our sister, Kali, when she died.”

“Is he older or younger than you?” she asked as she ran her hand over his back in comforting strokes that rose feelings that were not so innocent.

Her caress was light but steady, and even though he knew she meant only to comfort him, his body reacted to the contact. He took a deep breath and focused on the words needed to explain his past, which seemed remote now that he felt safe in Kelly’s arms. “I was the youngest of my family. Dain, Kali and Addy were triplets. Cas was the oldest. After Kali died, Caspian left Dain and I and went to help them. I’ll never forgive him for that betrayal.”

“I have trouble thinking of this as happening before I was even born.”

He pulled back from her embrace so he could meet her gaze.

“Before your parents were born.”

“Probably.” She shifted on the bed beside him.

Kelly really was amazing. After all she’d done for him in the past

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twelve hours, she was still here, still offering her strength. "You have been so strong."

She chuckled. "Until I heard that 'W' word. I'd appreciate if we don't say that one often."

The "W" word? "Werewolf?"

"Yikes!" She covered her ears and ducked her head.

"But it's not even a four-letter word." He couldn't help himself. A laugh burst out at her antics. The laugh felt alien, but good, so he laughed again as Kelly pressed her face into his shoulder and laughed with him.

"Worse! It's two four-letter words stuck together." A giggle welled up at the reality that she now believed in. *Werewolves, good grief.*

Saxxon lifted her chin, freezing her laugh with his sudden intensity. "I want to kiss you."

Oh? Then whatcha waiting for, wolfie? Her lips refused to form the words. She saw only his face, no longer blank to the world. His eyes...his eyes were dark blue now. They had been darker before, so dark that they'd looked black. So much more than his eye color had changed in the last twelve hours.

He shifted, bringing his lips closer. His hands escaped hers and landed on her shoulders. He closed the distance and brushed gently against her lips, drawing back with a tentative smile.

"That was nice." She let her tongue taste where he had touched so lightly, and found the barely there flavor that was all Saxxon.

"I think so too. May I kiss you again?"

"Umm...yeah." This time he wouldn't get away so lightly. Her fingers brushed up over his hard shoulder and feathered over his neck. As he leaned in again, she encouraged and directed him to stay. She drew him into the kiss and expanded it, exploring the softness of his lips with her tongue.

He felt so good, simply touching him warmed her and shut out all the problems that they had yet to face. His arms closed around her, pressing her against his hard chest.

She felt dwarfed by his strength. Even though he was still recovering, he lifted her so she sat across his lap. His action broke some

piece inside her, the part that occasionally pointed out that she was too heavy to be loved and desired.

In Saxxon's arms she felt petite and sexy. His fingers crept up into her thick hair, tickling their sensitive roots with slight tugs as he finger combed its length.

The sensation slipped through her, softening her stressed out edges, sharing her burdens.

And the man could kiss like nobody's business. His firm lips caressed over hers, then nibbled to gain access to a deeper exploration. His tongue brushed over her lower lip, then darted back as if to taste her. With a moan, he carried them deeper again, his tongue tempting her mouth to open, then stroking over hers.

She was burning up with desire, and all he'd done was kiss her. She blinked and then closed her eyes against the bright spots that danced in her vision.

What was it that he inspired? She was ready to throw him flat on the bed and have her way with him and his barely recovering body.

Geez, the man was barely off his dangerously high fever, and she was about to, what was the phrase...jump his bones?

He had such nice bones. Jump worthy bones. Never mind his jump worthy bones, that was a pleasant, downright flattering bulge pressing into her hip.

It had been so long since a man had held her like this. At least she could be sure that he found her desirable.

Man? He was a werewolf.

Okay so he was a werewolf. Who cared, as long as he kept kissing her like this?

The door sprang open with a bang into the wall. "Oh lord, don't do that in public!" Angel's voice cut in.

Saxxon couldn't restrain the growl that started deep in his chest and rumbled out at Angel, who had the gall to laugh at interrupting them.

"It's all right Saxxon," Kelly said as her fingers dug into his arms. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "We need her."

"Yes, you do need me. More now than before." Angel tossed two

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bags of food onto the small table.

Kelly straightened her clothes. "What's happened?"

With the bags open, Angel dug through for a moment before answering. "What happened is that your friends are openly ransacking the city."

"What?" Kelly and Saxxon echoed together.

"You heard me. It's all over the news. If this little dive had a TV, you might know that." She pulled out a plastic fork and a small take out box, taking a bite before continuing. "You just have to know what to look for. I happen to know they're after you, so I can guess that the places that have been hit are along the trail you took."

"Where have they been? Has anyone been hurt?"

"The first was the building where the child was found. It was burnt down, and a dark colored sedan was firebombed less than a block away. After that, there were several police homes broken into. The last was a private condo that was ransacked and also burnt. I understand that is where the mother and child lived."

Since he'd never run, he didn't know what to expect from them. "They think to flush me out with fire?" When Dain ran, he'd been sent to retrieve Dain, but he didn't know if they ever did anything else in their efforts to catch him.

Angle continued to pick through the food. "My guess is that they are removing places where you may find refuge. Pressuring people you may have met. Keeping you from feeling safe."

"I've never felt safe." But her theory made sense.

Angel continued to eat as she said, "I don't think they knew you've had help."

Kelly jumped. "Knew? You mean they know about me now?"

"Yeah, I think so. That pretty Captain of yours had his apartment trashed and a bunch of files stolen, probably some that mention you."

"Pretty Captain?" Kelly asked. "Do you mean Captain Rook? Oh no..."

"Yeah, he gave a statement on the news. I guess this pretty much just happened."

"Oh, I have to call my son." She fled across the room and grabbed up the phone.

He tuned out Angel and followed Kelly to offer any support he could give. Her hands shook as she tried to dial the numbers. They shook worse than his own. He closed his hands over hers and gently took the phone. "What's the number?"

She gave it and he dialed. Even with his unsteadiness, he handed the phone back.

"It's ringing."

She mouthed the words, "Thank you." Then she listened hard to the line. Seconds later, she clicked the phone shut. "There's no answer." Her voice was filled with hopelessness.

"It may mean nothing," Saxxon soothed.

"And it might mean they have my son!"

He pulled her into his arms while her fists pounded on his still healing chest. He took the assault in silence. She'd been his strength. He would do his best to be hers.

"Would he have gone anywhere that you can check with? Family or friends?" he asked as he rocked her in his arms.

"He was with my mother, but by now he should be in school. I could try her cell phone in case she was out of the house."

"Then we'll call her." He lifted the phone and waited for the new number, then dialed it in.

"Mom?" she asked almost at once. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm worried about you and Pat." She wiped at her eyes and offered Saxxon a slight smile. "No, please keep him with you." She cupped the phone to whisper, "His school was closed for some reason. She just picked him up."

He shifted her so that her head rested on his shoulder. Her one arm circled his back and held on tightly.

"No, Mom, I don't want him going back to school if they reopen it." She sighed, and he could hear the other woman's voice over the phone.

"He could be in danger. I want him kept with you and away from our house or his school. It would be even better if you could take him and go stay with Aunt Helen for a few days."

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Saxxon's muscles strained as she moved with a jerk. The hand not needed to balance her stroked up and down her arm.

"Thanks, Mom. Could you put Patrick on?" A higher pitched voice called out "Mom!" loud enough that Kelly pulled the phone back for just a moment. Then she clutched it close.

Fear, joy and love pulsed into Saxxon at a painful intensity, overwhelming and cutting off his breath in a way that both welcomed him and shut him out.

Kelly chatted with her son, and each word pushed the pulse of emotion deeper.

It was her love he felt burning in his veins. As she lectured her son on staying close to Gram and not playing outside, Saxxon soaked in the raw intensity of her emotions.

What would it feel like to receive such love? Had anyone ever cared for him like that?

A flash of memory revealed a woman held close by a man under the spreading limbs of an old oak tree. His parents, and they looked happy.

"Okay, Pat, be good for your Gram, and I'll call you later. I love you."

The miracle of her soft words cut into him, and his arms tightened around her, holding on for a long moment before relaxing. Had his mother ever said those words to him? Surely she must have, but he couldn't find a memory to offer as proof.

She snapped the phone off, as she turned into his arms. "Saxxon, I was so scared." Kelly was still trembling, and he set aside his own despair to give her what little support he could.

He tightened his grip again and let her snuggle against him for the space of a few heartbeats. "I know. Will they be safe now?"

"I think so. Aunt Helen is an old friend of my mom's, not really a relative. She lives outside the city." Kelly shuddered. "I couldn't stand to have him taken from me again." The words were mumbled into his shirt, but the pain within them caught his attention.

"Again? He was kidnapped before?" he asked gently.

"Yes. His father took Patrick as a baby to hurt me."

Would she tell him about something so personal? He wouldn't push. No matter how much he needed to know about other men in her life, he would let her tell only as much as she wished.

"I left him while pregnant with Patrick."

"He hurt you." He swallowed back his own pain at the thought of her in another man's arms. Even though he'd known she had a son after hearing her first phone call home, he'd put that information out of his mind. What would he have done different if the child's father had still been part of her life? Now that he knew the man was gone and why, all he wanted to do was comfort Kelly and hurt the one who had treated her badly.

"Yeah, and I wouldn't let him ever hurt my baby. The week I found out that I was pregnant was the week I started planning how I would get away from him. By the time Patrick was born, the divorce was final and I had started a new life here in D.C."

"Why did he take your son, and how did you get him back?"

"He told everyone that he wanted to be a father to Patrick, but the truth is that it was the last thing he could do to hurt me."

A growl rumbled deep in Saxxon's chest. The man should die for ever bringing pain to Kelly. He would see to it personally if he ever met her former mate.

"I've always had the ability to touch the minds of other people, but had pushed the ability down to hide it. To find Patrick, I accepted the useful skill and linked into James's mind. I tracked them for nearly a month before I was able to rescue Patrick. After that, I decided that I should help other parents to find their lost children."

"You are amazing."

"I only did what I had to..."

"You did so much more than that. If I had your strength, I might have gotten away from them long ago, but instead I did their evil." He released her from his lap and would have avoided her gaze if she hadn't caught his chin in her hands.

She waited for him to meet her gaze. "You had no control over

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that.”

How could she understand? “You don’t know that. What if—”

Kelly stepped back. “Angel, tell him it wasn’t his fault.”

Angel looked up from Kelly’s laptop. “No can do. For all I know, he might be right.” Her head immediately dipped back down to the screen.

“Oh, shut up. Both of you are wrong. They had the power. They made the decisions. Saxxon is not guilty of any crimes.”

He wanted to smile at her determination, but nothing about their conversation was light enough to allow any levity. She needed to see him for what he was. “I killed for them. Murder is still a crime, is it not?”

“You were forced. You never had a choice.”

“Will that matter before the laws of man or gods?” Never before had he felt guilt over his actions. Regret yes, but guilt had always been set aside for some later time. It seemed that time had come, because he wanted to be a good man for Kelly. He didn’t want her to have to make excuses for him any longer.

“No man or god of honor would hold you accountable for actions that you could do nothing to prevent.”

“Perhaps. I don’t wish to disagree with you.” Privately, though, he made a promise. If they managed to get out of this alive, he would find a way to make up for his crimes.

“Fine.” Obviously it was anything but fine. She turned Angel’s direction. “What are you doing?”

“I was checking in at the casino.” Angel answered without looking up. “I’m requesting a few extra sets of eyes and ears. I have a feeling that we will need them.”

“Who?” Kelly asked.

“My little brother and some of his friends.” Angel typed away while talking.

Kelly stormed across to where Angel sat. “Kids? No way! Leave them up there where it’s safe. What good would they be anyhow?”

“Don’t underestimate them. They are Valàfrn and have some powers already.”

"How old are they? I don't want to endanger any children." Kelly shook her head. Saxxon understood Kelly's objection, but he didn't think Angel did. He would stay out of it and leave the decision up to them.

"My brother, Rolf, is the youngest, and he's fifteen. The others are between sixteen and twenty."

"Is the benefit worth putting them at risk?" Kelly asked.

"They won't be much at risk."

"Wait, you said that the Valàfrn don't really have powers until they mature at around twenty, so why are the younger ones coming at all?"

"I know I said that, and Rolf doesn't have use of any magic yet. Rolf will be coming to help keep the older boys in line. The others, though, do have some control."

"At sixteen?"

"Max and Manny actually have the most power at this point. They're twins, you see. They sort of bounce their power back and forth like a mated couple would. The ability amplifies the magic and allows them better control than many adults. Trust me, they won't be in much danger, and I think they will be very useful."

Kelly sighed and sank onto the corner of the bed. "Fine. When will they get here?"

"I think late tonight, but knowing how they drive, it might be sooner."

"What is it that you expect them to do?"

"I want them to do what they're best at. I'm simply going to turn them loose on the city and let them bother anything else that might go bump in the night. With them harrying our enemies, we may have more room to maneuver."

"Maneuver?" Saxxon asked. What was Angel planning?

"Yes. We already know that these bad boys aren't willing to let Saxxon go without a fight, so let's give them one." Angel pulled out her cigarettes and lit one up.

"I don't like it," Saxxon said.

"You don't think we can beat them." Kelly moved in front of him asking him to be brave, to fight back when years of pain had taught him to

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submit and obey.

“No, I don’t.” How could she expect to defeat them when she didn’t even understand the power they held?

Angel took a long drag on her cigarette. “Well, I’m not a very good loser.”

Did they think this was a game? If so, this was the kind of game played to the death, because if they couldn’t catch him, they would kill him and everyone who he might have contacted. “They won’t play fair.”

“Neither will we, Saxxon. Neither will we.” Angel said with an evil wink.

Chapter Seven

The motel phone rang, piercing the tension filled air. Angel started to reach for it, but stopped and motioned Kelly to answer first.

"Hello?" Kelly answered while fearing the worst.

"K-Kelly?" her friend who owned the motel asked with a cracking voice.

Something else had happened. Something bad, and Kelly didn't really want to know about it. "Joanie, is that you? What's wrong? What's happened?"

"They came back."

"Oh no... Are you okay?" Joanie didn't sound okay. They'd waited too long to leave the motel.

"We'll live."

"You sound hurt. I'm coming over there." Joanie had been so willing to offer them sanctuary here. This was no way to repay her generosity.

Joanie stopped her. "No. Wait." Her heart pounded in the silence. "They left, but I don't want you coming out in case they are still watching the place."

"What did they do?" Flashes of all the terrible things she knew they'd done to Saxxon jumped into her mind.

"Kelly, they beat up my Melissa. I already called the police and an ambulance."

Her daughter. "Is Melissa all right?" Please let her be all right. She

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and Mel had gotten along well ever since she'd found the girl swearing at a pair of sticks that wouldn't light obediently into a crackling fire. The child had gumption, and she'd gotten it from her mother.

"Yeah, the bastards just smacked us around a wee bit. I could probably patch her up here, but I thought the extra confusion might help hide you if you need to sneak that guy out. It's you and that fella that we need to see to now."

"Oh, Joanie, you are wonderful. I wouldn't have thought of that. We'll leave as soon as they all get here."

"Should be any minute."

"I can't thank you enough for helping us."

"There is no need. I never would have gotten my baby girl back in the first place without you." There was a voice and some sound on the other end. "Get ready. Melissa said she heard a siren. Yeah, now I do too. Good luck and keep safe." The phone clicked off before Kelly could answer.

"So we're leaving. Any plans for where to?" Angel asked while she cleared away the food Kelly and Saxxon hadn't had the chance to eat.

"I don't know. I just don't want Joanie or Melissa in any more danger." How had it come to this, innocents being pulled into their little drama? At least Melissa hadn't been hurt badly.

"They should be safe if there are no ties to you left here. As for where to go, what about a decent hotel?"

"One where I don't know anyone would probably be best. Do you think they can trace my credit cards?" The little room suddenly seemed sad. She retrieved her toiletries and supplies and repacked them.

"I have a couple with me also, but I'm sure they would trace those. Maybe we could stop at an ATM for some of their cash." Saxxon patted the pocket that held his wallet.

Angel dropped the rest of the food into the trash with a laugh. "Great idea, Saxxon. Why shouldn't you live well off of their funds? And yes, Kelly, I think to be on the safe side you shouldn't use your cards."

"Okay. Then we'll use Saxxon's ATM money to book the room under a false name." Kelly pulled on her jacket and started a last

walkthrough of their room.

"Identification would normally be an issue, but shouldn't be a problem in the hotel I'm thinking of. Besides, you should save the cash for emergencies. Worst case scenario, I'll book the room under my name. There isn't any way to tie either of you to my name."

The sirens had risen to their highest pitch, then whined down after pulling in to the motel parking lot. The three police cars and still flashing ambulance did cause a great distraction.

"We can't take your Jeep," Saxxon said with a resigned sigh.

"They would have tracked it by now. I'll take the Jeep the other direction. You can handle the bike, right?" At Saxxon's nod, Angel continued, "It'd better be in perfect condition when we swap back."

Kelly picked up the liquid Silvertide and, using an empty toothbrush case, slid it into the inside pocket of her jacket. "Fine, where are we going? You never said which hotel."

"The Cambridge Hyatt has a political convention this weekend; it will be packed. You'll be able to hide better in the crowd. You two go and get some clothes. I'll lose anyone who might follow and meet you in the hotel restaurant. Just tell them you want the Low Key table."

Kelly and Angel traded keys. Angel lifted the packed stuff and slipped out the door.

Saxxon peered out the window until the Jeep pulled out with a roar and tore out onto the road. Then he turned back to Kelly.

"Are you ready?" she asked him. He looked one step from stoic, but also far too close to that blank military look he had earlier. His nod did nothing to reassure her. "What is it?"

"When they catch us, I want you to run and not look back."

"What?" Was he right? Were they going to be caught as soon as they left this sanctuary? "No, that's not going to happen." She stepped so close that she felt his sigh. Reaching for him, she felt how tense he had gotten. His shoulders were knotted tight. "Saxxon, you are not going back to them. We are going to get out of this together."

His eyes closed, and he tilted his cheek into her caressing fingers. "I've never had hope, but I think that is what I feel now."

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"I... We need to get going." Because if she didn't get her hands off him right this second, she was going to tear off his clothes and take a few minutes to forget about all the things that might go wrong in the next hour.

"Is there anything left to take?"

"No, Angel took everything with her. You really can drive her motorcycle, right?"

"Yes." He opened the door, scanning the area as she went through.

They eased around the corner and mounted up. He handed her the helmet, then put on a pair of dark glasses for himself. Her hands instinctively gripped his waist as the engine roared to life under them.

She'd never ridden one before and jumped as the engine roared wild vibrations under her thighs. And the tight press against Saxxon's hard back wasn't too bad either. Especially when Saxxon caught one of her hands and pulled her even closer, resting her hand over his chest. Then they were moving slowly toward freedom.

Probably she should have been watching to be sure no one followed as they left, but the sensations were too distracting. The throb of the motor sent vibrations through the seat, which amplified where their bodies touched. And they touched quite a lot. Her hands clutched at his chest. Her breasts pressed tight against his back. The cool wind brushed harshly around her, but his back nearly radiated heat and security. Need pooled where her thighs cradled his rear.

One of Kelly's hands slid under his fatigue jacket and curled over the hot flesh of his abdomen. His muscles tightened under her questing fingers.

A low growl rolled through him, and her hands froze. How had she forgotten that he was a werewolf? And exactly what did the growl mean? Did he want her to stop?

Saxxon pulled the bike out of the slow traffic and into a shopping mall parking lot. Before the final purrs of the motor fell silent, he twisted and drew her into his arms. His gentle touch clearly showed what the growl meant.

His lips crushed hers, demanding her more than willing response.

Her mouth parted under the onslaught. Even without the bike, she continued to feel the vibrations burning through her, awakening a need like she'd never felt before.

She flicked her tongue over his, tempting him, encouraging him to take whatever he wanted.

His arms tightened as he plundered her mouth with his thrusting tongue. The sensations of his touch and all that her body craved nearly overwhelmed Kelly. She wanted to make love to this man no matter what kind of animal he could turn into.

A long wolf whistle cut into their private bubble. Saxxon pulled back to glare in the direction of the whistle.

They were making out in the parking lot like a couple of teenagers. She couldn't stop the giggle that rose within her. So much was wrong around them, and yet she felt wonderful and safe.

Impulsively, she reached up and kissed Saxxon's cheek.

He swung his leg over the bike, and then helped her off. His relaxed smile looked out of place, but his warm hand clasped in hers felt very right.

"How can you make me feel like this?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"As if anything is possible. That we might actually get out of this. That even I could have a chance at happiness."

"I know what you mean, but maybe it all could happen." His optimism was surprising after all he'd been through. Surprising, and very welcome.

* * * * *

Angel drove the Jeep as if all the demons in hell were coming over for dinner. Fast and wild, just as she liked best. Would have been more fun if the hunk of metal didn't handle like a tank, but then that had benefits too.

At least the cop car was making some effort to keep up. The chase was almost worth the trouble. When she'd torn out of the lot, she'd had some slim hopes that the cop car was actually some of the guys after the

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lynx, but no, of course not. He was just some beat cop trying to be a hero.

Another turn and through a yard. She had to get out of these suburbs. Through two stop signs, another turn, then back the way she'd come.

No cop. Well, that was almost too easy.

Probably got called off by those still back at the motel. The manager would have recognized Kelly's Jeep and told them. She wished she had some way to check the police band.

Not that she didn't have tons to do. She still had about a million problems to deal with before meeting up with Saxxon and Kelly over in Cambridge.

She turned the Jeep in the direction of the nearest Low Key friendly garage while flipping her phone open. She'd have to check on the boys constantly just to be sure they were behaving. Letting them come help could turn out to be a huge mistake, but there simply wasn't anyone else available right now.

Rolf didn't answer his cell, so she left a message. Probably he would be on the road already. He wouldn't hear the phone over the roar of his new motorcycle, nor would he be able to answer it. Probably she should have told him to leave the new bike at home and ride with one of the others, but the truth was he would be safer on his own ride than with one of the wilder boys. She ordered him to call when they stopped to check in. Who knew, he might even do it.

Then she called the garage. They picked up on the first ring.

"Ello." The voice was ancient, dry like a dust filled breeze.

Damn, what was the name of the man who Grant had used here? It slipped through her mind like some slippery creature. Something that started with an E... Ahh! "I'd like to speak to Emanuel, please."

"You is. What can I do fur ya, perdy thing." Boy, could the man really rustic it up when he tried!

She had figured it was him, but she couldn't afford to be questioned. "I need some fast work done for Low Key." Might as well jump right to the point. "Can you do it?"

"Of course." His voice became smooth and precise. "What needs to

be done and by when?"

"I need a ninety-six Jeep Cherokee to be reidentified ASAP." If this was who Grant had used, and she was sure it was, then it shouldn't be a problem to have the work done immediately. Despite the laid back air, they specialized in car work of any kind that could be done fast and secret.

"When can you be here?" She could almost hear the details flicking through Emanuel's mind.

"Is five minutes too soon?" she asked. She needed to get it done and catch up to Kelly and Saxxon.

"Nope. Most of the team is already here. Anything else?"

"That's all. Thanks. I'll be right there." She clicked the phone shut and sped the rest of the way to the garage.

As she turned left into the small lot, she smiled at the innocuous feel of the rundown gas station. Its peeling blue paint and cracked office window would keep all but the desperate from entering. Two rusty pumps hunched in front of a set of garage doors. One door lifted after a few seconds, and she pulled the Jeep inside. She drove right to where the young man motioned.

Despite the rundown exterior, the inside was a car fanatic's wet dream. Around the two in-floor car lifts were rolling stainless steel tool boxes.

And men, a lot of men.

Probably twenty guys ranging from teen to ancient stood about in readiness to take on the emergency ID change that she'd requested. She didn't recognize a single one of them. Yet, she knew the Jeep was in the best possible hands to get the job done.

"Mmm...manpower. I love manpower."

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Chapter Eight

Saxxon held the door open for Kelly, but also scanned in every direction. Even here, where it felt safe, security was priority. At any point, they might send Caspian to track him. Then his time of freedom would be over.

Kelly's hand tightened over his arm, drawing him close. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I was thinking of Cas." He looked away to study the store they'd entered. Its name was Whammies, and it had everything from groceries to children's toys. "What all do we need?"

"Clothing for you. Maybe a change for me. I think that's all." Kelly was still looking at him curiously as she led the way to the clothing section for men.

How could he explain it to her? Now that he was outside of the institute, he wanted to stay free. Yet the feeling of doom followed him. He offered Kelly a half hearted smile. "I'm not sure what I should get. Can you choose?"

Kelly maneuvered through the aisles, finding jeans, a couple dark shirts, and a change of clothes for her. Then they were on the way to check out. He picked up a small duffle bag for the clothing.

She paid with her cash despite his quiet objections. With fresh clothes in hand, they ducked into the respective restrooms to change. Then they stopped at the in-store ATM to run out his two credit cards, withdrawing three hundred from each of the two accounts.

"So now what?" he asked as they walked back to the bike.

"Now, I think we should haul hinny out of here in case they caught that ATM info already. Let's circle west, then head to Cambridge where the hotel is."

She had a good mind for this subterfuge. Circling the city west would add another hour to the already hour long drive, but should be worth it. Kelly also had picked dark, unremarkable clothing.

He stowed the half-filled duffle into one of the saddlebags and mounted the motorcycle. She slid on behind him, and the contact was electric. The friction of his movement to start the motor shot through him much like pain. He settled back on the seat with his back pressed into Kelly's front. Perhaps it was pain. The crisp new jeans left little room for his growing arousal. He bit down on a grumble as her hands slid over his chest.

The first time he'd growled his pleasure, she'd misunderstood and stopped. He'd swallow every growl from now on to keep Kelly happy.

The rumble of the motorcycle settled some of his wandering thoughts. The wind blew over them and cut them off from everything around them. Here, at least, there was only Saxxon and Kelly. Nothing and no one could come between them.

Kelly's head pressed against his back, and her arms tightened around him. Did she feel the same way? What would it be like to be able to claim her for his own? If he ever got free of them, he would come back for her. Already, he felt a connection to her almost like the ones to his brothers. Was this the mating bond that Angel had spoken of?

Kelly squeezed his shoulder and pointed off to their right at a ramp leading to the beltway. Although her words were dragged away by the wind, he clearly heard her thoughts.

Go right. Take the beltway to Route fifty.

He shifted lanes and took the ramp. He could hear Dain's thoughts and share his own that way. Could he do the same with Kelly? He merged into the thin traffic, grateful that they would be moving smoothly, still encased in their private windy shell. Focusing part of his mind on the connection, he called out to her. *Kelly? Can you hear me?*

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Her arms clenched around him, and he felt her surprise. *How did you do that? Can you hear me?*

He smiled at her soft, warm mental voice. It was as strong and gentle as the woman herself. *Yes. I can hear your thoughts.*

You can read my mind?

No, just what you say to me. At least he didn't think he could read her mind. He couldn't do that with his brothers.

Telepathy. That's amazing! How can you? How can I?

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. I guess it's a werewolf thing. Do you still hate that word?

Well, this might make it okay. I wonder what else you can do.

I'm not sure. He could only think of a few things, and they were probably beyond him until he was better healed.

Angel said you could control some magic.

She also called me a pup.

Kelly's laughter rolled through him, leaving devastation in its path. If you're nice, maybe I'll rub your belly.

I can be nice. Especially with such inspired positive reinforcement.

I bet you can. Do you remember any other magic that you've done? Kelly's enthusiasm pressured him for more information.

I can change into the wolf.

I'd like to see that. But not now, please. Might be hard to drive with paws. Can you think of anything else?

Nothing pleasant. He remembered calling rats to him so that he and Dain could eat while caged in various places. He wasn't about to tell Kelly about those times. Already she pitied him with her kind heart. The other things he remembered were all related to missions when he had used his powers to kill, and he wouldn't share those either. No, I can't think of anything else.

Okay. Her hand slipped over his chest in a caress. We have some time before our exit.

Good. I like this. Was there anyway to explain to Kelly just how precious this moment was? Would anything in her life allow her to understand how he'd lived without contact with others for so long?

Me too. It's almost like being protected by the wind. Both her hands

burrowed under his T-shirt and moved over his flesh.

I like how we touch. Had he ever been touched with such kindness? He couldn't remember his parents or any affection they might have shown him, and he had rare opportunities with human women when sent out on missions. In fact, the only sexual experience he had at all was with the women at the institute. Even the thought of those times left his skin crawling in self disgust.

It's so innocent and yet, very sensual.

I want... his thoughts trailed off as he considered what he wanted. He wanted to make love to her, to claim her heart and soul. He wanted to be worthy of her. He wanted to stay with her.

I want that. I want to be with you. When we get you safe from those criminals, maybe...

He would never get free of them, but maybe he could steal this moment.

Don't think like that. We will get away. You will get your chance to be free.

I hope you're right. He could feel the hope that she honestly believed in, but that same feeling was absent from him. The possibility of having an hour or a week to be with Kelly was more than enough to wish for. Anything more was beyond the realm of his imagination.

For now, the sensation and comfort that she offered were all he would hope for. And when they caught him and he was forced back into that hell, maybe then he would have the strength to escape. Perhaps then he could at least fight back against the Silvertide.

The effects of not having the drug were diminished at this point. His muscles still ached and cramped some, but nothing that would keep him from functioning.

Saxxon! I think we're being followed!

What do you see? He asked her.

A dark sedan just changed lanes when we did. What should we do?

He checked the mirrors, but didn't pick out their tail immediately.
How far to the hotel?

Not far. Maybe fifteen minutes. Can you lose them in this traffic, or

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should we leave Route Fifty?

I can try to lose them. Hang on.

Her arms tightened around his waist as he increased their speed. She clung to his back and leaned with his every motion as they dodged in and out through the traffic. Her body pressed hotly against his back.

Their synchronized motion let them become a single being. Both Kelly and the bike became part of Saxxon, and together they flowed through the light traffic like water through still boulders. Surely nothing could catch them.

A horn blaring behind them proved that wrong,

The sedan was keeping up and no longer trying to be inconspicuous. *How much further?*

Not much. The Bay Bridge should be coming up on the left.

We need to lose them soon or it will make their finding us much easier.

The traffic thickened around them. All the new cars seemed to be going toward the bridge too. That would make it that much more difficult to escape. Another horn sounded. Or perhaps the bridge would work in their favor...

Saxxon! They're right behind us! Kelly yelled mentally just as the sedan shifted lanes behind them, dangerously cutting off a truck.

Hold on. He leaned hard to the left, swerving the bike around a car and onto the inside burm. He accelerated as the sedan followed. Then they raced back into the traffic once more, the same traffic that was now crawling toward the approaching bridge. And that was what finally stopped the sedan, while the bike skimmed lightly between the columns of cars and was too fast to be caught on foot.

Eventually they took Route fifty to Cambridge and, too soon for both their tastes, they were at the hotel. He parked the bike and dismounted. He reached for Kelly. Both jumped in surprise when sparks danced off his fingertips.

She pulled the helmet off and asked, "What was that?"

Good question. "I'm not sure. It must be more of that magic. Did it hurt you?" he asked, but was distracted by some warning he felt in the air. Scanning the parking lot showed nothing suspicious, but the feeling

persisted.

"I'm fine. It just surprised me." She caught his arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but something is different here."

Her gaze danced around for dangers just as his had. "What do you mean?"

He wasn't sure if he could explain it. Something here set all his instincts on high alert. "I'm not sure. I just feel something strong and different here."

"Should we stay or go?"

"I don't think we're in immediate danger. Besides, we have to stay at least long enough to meet Angel. Then I don't know."

"Well, let's get into the restaurant and get this over with." She fluffed out her hair with her fingers.

Saxxon offered her his arm, and they walked in together, looking like any other normal couple.

The restaurant was inside and to the right. They were stopped at the door by the hostess. "Welcome to the Hyatt. Do you have a reservation?"

"No," Saxxon answered.

"I'm sorry, but there is a wait of about two hours tonight. Would you like to wait?"

Kelly flashed him a nervous glance then added, "We don't have a reservation, but we are meeting someone. She said to ask for the Low Key table."

The hostess looked doubtful. "Hold on, please. I'll check with the manager." She sashayed across the room to speak with a man in a sharp suit. He immediately rushed back to them.

"I am so sorry for the inconvenience. If you would follow me, I will personally show you to your table."

"Thank you," Kelly said.

Saxxon had been too surprised to answer. Just who was Angel's group that they kept a table ready for them here? The manager led them past a pair of armed guards to a secluded room that only had half a dozen

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tables in it. Two of the tables were occupied by high ranking, recognizable politicians.

They sat, and when Saxxon didn't answer the waiter's question about choice of drinks, Kelly ordered wine for them both. Once they were alone, she asked, "Do you know who that is?"

Her voice buzzed through him. Yes, he should know who the other diners were. Something was terribly familiar about the woman. He could plainly see her picture in his mind, the same but different. In his memory, her picture was from a higher angle, and she had been walking through the snow.

"She's the First Lady, and the man in blue is the Vice President."

There was no security in this room. The men just outside this private dining room must have been the secret service, but they would do no good once an assassin got into the room.

An assassin is in this room.

He was here, and he was armed. And she was the target.

Target acquired.

"Saxxon, look at me." Kelly's voice cut sharply into him. She clenched his hand in a fierce grip. "Saxxon, talk to me?"

Mission priority one: secrecy.

"Saxxon, stop listening to them. You are Saxxon. They don't own you. Saxxon, you can choose."

Mission priority two: elimination of prime target.

"No Saxxon, don't even think it. There is no mission. The mission was theirs, not yours."

Mission priority three: elimination of secondary target and any witnesses.

"Saxxon! The Saxxon I have come to know wouldn't hurt them."

Her voice was low and insistent, but too distant to compete with the mission priorities. "Saxxon wouldn't kill. The killer is the one they force to do as they want. Saxxon, that killer is not you. You can choose."

Mission priority one. He must maintain secrecy. *Mission priority two.* To eliminate primary target, he needed to acquire a weapon. Kelly had a weapon he could use. Kelly... *mission priority...* He pulled her closer and

slid his hand under her jacket for the pistol.

But the pistol wasn't there. "Where is it?" he growled.

"Saxxon, I can't let you do this."

He felt the barrel of the weapon press into his side.

"Please, Saxxon. Let's just walk out of here. We can wait for Angel outside. Please..."

"No." His hand spun the gun, twisting it free of her fingers and turning it back on her with a low growl. *Mission priority two.* She would warn them if she could. She would prevent mission success.

They were so close that he could feel her heart racing and smell the fear that froze her in place.

"Please, Saxxon, don't do this." Her words were soft and sad, heartbroken.

Mission success was all that mattered. Nothing else. Only mission success.

Why? Her mental whisper interrupted.

Mission success keeps away the light and pain. Memories of the pain clenched over him.

Oh Saxxon, I hate them. Tears streamed from her eyes and were caught by his shirt. I hate what they turned you into.

Something was not right. *I must succeed.* He looked around, searching for the disturbance that might keep him from successfully completing the mission.

You will, but not at this. If you kill them, you will have to kill me.

A shard of agony tore through him at her thoughts. Mission priority three.

If you kill me, who will help you? Her words were whispered against his throat as well as projected into his mind.

His pulse jumped at the contact. His mind grasped for the meaning behind the words. *Help me?* His programming fought a losing battle for control.

She pressed a kiss into his flesh. The touch was gentle and accepting. *I will help you to escape them.* She pressed a second kiss to his neck over the wound she'd so carefully stitched closed. *If you do this, who will love you?*

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Her words and her touch were the magic that broke him free. The programming lost its power, and his soul reached out for that most precious of needs, hope. *You...love me?*

He felt her smile. Tell me your name.

Samuel. No, Saxxon. My name is Saxxon.

I don't know Samuel, but I am falling in love with Saxxon.

Chapter Nine

Kelly sagged in relief as Saxxon's expression lost its blank coldness. She dropped the syringe of Silvertide back into the case in her pocket. Even though he still held the gun, she knew he was Saxxon again and wrapped her arms around him. Their bodies touched from shoulder to thigh, but it wasn't nearly enough. She tugged his head lower and pressed up into his kiss.

His desperate passion matched her own. He immediately deepened the kiss into a dominant sparring match. He demanded and she offered. She clung to him, one hand slipping beneath the table to grip his thigh.

His hand pressed against her chest and ribcage. She felt him return the pistol to her holster. Then his warm palm remained, cupping her breast, kneading the already aroused flesh into a tight mound.

She moaned into his mouth at the delicious sensations that raced through her. Her hand climbed higher, her nails scraping over the hard denim ridge.

His low growl was swallowed by her gasp of pleasure.

"Excuse me." The words came from nowhere and had no meaning. "Would you two stop sucking face long enough to hear about the latest disasters?"

Saxxon's lips softened against hers, and she bit back the desire that wanted to ignore Angel's voice. She pulled back, mentally promising to return to this moment as soon as humanly or werewolfly possible.

"Finally."

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Kelly felt a hot blush creep up her cheeks. The politicians had moved to the furthest side of the room and were watching them with great interest. "So, ah, what's happened?"

"Besides you two creating an Olympic sport out of necking? Oh, tons of highly interesting stuff."

"Well?" Kelly asked, although she couldn't draw her gaze away from Saxxon's lips.

"Wait a second. We will need some privacy." She walked across to the First Lady, shaking hands with her and several of the men, including the Vice President. "I'm very sorry to have to ask this of you, but Low Key needs this room for the time being. I promise it will be available within the hour if you would like to return later. Of course, the bill is taken care of. I apologize again."

As the group began to stand, Saxxon tensed beside her. *Please don't. Let's not go through that again.* Her hand dug into his thigh as if to hold him in place using brute force.

We must stop them.

Saxxon? Or was this back to bad boy Samuel? She was really pretty sick of him.

He offered her a lopsided grin that set her heart pounding. *I won't hurt them. I can feel another nearby.*

Just so long as he wasn't giving her the old blank stare thing. *Another like you? One of your brothers?*

I think so. I think it's Cas. If so, then he's probably here to complete the mission that Dain fled from and I just failed to do.

Wait here. I'll go tell Angel. He nodded and Kelly rushed to Angel's side. "Angel? Saxxon felt something you should know about." She spoke quietly, but the Vice President was close enough to hear her.

"What is that, young lady? What has your gentleman felt?" His voice held a note of irritation and disbelief.

"Kelly, is this important? Does it have to be said now?"

"Yes, he thinks there is someone nearby who would wish to harm one of you. It's probably someone close to him."

"Aha. Okay, then we will have to have a slight change of plans."

She motioned the First Lady to move to the side and then flipped up a hanging lamp, revealing a keypad sunk into the fixture. She typed in a series of twenty numbers and a panel of the wall slid open. Inside the narrow hallway stood a young, blond man. "I apologize once again. It would be wise for you to leave by this route to avoid any disturbance. Rolf will show you out, and I will alert your security to your new location."

"I didn't know there was a secret entrance here!" one of the men exclaimed.

"Neither did I," said the Vice President, "and I will expect an explanation for all this." He sounded peeved to be left out of such a big loop.

"Sir, I am quite sure that you will be debriefed as soon as Dàn can get free. If not him, then Grant will see that you are properly informed."

The group moved into the hallway to follow Rolf. It was very trusting and seemed highly unusual. How was it that Angel could order about such high ranking politicians? And who was Dàn that he could debrief the Vice President of the United States when it was convenient?

Angel closed the wall back up and walked back to where Saxxon stood waiting.

"I trust that you will explain it all to us a little sooner than that." Kelly glared at Angel until she gave in with a nod. She held up a finger signaling patience, leaving them waiting while she explained to the guards outside the door the change of plans.

Before Angel could find a way to sidetrack them, Kelly said, "Okay, spill the beans, then we'll listen to the latest."

Angel offered another glare before answering. "Low Key Enterprises is a worldwide organization formed about twenty years ago. It is made up of a variety of civic minded paranormal beings who want to make the world a better place for all."

"Great commercial, but why all the secrecy?" Kelly asked.

"How would you react if you knew your survival depended on a group of werewolves, vampires, or demons? How did you react to finding out you had helped one werewolf to survive the attack of another?" She

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snorted. "The world is not quite ready for the true depth of its diversity."

"That makes sense. How does this group come to control the government? Doesn't that make all the elections pretty much useless?"

"Not at all. Low Key rarely pulls power plays like they have had to do in the past week, but never mind that. We have our own concerns."

"What's happened?" Saxxon caught Kelly's hand and tugged her over to his side.

"Well, first of all, I found out what that villainous group has been calling itself." Angel began digging through her jacket pockets.

"Oh?"

She stopped searching and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "They go by APM, for Aryan Purity Movement. They're nothing but racist scum." She shook out a cigarette, holding it with her lips while searching her jacket again, probably for a lighter.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" She frowned at Angel's desperate search. How could a stupid cigarette be as important as whatever else she had to tell them?

"Well, what they've been doing in the last few hours sure surprised me. I didn't think they would be so willing to risk discovery." Angel found her lighter and began flipping it to light her cigarette, but it only sparked and produced no flame.

Good grief, what could the group be up to now? "What are they doing?"

"They've kidnapped a bunch of children from the D.C. area. A lot of them."

"Oh no! Why would they...?"

"They must figure it will be the only way to flush you, and therefore Saxxon, out of hiding."

"Have they hurt anyone?" Kelly focused on her contact with Saxxon. The idea of more children being hurt was simply too painful to bear.

"There've been a few injuries in the attacks, but mostly those seem to be attempts to extract information. I don't know if anyone has told anything more about you."

"How would they know anything? Oh lord! The files at Rook's house! They have the home addresses of all the children I have tracked over the past eight years." Those poor families had been through so much and now this. How horrible.

"Do you think they might find Kelly here?" Saxxon asked.

Angel threw the dead lighter onto a nearby table. Then she cupped her palm over the end of the cigarette. After a second and a small spiral of smoke, her hand moved, revealing her lit cigarette. She took a long drag and then answered, "No. It's very unlikely. You should be completely safe here, no matter what else is going on." Her hand shook slightly as she lifted it for another puff.

Kelly held tight to Saxxon's hand. "There's more, isn't there?"

Angel looked pained for a moment. Her usual smart mouth demeanor slipped a notch toward worry. "I couldn't find the Captain."

"Rook?" Why would they do anything to him? Rook wasn't involved directly with Saxxon in any way. It didn't make any sense.

"Yeah, I was after him to give us more information about what he's found, but he has dropped completely out of sight."

"We've got to go find him." It was really that simple. He had always been there for her. She wasn't about to leave him in the APM's hands.

"No way. You two have to stay hidden. You will stay here as planned, and I will use the kids to track as much info as I can get. As soon as I know where he is, I can maybe call in some big guns to get him out."

"All those kids..."

"Not all. I found a duplicate set of files at Rook's office and had the boys track the families to move out the ones that hadn't been found yet. All but nine kids were accounted for."

"Nine of them. I wish we could do more." Kelly swallowed back anger at what these people were doing to innocents. She needed a clear head if they were to get through this. "What about my mom and Patrick? Are they still safe?"

"They should be. I called to check on them on the way here, and they were about to leave for Aunt Helen's. We're not doing too badly so

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far. I don't think they will hurt the kids just yet. They are just using them to get your attention and try to get you to do something stupid. Will you stay here as we planned?" Angel crushed the stub of her cigarette, then lit another.

Saxxon squeezed her hand. "Considering what I almost did, do you think that's wise?" He continued silently to Kelly, *She needs to know.*

"Saxxon..."

Angel's cigarette drooped, and she looked as if she didn't want to hear any more. Since it was a smoke-free room, she tapped the ashes into a crystal goblet. "What happened?"

"My programming kicked in, and I almost killed all those people that you just sent out of here. And probably Kelly as well."

"Oh?" The cigarette froze on its way back to her lips. The pause was her only sign of concern.

"It wasn't like that," Kelly argued.

"Yes, it was. They still control some part of me, and as simple as a light switch, I was right back to being their weapon."

"So what stopped you? When I came in, you were busy playing tonsil hockey. You certainly didn't look like a well trained, cold blooded killer to me."

"Kelly distracted me. She's the only reason those politicians lived."

Angel snorted, which somehow fit her personality if not her petite looks. "Well, then she can protect the world from your unleashed violence. Who knows, you may end up with a litter out of it."

"What!" Kelly yelped.

"Never mind that, kiddies. We need to get going. I picked up the room key for you." She laughed. "I need to go back out and hit the streets back in D.C. Do you still have your phone?"

"Yes." Kelly pulled it from her pocket.

"Good. I had the number protected by some ass kicking new technology. APM won't be able to trace it now. With this little patch..." She held up a thin black strip that looked a bit like a Band-Aid. "Your phone and internet will be invisible."

Angel took the phone and carefully applied the strip to the inside

of the battery cover. Then she flipped the phone over and typed in a number. "I saved my number in your directory. Call if anything comes up or if you have to move."

"What about my Jeep?"

"It's now green, is minus a few dents, has new plates, and is parked in the back. Oh, and I had them clean up the bloody mess that was in the backseat. I'll leave it and the bike, just in case you have to go different directions. However, Dàn thinks it would be best if you stay together." She laughed again, this time more lightly. "He has a romantic streak, our Dàn does. Actually, he does have a good point. Bonded mates are always stronger together than they would be apart. And the Lynx Clan does need some rebuilding."

Kelly decided to ignore Angel's own romantic streak. Whatever Saxxon and she had was none of the woman's business. "If you leave the bike and Jeep, how will you be getting around?"

"Oh, don't worry about me. The boys rode bikes down, and Max said I can ride with him." She handed the phone back and reopened the secret door. "On second thought, I think I'll throw him off and keep his pretty ride for myself."

"You will let us know when you find out more?" Kelly asked.

"Yes, I'll call if anything comes up. Now, if you go through the first door on the left, you'll come out in a private elevator. Take it up to your room. I will make sure everything here is settled."

The moment Kelly and Saxxon entered the hallway, the panel slid shut behind them. The lighting was dim, but bright enough to walk to the elevator door, which looked like any other plain interior door.

Saxxon opened the door and slid back the decorative grate. "What floor? The key doesn't say."

"Angel didn't say either. But then I don't see floor numbers anyhow." On the control panel were only three buttons, an up arrow that was lit, a down arrow that was dark and a red stop button.

"She said up." Kelly pressed the glowing up button, which let out a quiet confirmation chirp. Despite the antiqued look, the floor rose smoothly and silently before stopping.

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Outside the closed grate was a beautiful suite decorated in white and shades of grey. Saxxon slid the key through a slot on the grate, and then opened it. They stepped into a relaxed sitting area. Two long sofas and half a dozen soft looking chairs filled the space. Thick support pillars were spaced evenly across the expanse that surely must be the entire floor of the hotel. To one side was a formal dining room, and beyond that a sectioned off room, probably for cooking.

Kelly grasped Saxxon's hand and tugged him in the opposite direction. Five large bedrooms, each with its own bath, stretched across one side of the room, plus two office areas, one of which was closed in, locked, and identified only through the window set into the door. The open office area had four desks and more equipment than Kelly could identify. And beyond that was a training center complete with a sparring mat.

Kelly giggled. "We could explore this 'room' for months and still not discover all its secrets."

"You're probably right. This is very impressive."

"You know, I'm really hungry and I'm sure you are too. We've managed to miss both of the last two meals." Still unwilling to release his hand, Kelly tugged him toward the dining room. Beyond that was a huge, stainless steel kitchen filled with enough food to feed a small army.

"Wow, so what are you hungry for? I think they have everything here."

"I don't know. You choose." His gaze held a suspicious fire that said he was hungry for more than food.

"How about breakfast? It's Patrick's favorite meal of the day." The reminder awakened the need to hold her son, and pain tightened in her chest.

Saxxon, pulled her into his strong arms as he nuzzled her neck. *I know you miss your son. Soon he'll be back at your side.* His comforting thoughts flowed over her.

"Thank you, Saxxon." She held on for a long moment, soaking up his strength, then pulled back to wipe the betraying tears from her cheeks.

"How about pancakes and sausage?"

"That sounds good. Can I help?"

"You're in charge of the sausage and toast then. I'll do up the pancakes." She rummaged through the kitchen in search of all the materials.

"Kelly?"

"Yeah?" She'd found the skillet in a lower cabinet.

"I don't know much about cooking."

She looked up at him from her crouched position. His lean, hard appearance made her forget his former caged life. "Oh." He wouldn't have had much chance to learn how to cook, let alone practice the essential skill.

"I've never cooked my own food. They mostly fed us prepackaged rations. Can you show me how?" He reached down and lifted the skillet, placing it on the counter.

Kelly straightened. "Of course, I'd be happy to teach you to cook."

His hand darted out and caught a stray tendril of hair, tucking it back behind her ear. "Thank you." His voice dropped to a low sexy growl. The same growl she was beginning to think of as his possessive sound.

Heat burned through her. "Ah, it's no trouble." He made her feel as sexy as any model with that desire in his gaze and the spark in his touch.

He stepped close, pinning her against the counter. His hands slid up her arms, one continuing to her neck and the other moving to her waist. "I want to taste you." His mouth descended to a mere breath from her own.

She couldn't utter a single word, but her thoughts raced on despite that. *Taste, oh yeah, please taste.* She pressed her lips to his, brushing, then devouring.

His head tilted to accommodate them, deepening the kiss. His mouth parted. His tongue plunged and dominated, raked over her teeth, begging for access.

She clawed at him, desperate to touch. Her mouth welcomed him. Her tongue met his stroke for stroke. *You feel too good. I can't take any more. I'll burn up.*

He tore away from her greedy tongue. "Too good? You wish me to stop?" he asked with a low, sexy chuckle.

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"God no. Never." She caught his short curls and guided his head back down to hers. His mouth and lips continued their wild exploration while she slid her hands up under his shirt to his chest and its delectable pecs. He was so hard and perfect. Her thumbs brushed over his nipples, feeling them pebble tight to her touch.

With a growl that vibrated through her, he tugged her hands away, claspings them against the counter to her sides.

She bit lightly at his lip, breaking free for a breath. "I want to touch."

His body crushed against her own, and the heat of his arousal burned her, even through the thick denim. "I want you to touch, but I will take you here on the counter if we don't stop."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"It limits what I want to do to you." A variety of burning images that would make the Kama Sutra proud flashed through her mind. The last was one that she'd never considered, proving they were his thoughts, not her own. His gaze burned into her, and her brain froze.

"Limits are bad." She wanted to explore every one of his desires, pushing any limits that they could think of.

"You wanted food." *We can wait long enough to eat. Perhaps...* His long lashes drifted shut, and she saw them together on a bed with the maple syrup and his evil grin.

What had been her panting breath caught and stuttered. "Food would give us more energy."

"That doesn't sound so bad," he tossed back her words.

"Mmm...no, not at all."

He lifted the skillet and put it into her hands. "Tell me what I can do."

"Okay. Go get out sausage and eggs from the fridge. Butter too." The air rushed from her lungs as she thought of what she could do with melted butter.

"I like that. Perhaps better than maple syrup." He set the eggs and butter next to her and began opening the sausage.

She couldn't believe how relaxed he was with the teasing. His

shoulders lost the tenseness, and his easy grin was a pleasure to see and kiss. He was so different now from the broken man she'd found on her backseat. Maybe there was a chance his mind could heal as easily as his body had.

She turned his head just enough to devour those tasty lips. She'd never get the cooking done this way. His smile broadened, but he continued with the sausage, placing it on the plate that she'd put there for just that purpose.

"Pancakes will take too long. Did you see any waffles in the freezer?"

"I'll check." He went to the freezer and returned with a box of frozen waffles. "I got them. The directions seem pretty easy. I think I can handle these."

"All right. I'll fry up the eggs and sausage. Did you see anything else in there?"

"This will be fine for me." He smiled while opening the packaging and studying the toaster.

"Are you sure it'll be enough? It's been a while since you've eaten."

"Cook a couple extra sausages. It's been just as long since you've eaten."

"I don't need it, though," Kelly said with a tight smile.

"You need to eat."

"Saxxon..." She made a dismissing motion at her body. "I don't need it, as you can see." She tried to make the comment light, but knew it came out serious instead. For him, she wished she could be perfect. For Saxxon, she'd be happy to diet.

He caught her hand and pulled her into his arms. "I see you are beautiful and desirable."

"I'm no model, like Angel could be."

"Angel is skinny and has no curves. She looks like a small boy. She does not do this to my body." He slid their linked hands down his chest and past his waist, unfolding her fingers to press against his arousal. "You do this, Kelly. Your body is what I want. You are who I plan to make love to."

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The pan sizzled behind her.

Saxxon sizzled in front of her. "You'd better get that cooked, or I may decide to take you right here after all."

He was right. The faster she prepared the meal, the sooner she could move on to dessert. She concentrated on frying, but it wasn't easy when Saxxon insisted on touching her every few seconds. A touch, a caress, a kiss came her way with each easy moment.

She was beginning to become suspicious over his motives though. Each time he came close, some of the cooked food disappeared too. Then she caught him.

He pressed against her back, one hand slipping around her ribs and brushing under her breast. The other tipped her chin back, baring her neck for his nibbles.

The feel of his teeth brushing over her skin tingled and burned. Then he backed off, returning to his task.

What was it about his touch that made her melt right here at the stove? The touch of his hands and lips, the brush of his teeth...

"Uh oh..." Teeth, was that going to be a problem? "Saxxon, I have a question I hope you can answer."

"What's that?" He moved back behind her once more, this time lifting her hair and pressing kisses against the back of her neck.

Oh, that feels good... "Um, just how much like a werewolf are you?"

"A lot, I guess. Why?"

"Because I like it when you nibble and bite, but would that turn me into a werewolf? Isn't that how it works?" She wasn't sure she was ready for that kind of major step.

He chuckled, and the vibrations tickled over her skin. "Not that I know of, but I've not bitten many people."

Goodness, how was she supposed to think when he could do that? "Oh."

"From what I remember, being Valàfrn is like being a race of human. We just are. It's not contagious through biting."

"Okay." She hoped he remembered right, because she enjoyed the feel of his teeth, which was something she'd never been into before.

It was impossible to think of Saxxon as something other than human. A wolf was a predator that hunted and killed. Well, okay, if she went by the scene in the restaurant, he was a predator, a killer. At least, part of him was.

What else was different? What else was there about werewolves? They were allergic to silver, and that seemed to be the same. What about the moon? Would he become a wolf or half wolf when the moon became full?

"Saxxon?"

He chuckled. "I was listening to your thoughts. I can turn into a wolf. I've never tried turning into a half wolf. The moon affects Valafrn in the opposite way. Without our magic, we would turn into a wolf for all but three nights a month."

"Oh." That was strange.

"So right now, my magic is what keeps me from turning into a wolf."

"How did you keep from turning into a wolf while on Silvertide? Didn't it suppress the magic?"

"They taught us to remain in wolf form no matter what." The way Saxxon's voice lowered to a rumble and how he avoided her gaze reminded her that they'd used abuse to teach them everything.

Kelly tried to focus on finishing the food, but her mind couldn't wrap around the idea of Saxxon as a wolf. What would he be like? Would he still be Saxxon, but hairy? Or would he become an animal? "What do you look like as a wolf?"

"Do you want to see? I think I can control the change now. It was difficult to control my form while on the Silvertide. It took almost all my power to stay in one form and didn't leave much for changes. The most I could do was keep from shifting with the moon's influence." His hands stroked over her, but now there was a slight hesitation to the touch.

The food was ready, but she wanted to see this other part of him. She nodded. "Please, Saxxon. I'd like to see."

First he came to her. He held her gently and kissed her with a gentle passion filled with tenderness. Then Saxxon moved into the more

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open area past the spacious banquet sized table. He stood relaxed as if lost in thought.

Her heart jumped up a gear when tiny blue sparkles appeared to dance over his body. He shimmered for a second, the sparks covering the human form with an obscuring haze. Then, with a crackle like static electricity, Saxxon's image wavered, reforming in the shape of a wolf.

The wolf turned its blue gaze on her. Its coat was a plush, cream color. His wolfish body was long, lean and powerful.

"Saxxon?" she whispered.

The wolf raised his head high. His ears pricked intensely.

She couldn't tell if he was able to understand or not. Even if he did, how would he answer? She swallowed back a giggle as she pictured his wolf lips forming words like they did in cartoons.

Maybe she could speak to him mentally. *Saxxon, can you hear me?*

Yes.

Thank god. His mental voice was the same as at any other time. That alone eased the weirdness of talking to an animal. Can I come touch you?

I'd like that. He met her halfway.

She lowered her hand the same as she would to a strange dog, letting him smell her, accept her before reaching closer.

You smell delicious. He nuzzled her hand, pushing his large head under it, encouraging her to stroke his thick fur.

Am I doing this right? Is there anything I shouldn't do? I don't know much about dogs, let alone wolves.

I like your touch. It's comforting. He leaned his body against her thigh. His weight was enough to shift her balance, forcing her to kneel, which put on eye level.

Your fur is so soft. Her fingers burrowed through the long fur.

His blue eyes turned back to meet her gaze. You really don't know much about canines, do you?

She stopped, stilling her fingers mid-stroke. *No, I don't. What did I do wrong?*

Nothing wrong, but you are mixing signals about dominance.

That didn't sound good. What does that mean?

To wolves, life is about dominance. Who has the strength to punish another. Certain motions and touches are considered strong and dominant. Others are weak and submissive. His voice caressed over her mind. To touch the upper part of the body is dominant. To lower yourself to another is submissive.

So my stroking your head is like saying I am stronger than you?

Yes, and you are. But you also knelt next to me, putting us on the same level, telling me that you see us as equals.

I think I understand. She scratched his chin and throat. This is submissive because I'm touching your lower side.

Oh yeah, and it feels pretty good too. He pushed her over, knocking her flat to the floor. Be careful. A submissive posture can encourage dominant behaviors.

She froze as the wolf stood over her, one foot resting on her chest. Should she be afraid? He stared at her with a hungry look that made her think perhaps she should be worried. Still, his blue eyes were not at all wolfish. They were wholly Saxxon's in both appearance and depth.

Blue sparkles danced over him, some seeming to fall on her. This time she noticed their color matched his eyes. Those eyes once again were framed by a human face, a much loved human face.

His paw that had reformed into a hand shifted to claim her right breast. His mouth descended and reminded her that dominance could be a very good thing.

There was no careful meeting of lips or tentative brushing. No slow touch requesting response.

His mouth crushed hers. His teeth bit her lower lip. His tongue leaped into hers, thrusting, demanding. His body controlled hers. He owned her. Not because he took without asking, but because she offered without needing to be asked.

Kelly, I want to make love to you.

She felt his hard arousal pressed against her thigh. His mouth relaxed its onslaught, slowing to a more languid exploration. His hand moved under her shirt to reclaim her breast. Her fingers burrowed into his silky hair, holding him close.

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Here on the floor? he asked.

She didn't care where. His body felt delicious. His weight was perfect to pin her in place. With his strength, he lifted her shoulders and pulled her shirt over her head in one smooth motion. *Here, there, everywhere.*

He unhooked her bra, and her breasts bounced free. As free as they could be when immediately caught by his large hands.

She reached for him, planning to remove his shirt. Fair was fair, after all. But he seized both her wrists, lifting them above her head. His head dropped, and he sucked one hard nipple into his mouth. His teeth closed, and he rolled the tip with his tongue.

Her body arched up with the fiery contact. The motion thrust her breast into his hand and mouth and her thigh against his burning heat.

Tell me you want me. His mental voice was low and sexy, like a purr that tickled through her mind.

The corresponding physical reaction sent trails of desire between her thighs. *I want you.* That was the understatement of the century. Her body was so tight and aching. Surely she would die without him, without his touch.

Tell me how. The man's mind was as seductive as his touch. His words pooled in her.

Here, now. Don't make me wait.

He released her hands and set to undoing her jeans. His deft fingers made fast work of it even as she still fumbled with the button of his jeans.

In mere seconds, he was sliding her from the denim. When he had her naked before him, still lying on the thick rug where they'd started, only then did he concern himself with his own clothing. Those blue sparks flew, and his clothing disappeared down to his delicious skin.

Her hand reached for his impressive erection. That evidence of his desire was better than average, and better still, it was all hers. Her fingers barely brushed the underside when sparks of a different kind flew.

He twitched at her touch. His hand claimed her mound with his fingertips, caressing, sinking into her moist folds.

Her hips jerked up toward the contact. Her muscles clenched as

need burned through her.

Then he was falling on her, his shaft replacing his hand, pausing at her entrance.

Yes! She gripped his hips, rising up against him, increasing the pressure without quite impaling herself. With a slow rotation of her hips, she ground against his tip. The intense sensation drew moans from both of them.

She moved once more.

He growled, shifted his weight, and thrust into her. Slow and deep, the motion sent wave after wave of pleasure rocketing through her. Her body tightened around him.

His pace quickened. Each stroke became the sole center of sensation. Each motion focused on where they were joined. They joined perfectly. His body fit hers. His need matched her own.

Saxxon's hands lifted her hips, plunging in, pounding their passion together, deeper still.

Her body tightened, ached, burned. The need built. The desire to crest was overwhelming.

He shuddered, and his rhythm shifted.

She panted, clenching his flexing rear. She was so close, on the verge of pain.

There.

Oblivion stretched before her. Her body clenched around his. Her cry of ecstasy was followed by his growl. His hot seed filled her as she milked him for more, each tremor shared and amplified between them.

Kelly looked up into Saxxon's face and was caught by the beauty of his release. The man's pleasure was beyond physical. He looked as if he'd found heaven. Despite lying in the center of the hotel floor, the moment echoed a perfection that brought tears to her eyes. While she and Saxxon had been avoiding the bad guys, they had somehow found each other. And what they had might be fragile, but she was certain that it was precious to both of them.

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Chapter Ten

Angel and frustration just didn't pair up well. Not well at all. She was used to getting what she wanted or needed without much trouble.

This time, it wasn't going as she wanted. The boys were scattered about the city already. She hadn't even yelled at them yet for getting here so fast. That alone showed how much she needed their help.

Normally she was a little fish swimming with her friends the sharks, but this time she was the little fish out on her own, trying to protect the tiny fish.

Entirely too many fish.

Kelly and Saxxon would be safe at the Low Key suite. Nothing could get in there without explicit permission from the big guy himself, and that wasn't handed out lightly.

The fact that he'd given permission to use the suite said a lot for what he expected from this couple. Either they would be something special, or maybe Dàn was just showing his weakness for romance. He tried to hide it, but she was beginning to suspect that was his only real weakness. Anytime he sent one of the guys somewhere new without a good reason, she grinned and checked him off the available list.

He'd never pointed his finger her way, but that was fine with her. She wasn't ready to settle down. She might not be Valàfrn, but she'd have a nice long life, especially while she served Dàn. Why would she want to spend those centuries bound to one man?

Though she did have to admit to being curious about this Captain

friend of Kelly's. Captain Peter Rook was by all accounts completely dedicated to his position in missing persons. She'd been through his office at the department and spoken with several of his co-workers.

He spent long hours working, but skipped out on the social side of the department. One woman even mentioned that she thought the Captain was homosexual. From what she'd learned, the only woman he spent any time with was Kelly, and that was all job related.

So what was it that made the man valuable enough to ransack his home, breach his office, and kidnap him as well? At least at this point she was assuming he'd been taken. Although there wasn't any evidence of foul play, the man was simply nowhere to be found.

She flipped open her phone and dialed Rolf.

This time the brat answered. "I told you I'd call."

She smiled at his cracking voice. "Well, you didn't call soon enough. What have you found?"

"Not much. We've been canvassing the streets. Alex and Justin even hit some of the lowlife hangouts. There's not a whisper anywhere."

"Did they shake or just listen?"

"Mostly listened, but a couple places they shook down a bit."

Good, those two could shake a place up well when they needed to. "Are you staying out of trouble?" she asked him. It wouldn't do to let little brother get into any trouble.

"Yes. Of course I am. I don't want Mom mad at me or you."

"Good. I'm glad you know what's at risk." She laughed at his logic. Here they were faced with a pretty rotten group that would kill them all without any regret, and he was worried about what Mom would do if he got into trouble. The boy did have his head on straight. Mom, for all her petite beauty, was a terror to a child with erring ways.

"So what else do you want us to do?"

That was the question, wasn't it? She didn't really have an answer. "Are Manny and Max still watching the Hyatt?"

"Yeah. I heard from them about ten minutes ago."

"Good. I want you to stay close to Justin and Alex and keep doing what you're doing. Try to encourage them to be somewhat close to within

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the law.”

Rolf snorted. “Right, I see that happening.”

“Well, do your best. Try not to draw too much of the wrong kind of attention. I don’t want to have to bail them out of juvie again, especially since it would be a real jail now. I think I’ll need you all to be ready to move as soon as we track down the home base of these evildoers.”

“Okay, Sis. I’ll let them know to stay on their toes for some action.”

“Be good.” She clicked the phone shut.

Rolf was a good kid, and she trusted him to curb the antics of the older boys. Alex and Justin were the next thing to spoiled monsters, but she knew even they would eventually grow out of their childishness.

She’d known that Manny and Max were around the hotel, yet she still hadn’t seen them. Weird, warped little boys. She was sure they’d managed to learn even more magic than their parents knew about.

Now she needed to refocus on finding Rook. She was positive that he was the key to locating the APM headquarters. Her next stop was his apartment.

* * * * *

Saxxon lifted Kelly and moved her to make room on the sofa for himself. The low table in front of them was laden with food, and Kelly had clicked on an enormous TV to scan the news.

Something had changed in their relationship. Something beyond the obvious.

Making love had broken open a dam of emotion. He could now feel her every emotion and many of her thoughts. They were bound together. He imagined it was the same for her. He wasn’t sure, though, because the flood gates had somewhat overwhelmed him. He was almost afraid to put their budding relationship at risk. He thought she might be hesitant for the same reasons.

He let her watch the news while he focused on devouring the plateful of sausage and eggs. She had stacked several waffles on her plate as well as a pile of tasty looking fruits.

They had found a couple of bath robes in the master bath. They

probably looked very homey sitting together wrapped in the blue robes. He felt calm and centered for once. Just being here with Kelly had that affect on him. He felt safe.

"Are you going to eat all of those?" he asked, pointing at the pile of strawberries on her plate.

"I thought you didn't want any?" she teased him, pulling the plate back as he reached for it.

"I may have changed my mind." His growl did not have the desired effect. Instead of giving in to his demand, she lifted one berry and held it out for him to bite into it.

His teeth sank into its flesh, squishing out a couple of drops of the juice over his lower lip.

Kelly's eyes danced as she pulled the strawberry remains away and licked the drops from his chin.

She is my heaven.

"I am not. I just didn't want you to waste anything that delicious." She grinned up at him, and he couldn't resist dropping his head back down to claim her lips. The strawberry flavor simply added another dimension to their kiss.

He could taste the flavor, but also feel her reaction to it. She had a thing for strawberries. He felt her pulse race, and his own matched the fast pace. He could smell her desire and feel the heat pooling through her veins. His hand slipped under the edge of her robe. His fingers stroked up her thigh to the junction of that heat.

Her need matched his own. She was hot and slick, and all they'd done was kiss. Which was fair as far as he was concerned. After all, he was hard and throbbing and could think of nothing but sinking into her.

He lifted her, settling her into his lap. She reached between them, stroking him even harder. His body responded to her every touch.

He wanted this time to be slow, but instead they rushed toward the brink, and within minutes he was dying to be inside her.

The bond they had included many benefits. One being that she knew how close he was. She rose up and guided his shaft into her welcoming warmth.

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His motion was limited by their position, but he made the most of it by nibbling at her breasts, which were so handily near his teeth.

She in turn controlled the rising pleasure, riding him slow at first, and then increasing the tempo, reflecting the fevered pitch.

He suckled at her breast until she demanded his lips meet her own. She was much better at this dominance thing than he'd first believed.

"Oh Saxxon."

"I can't take much more," he growled out. Her body clenched around his, her every motion melting them together.

Then he was there at the brink. The exquisite pleasure-pain held tight as Kelly convulsed over his shaft. She was so tight and hot. So perfect.

With a gasp, he let go, filling her and rocking his hips hard in that last moment.

He held her there when she would have shifted away. He liked her draped over him, his body still inside her.

"I want a shower. Care to join me?"

Her suggestion, and the visual that filled his mind of the two of them in the enormous bath tub, became exactly what he cared to do.

* * * * *

Angel couldn't figure out what the APM's purpose was for taking Rook. Sure, he might have some information about Kelly, but the Captain didn't know anything about Saxxon.

Maybe they just had a thing for the sexy man same as she did. Probably not. She somehow doubted that any of the bigoted bastards were daydreaming of the good Captain naked and bound in her bed.

Rook wasn't high ranking in any way. He was a detective in missing persons in one of the major D.C. police departments. His employment records showed him as dedicated and successful, but practically unnoticed among the others. Which was remarkable considering the files said he was six feet four and two hundred and twenty pounds.

Angel wondered if the boys were finding anything useful out on

the street. They were scattered around the city, checking sources and bothering people as they saw fit. Her only rule to them was that they had to check in every hour on the hour. So far, they had done so and had been providing interesting information.

She'd focused all her effort on tracking Rook. Going through his apartment had given her a glimpse of the man. He led a solitary life and was dedicated to his work. Not a single picture of family anywhere in the house told the reality of his being alone in the world. He did have a picture of Kelly and Patrick set on his desk, but that was the only personal item anywhere. Toiletries were neat, all in their places. His whole house was tidy in a way that felt almost cold, sterile.

From the reports, his house had been broken into and ransacked just hours before he went missing, and yet it was all in order. He didn't have a maid or a girlfriend as far as she could tell. So he must have cleaned the place up right after finding the damage.

How strange for a man who lived alone. At least her experience had shown that most bachelors didn't rush home to tidy up.

He hadn't had much time to do this cleaning act. Maybe he'd missed some things. Angel walked slowly through the rooms, watching for anything that seemed out of place. The living room, kitchen and bathroom were all perfectly neat. The bedroom loomed at the end of the short hallway.

She opened the door and studied the bedroom. Small and neat, the room had a military feel with bare walls and a large footlocker at the end of the bed. The only color that the room held was the plush quilt that was done in harvest shades.

She could imagine the big man stretched out on the bed in jeans and an unbuttoned shirt. He would be comfortable in this place. Maybe spend a quiet evening reading a book. She glanced at one wall where a short book case held a collection next to the bed. She ran her finger along the bindings as she read the titles. The titles varied greatly between manuals, crime novels, poetry and a small stack of romance novels.

Captain Rook appeared to be a man of varied tastes.

Unfortunately, none of this helped her find where he was.

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Chapter Eleven

Saxxon pulled Kelly's rear tight against his front. Even tucked spoon-like in the bed, he wanted her as close as possible. She was a warm bundle that brought his blood to the boiling point just with her sleepy snuggling. He stroked his fingertips over the curve of her hip. What lush curves. His fingers trailed back up to her ribs, inching toward one perfect breast.

He should try to catch some sleep too, but something was nagging at the back of his mind. Some danger that they were overlooking that was creeping closer. The hair raised on his neck as he sensed someone watching. No, not watching with eyesight, but slipping through his mind, reading him.

Only one person ever did that. Caspian had found him. He'd have to be close to reach him in this kind of contact. Invading his mind, trespassing without an invitation.

Kelly's hand locked over his fingers. "What's wrong?" Her voice held a sleepy note.

What wasn't wrong? All this paradise, that he'd only barely tasted, was about to be taken away. "Cas. I can feel him reaching for me. He has to be close."

"How close?" She rolled over, cupping his face in one palm.

"Very. Probably back inside the building." He dipped his face close and rested his forehead against hers.

"So what's changed? You thought he was here earlier too, but now

I can feel how much it worries you."

She was so perceptive. "He's trying to connect to me. He didn't try to touch my mind before. Now he's serious, and his focus is on me."

"I don't know what that means. Connect how, exactly?"

"Like we did on the bike. Remember how we could talk to each other?" Only Kelly's touch had been welcomed. This was more like an invasion.

"Yeah. So, you can do that with Cas too. So tell him to leave us alone and send the kids home."

"I've been blocking him out. I wasn't sure if I should encourage his mental touch. It might make it easier for him to find us."

"Angel said this place is safe. I think we can trust her."

He still wasn't sure. Maybe it was fear that kept him from wanting to speak with Caspian. For decades, his brother had helped Dr. Jon to torture him and Dain. He'd held so much control over them. Forced them to do so much wrong and given them no choice. Yes, it was fear and hatred that made him fight the connection. He would sever their brotherly bond if he could. He would kill him if the chance came.

"Saxxon? Can you tell me more about how this works?"

"I've always felt a connection to Cas and Dain. I remember feeling the same thing for our sisters too." The sisters that Cas had let die. "When it's weak, the connection feels like a subtle touch." He brushed her fingers over her shoulder, barely touching. "When one of us wanted to strengthen it, we could reach up and catch that mental touch. By focusing on it, we could share thoughts and emotions."

"So if you opened yourself and focused on Cas's touch, you'd be able to share your thoughts with him."

"And he with me." Saxxon couldn't stop the shiver that must have betrayed the depth of his fear to Kelly.

"Do you think you'd be able to find out anything that could help the kids?" she asked as her gaze locked on his with a hopeful look.

He hated to feel weak in front of her, but she deserved the truth. "I don't know. Cas is stronger than I am." Saxxon closed his eyes against the sympathy he saw on her face. "He might see more from me than we want

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him to know."

"I see what you mean. I really think we're safe here, but we wouldn't want him to know we have others out looking for him and his friends."

"Right. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to keep him from taking the information."

"Wait a second. Didn't Angel say something about us being stronger together than we are apart?" Kelly ran her hand over his shoulder as if she knew how much the simple contact affected him. "Can we use that strength somehow?"

"I hadn't thought of that, but maybe we can."

"How can we make it work for us? I know I can click into the connection with you fairly easily." She grinned at him. "It's even easier now."

"I think if we link before I open to Cas, then maybe..."

"You need to be more positive. Together we can do this." She pressed a kiss to his lips. "We can. It's funny, but I think Low Key may prove useful once again."

"Oh, how?" They'd already helped more than he'd ever expected.

"When I went to the conference out at the casino, they offered classes for people who had psychic abilities. One of them was on how to keep out the garbage that can become overwhelming."

"I don't understand."

"They taught me how to shield against mental intrusions."

"Really? That might work." It had definite possibilities.

"Right. We connect, and I can use my abilities to keep him from wondering around your mind while you try to get him to give up some of his info."

"I don't know..." It sounded good, but would it put Kelly in danger? He was sure if Caspian knew about her, his brother try to use her as leverage.

"Saxxon, what if we can find out where they have the children?"

"I just don't want you in danger."

Her expression softened. "I understand, but I want to try. If it

works, it will be more than worth the risk."

She was so beautiful and strong. Her instincts and need to help others made more sense than his fear. "All right. We can try, but I insist on one thing."

"Anything."

"If I push you out, don't fight me."

"Why would you?"

"If Cas begins to suspect you're there, I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"Okay. I won't fight you if you get all pushy." She laughed at the danger they were in. How he wished he could feel as at ease. "Well, let's try before he gives up."

Can you hear me? He focused on shutting out Caspian, but welcoming Kelly.

Yes. Have I mentioned that you have an incredible mental voice?

No. I don't think you have.

I mean, your out loud voice is sexy as heck, but your mind meld thingie feels like a caress. Her hands stroked up his back and tugged him down to meet her hungry lips.

She tasted so sweet. His own lingering taste and some hint of maple syrup, but mostly all Kelly.

While her tongue continued to tease his, she said, Oh, my. I do love this. I do love you. By the tiniest increments, she withdrew, finally leaving trails of butterfly kisses over his chin and throat. Okay. Let's do it.

Don't think anything to me. Please remember he is dangerous and will use you if he can. Please, don't let this be a mistake. Already too much was at stake. If anything happened to her... It was unthinkable.

I'll be careful. Quit stalling. I'm ready now.

He closed his eyes and focused on Kelly and the connection they had. He could picture her on the bed with him as clearly as if he opened his eyes to the real world.

We need clothing.

Why hadn't he thought of that? He pictured the clothing covering her, then himself. How will you build this shield?

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Brick by brick. Immediately bricks began to appear and settle into a tall wall. They climbed around them, building a room, then filling above and below, leaving only a narrow doorway. The room is for me. The door is for you.

This might work.

Of course it will work. We are stronger together than we are apart. Now, you need to invite Cas into the hallway through that door.

Hesitating wouldn't help. He moved to the door, looking back to see Kelly's encouraging nod. He could still feel her behind him, but he turned his mind to the hallway she'd created.

He felt for the insistent jab that was Caspian, more demanding than he'd ever felt before.

Caspian.

Cas answered the call hesitantly. Brother?

Since when. Caspian hadn't been much of a brother since the day Caspian had walked out on them, betraying them in the worst way.

Since forever. It is time for you to return to your duties. You have disobeyed your superiors long enough.

Saxxon felt Caspian trying to read him more deeply. Then he felt his frustration at finding only a brick wall. *No. I am free of them. I will not be returning to any of their evil duties.*

You will never be free. They own your soul. They control you for every need that you desire. You will return. The sooner you return, the lesser the punishment. Caspian became the voice of reason. He backed off on the dominant attitude and offered instead what at first might seem to be kindness. In the past, Saxxon would have fallen for his lies.

No. I no longer listen to your demands or your advice.

Caspian hesitated once more. He seemed to be weighing his options and trying to judge Saxxon's strengths and possible weaknesses. *You do feel...stronger. Are you strong enough to get free of the addictions?*

Saxxon didn't know the answer to that. For now, the addiction was bearable, but he didn't know if it would get worse or better. Time will tell.

You will return. You have no choice. Caspian had seen his indecision as failure and a weakness to take advantage of. Now he would be like a dog worrying a bone.

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I am no longer a child to be bullied. I will not be returning.

You are too weak to survive outside the institute. You always have been.

The addictions are too strong for you to ever get free of them.

Apparently not.

Then why did you answer my call? You need my aid. Perhaps even hoped I would supply more Silvertide for you. Surely you have no fond need to converse with one you see as an enemy.

No. He didn't have a good reason to contact Cas. He wanted only to be free of every reminder of what he'd been put through. He wanted to be free of Caspian. I think the better question is why were you trying to reach me? What else do you want to take from me?

I have information for you.

That was unexpected. I need nothing from you.

Caspian paused only a moment before continuing. Daniel is loose in the city. I have information about his whereabouts that I'm willing to give you.

It had to be a trick. Caspian would demand a high price for any information that didn't serve the institute's plans. Dain is free, and I won't help you to recapture him.

Dain's capture is to both our benefits. If he is not contained, he will be discovered. He isn't currently capable of hiding what he is. Our kind will soon become public. Secrecy is always mission priority. It has little to do with the orders given by the good doctors.

Why would you give this information to me? Why have you not gone after him yourself? Why hasn't Dr. Jon sent his own men?

Dr. Jon has sent a team to eliminate Dain. So far, they have not had much success tracking him. Our brother hasn't trusted me for several decades. I cannot get close enough to stop him. That leaves you as his only hope for survival.

Give me the information. If I can help Dain, I will.

In person. Outside the hotel.

No. It was a trap. That could be the only reason they would need to lure him out. But what if he did have information about Dain? Even if his brother was not stealing children within the city, he would still need help.

It's the only way I will give you the information to save Dain.

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He felt Kelly's nod. She thought he should go. Didn't she realize it was a trap? There might not be any information to gather. But what if he could help Dain? Again, Kelly silently signaled her approval. I'll meet you, only you.

Agreed, Caspian said.

Where?

You are doing the right thing, Samuel—

Saxxon.

Saxxon, then. Meet me at the Marina. It's not crowded. We should have privacy, and you will be close to your safe haven.

Fine. In ten minutes, be there alone.

Saxxon stepped back through the brick doorway, imagined a thick wooden door, and felt his hand grasp it. Then he slammed the door shut, locking out a betraying brother and turning to face his mate.

Open your eyes, love.

As he did, the walls fell away and he was back on the bed holding Kelly's naked body tight in his arms.

"Are you sure we should do this?" They were safe here in the hotel, and going out to a certain trap didn't make much sense. Kelly didn't know Caspian like he did. She couldn't understand the betrayal he was capable of.

"I felt that you want to help Dain if you can."

"This is a trap. He probably doesn't have any information that could help Dain. If he did, he wouldn't give it."

"He is your brother. I'm not sure..."

She still didn't understand. "Cas betrayed us."

"He may have had reasons." Her hand stroked over his chest.

"He joined them and helped to make Dain and I become their killers. Caspian was the one who punished me most often. He is the one who put most of those scars on my back. He turned on us."

"So why would he offer the information?"

"To trap me. To take me back for retraining. For pure, sadistic pleasure." Saxxon could never trust Caspian, not after all that he'd done.

"I felt you accept part of his reasons, though. What part was that?"

"Secrecy. Mission priority is to always maintain secrecy. He knows

that is instilled well enough that I will be drawn out to seek Dain and destroy him if necessary."

"But you wouldn't do that. You wouldn't kill him."

"Not now, no. But in the past, I was different. I followed orders. I obeyed the priorities. I would have killed him or anyone who threatened the missions."

"I don't believe you." Kelly stubbornly refused to believe how he was in the past.

"It is the truth. I was their assassin. I killed whoever they marked. I don't expect you to understand or forgive me for what I was. I only hope you will help me to become someone better."

"Oh Saxxon. I may never understand, but I can forgive you for anything. What you've done is not who you are."

She clasped him tightly as if to melt into his body. Her warmth was the balm he needed to face what was coming. He needed to be sure that Caspian wasn't lying. He had to try to live through meeting with the traitor. Above everything, he had to keep Kelly safe.

"We have to go. You told him ten minutes." She pulled from his arms and yanked her clothes on, throwing his at him. "Why did you tell him so soon? We'll have to run, and probably still be late."

"To keep him from having enough time to set a perfect trap." He had a terrible thought. "It still won't be safe. He picked the location. The trap, if there is one, may already be set." Caspian might be down there waiting with who knew how many men. "You're not going."

"Yes, I am," Kelly said while she pulled on her sneakers.

"I'm sure it's a trap, and I don't want you to get hurt."

She caught his arm in a fierce grip. "You're probably right. It most likely is a trap. And there is no way I'm letting you walk into it without backup."

"Kelly..."

"Don't you 'Kelly' me. I'm going, but I'll stay out of sight. Besides, I've been here before and know the layout of the Marina."

He knew it was hopeless to argue with her. She was right about his not knowing the Marina. "If you're going, I want you as safe as possible."

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"Sounds good to me. I don't really want to be caught by them anyhow. I know just the place." Both were ready. She started for the elevator. "On the dock, there is an events pavilion. It's fairly open, but does have a lot of shrubs I can hide in. And as far as keeping him from setting a trap, contact him with that specific location once we're there and in place."

She caught his hand, tugging Saxxon to a stop when he turned the direction they'd come from. "Wait, we can't go out through the restaurant. There might be people in there."

"There must be another way out. It wouldn't make sense for that to be the only entrance. Hurry, we'll try the other end of the hallway." The secret hall actually had a few options, but they followed it to the end where a door opened to the back parking lot. He grabbed Kelly's hand and pulled her out onto the mostly empty lot.

Her Jeep sat two spaces to the right of the door and the motorcycle six spaces to the left. A half a dozen other vehicles were scattered among the thirty or so spaces.

"Do we need to drive down?" he asked.

"No, the Marina isn't far, but we'll have to jog if we're going to make it on time."

He let her lead until they got within sight of the almost deserted events area. "Go find your hiding hole."

She kissed him quickly, then bolted into the shrubs. He lost track of her immediately, so she must have been right about finding a good place to hide.

Caspian. I await you at the pavilion. Come to me.

Chapter Twelve

Angel heard the sound of the door opening just as she picked up her jacket to leave Rook's apartment. Much as she'd hoped to find answers here, all she found was more questions.

"Excuse me; can I help you with something?" The woman who'd come in glared at Angel. Her cute skirt and stiff hair couldn't hide that she was past her prime. Her makeup was caked on, and she stepped into the apartment as if she owned the place.

Her help me? "I doubt it."

"Who are you? Why are you in Peter's apartment? You'd better have a good reason or I'll be calling the police." Her face pinched up in anger as Angel nonchalantly pulled on her jacket.

"Have you seen Rook or heard from him in the past five hours?" she asked, though she didn't expect a useful answer.

"Of course. Well, it might have been a little over five hours ago."

"Well, when was it?" She walked over to Rook's small entertainment center where he had a small case with CD's in it and a larger rack of cassette tapes. Well, at least he didn't have any eight tracks lying about.

"What business is it of yours? Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Rook's. I'm in law enforcement." Which was at least sort of the truth. Despite her family's outspoken hatred for what she did, she continued to track mass murders to a certain final justice that they deserved.

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She was about to elaborate when her phone vibrated. She glared at the woman, hoping she would leave her alone while flipping the phone open. "Hello?"

"Angel, you need to get back here. There's tons of action, and I think Saxxon and Kelly just did something dumb."

"Max — "

"It's Manny. Max is shadowing them now."

"Manny, I'm on my way. You and your brother watch your backs and stay safe. Remember, you can't save anyone if you're dead yourself."

"Got it, cousin. We'll be careful. Just hurry."

"I will."

She clicked the phone off and faced the rotten woman who'd just heard way too much and probably didn't understand a word of it.

"No way am I going to explain that to you. Just pretend you didn't hear it."

The woman wasn't buying it. "What was that all about? I've never seen you before, and I've been to the department. I'm going to call them and check on you."

"Fine, go ahead." Angel didn't have time to spar with the woman. Though she did plan to make time eventually. She followed her out into the hallway and watched her go into the next doorway to the right. So she was his neighbor. Just how close was he to his neighbor? Her instinct told her not very. Still, the more she learned about Rook, the more intrigued she became.

As she walked past the woman, her cell vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out, expecting one of the boys. "Hello?"

"Angel, where are you? What did you need?" It was her best friend, Faith. She'd left her a message to see if she could come help them. She was better at healing than Angel was, and she would just feel better with more back up.

"Very good to hear your voice, doll. I need some help if you can swing it."

"I probably can. What do you need? Do you want me to come there?"

"I need help watching the boys and in general another adult to help me with a situation. And yes, absolutely. Please come."

"I'm not sure how I qualify as an adult, but I'd be happy to ditch my bodyguards and come help you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Angel breathed a sigh of relief. Faith might not be able to do much magic, but what she could do was pretty damn impressive. Not to mention it just felt better having friends watch your back, friends who experience had already proven reliable.

"No problem. I'd be happy to get away. The guys are driving me nuts, wanting to give up baby sitting duty and get involved in all the things happening right now. Should I come to right where you are?"

The neighbor lady was still in her own apartment, and the hallway was empty. "Yeah, right here would be good."

The phone clicked off, and Angel dropped it back in her pocket. She stood still impatiently. She and Faith had practiced this skill as children and had it fairly well perfected. If she stayed still, Faith could focus on her location and materialize immediately in front of her. It took time, but was still amazing considering Faith seemed to be the only Valàfrn with the skill, not counting Dàn whom everyone assumed wasn't Valàfrn anyhow.

But staying in one place for several minutes could be very hard to do, and that was often how long it took for Faith to do her nifty trick.

She felt her friend even before she appeared.

A disturbance in the air, a change in pressure, and then Faith's tall, lean body slowly faded into existence directly in front of her. She was dressed in typical Faith style with a bright orange T-shirt, faded jeans and sandals.

"Hey. Am I in one piece?" It was her opening line, and had been since her one accidental arrival, minus her lovely sable colored hair, which luckily enough had grown back.

"Yep, you seem to be all here. Ready to roll?"

"Sure, where to now?"

"Back to the Hyatt. I need to check on Saxxon and Kelly. I'll fill you in on the way."

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Saxxon stepped up onto the raised dais, making himself a target to any weaponry attack. He knew the risk, but was counting on this move to draw attention away from Kelly. He didn't expect anything so obvious as an open attack anyhow. Caspian was more likely to have thugs jump him, thinking to subdue him by force or with drugs.

Caspian stepped into sight at the bottom of the pavilion steps. "You actually came."

He couldn't believe his eyes. His brother stood in the open, wearing a sedate grey suit and seemingly unarmed. Caspian appeared to the eyes and other senses to be non-threatening. "You knew I'd come."

Cas shook his head. "No, I thought you were smart enough to expect a trap and flee, and yet here you are."

That didn't ring true at all. If Caspian hadn't thought he'd be here, then he wouldn't have wasted his own time. In fact, there was something almost innocuous about Cas, which was so out of place that it set Saxxon's nerves on edge. "What is the information? Tell me so we can be done."

Cas frowned. "I thought we might talk for a moment."

When Saxxon felt the insistent brush of Cas's mind, he was quickly reminded that there was nothing harmless about his brother. He shoved away the mental intrusion and focused on Cas and all that might yet go wrong. "I have nothing to say to you."

Cas took a step closer and studied him far too closely. "You are much stronger." His voice was puzzled. "I don't feel the addiction in you. At least, not much."

Saxxon kept his body loose and ready. Something wasn't right. Cas never acted this polite. The alien feeling of having a conversation with him set off all his warning bells and made him want to escape. "I am free of it. What about Dain? Tell me what you know and quit wasting time."

"Perhaps you are almost free. Dain is lost. But you may actually be strong enough to survive on your own."

"Shame he will never have that chance." The intruding voice was quiet and soft. That voice was never raised in anger, but the man caused

more pain than any other being Saxxon had met in his whole life. Dr. Jon walked into the clearing from the opposite side of Cas. Saxxon was caught between them.

But where was Kelly?

He stepped back in an attempt to move from between them to a place where he wouldn't have an enemy at his back. Two more men moved in from that direction.

"Run Kelly!"

Instead of running for safety, Kelly jumped from the bushes and pointed her gun at Dr. Jon. "Tell your men to drop their weapons."

"Kill her," was the only answer Dr. Jon gave.

Are you strong enough? Cas's mental voice forced past his defenses and grated over Saxxon's nerves.

They were out of luck and time. His heart stopped with the soft click of chambers turning.

He leaped Kelly's direction, planning to shove out through the men and toward safety, but he was knocked aside as Cas yanked Kelly into his grip. The whistle of several silenced guns firing froze Saxxon in place.

Cas's move had saved Kelly from the gunfire, but now she was at his mercy.

He twisted her arm until the gun fell to the ground. Cas didn't bother to restrain her hands after that. His one arm clamped her waist to his own.

All this in the space of a few seconds. Saxxon watched helplessly as Kelly hugged herself and shook in terror.

"See, that wasn't so hard. Now shoot him."

Then Kelly wasn't crying or shaking. She was swinging. Her hand flew to the side with a glisten of glass and steel.

The needle stabbed deep into Cas's shoulder, partially depressed from the force. And suddenly she ripped herself loose, falling to her knees. Kelly was free.

Cas fell to the ground with a snarl of pain.

Saxxon jerked two of the guards off their feet, smashing them together. Two others fell before he reached them. The space they had filled

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was now left open for him and Kelly to run through.

And run they did. Through the shrubs and what protection they offered, they ran, low and fast. The whooshes here and there of narrowly missing bullets kept them moving in a headlong rush. Not slowing for even a spare breath, they sprinted the whole way to the doorway, then back in and upstairs to safety.

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Angel parked the bike, then she and Faith started toward the back entrance. The subtle smell of gunpowder hurried their steps. But they'd only gone a few feet when a commotion near the entrance to the parking lot drew their attention.

The squealing tires sounded like impending doom as a full sized van recklessly raced between the parked cars. Angel threw Faith to one side and drew her gun to face the oncoming vehicle, which barreled at them from the direction of the Marina.

Barely slowing, the van turned sharply just as a body was thrown from the open side door. The rolling, tumbling body settled to a rest almost on top of Angel's feet.

Her hands steady, Angel shot two rounds into the back of the van. With some luck, she'd blow out one of the tires and stop the assholes. *Well, my luck's shit today.* No tires blew, and the van made a clean get away.

Faith knelt by the body. "Who is he?"

Angel leaned close and pulled the trench coat away from the man's face. "Dear God, it's Captain Rook."

She wiped away a strand of his tangled hair, revealing his face enough to assess the damages. He was badly battered. His heart raced erratically. His breath came in shallow gasps.

Rook's eyes opened, and he met her gaze. The dim sparkling hazel color softened. "I dreamed of you," he said with a raspy sigh.

Her hand shot out to cup his cheek gently. Her thumb brushed over his swollen lower lip. Her knees jerked under her. Suddenly, this almost broken man held the promise of a life full of love and laughter.

And just as suddenly, that picture perfect life became the vision of what could be greatness.

How could it be him? Why now? She had so many things going on while fighting to keep Saxxon and Kelly safe. Now here was this man that she knew almost nothing about, lying at her feet, awakening needs that she'd never expected.

Rook tried to lift his hand to touch her. She felt his intention and watched as he lacked the strength. She caught his hand before it fell back the ground. Rook's strong jaw clenched and his eyes closed.

Damn it, she was too young to find a mate.

She was far too young to watch him die.

* * * * *

A quiet ping drew Saxxon's attention to the in-room elevator. Above it, a light flashed.

Kelly was asleep, having crashed from the adrenaline rush as soon as they had returned. He'd started breakfast to surprise her. He turned off the stove and moved toward the elevator cautiously.

The floor rose, revealing Angel and another girl holding up a large man between them. The man hung limply, unable to support his weight.

Saxxon stepped forward to help as Angel shoved the metal grate out of their way. The second woman gave over the man for Saxxon to move.

"Thanks Saxxon. Put him on the sofa there." Angel let Saxxon lift the guy.

He carried the man over and set him on the couch that Angel had motioned to. "Who is he?" The man looked familiar, but he couldn't place from where.

"This is Captain Rook, Kelly's friend. Fucking bastards just dumped him at my feet downstairs."

"Downstairs? They must still be hanging around here then."

"Yeah, after your little excursion, I guess they know your location, but it won't matter much. They can't get you up here. I just don't understand why they did this to him."

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"He looks pretty battered. Is he going to make it?" The man had the smell of death on him. That, more than any cuts and bruises, made Saxxon doubt his chances.

"Faith has been keeping him alive. I don't know what else to do for him. I think they poisoned him. Do you recognize that smell?"

Saxxon leaned closer, but already knew what to expect. "They gave him Silvertide."

Angel's gaze shot to his with a worried jerk. "On top of the beating, can he survive it?"

"Without the beating, he couldn't survive a full dose of Silvertide. The only chance he has is if his blood could be flushed before it reaches his heart."

"Shit."

"I can't keep this up much longer, Angel." The new girl had moved next to Rook and held one hand to his chest.

"I know." Angel looked at him with such desperation. "I don't want him to die. Can you think of anything that might help?"

"Where was the drug injected?" he asked.

"On his wrist." She lifted his torn sleeve to show a swollen black area and a leather strip twisted over his upper arm. "The tourniquet was on him when they threw him out."

He growled at the cruelty. "They didn't want him to die too quickly."

"Faith has slowed his heartbeat as much as she can. If I could drain off the poisoned blood from his arm, would he live?"

"He might, but I don't know how you could do that or what the poison would do to you if you ingested any of it."

"No doubt it will suck, but I can't think of anything else. He has to live." She dropped down on her knees beside Rook, studying the bulging veins. She took a deep breath and gave him a worried and suddenly fang-filled grim smile. Then she lowered her head and sank her long fangs into Rook's arm.

The minutes drew out. Angel's already pale features turned ghastly gray, and her eyes closed under the strain. Yet she continued to draw the

poisoned blood from the human and into her own body.

Faith touched Saxxon's shoulder. "She can't do this on her own. It will kill her."

"Then why does she continue?" Saxxon watched the selfless attempt to save the man's life.

"Captain Rook is her Morning Star. That's what her kind calls their predestined mate. He must live."

He couldn't help but picture the scene if Kelly were the one lying near death. Yes, he too would risk everything to save her. No matter what the cost.

"After she draws off the blood, I will have to get help to save them. I'm not sure who will come. It may become rather crowded. You should go get Kelly now."

Good advice. Saxxon went to the large room they'd claimed and found Kelly still asleep. One arm was flung over her head, and her full breasts pressed up into the air, tempting him. But now was not the time.

"Kelly, wake up." He leaned close and kissed her gently.

She moaned and pressed into his touch. Gradually, her eyes fluttered open. "Hello," she whispered shyly.

"Angel's back, and she brought Rook."

Kelly sat up and began looking around for her clothes.

He handed her jeans, which were on the floor. "He was hurt pretty badly. A girl named Faith came up with them. She thinks we'll need help to save him."

Her startled gaze collided with his. Then she rushed to finish dressing. Together they returned to the sitting area in time to see Angel collapse to the floor.

Kelly ran to Angel's side, but could do little to help her. Angel's breath came in ragged gasps.

Faith held Rook in her arms, but it seemed too late for him. She closed her eyes and cried out, "Send Grant to me now!"

Whoever she had yelled out to must have been listening and prompt. Almost before she finished speaking, hazy tendrils of smoke curled up tight into a column. As the smoke faded, a very tall, dark haired

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man appeared. His angry, impatient expression fled, replaced by fear when his gaze fell on Angel.

"What happened to her?" he asked to no one in particular as he dropped to his knees beside Angel. "Angel, just what have you done to yourself?"

"She drained a poison from the Captain to save his life, but she's not strong enough to handle it," Faith explained.

"What poison?" The man asked while stroking the hair back from Angel's sweat covered face.

"Silver and opium," Saxxon answered.

"Shit." He shifted Angel to laying flat. "I may need a little help here." His large hands framed Angel's heart shaped face. A glow formed where he touched her, intensifying and expanding until the light was painful to look at. Then the brightness hit its peak and dissipated, leaving the man assumed to be Grant holding a much healthier looking Angel. She coughed and choked until she spit out several BB sized balls into a cup that Grant held out for her. Then her breathing evened out, and her color returned to its normal porcelain shade.

"Thank you," Angel said as she snuggled into the man's affectionate hold.

"What were you thinking? Why would you do something like that?" He shook her roughly before hugging her again.

"Rook... Oh God, did it work? How is he?"

Faith shook her head sadly. "Not good. Angel, I don't think he's going to make it."

Tears clouded her eyes, and her hands clenched onto Grant's jacket. "No, Grant, he has to live! Can't you feel it? He's has to. He has so much left to do. Please, can't you help him?"

"I've never been able to refuse you, and you know it." He lifted her to sit on the sofa beside Rook then turned to examine the man in question. "Shit, I can't do anything for him, honey. He's too far gone."

"Please, no." Her eyes pleaded with Grant to say there was at least a chance.

He sighed. "Fine, but I think you know what this means. He may

never forgive you for this decision.”

“Just bring him back. Bring him back.” Angel sobbed into Faith’s shoulder.

Grant lifted Rook, who was no small man. They disappeared into a cloud of swirling smoke.

“So, are you going to tell me what I just saw? Who was he? Where did he take Rook?” Kelly said. Saxxon suspected she wouldn’t like the answer, so he moved to her side in a show of support.

Angel’s eyes still streamed as she tried to explain. “When Faith and I came back, Rook was dumped out of a van almost on top of us. We brought him up here to see what could be done. Grant is my grandfather about a hundred times removed. He took Rook to hell to bargain for his soul.”

“Are you serious?” Kelly asked. “What is he? What will he do to Rook?”

“Grant is, well, Grant, but his mother, Sadrina, rules over the demons. She will have to give him vampire blood to save him, unless she thinks of something else.”

“A vampire!” Kelly trembled in Saxxon’s arms. He could tell she was having trouble putting it all together.

He wasn’t having much luck understanding it all either. “Angel, I watched you drink his blood. Are you a vampire too?”

“No, I’m not a vampire. I’m like Grant. Look, I can’t explain how I am what I am. I just am, so deal with it.” Her voice rose as she spoke until the last came out on a shout. Then Angel tried to get control, taking several breaths before saying, “Look, I’m sorry. I’m just worried.” Angel sighed. “I’ll try to explain a little better. One kind of demon, called a Cyvampis, lives on blood. A Cyvampis is not a vampire, but if they drain a human and feed the human their demonic blood, the human becomes a vampire. If a Cyvampis gives a living human Cyvampis blood, then the human remains human, but becomes more powerful. That is what I just asked Grant to have Sadrina do for Rook.”

“So why do you think they dumped Rook out here anyhow?” Kelly asked.

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"We don't know. They obviously wanted him to die, but not too quickly," Saxxon said. "I think they wanted him to tell us something. Did he say anything to you while you brought him up?"

"No, I knocked him out to slow the poison," Faith explained. "So we don't even know why he was sent back."

"Yet another reason to hope he lives. Though I don't really think that counts as living," Angel said while wiping furiously at her tear streaked face.

Kelly's fists tightened their grip on Saxxon's shirt. "Well, that makes it sound all warm and fuzzy." She held on hard enough that he could see her knuckles were white from the pressure. "You mean you turned my friend into an undead monster of the night?"

"Yeah, pretty much, but what choice did I have?" Angel snarled back. "It was either that or let him die. At least this way he will still have a life. It will just be different."

"That is pretty different. So does that mean you have to kill people to survive? Is that what he will have to do?" Kelly asked with a little less challenge.

"I don't drink blood."

Saxxon stopped her denial. "I watched you—"

"I don't drink blood to survive, I swear." She made a cross over her heart.

"So what about Rook?" Kelly's question was interrupted by Grant's return.

Grant's pillar of smoke began to fill the same spot he had earlier left. Beside him, covered in his long trench coat, stood a wobbly, but seemingly alive, Rook.

Grant glared at Angel. "Least you could have done was darken the room." He flung out his hands to the far blinds, and they all dropped closed, sealing out the fading sunlight. Several lamps brightened the room slightly.

Rook stumbled two steps back to the sofa where he sank onto it without a word.

"Faith, you are going home now."

"Now?" She seemed to want to stay and help Angel deal with this, but Grant's angry glare left no room for argument.

"Yes, Dàn said the clans need you, and your bodyguards are pissed that you left without warning them. Go willingly or I will take you. Too much depends on you for you to remain here with so little protection."

"I'll go." She disappeared, but without the cloud that Grant used to pop in and out.

Grant sighed and turned back to them. His gaze flicked over Rook with a frown. "Angel, you will be responsible for teaching him." Grant pinned Angel with an accusing scowl. "And if he fails, you will be the one to kill him. Do you understand?"

Angel barely took her eyes from Rook. "Yes, but I don't know enough to teach him what he'll need. I need help, and you know it."

"Then you can ask Sadrina or Pahele. Perhaps they will be more understanding." With that, Grant began to disappear into his smoke once again.

"Wait, what was done to him?" Angel cried out to the fading smoke.

"He died. He is fully vampire." And Grant was gone.

Rook seemed surprised by the news. "I'm a vampire?" Rook asked in a weak voice.

The room was silent for almost a minute as Angel studied an abstract painting on one wall. Then she turned to face him and answered his question. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"Are you sorry?" he asked.

"No, I'm not." She looked paler than usual and a bit fragile as she stood there, waiting for Rook to condemn the decision she'd made about his life.

But instead of anger, he responded with a surprisingly quiet patience. "You will teach me, won't you?"

"Yeah, I'll teach you."

He sagged back into the sofa once again. His large body sagged under the pressure of all that had happened. Then his eyes shot open, and he struggled to sit upright. "Kelly?" His gaze took in the others then

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settled on Kelly. "I..."

"What is it, Peter?" Kelly asked.

The anguish on Rook's face was warning enough that no one would like what he had to tell her. And in the seconds of waiting, Saxxon remembered that the APM had left him half alive for a reason. Whatever he was about to tell them was the message that they'd left him to deliver.

"I don't know how to tell you... Kelly, they have Patrick."

Chapter Thirteen

Saxxon's heart broke for Kelly. How could she get through this? Her son was everything to her.

"No! That can't be, he's with my mother. He's safe." She resisted what Rook had said.

"I'm sorry, Kelly." His voice cut out with a hard swallow. "I have to tell you. It's my fault they found him."

Tears trembled on her eyelashes before running down Kelly's face as she stared at him in surprise. Her mouth opened once then again, but no words came out.

"I...I was following up on all the kids that were assaulted and stolen, when they came to question me. That's when I put it together. I took every precaution before going to check on Patrick. I caught your mom and Patrick just as they were leaving. If I'd been a minute later they'd still be safe. I still don't know how they followed me without me noticing."

"They have Patrick and my mom..."

"No, your mother is fine as far as I know. I saw them coming and shoved her into a closet. I tried to get Patrick safely hidden too, but didn't have time. There were eight armed men, and they dragged us off in a pair of vans before I had time to call for back up or even draw any attention to what was happening."

"What did you tell them?" Angel asked gently.

"Nothing. They kept asking about a man, who I now guess is him,

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but at the time I didn't know anything. They are after you, aren't they?"

"Yes." Saxxon nodded.

"You're Samuel?"

"Yes." Saxxon forced his mind to slow down, while he worried at the details. Dr. Jon and his men would use the boy as leverage, just as they'd hoped the other kidnapped children would be. Only this time they would be brutal and specific. He knew these people, and he knew what was coming. And Kelly was the one their tactics would hurt. There would be a lot of collateral damage, but now that they knew she was his weakness, they would focus on her.

"They gave me a message for you and Kelly. They are holding Patrick until Kelly gives you up. They will hurt him every hour you are still missing."

"Oh God." Kelly would have collapsed if not for Saxxon catching her swaying form.

He held her tight against his chest, savoring the feel of her body and accepting that this would be the last time he would ever hold her. She needed her son more than he needed his freedom. He would return to the institute as soon as he knew Kelly would be all right.

She stiffened in his arms, her hands tightening into fists clenched around handfuls of his T-shirt. "It's your fault." Her sobbed words tore through him. "My baby, my poor baby." Her fists pounded at his chest.

"I'll get him back." He said into her thick hair, crushing her in a last hug, praying she understood. When her hysteria began to subdue into racking tears, he handed her over to Angel and quickly gathered what he had, which was very little. He ignored all that the others said, including Angel's plea that he should wait and talk about what he planned to do. He stopped to kiss Kelly's tear streaked cheek, then left.

Kelly heard the soft whirl of the elevator fade into silence. She saw the worried looks on the faces of the people around her. She smelled the scent of the bacon that had been cooked but never eaten. She felt the pain that throbbed through her fists where she had beaten them against Saxxon's chest. All of it she sensed through the painful knowledge of what might be happening to her son. "I have to get him back," she mumbled

into the soft leather of the sofa.

No one answered, no one even moved.

"Do you hear me? I have to get him back!" she screamed at them all.

"We will, honey." Angel squatted before her. "We will. I'll call the boys now and see what they've learned in the last hour."

"Boys? I don't want children after him. I want the best men, and even that's not good enough."

"You have at least one man already after them." Rook glared at her angrily. "Or didn't you even notice how your reaction sent him running?"

At first she didn't register what Rook was talking about. Then she felt the chill creep through her body at the warmth that was missing from the room. "Saxxon?"

"Saxxon or Samuel? He's the guy that you now smell like? The one you have obviously been very cozy up here with all this time?" His voice flooded the room with his anger and something very close to jealousy.

Had Rook loved her? She'd never really considered the possibility, but she felt the emotion as clearly as she saw the glow of pain on Rook's face. His sense of betrayal overwhelmed her, and she had no idea how to react to his accurate criticisms.

"Was Saxxon the one that just left here on a suicide mission because you blamed him for what those assholes did?" His voice fell tired and flat as if he'd used all the anger and was left with only emptiness. "Is he the one who will be giving up everything so that you have your son back? Giving up his freedom, his integrity, and his life to those monsters?"

"Saxxon went back?" Suddenly, the first part of her friend's rant made sense. Saxxon was going back to get Patrick free, but giving himself up wouldn't save her son. "He can't do this alone."

Angel gave a half hearted smile. "So what are we going to do?"

"They will take him back, drug him and put him through retraining. As soon as they have Saxxon, they'll kill Patrick." *And I will have lost them both.* "That can't happen. We'll have to find them first."

"But how?" Rook asked.

Angel shrugged. "We all can tell you had sex with him, but did you

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bond with him?"

Kelly felt helpless under their disapproving glares, but she wasn't about to apologize for what she and Saxxon had shared. "I don't even know what that means."

"Could you feel what he felt while you were together? That's the way it is between mates. If you two bonded, the connection is set and very hard to break. So, how close did you get to the lynx?" Angel's eyebrow rose in cocky inquiry.

"Yes." If it weren't for the fear for her son, she might have blushed at the thought of what she'd felt with Saxxon. As it was, all she felt now was scared.

"Then you are probably bonded and can track him that way. What about Patrick, can you track him?"

"I should be able to. I have in the past."

Angel nodded to her encouragingly. "Then try now. Try Patrick first."

Kelly nodded and closed her eyes, focusing on the last words she'd heard Patrick say. Without a physical item that he'd imprinted, it was the best she could do. With someone else's child, it would probably not be enough, but with Patrick, she should sense his mind easily. Instead of him, she felt only blackness. Cold and empty nothingness.

"Anything?"

She shook her head and tried another direction while beating down her panic. She thought about his recent round of the game, I Spy. He had stumped her completely by choosing her shadow. The memory was strong and should have opened the connection immediately. Instead, the emptiness stretched in front of her. Like death?

"Still nothing?" Angel asked.

Pain bloomed in her chest. "They killed him — "

"No, I don't think so." Rook's voice cut into her words. "When they showed him to me before...before they threw me out, he was asleep. I think he was drugged."

"Drugged? Yeah, that might feel the same." She grasped at the possibility. Anything was better than the thought of Patrick already dead.

"If you can't track him, can you track Saxxon?" Angel asked while she opened her phone. "He must have some way to find them, which he was holding back from us."

"I can try." She loosened her death grip on the useless link to her son and felt for the gentle touch that was Saxxon's mind. She sank into the deep well of his mind.

It was like walking down a dimly lit hallway, and there at the end stood Saxxon, waiting. His subtle lost feeling was gone, replaced by a bleak self-loathing and despair over the destroyed dream that was their future. She reached for him, but the floor stretched between them. He gave her a gentle, sad smile, before closing the door, shutting her out of his thoughts.

"I can't reach him. He's locked me out of his mind." She sagged into a chair. Now what? She couldn't track Patrick or Saxxon. How was she going to find them? Maybe she could use something they'd imprinted to get a better trace... Maybe she could check the city by sections until she found them... She could, but she'd still be too late. It couldn't end like this.

Angel waved the phone at them triumphantly. "My brother said that Max and Manny followed their van from here. Those boys are worth their weight in gold sometimes."

Kelly's heart sped up. Thank goodness Angel had asked the boys to come. Even if she'd been set against it before, she was more than grateful now. "Where are they?"

"In a warehouse down at Long Wharf. The twins are still there. We can be there within ten minutes." Angel grinned at her.

"Let's go then!" Kelly's feet moved, and she ran three steps before her mind caught up to her body's desperate need for action. "Wait. We need a plan."

"You could say that again," Rook said. "They're not going to give up either, not willingly. We'll have to storm their defenses and take the hostages back."

Kelly was surprised to see that Rook seemed excited about going into a battle. Usually he was the voice of caution in their team. She

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guessed that having the APM kill him must be the difference, and could hardly blame him for his sudden need for vengeance. "We need weapons. All I have is my pistol."

Angel's grin broadened. "That I can cover. Follow me."

* * * * *

Every dream he'd never even dared to dream was lost.

Saxxon maneuvered through the traffic toward the devil's hideaway. Even now, he flinched from the degree to which Dr. Jon had manipulated his mind. He could easily find his way back to the hidden headquarters, but he was unable to name the place either in his thoughts or aloud.

How can they have that much control?

How can I have so little?

Anger awoke a restless violence within Saxxon. The bike sped up, racing to the unwanted destination. Soon he would be before them once again.

The vibrations pulsed through his body, reminding him of the wild ride he'd shared with Kelly. He could feel her phantom touch as she gripped his sides. Her breasts pressed against his back.

She was everything. His body ached for her touch, just as his mind and heart did. Kelly had shown him how to claim life, and now all he wanted was to claim a life with her. But that would never be.

Kelly hated him, and he deserved it.

His weakness created the situation, and his desire for freedom was the reason Caspian and Dr. Jon held Patrick and the other kids. It was his responsibility to get them free.

He needed a plan.

Or perhaps a prayer. Now that he was free of the Silvertide, he could think clearly and was stronger than ever before, but would it be enough? *Probably not.* He had a single knife for a weapon and was about to face mass murders who knew his every weakness.

He had the wolf within, but he didn't yet know how that would help. He could feel the magic like a quiet pulse. *Lot of good that will do.* He

didn't know how to do much with those powers. Sure, he could turn lights on and off and move small objects, but that was all.

He had no chance. He would fail.

Kelly would get so pissed at that attitude. He'd give about anything to hear her chastise him right now. She had stayed positive and helped with so much in the past three days.

Had it only been three days? Really it was more like two.

He wanted to turn around and go back to her. The desperate need to drag her into his arms and hold her tight overwhelmed him. He felt stronger with her, because of her. She accepted him and his problems and still saw him as a good man, worthy of her love.

She is my mate.

Kelly, sweet, warm, loving Kelly. How did he ever deserve her love?

He hadn't. He had failed her. Her son was in danger because of him and his past, but he would get Patrick free. Somehow, he would make this right.

* * * * *

Angel led them past the open office to the locked room on the other side. Flipping up an almost hidden panel, Angel pressed her hand against an ID plate.

The door slid open, revealing G.I. Joe's play land. Weapons of all types and from every century filled the room's storage units. One area held knives and swords, another handguns and rifles. There were decorative displays and full-combat assault gear.

Angel pushed a cart through the room and gathered her choice weapons. She placed a grenade launcher onto the cart, as well as a box of artillery.

Rook had moved deeper into the room and came back carrying a shiny blue canister. "What is this?"

Angel sucked in a sharp breath. "Put that back, Rook. It's biological. Any of the ones from that black shelf could wipe out the east coast."

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Rook very gently placed the canister back onto the black shelf of doom. "Why do you have them then?"

This time, Angel didn't even look up at his question. "This is one of the most secure areas of the country. They are held here so that they can't be used or reproduced." She continued to sort through the weapons before her, loading most into large duffle bags piled onto the cart. They would need to be able to move them as easily as possible.

Her answer must have satisfied Rook because he left that section without further comment.

She pointed Kelly in the right direction and watched her look through the ammunition. She would find plenty for her own pistol and also could pick out a smaller pistol and holster meant to strap to her ankle. As well as a shotgun and plenty of spare rounds. Pretty much anything she felt comfortable using.

"Got everything?" Angel glanced around as she tried to think of anything else they might need.

"Not as much as you!" Kelly stared at the overflowing cart. All three shelves were fully loaded with weapons.

Rook walked out carrying three Kevlar vests, a short barreled shotgun, and pistols holstered on his hips like a sexy-as-hell gunslinger. "Here, we should use these." He passed around the vests and started to pull his own on.

Angel laid her vest down. "Um, Rook?" *Oh shit.* How could she explain it to him?

"Yeah? What is it now?" Rook's face drew tight while he shifted his weight.

"You don't need that," she whispered. Not only did he not need the vest, but it would actually interfere with his abilities once he began learning more about being a vampire.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "The vest? Like hell! I don't want to die."

Angel started fidgeting with the boxes of ammunition that were stacked on the cart. She really wished she didn't have to be blunt. His hand locked over hers with a cool, tingling grip. He held her still until she

looked up and met his questioning gaze. "Rook, you're dead. You can't die from a shot to the chest with any normal gun. And anything that can kill you won't be stopped with Kevlar."

"Oh. Are you sure?" He backed off again and stared thoughtfully at the vest.

She sighed and was glad to have her personal space back. "Of that, yeah. I know how to kill vampires."

"You know how to... Are you telling me you've hunted vampires? You've hunted people like me before?"

Oh sure, she knew how to hunt and kill vampires. So far, she had killed a couple. But the last one had almost killed her. The last one had broken her heart. Sure, she would tell Rook all about that. Like hell she would. "Let's go, and I'll explain on the way." Or at least explain some of it.

"I think this might be important, especially if I ever have you at my back. Tell me now."

"Fine. Some of the killers that I tracked were vampires. I killed them. That's how I know how hard it is for you to die. The last one damn near killed me more than once. I killed a couple from a distance, but he's the only one I ever got close to. So other than that one evil bastard, I know almost nothing about your kind."

"Fine. I will expect more details later, though."

Angel picked up a white sheet and threw it over the cart. Despite all the odd shaped stuff, the sheet fell smoothly, looking just like any non-explosive room service cart. Actually, the sheet didn't fall smoothly at all, but she was able to bend the image of what people would see to make it look like a typical harmless cart. "Let's go."

They left the suite and made their way to the back parking lot.

"Whatever Low Key is or isn't, the group definitely has privacy issues," Kelly said to Rook. "How are we going to get all this on the bikes? Or are we going to take my Jeep?"

Angel stopped them just inside the door. "I think your Jeep might still be recognized. Besides, we have something much better." She laughed. "We have the Low Key bulletproof Hummer, with all standard

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and luxury accessories. Not to mention quite a few extra modifications.”

Kelly asked, “What kind of modifications?”

“Lucky for Rook it has special windows that can block the sun’s damage. Wait here and I’ll pull the Hummer around to the door.” Angel turned and slipped out the door, leaving Kelly and Rook inside the hallway.

Kelly stared at her friend of many years. Everything was so different now. How should she treat him? “So vampires really will burst into flames in the sunlight? I wonder how much else is true.” Already he was much stronger, almost completely recovered from his earlier injuries, if she ignored that he had died from those injuries.

He grinned wryly. “Beats me. I wasn’t one until, what, about twenty minutes ago. Might be good to know, though.”

She caught his arm when he started to turn away from her. “Rook?”

His huge frame towered over her. “Yeah?”

She pulled him into a hug. He’d always been there for her and Patrick, and she knew that wouldn’t change. And this once, she wanted to be sure he knew she would be there for him. “I’m glad you’re back. Dead, alive, whatever.” Her arms tightened around him. His strength gave her hope. Maybe, just maybe they had a chance to save Saxxon and Patrick.

“I’m glad too, just don’t tell Angel yet. I don’t want to let her off the hook until I know a little more about her and what she made me.” There was a glint to his eye when he looked at Angel, which she’d never seen before. Somehow she didn’t think it had anything to do with his newly undead existence.

Chapter Fourteen

Saxxon stared at the square, one story building that was one of the secret laboratories for the group. His memory was spotty, yet perfect. As long as he didn't push for the information, it flowed easily to him at the exact moment when he needed it.

Long Wharf hadn't changed. Many people relaxed here on the wharf, and only a few of them truly connected with the others around them. And none of them noticed the institute's property as a threat. Happy or sad, busy or relaxing, they were oblivious to the laboratories and the evil they held. How could they not see the enemy hidden right among them?

It wasn't fair to accuse them. They expected others to be like themselves. The silent warehouse might look out of place but it wasn't to be questioned, so long as it didn't interfere with the flow of activities.

And Dr. Jon had trained his people all to fit in so well that no one would notice any difference or question any purpose.

He felt his own muscles straining to form the patterns that were accepted as normal. Here it was a relaxed, loose walk that showed an ease with surroundings. His breathing slowed, and he actually ached to crack his tense back and relax his straining body.

How could his very body be programmed out of his control?

No. His body was his own.

This time, he wasn't going to give up his soul to them. No matter what happened, he would keep the gift of self that Kelly believed in so

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strongly.

Saxxon walked toward the front entrance. Alone he had no hope of gaining entrance any other way. The side doors would be locked, and he couldn't break in. Only the front would be unlocked, and it would be well guarded.

The guards would include two primary and two secondary. The primary ones would stop him, the secondary would watch from beyond the next entrance. They would be the ones to carry serious assault weapons.

He stepped in front of the doorway, assuming the pose of a man expected. The first guard opened the door and motioned him inside, while his partner waited silently against the far wall of the entrance cell.

And make no mistake, it was a cell. The walls were covered with soothing cream paint and decorated with framed prints in cheerful colors. Under the paint and prints would be more than a foot of concrete and steel. The exterior doorway locked behind him. It could only be opened when the locks were buzzed open from the security room. The interior doorway also was locked. A palm print sensor identified visitors and admitted any who were recognized personnel.

To the best of Saxxon's knowledge, this security was unbreachable.

The first guard carried in a smaller version of the palm print sensor. "Sign in, Sergeant Samuel." The words were said with admiration and respect.

Saxxon raised one brow in question. Why would they want a sensor reading other than the doorway one?

The guard frowned. "Sir, we were informed that your files may have been damaged. You will need to be rescanned before entrance."

The irony of this young guard idolizing him because he was a murderer crawled over him. The boy, barely out of his teens, reminded Saxxon of Hitler's Youth Supporters. They were filled with awe over the strength and had lost sight of compassion. Such one sided movements never ended well.

The guard motioned once again with the sensor and shifted his feet. Nervous or impatient?

He made him wait another minute while considering what he should expect next.

The guard's gaze darted to the doorway as he shifted his weight again. Definitely nerves.

Inside the second door would be more guards. They might search him. They would have called for support by now. Those called would be from his unit, probably carrying silver weapons and possibly liquid Silvertide.

"Sergeant Samuel? Sir?"

Saxxon returned his focus to the young guard.

"Will you agree to the scan?" The boy's other hand rested on the butt of his pistol.

"Yeah." No point in waiting any longer. He placed his palm flat over the sensor for a complete hand scan.

"Thank you, Sergeant Samuel."

"My name's Saxxon," he said quietly, more to himself than the guard who didn't have enough clearance to know him as anything other than Sergeant Samuel.

"Sir?"

"Never mind." Saxxon forced his legs to carry him to the second doorway. Like moving through seawater, his motion was slowed and drawn out. He pressed his palm against the sensor plate and waited for the subtle vibration that signaled acceptance.

Acceptance here, when the only true acceptance he'd ever felt was in Kelly's arms. *Kelly*. For her, he would walk into this lion's den. For her, he would find the courage to fight back. For her.

The vibration never came, but the door slid open.

* * * * *

Kelly smiled at Rook. She understood his need to keep Angel off balance. "Sounds like a good plan."

Angel pulled the Hummer up to within a few feet of the door. Rook pulled the trench coat over his head and rushed to climb inside. He let out a yelp when the fading evening sunlight hit his hand. He leaped

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inside with unexpected speed, leaving the loading of the cart to Angel and Kelly.

Before even leaving the parking lot, three motorcycles roared in behind the Hummer.

"Friends of yours?"

"Yeah, the one in blue is Rolf. The two in black are his friends Justin and Alex."

The bikes darted in and around them and other traffic, daring and reckless. "They're pretty fearless."

"Stupid," Angel growled.

"I notice your brother drives more carefully than the others do," Kelly commented. "I thought he was the youngest of them."

"That's only because I'm here. He knows I won't put up with that nonsense for long. He's only fifteen and he can be bike-less very quick. I don't have as much say over what the other boys drive."

Kelly watched as the two boys in black weaved back and forth around the car behind the Hummer. "Well, really, what can you do about it?"

"Plenty as soon as the car that's back there turns off. Wait and see."

Sure enough, the Buick behind them that the boys were irritating took the next turn. As soon as their entertainment left, the two in black began their antics with the Hummer.

"They are even dumber than I thought. Geez, when will they buy a clue?" Just as one of them whipped his bike up beside the Hummer, Angel cut the wheel hard into him. "Take that! You obnoxious little shit."

The bike bounced off the side of the Hummer and spun out into the grassy median.

* * * * *

The door opened, and Caspian stood waiting.

Part of Saxxon wanted to grab his brother and share all the love that he still felt for him. Admittedly it was a very small part. The rest wanted to attack Cas and tear him into very small pieces.

Trapped between the love and hate, Saxxon stood frozen, unable to

act on either desire.

"Welcome home, Samuel." Cas stepped back, allowing room for them to both stand in the inner chamber.

"My name is Saxxon. This is no home of mine, and I damn sure don't want to be welcomed."

The fake smile faded from Caspian's face. "Then what do you want?"

The question seemed out of place. "You know what I want. I want the children released as was promised in exchange for my return."

"I don't believe that will be possible." Cas said in a neutral voice as if the fate of ten children didn't matter at all.

"They are of no value. Why hold them?"

Cas continued in that same quiet tone. "They must hold some value if you came back to the APM to see them released."

"They are innocent," he growled.

"So were we once."

Saxxon couldn't listen to Caspian's lies. Cas had never been innocent. "Some of us perhaps. Others simply sold out to save themselves."

"Things are not always as they appear." Something about Caspian's responses wasn't right. He was almost always calm, but this was different, almost resignation.

It didn't make sense and had to be a trick. "I watched you with my own eyes. You couldn't face dying like Kali did. You turned on your own clan, or at least on what was left of it."

"What do you know of clan? We were all too young and had no elders left to save us or even to teach us. I was the eldest. I did what I had to."

"To save yourself." A look of pain crossed his brother's face. Did Caspian actually feel guilty for his choices? "Why did you do it, Cas? Why?"

"How did you get free of the Silvertide?"

The change in questions caught Saxxon by surprise. "How did Dain?"

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"Daniel had come close to escape many times. You never even tried." Caspian's words sounded like an accusation.

He chose to instead consider them a challenge. Maybe he hadn't tried to escape in the past, but never again would he settle for captivity. "Dain is free now, and I will be again."

"How do you know we haven't recaptured Daniel?"

Could they have caught him already? Saxxon felt for the link that bound him to Dain and found it was stretched and almost nonexistent. Caspian lied. His brother was out there somewhere, alive and free from the institute and the cruelty of Dr. Jon. "Dain is still free."

"Perhaps he is, but you aren't."

Chapter Fifteen

Kelly stared at Angel in horror. "Good lord! You could have killed the boy!"

"Nah, he's fine. Look and see." Angel laughed.

Kelly looked back and watched the biker standing up and dusting off his legs. "What about his bike?"

"It's fine," Angel said. "Maybe next time the little snot will show more sense."

"You're not worried that he would be killed?" To Kelly, every life felt entirely too fragile right now. Even as they sped to the dock, Saxxon, Patrick or any one of the other children might be suffering or about to die. "Even sturdy young men like that one can be hurt, you know."

"Kelly, you don't understand how the young Valàfrn are. They are reckless and often don't bother to think before they act. It takes painful lessons for them to finally get the idea that, despite their magic, they are still part of this world and responsible for their actions."

"Learning a lesson should never put them at risk of dying."

Angel finally stopped laughing. "I understand what you're saying, but think about how bad it would have been if their antics had hurt or killed some innocent human."

Rook spoke up in Angel's defense. "She has a point. Even those children are probably beyond the ability of the local police department."

"Really, Kelly, the only other option is to lock them away until they grow up some more."

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"Just how old is he? He looked pretty grown up."

"That was Justin. He's twenty, and yeah, he looks pretty mature for a human. But he's not human. Mentally, he's still a child."

"A twenty year old hunk with the mind of a child. Wonderful."

Angel grinned over at her. "He is pretty dishy, isn't he? Alex is just as gorgeous too. Those two are going to break hearts over the next couple hundred years."

"You mentioned that they don't settle until they're older. Why is that?" She was thinking about Saxxon. If they managed to get out of this... It was a big if. She'd like to think they had a chance at a relationship.

"Most seem to mature enough and be ready for bonding at around two or three hundred. Some wait even longer. Justin and Alex's father was over seven hundred before he settled into a mating bond."

"Saxxon is young..." Her thoughts came out aloud.

Angel glanced at her before returning her focus to the road. "It's all very individual. He might be ready for that after all he's been through."

"I shouldn't worry about it until I know if we're even going all survive this night." Kelly sighed. "Besides, we're almost to Long Wharf."

* * * * *

Saxxon knew Caspian wasn't bluffing. The doors were locked behind him, and guards were all on alert by now. He was trapped inside again.

"I want the children freed." He tried again. It didn't matter that much if he was trapped as long as he could get Patrick and the others freed.

"You have little to bargain with here."

Damn Cas for being right. What could he offer? He owned nothing that they hadn't given him. He was already within their grasp, so offering himself would have no value.

"Perhaps this conversation would have gone better if you had something to offer in trade for those humans. You should have considered that when you had your target in sight. If you had succeeded in your mission, Dr. Jon might have offered you a favor as a reward. So unless

you have information that could be considered useful, there will be no deal.”

Information... He did have information, but should he betray the group who had helped him to save the children or not?

“You have nothing to offer that cannot be taken by force.”

Cas motioned to the guards that had moved closer, and they advanced, grabbing Saxxon by the arms.

He shook free of them and drew his knife for what little defense it offered.

“Why did you come back, Saxxon? Why?” Caspian sounded disappointed in him.

“For the children.” *For Kelly.*

“For nothing.” Cas pushed aside the closest guards and advanced on Saxxon himself.

No, it wasn’t for nothing. He came back for Kelly, to save her son, to make her happy. And yet again he was failing. The wave of sorrow hit him harder than any physical blow could. He staggered under it. He’d failed his mate. The pain burned like fire over his skin.

“Leave us!” Cas shouted to the guards and shoved him roughly inside a small room.

The distracting pain changed to rage at being pushed. The growl that surged up from within him bore no resemblance to a human sound. The wolf roared awake and demanded respect.

Caspian blocked the doorway. “I couldn’t let you change in front of them.”

Saxxon was beyond words. He snarled as he felt his form complete the change into full wolf.

This one caused his mate pain. This one would pay!

He attacked with no warning, without proper challenge or allowing his enemy to change form to meet him as an equal. He met the battle without honor. And he didn’t care about the lost honor, didn’t consider it at all. The only thing that mattered was the feel of his enemy under his jaws.

As Cas’s weight fell under his own, he felt the sting of the needle

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stabbing into his flank.

* * * * *

Angel pulled the Hummer onto High Street and followed it down to the circle at Long Wharf. The area wasn't exactly crowded, but it was far from empty.

"How are we going to do this without getting all these people killed?" Rook asked.

"I don't know. Wait, I think I see Max and Manny down at the far end." The two weirdos stood at the one side of a large parking lot next to the water where there were significantly less people about.

"They aren't very subtle, are they?" Kelly asked.

The boys had their bikes parked across from a large, squat building that looked out of place with all the old stately homes around it. The twins were obviously watching the building and made no effort to appear interested in anything else. "Nope. We're actually pretty lucky that they didn't fire bomb the place before we got here."

"What? Are they psycho or what?" Kelly stared at the two boys who were dressed in dark clothing and seemed totally at ease without parental supervision.

"No, they just have a very warped sense of humor." To say the least. These two loved to wreck havoc and mayhem wherever they went. She actually found them quite amusing and had asked for their help a couple of times. Unlike Justin and Alex, the twins were very careful about what they left devastated, and they could be counted on to only endanger those who needed to be endangered.

"Great." Rook grumbled from the back seat.

The Hummer moved in close to the boys and slightly behind their bikes. Angel cut the engine. "Rook, stay in here. The sun's almost down, and then you'll be fine." The three other bikes pulled in and parked with them. One had distinctive scratches on one side.

Angel hopped out, and Kelly followed on her heels. She probably wasn't quite comfortable jumping into a pack of werewolves, even if they were barely pups.

Justin stalked up to Angel. His face reddened. "What the hell was that for? Look what you did to my bike."

"Shut up, Justin." She tried to step past him, but he moved his muscular body to block her path.

"You can't just go doing shit like that. What if you'd killed me? What would you tell the Keeper? Huh, did you think of that?"

"I did think about what your mom would want. For her sake, I almost didn't run your ass off the road."

"But you did." Justin continued to block her path and glare at her as if she might find his size and attitude the least bit intimidating.

"Your father would understand and heartily approve." Angel tried once more to step around him.

"Athair would not want me turned into road kill!"

No, probably not. Athair was big on physical training through wolf on wolf combat. That was how he would have disciplined the wayward pup. Rather a shame she couldn't change into a wolf and kick his ass. "We'll settle this later."

Justin didn't budge. "We'll settle it now. I expect an apology."

Angel snorted. She didn't need to change forms to put him in his place. She slung a sharp left hook into Justin's stomach, leaving him bent over gasping for air. "It's settled."

She stepped away from him, and the others moved with her. No one offered Justin so much as a look of sympathy. It was the way of the clans and another sign of how their system of dominance allowed for clear control.

"So now what?" Kelly asked from her elbow.

Angel was very glad that Kelly hadn't commented on Justin's discipline. Maybe now she understood. "Now we figure out how to storm this bunker. What have you boys seen while waiting?"

They approached the twins who leaned against their bikes looking very much like a pair of hoodlums. Their clothing was denim and leather and dark in color. Both had shoulder length, curly brown hair. They were identical in nearly every way. One had an eyebrow ring, but as far as Angel knew, that was the only external difference.

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"Max, you start." Angel spoke to the one with the ring.

"We've been here a while and seen plenty," said Max.

"Not many going in." Manny shifted closer to his brother as if seeking his support while offering his input.

Max continued, "Or out either."

Angel sighed. This was going to be annoying. Max and Manny tended to talk in turns, using their bound minds as if they were actually one being instead of two. It was a skill that usually got on her nerves pretty quick.

"Did you see Saxxon go in yet?" Kelly asked.

Max looked puzzled. "Saxxon—"

Manny finished the question, "Who?"

Angel growled in annoyance, but described Saxxon to the odd twins. "Valàfrn man, blond, probably dressed in black. The man who was with Kelly at the Hyatt."

"Oh yeah," Manny offered.

"One blond guy—" Max elaborated.

"No, two blonds." Manny touched Max's arm and said quietly.

"Right, two blond wolves went in." Max corrected with a nod to Manny.

"We didn't know either of them," Manny said as if it was their fault.

"One in a suit." Max started filling in details, but paused often to allow Manny to share what he knew. "The other in black. They were both at the hotel. The wolf in a suit was the one that Kelly stabbed." Max glanced past Angel to where Kelly stood listening. "Good move by the way."

"Did they see you?" Angel asked.

Kelly found the twins fascinating. As easily as she and Saxxon could mind speak, these two must practically share a brain. Their words bounced back and forth with an ease that said they were like two parts of one whole. She was sure if she closed her eyes that their words would flow smoothly and sound enough alike to seem like one voice.

"I don't think so," Max said, looking proud of their ability to blend

in. His seriousness just about had Kelly laughing. They had stuck out like sore thumbs down here. The two boys were lucky the police hadn't shown up thinking they were casing the place.

"One looked our way," Manny added.

"The one in black," Max said this almost as a question, but not quite. Manny must have been the one to see Saxxon looking.

"But he looked strange." Manny's brows pinched together as if trying to understand what had been wrong with what he'd seen.

"Like he wasn't really looking."

"Weird."

"Real weird."

"Saxxon..." Was he already under their drugs again? Kelly swallowed a sob. What if they had already killed Patrick? Once they had Saxxon, her son would be killed. They had no reason to let him live.

Angel must have picked up on her distress. "We'll get him out. Come on."

"Don't you..." Max said.

"Need some plan?" Manny finished the question.

"I kind of figured we would find a way into that place, find the kids, and get the heck out of Dodge."

"Cambridge," Manny said.

"We've been..." Max shifted to stand up straight. They were taller than Kelly had originally thought. Even at sixteen, they were near to six feet tall.

"Watching..." Manny said.

"For a while now." Max had puffed up a bit. Maybe he was bothered that Angel hadn't asked their opinion on plans.

Angel, though, was obviously sick of the double talk. She wasn't likely to put up with the boys getting bent out of shape and put him in his place, saying sharply, "All right, knock it off or one of you gets duct taped."

"Fine." They both said at the same time.

"Max, tell us what you saw," she asked a little more calmly.

Max looked to his brother and their eyes met. Manny gave him a

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single, barely perceptible nod before both boys turned back to Angel. "We got here about an hour ago. Manny saw a blond guy who looked out of place near the hotel. I followed when our two went down to the Marina to meet him. After we made sure they got back inside safely, we followed the blond wolf in a van with a bunch of humans. They led us here."

"So they followed Saxxon's brother." Angel caught Kelly's eye.

"The dude in a grey suit. He looked like a business man, but not, if you know what I mean." Max hesitated and looked to Manny once again. It was becoming obvious that despite only one speaking, both were definitely getting their say. "The guy looked like he was trying to fit in. We picked him out right away as a wolf, and since he was with the ones who shot at our two, we figured it might be worth checking out. We called Dad and asked if there was anyone in the area to match the description, and he said no. Everyone is too busy with—"

"Right," Angel cut in. "Go on."

"Oh, right. Guess that's not common knowledge."

"Max." Her voice dropped in warning.

"Okay. Well, we followed the guy here. We think he's been inside since then."

"What else have you seen? What people went in or came out?"

"The other blond, the one in black, went in about twenty minutes ago. Maybe a dozen humans went in before that. Some came out a few minutes before you got here."

"Have you seen anything else?" Angel asked.

"Not really. The building has no windows. There seems to be four doors. This one in front is the only one that doesn't seem to be locked from the inside. Those going in here were met by at least two armed security guards. Both had side arms and one with a MP5 with adapted laser sight," Max said approvingly.

Angel frowned. "Okay, so storming it will be noisy from the front."

"Noise might be good," Max said. Kelly had the feeling that he just liked the idea of making the noise, whether it would be helpful or not.

Kelly did not like the idea much. "Maybe, but not if we find the kids and need to get them out without being hurt." She stared the

building for a moment. "So what if we approach from more than one direction?"

Angel nodded. "Rolf and the twins could raise the alarm at the front while we enter from one side."

"Or better yet, Rook and the older boys take right flank and we go to the left." Kelly felt a surge of hope. They might actually have a chance at getting in, and once in, maybe they'd find Saxxon and the kids. Maybe they'd actually get everyone out.

"Sounds good, go tell Rook," Angel said.

"I heard." Rook stood almost directly behind Angel. "The sun's been down for a while."

"Gear up. Let's go," Angel called to the boys. She passed out the weapons and made sure everyone knew their jobs.

As they divided and moved off, Kelly felt bereft of the support the strange group had offered. Was that what it felt like to have a pack? No, they called it a clan. So far, clan felt pretty good.

She and Angel moved silently to the left side entrance. Once there, Angel passed the AK47 to Kelly and pulled an interesting device from one of her two small duffle bags. The series of shiny cylinders and intricate workings fit over the security locks of the steel door. After a quiet whirling noise, the door clicked open.

Angel repacked her duffle quickly and slid one bag to the side of the door. At Kelly's questioning look, she said, "If anything goes wrong, those items will be less likely to be claimed by the Nazi nuts. That one would gain them access to far too many places."

Well, that made sense. She just hoped they didn't need anything left behind. She handed back Angel's rifle and reached for the door. She slid it open and moved inside. Angel passed her the spray paint then boosted Kelly up to knock out the surveillance camera. Even though that pretty much announced their arrival, they repeated the action on the next two cameras as well. Might do them no good right now, but it might be the difference in whether they made it back out.

They continued on, checking each room in the first and second hallways. None were locked. All were empty of people. Most were even

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empty of furniture.

"Why didn't we think of radios?"

"Sure, now you mention it. We can't be far from the center now."

"The place feels dead." Since opening the door, she had the feeling that this building was nothing but a shell. Usually she had some sense of people within a building, but only emptiness rang here.

Angel turned another corner, nearly colliding into Rook.

"I don't know how they left without being seen, but they did.

There's no one here, but follow me. We did find something." His words shot ice down Kelly's spine. The "something" wasn't good.

She and Angel both followed Rook back down one hall and into a large room set up similar to an operating room. Stepping into the room, Kelly gagged on the overpowering stench of blood. Four stainless steel tables with thin padding each made the focal point within four areas. The first grouping of table and equipment was the source of the smell. Pools of blood lay dark and partly dried across part of the table and splattered over the equipment and floor. Whoever had lost this battle hadn't done so easily. Much of the expensive looking machinery was broken past identification.

"Oh no..." Kelly couldn't stop the gasp of pain as she caught the sense of who'd been tortured here.

"I'm sorry, Kelly."

Angel looked at him in confusion. "Sorry about what? What do your newfound abilities tell us?"

"The scent of blood belongs to Saxxon. It was him they bled out here."

Kelly sank to the floor next to a syringe with a broken needle. "I have to see." Sometimes items called to her, and she could use them to see events. Usually only a flash or two from the event. Only once before had she seen clearly, and that was when Patrick was kidnapped as a child. This time it wasn't Patrick calling to her, but Saxxon. Her fingers closed over the syringe.

"No Cas, don't do it"

A cold eyed blond stared down at him. Cas was a shell. He was not family.

Cas was the enemy.

Cas held the syringe.

"It is for the best." Cas twisted the cord over his arm, raising the vein and positioning the needle.

"Then you take the shit." Saxxon surged up against the restraints. His right arm tore free. The needle snapped with a ping.

Saxxon reached out and grabbed his brother by the throat, squeezing as he dragged him closer.

"I am through here, one way or another."

The other men struggled to free Cas and subdue Saxxon. One ripped Saxxon's hand from Cas's throat. Saxxon slugged him, dropping him to the floor where he remained unmoving. It took six of them several minutes before Saxxon was once again strapped down to the table.

Cas stood staring at Saxxon. "You'll be through when your superiors say so."

"I will die before I do any more of their killing. Like Dain, I have made my choice."

"Daniel still lives," Cas said coldly.

"Even before Dain regained his reason, he chose death over returning. You know this."

"Samuel, you have no choice here. You will do as you are directed."

"My name is Saxxon. I will never kill for them again."

"We'll see about that." One of the men grabbed Saxxon's arm and plunged another syringe needle deep before he could do more than twitch.

His scream burst from between clenched teeth. The jerk of his arm tore the needle through his flesh. Blood sprayed from the ruined arteries and veins.

"Damn, he'll bleed out all the Silvertide," one man said.

"No, don't stop the bleeding. The blood loss will weaken him," a second replied.

"Fine, but we'll have to dose him again."

"An overdose will lose you your best assassin." Cas's voice was as cold as his empty, unfeeling eyes.

"To underdose him will put us all at risk," the man replied while checking Saxxon restraints.

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"Perhaps a partial dose will work as you wish." Cas held out a syringe filled halfway with the silver liquid.

A new man stood at the edge of the room. He motioned Cas to come closer so that he wouldn't have to step through the blood. "Get him loaded and meet us at the estate."

"The mission proceeds?" Cas asked.

"Indeed, it proceeds as planned. All is in place for our success." The man looked over at the body of the man whom Saxxon had struck. "The termination will be completed tonight before we return to the ship. Bring the boy too. We can see if he or any of the other children are trainable. If not, they can be disposed of when we leave."

"We cannot leave evidence."

"Of course not. They can be dumped in the ocean. She often swallows evidence. Don't waste your time here. The others could have followed him."

Cas nodded to the man, then went back to lift Saxxon to the new stretcher and strap his unconscious body down.

"Once you have Samuel at the estate, you will search out this organization and learn all you can," he commanded to Cas.

"They are powerful and well hidden."

"So are we. You will determine if they are a threat to our plans, and if so, eliminate them."

"As you wish. If it is possible, it will be done."

Cas followed the others out, leaving the room empty. The bright glow of the overhead lights blinked out, leaving Kelly alone in the dark.

Chapter Sixteen

"Kelly, wake up!" the voice repeated. Some time after the annoying words, Kelly woke up to a hard slap across the face.

"Not so hard," Angel's voice chastised.

Rook carefully stroked her face. "Sorry. I didn't mean to hurt her."

"You just don't understand that you are stronger now than you were. You'll have to watch every move you make from now on."

"And whose fault is that?" Rook grumbled so low that Kelly was sure he meant it for his own ears only.

But Angel heard him. "Mine. Still mine," she growled. "I haven't felt guilty for about thirty seconds. Good thing you're here to remind me. Oh wait! You think it would be better if I'd let you die. Well, too damn bad. I'm through feeling guilty over saving your worthless ass."

Kelly's eyes shot open as the floor rocked under her. No, not the floor, the back seat in the Hummer. She inched her way upright with help from Rook's too strong arm. "Where are we? What happened?"

Then the images from the blood filled her with horror all over again. The agony of watching what had been done to Saxxon drew a cry from her. Saxxon was caught. Patrick was still missing. The killers were still at large.

Rook shook her shoulder. "Do you remember? Can you tell us?"

"Yeah." She shared every detail that she remembered from the vision.

"What does it all mean?" Angel asked.

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Rook answered for her. "It means we don't have much time to find them." Rook helped Kelly move to the front seat. "And we don't even have a place to start. What did he mean by your group being powerful and hidden? You want to tell us what Low Key is?"

"No." Angel glared over her shoulder at him.

"Don't you think that information might be important at this point?" Rook demanded.

"No, at this moment it's not all that important. I can't tell you. I won't tell you. No."

"Could they help us find Patrick?"

"All I will tell you is that I'll call in help only if I absolutely have to." The Hummer rocked as she took a sharp turn onto the road. "Low Key has bigger fish biting at their tail feathers right now."

"Bigger than Nazi psychopaths out to murder the First Lady?" Rook braced himself.

"Way bigger." Angel drove the Hummer recklessly through the thickening traffic. "Kelly, where are we going?"

"Do you know that there is a river that flows down to the docks?"

"Yeah. We're not far from there now."

"Along the river are expensive, ultra private estates. They didn't say 'house', but called it an estate. That sounds like the perfect hideout for a group wanting to make a fast escape by sea."

"Right. I heard a rumor that the Vice President had a retreat down here. Good thinking, Kelly." Rooks began rummaging through some of their supplies.

"Not a rumor, and very good thinking." Angel flipped open her phone and dialed a number, then handed the phone to Kelly so she could steer with both hands.

Kelly held the phone to her ear in time to hear the final ring, then a woman's cool, calm voice answer.

"Good evening. How can I help?"

"Um...hi, this is Kelly Greene, I'm calling for Angel while she's driving."

"Put it on speaker, Kelly," Angel said.

Kelly found the button.

"Hey, Kita? Is that you, fish breath?" Angel's way of addressing the professional voice who had answered was appalling. Kelly was about to point that out when the formerly professional voice answered.

"Hey, bat girl, how's it hanging?"

Angel let out a short, ironic laugh. "Hard and in knots. I need intel. Can you get it?"

"If I can't, it don't exist." Angel and this woman's byplay almost had Kelly smiling. Their rapport was fascinating and should have been reserved for more lighthearted times, and yet, the very oddness seemed to take some of the stress from what they were coping with.

"I figured. I need the address for the Bluebird's estate on the Chessy."

"Easy. I'm on it. What else ya need?"

"Anything that could help us storm an estate near that address and rescue a hot snack and a bunch of little bugs." Now Kelly was lost. Did Angel mean Saxxon was the hot snack? Were the kids little bugs? All this double talk was too much to follow.

"Aha, that does sound like fun. Wish I could come help." There was a note of longing in Kita's voice.

Angel sighed. "Would have been great. You still hopping? I was surprised to find you so easy. I thought you might be all wet."

"I would be. I just came up for some supplies."

"How is everyone?" Angel asked.

"Grant is being an ass, like he always does when he gets stressed."

Angel shrugged as if the movement could be seen through the phone. "Grant's stressed? Guess that explains why he jumped all over me then."

"Feel lucky that's all he did." Kita's voice hardened. "You jammed him in a bitchin' hard place and forced him to risk more than he ever should. You won't do it again."

"I'm sorry, Kita. I didn't know what else to do."

"I know that, child, and that's why...oh, never mind. Here's the address. 4720 Beech. I see Billy Goat is on the move. I take it that's you in

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the Hummer?"

"Yeah."

"Good, I'll send all the intel I get to the computer. You are only a few minutes from there. Do you have a plan?"

"I wouldn't exactly call our intentions a plan," Angel grouched.

"Then may I suggest that you check over the satellite photos and real estate blueprints. Looks like the estate just to the south of Bluebird has had a lot of action in the past week. It has a large yacht at a private dock and a huge wine cellar, which would be perfect for hostages."

Kelly picked up the sheets that were printing from the computer built into the dash. She shuffled to the plan labeled "bad guys here."

"Do you see what I mean?" Kita asked.

Kelly did see it. "Yeah, I see the cellar is marked as having locks and private climate controls. It looks almost as big as the house."

"Good, now check out the west side."

"Okay." Kelly didn't see anything odd on the blueprint, so she flipped through the photos. "Oh! I see what you mean. The west side has a stairwell hidden by the shrubbery."

"That should be your main entrance. Even if the cellar holds wine, you'll be at a good position to take the house," Kita recommended.

"4710." Rook pointed to the perfectly trimmed entrance that included a partially hidden guard gate. "That's our house. The next one is Bluebird's roost."

"Why don't you use his name?" Kelly asked Rook.

"Safer that way. Angel has good undercover skills. Never say the mark's name in case of surveillance."

"How do you know? When have you been undercover?" Why was he suddenly a super agent dude?

"Kelly, I love what you do to find missing kids, but you really don't know me very well. I worked with the NSA for several years before I was relocated to D.C."

"I'm sorry for biting your head off. I'm just worried."

"I know. I would appreciate it if you didn't mention biting anything for a while though. The word does something funny to my

mouth."

"Don't mention..." The word definitely had an effect. Rook had his mouth open, trying to see inside it with the rear view mirror. He now sported almost inch long, very sharp looking incisors. "Ah, Angel? Rook has, um, fangs."

"Oh shit," Angel yelped. "Damn it, I wasn't expecting fangs yet!"

"Did I hear correct?" the voice from the phone squeaked. "Does that mean the young man has sprouted fangs already?" She sounded excited about the development.

"Yeah," Angel groaned. She didn't seem to think it was such a wonderful thing.

"That's wonderful! For him to develop so quickly must mean that he'll be very powerful," Kita continued.

Angel snorted. "Can we focus on our current problem before moving on to the next one?"

"What else do you need?" Kita asked.

"How about a way into the estate that preferably doesn't include killing the guards."

"Shake the curls out and use your head. Just go through Bluebird's estate. That way you can be sure he's out of danger too," Kita said with a laugh. "If you are done bugging me, I must go save the world. Do your part and everything will work out."

"Since when do you spout Dàn's wisdom?"

"Since he has stopped spouting them. Go. Be good. Come by for dinner when the dust settles and bring that young man. I'd like to meet him." The phone clicked silent.

* * * * *

Saxxon heard the door close. No one else was in the room. He thought about opening his eyes, but the effort seemed too much.

The third dose of Silvertide should have killed him. Hell, the second one so soon might have. In fact, he wasn't sure how he'd survived or why was he alive.

Because they wanted him alive.

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He didn't even want that. He'd let Kelly down.

He thought about the door in his mind that connected him to her. He wanted to open the door and beg her to forgive him for his failure. Deep inside, he knew she would. Kelly would accept him and all his faults and failures and love him still. She was his mate.

Unlike himself, his mate was strong and filled with courage. Even now, he felt her presence in his mind like a gentle touch that comforted him and eased his pain.

His arms tightened as if to reach for her.

The straps cut into his arms. He was bound. Apparently they expected him to live.

But it was Kelly's strength that kept him alive. He was sure of it.

Did they know about her? Did they know about his mate?

Were they, even now, tracking her to use against him? To them, her only value would be to control him. If they held her, he would be helpless against their demands. He would kill anyone they demanded until he had a chance to kill them. His heart sped up at the thought of wrapping his hands around Dr. Jon's throat and squeezing the life from his calculating eyes.

A loud beep sounded to his right. It was the sound of their monitor. They would now realize he was awake. Soon they would come for him.

He had to be smarter this time. He couldn't fight them, especially now while recovering from the drugs and blood loss.

Smart was never really his best asset, but too much relied on what happened next. What was his strength?

Kelly.

He relaxed once more, picturing the door that opened into Kelly's mind. He reached for it, but hesitated. He needed her. He didn't want her in any more danger. Maybe together they could stop the APM.

His fingers closed over the warm knob and turned.

Chapter Seventeen

Kelly listened to them bicker while focusing on the picture of the grounds that she gripped.

"Young man... Does she mean me?" Rook asked.

"Yeah, which is ridiculous. Kita is younger than you are. I think Grant's maturity, what he has of it, has been wearing off on her."

"Wait, you said he was your grandfather about a hundred times removed?" Rook seemed to be doing the math.

"Yeah, he is. He's about six thousand years old, but she is about thirty-five or so."

"That is robbing the cradle." The words were muffled as Rook explored his new fangs. "So Angel, why did the fangs pop out now? Should I expect any other surprising changes?"

"I'm not sure. Are you feeling hungry yet? I think that might affect how the fangs develop."

"Hungry? Do you mean for a hamburger or for blood?"

"Either. I don't know how it works," Angel growled while staring hard into the mirror at Rook.

"Maybe a little," Rook answered.

"Well, don't bite anyone, no matter what happens tonight. Later we can go out so I can explain some of the rules. But I swear if you bite anyone, I will stake you out for a morning tan before you ever get a second chance." Angel paused a second, meeting his gaze. "Do you understand?"

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"Yes." Rook quit playing with his teeth and studied one of the surveillance photos that Kelly passed to him. "Will they retract after I eat...er, feed?"

"No. Now that you have fangs, you keep them. You'll learn ways to hide them so people won't get suspicious. Demons can retract their fangs, but vampires can't."

"So is Kita a demon like Grant?"

"Nope." She grinned. "Worse. She's a gypsy."

"Life was so much more simple when I was the weird one in the room." Kelly sighed and studied the hidden stairs. She could almost feel Saxxon looking over her shoulder, could almost feel his hand resting on her neck. The thought of him opening the connection once more encouraged her. She looked at the next photo and stared in surprise as she saw proof that they had the right place. The angle was from above, but the photo was of Saxxon's brother, Caspian. Suddenly the truth of their coming attack sunk in. They actually had a chance of saving Saxxon, Patrick and the other kids. "How will we get from one estate to the other?"

"That should be easy," Angel said. "The hard question is what we'll do with the boys to keep them from doing anything stupid."

Rook shook his head. "You are too hard on them. They listened to me well enough out at the warehouse."

"Then you get to watch them for this assignment too. I don't want them to put anyone at risk." She had circled the block and pulled off in a small parking lot. "Okay, we'll use pretty much the same plan as back at the warehouse. Rook, you and the boys will be in charge of distracting the Nazi pricks while Kelly and I go in through the basement."

"Sounds good to me," Rook agreed.

"Make sure you send at least one boy to the gate, preferably two. The yacht as well. We don't want any of the critters escaping by sea. Max and Manny would be best for that. They know how to sail just about any ship, if it comes to that."

"No way." Rook stopped her. "If I take the boys, that's only six of us to do all that. It won't work."

"There is a box of Plastique in the back. Send Alex in with that. He can set plenty of extra distractions. And he has a good eye for that kind of thing. Just be sure to draw them away from that back door. And don't blow us up either." Angel added. "Please, watch over the boys. I really wouldn't want to have to explain to their parents if they were killed."

"But you were willing to hit them with the Hummer?" Kelly asked.

"I knew that wouldn't kill them. Being blown up or shot badly enough will. If anything happens, call me." She tapped the side of her head. "I will hear you."

Rook nodded. "Okay. I'll watch out for them. Let me out here. I'll ride in with the boys."

"Use the extra duffle to carry the explosives, and take anything else you think you might need." She waited while Rook picked through the weapons and gathered what he wanted.

"Got it." Rook stepped lightly to the ground. "Be careful. Both of you." The door slammed shut.

"Do we need to coordinate the timing?" Kelly asked.

"No. If we go now, we should be in position in plenty of time for the first explosions." She pulled out and drove directly to the estate belonging to the Vice President.

"How are we going to get in?" Kelly asked as they approached the barred gate of the lavish estate. "Never mind." If Angel could boss Mr. Bluebird around, then surely she could get in for a visit.

At the gate, Angel flashed a badge of some kind to the guard, and he immediately opened the gate for them.

"What kind of badge is that?" It sure didn't look like it came out of a cereal box.

Angel looked smug. "Modified Secret Service."

"Modified how?"

"For the people who don't know about the existence of Low Key, it looks like a Top Security Secret Service ID Clearance. For those who do know us, it identifies me as outranking them."

Kelly was shocked. "How can Low Key get away with having so much power?"

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"Easy, we don't abuse it."

"We're about to bust in on the Vice President in his private home, and you can say that your power isn't abused?"

"Yes, I can. It's not like we're coming in to raid his fridge or make long distance calls."

Hard to argue with that, so Kelly didn't bother. They pulled up to the house and were met by two more security guards.

"Please tell the VP to meet us in his library. It is urgent." One of the guards ran off to do as she asked. The other helpfully held the door while Angel moved several bags of not so concealed weapons that he obviously recognized, but made no comment about.

Kelly followed Angel through the mansion, to the right, and into the spacious library. The Vice President stood waiting for them.

"Hello, Sir. Thank you for meeting us so suddenly."

He shook hands with Angel. "It's no problem, Ms. Powers, but I would appreciate knowing what's going on."

"Yes, Sir. I can sum it up quickly for you, and then I have to ask you to clear the premises." When he nodded, Angel continued. "We have reason to believe that a dangerous outside agency has set into motion plans to assassinate several political leaders, yourself included. They are about to attack here, pretty directly."

"Will you be evacuating with us?" he asked.

"No, we will be counter maneuvering in hopes of rescuing innocent parties that they currently are holding hostage."

"Sounds like the makings of a fine Bruce Willis movie. Is there any support that I can offer you to increase your chance of success?"

"Just see to your own safety, Sir," Angel said.

"Do you recommend a specific means of leaving?"

"Any will do. A quiet exit would be better for our plans."

"Then that is what we will do. Good luck, Ms. Powers."

"Thank you, Sir."

He slipped into the jacket that his assistant held for him. Then, he turned back to Angel with a thoughtful look. "How destructive do you expect this to be?"

"If you're lucky, you should have a home to come back to."

* * * * *

Saxxon relaxed. Kelly and her small army were on their way. He'd gathered the gist of their plans and figured that he could help from the inside if he could get free.

Having already tested the straps, he knew he couldn't break them, and Dr. Jon would leave him tied until he was sure he had regained his leash.

Poor Dain had once spent three months strapped to a similar table.

Kelly would need him. How could he help her to succeed?

Her only concern had been for him and Patrick. Perhaps he could find Patrick and be sure he and the other children were safe when the chaos began.

How? He would have to convince Dr. Jon that he was back in the fold, but damn it, how?

The door opened and in strolled Dr. Jon. His smile was cold and empty. "Hello, Samuel. It's good to see you awake."

Saxxon swallowed a biting retort. He needed this man to trust him, or at least to trust that he was controlled.

"How is it that you survived without Silvertide so long?"

An idea formed. "I don't know. All I remember is pain."

"When did you learn to lie? A woman helped you."

"A woman?" He needed to keep his true feelings hidden. "She wanted to use me, but it hurt too much to be without the drug." Before, Silvertide had always been his weakness, and he did feel a craving for the drug even now. Kelly's strength filled up the space that cried out for the drug, allowing him to see past the need.

"So you returned because of your addiction." His tone lacked conviction and somehow sounded hurt. Despite all the abuse he had forced on Saxxon over the years, he obviously thought he deserved loyalty and perhaps affection.

"And..." He drew out the word, tempting the man to believe there might be more behind his reasons, making him be the one to ask the

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questions.

"And what?"

He let his voice fill with uncertainty. "The group is all I know. I needed to come back."

"Fair enough, Samuel."

"I regained some of my memories. Please, Dr. Jon, I'd like to be called Saxxon. I want my own name, like Cas."

"Caspian earned his. Perhaps in time you may earn yours as well," Dr. Jon said calmly.

"How can I do that strapped down on this table?"

"I'm not yet ready to trust you. You went against us at the Marina, and you did attack Caspian at the warehouse."

"I'm sorry. The woman, she made me. I was burning with need for Silvertide. I couldn't think of anything else."

"Was that the only reason you came back?"

He's trying to trap you! "I... I promised the woman I would ask about the children. It was the only way she would give me the tablets."

"So you still had some of the Silvertide left?"

"She has them now."

"Why didn't you take them from her?"

Saxxon swallowed over his slip. Of course he would have the strength to simply take the drugs, and Dr. Jon would never understand his not doing so. "I didn't think to try."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I was hurt and confused. I thought she was helping me, but it didn't make sense. I didn't understand the rules." *Please let him remember my weaknesses.*

Dr. Jon's lips quirked up just slightly. It was the only sign of satisfaction that he ever gave. "Do you know why I am listening to your lies? No, don't argue the point. I'm listening because often parts of the truth slip through."

"Dr., I'm not lying. I came back on my own. You know that is true."

"Yes, but the why still doesn't add up."

"I've never tried to escape before. You're all I have for family."

Since his weakness hadn't been enough to sway Dr. Jon, Saxxon played up the family end of it. If Dr. Jon actually thought he deserved affection from him, then it might work. But if he was wrong... It was a gamble with long odds.

"So was it for the drugs or for family that you returned?"

"I only stayed with the woman long enough to heal. Dain had attacked, and I was badly injured."

"That may be true, but you knew we were searching for you. You could have revealed yourself and did not. You could have surrendered at several points during this pointless conflict."

"I'm very sorry, Dr. Jon. I should have done more. I want to do better. I will do better if it ever happens again."

"I believe you, son."

"Thank you, Sir."

"After your punishment, you will help Cas to move the children to the yacht."

"The yacht, Sir? Does that mean we are going home?" He added a note of longing to the word "home" in the hope it would gain him more freedoms after the punishment.

"Yes, Saxxon. As soon as the target is eliminated, we are going back to Brasilia. Now for your punishment. So serious a transgression requires the electric. Don't you think?"

"Yes, sir." Of all the variety of tortures that the good doctor had thought up, shock therapy was the most painful and debilitating. But, if he could get through it without getting too much damage, he might be in a good position to help rescue Patrick and the children.

If...

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Chapter Eighteen

Kelly waited impatiently at Angel's side. Too many guards roamed the property to make their entrance silent. They would advance only after the first charge exploded.

"What the hell is taking them so long?" Angel whispered.

"Have you seen Alex at all yet?"

"Yeah, I watched him rig two by the front doors." Kelly shifted to ease a cramp out of her calf. She didn't have any idea how Angel stayed so completely still when she seemed a ball of motion the rest of the time.

"So he's probably still setting up on the other side."

"Any contact with Patrick or Saxxon?"

"No, not really." She had reached for each so many times that the connections stayed open. Each touch to Patrick was a vast blackness that she still prayed was a drug induced sleep.

Saxxon's connection was entirely different, though. Ever since she felt his contact in the Hummer, she'd felt something there. He was inside the house. She was absolutely sure of it. Feather light brushes of his emotions came and went.

The worst had passed a few minutes ago. That had been the hardest to bear. More than ten minutes of unending agony. Even softened as it surely was through their weak connection, the pain had been like broken glass rubbed into her open nerves. She'd been grateful that Angel had been distracted with evacuating the VP at the time.

Currently she felt only his determination.

She reached deeper in hopes that she could talk to him over this distance. Deeper so she could be sure his determination wasn't drug induced, mission focused nonsense.

And there he was, filling her mind. *Saxxon?*

I'm here, Kelly. I'm okay. I'm almost to where Patrick is being held.

Oh, Saxxon. Be careful. We're right outside and just about to bust in.

"Kelly, get ready. Check your weapon."

She did as Angel directed, clicking the safeties off both her pistols.
Did you hear?

Yes. I am with the children.

In the basement?

Yes. His surprise and pride filled her. I've found Patrick. He is alive and doesn't seem hurt. Cas is waking him now.

Before she could reach for her waking son, the first explosion went off.

"Now, Kelly! Run for the stairwell."

Seconds into their sprint, the second and third explosion ruined the shrubbery line and part of an outer building. Bits of building flew their direction.

A bizarre war cry filled the air as five motorcycles roared onto the property, tearing up the grass.

The next blast knocked Kelly from her feet, and she watched as armed men poured from the house.

She jumped back up and started after Angel. Somehow, they both made it to the secret hiding shrubs without being blown up or shot to bits.

Kelly shoved through just as a burst of gunfire sounded almost on top of them.

"I got them! Get going Ang—." Alex's voice was cut off by another round of fire. *"Angel, I'm hit."*

The limbs of the tree shook once before Alex fell. Kelly leaped forward and tried to catch him, but instead was buried under the young man's weight. She rolled him off and gaped at the blood blooming across his chest.

"Oh shit." Angel dropped lightly beside Kelly and ripped open the boy's shirt. *"Hang in there, I got ya."*

"It looks bad." Worse than bad. Kelly didn't see how the boy could live with three bullets to the chest.

"Go. Get the kids. I'll take care of Alex."

Unbelievably, the boy opened one eye and said, *"She's my guardian angel."*

"Oh, shut up or I'll vamp you," Angel answered in a worried tone.

"Kelly, go."

Momma? Patrick's sleepy voice filled her mind and made her decision. He

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hadn't called her "Momma" for years.

I'm here, baby, and on my way to get you. She ran down the stairs to where Angel had opened the doorway. Flinging open the door, she rushed inside, heedless of the danger.

One man spun her direction, swinging his Uzi with a spray of bullets.

The moment drew out as she thought of the few times she'd been forced to shoot a suspect. Always the option of a nonfatal shot had been available. That was the reason that she spent significant time on the shooting range practicing. When given the choice, she would disarm instead of kill the shooter.

All her instincts whirled smoothly. She aimed and fired her .38 without a single thought about saving the man's life.

Kill or be killed.

His head jerked back with the impact to his face, and he fell dead. The Uzi stuttered to a stop two rounds later.

She'd killed.

Yet the death that she felt was partly her own. She nearly dropped the .38 in disgust. How easy it was to end a life. In but one second, the bullet had rendered a man's life over.

Her heart clenched with doubt.

"Hans?" Another man stepped into the room.

Through the blur of the tears streaming from her eyes, she raised the hated .38 and aimed it at the man's chest. "Run," she whispered desperately.

One glance at the body that must belong to Hans, and he ran.

Kelly, stand up. Patrick needs you, Saxxon's steadfast voice urged her on.

She wasn't even sure how she'd wound up on her knees. She stood and forced her baulking legs to carry her though the next doorway.

The door opened into a long hallway lined with five doors to either side and a set of stairs at the other end. She rushed through the rooms. She'd cleared four rooms when she heard a much beloved voice coming from the room at the base of the stairs.

"No!" Patrick screamed, "We won't go with you idiots! Leave us alone."

Before her son finished yelling, she was crashing through the partially open door. Three men and ten children turned her direction. The forth man faced away from the door as he backhanded Patrick, knocking him to the floor.

"Mom!" Pat cried.

The child-beating bastard swung her direction.

"I already killed Hans, and *he* hadn't hit my son." She moved so the doorway was free if he was willing to run.

Instead, he reached for his gun.

The .38 roared in her hands and echoed through the room. Her control might be slipping. Her anger was certainly flaring, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with her aim.

The man's gun fell useless to the floor. He wailed and ran from the room, gripping his ruined elbow. Although he'd live, he'd be lucky to ever again have use of the hand that had hit her son.

A second man ran from the room after the first, leaving only Saxxon and his brother, Caspian. The family resemblance was amazing. Oh, sure, Saxxon wasn't as tall and might be a hair leaner, but their coloration and facial features were nearly identical. Now that she could see Caspian straight on and how much he looked like Saxxon, she almost regretted stabbing him with Silvertide. Almost, but not quite.

Patrick jumped up and started running her way.

"I don't think so." Cas reached out and snagged Patrick as he crossed near him. He pulled him close, setting him between himself and the gun. "Let's see what your mother chooses to do now, shall we?"

This was the man, Valàfrn, asshole who had let his brother be tortured. And he had her son. Kelly's heart pounded with fear, but her mind stayed clear. She shifted her grip on the .38 and considered where to aim if she had to shoot. Caspian was a big man, and Patrick didn't protect much of his body. With Pat to the right, the best shot would be high and to the left, maybe a shoulder shot.

"Let him go, Caspian." Saxxon tried to draw his attention.

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"Why, Saxxon, should I do that?" His cutting voice was filled with loathing.

Saxxon seemed calm and in control. "Because if you don't, I'm going to rip you apart. Or maybe hold you down and let Kelly do it."

"Hmm...you spent how long with Kelly?" Patrick struggled, but Cas only tightened his grip while studying Saxxon in a peculiar way. He froze. "Is she your mate? How can that be? She's human."

"So was Aunt Silvia, or have you forgotten?" His body was still, his voice filled with patience as if he and Cas were discussing the weather.

"I had. So you managed to fool Dr. Jon. Amazing. You are much stronger now. Perhaps it would be a fair fight."

Saxxon scoffed. "It will only be fair until I get a chance to take you out."

His confidence surprised Kelly. Was it all bluff? Was he strong enough to fight Cas and survive? If she got a chance to shoot Cas, should she? As much as Saxxon hated his brother, he was still family to him. How would he feel about his death?

"This is true. You always did know how to fight dirty. Still, one on one, fair and even battle would be better. Will your mate stay out of the fight if you tell her to?"

"Yes," Saxxon said.

"No," Kelly answered.

Cas gave Kelly a dry look. "In that case, I'd better keep you busy while Saxxon and I discuss and settle matters between ourselves."

He shoved Patrick hard back toward the other children. Caspian's fingers shaped what looked like runes into the air as he chanted, "Kaylykkee Sarenececa Indikiro."

From nowhere appeared a collie-sized, blood red creature that spun around in circles several times before turning its spine covered head toward the children.

"What the hell is that?" Kelly screamed.

"Half right. Kaylee does come from Hell, but she doesn't like to be called a what," Cas snarled the words.

In the last forty-eight hours, Kelly had fought back against Nazi

psychos, fallen in love with a werewolf, and her best friend had been turned into a vampire. Maybe that was why seeing a nightmarish demon from hell pop in from nowhere didn't faze her all that much.

Okay, so it fazed her, but not enough to keep her from running to the rescue.

Kaylee ran at the kids who scattered, screaming in all directions. Kelly jumped in front of it, but was literally run over before she could fire.

It grabbed one of the girls, knocking her to the floor and pulling her blonde hair. The child howled in fear.

Behind her, she heard Saxxon growl and the thud of bodies crashing into furniture.

"Get off her!" Kelly yelled at the demon, which responded by growling her direction and tugging the girl's hair again.

The little blonde screamed and cried. She couldn't be more than seven or eight and was much smaller than the beast that sat on her chest.

"Enough's enough." Kelly did the best soccer kick she'd ever managed and knocked the monster off the terrified child.

Patrick helped drag the girl to her feet and pushed her toward the doorway where several of the others were heading.

Sweet little Kaylee snarled, raged, and jumped that direction as well.

Kelly blocked her path, firing the .38 at close range directly into the beast's chest.

It paused long enough to stare at the place where the bullet entered, which had already closed. More growls and what sounded remarkably like a burp then the critter was back in motion.

Okay, so shooting it didn't seem to have much effect. She fired again anyhow. She hollered over her shoulder at the fleeing children. "Patrick! Take them down the hall and outside through the back stairwell. Hide low in the shrubs until we get there."

"Okay, Mom. Shoot it again for me!" Then he was out the door and away from this part of the battle.

She just prayed she wasn't sending him into a worse one. Then again, exactly what was worse than a demon from hell?

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Kaylee jumped at her in time to catch another kick, which tumbled her back into the corner.

"Kaylee, go home little darling," she said as she aimed the gun once more. "I think I hear your momma calling." Please don't let her momma come here after her.

The demon spun in a tight circle and for a moment resembled a dog chasing its tail. Unfortunately, Kaylee seemed to keep her weapons attached to her flailing tail and was only circling to grab one. From tail to clawed hand to the floor right in front of Kelly, the spike quivered with the force of its impact.

"Oh shit." The profanity slipped out before she could swallow it back.

Kaylee gave her a lopsided gargoyle grin, and then mocked her with "Ay shyt." Or at least that was what the squeaky voice sounded like.

"Nice demon, good little demon..."

The snotty little beast began circling again.

Kelly raised the gun and fired just as Kaylee came to a stop with a new spike. Once again, Kaylee paused to watch the hole swallow the bullet and seal up, without even bleeding, if such a beast could bleed.

"Fynn, aye?"

"Whatever that means." Kelly ducked as the spike flew at her head, barely missed her, and embedded in the wall.

"No, fynn. No, definitely no fynn." She pulled up the gun once more, but instead of firing, the chamber shifted with a hollow click.

Empty.

She bent to grab her spare and was knocked flat by Kaylee's powerful little body. The demon grabbed the .38 in both hands, pulling it free and biting down on the barrel with a crunch.

Evidently, metal was considered high gourmet by small, red, demon monstrosities. Kaylee devoured the pistol in fairly neat bites and uttered satisfied growling sounds during the process.

"Taky," she said as she reached for another spike.

Struggling for all she was worth made no difference at all to the demon. Kelly pushed at her chest and twisted in all directions, but still

was pinned securely to the floor.

Out of nowhere, a table leg landed with a thunk, hitting the demon's head. Kelly glanced the direction it came from and saw Saxxon briefly on top of Cas. But dividing Saxxon's attention didn't help him any. Cas threw him sideways. Even from his disadvantaged position, Saxxon hurled another table leg her direction, this time missing his mark.

Kaylee held the first one with interest. She swung it this way and that as if testing the weight of a sword. Then playtime seemed to be over. The demon spun the makeshift club above her head and slammed it down, connecting with the floor about two inches from Kelly's right ear. She raised it for another twirl.

"No, no, no, no..." Kelly watched as the club descended...

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Chapter Nineteen

Saxxon reached for another piece of the broken table, just as Kelly let out a scream. *No!* He watched in helpless horror as the demon swung the table leg down toward Kelly's head. Kelly dodged the blow at the last moment.

"You have concerns of your own. Let her fight her own battles," Caspian growled down into his face. "Tell me, what would you do to save her?"

There was nothing he wouldn't do. She was everything to him. In a little more than two days, she had given him back his soul. "I would die for her." Saxxon swung the broken piece of table with all his strength toward Cas's throat.

"Is that all?" Cas laughed as he knocked the makeshift knife aside. Then he blocked a punch and caught Saxxon's arms, pinning him down.

"I will kill you to protect her."

"Do you think you could kill me? Do you think you can protect her? Even now she fights for her life because of you. You know this. I feel all that you feel. All of the supposed love as well as the guilt and fear."

"Yes."

"Do you think you will kill me today? Well, I don't. You may be stronger and finally free of the institute, but I am still your elder. I am still your Alpha. I will have say over you and your mate."

The thought of Cas having any hold over Kelly shot through Saxxon, offering him the strength he needed even if it came from his fear.

"Never!" Saxxon arched under Cas, bucking his body free of the weight. A right hook knocked Cas off balance and put them back on even footing.

Cas wiped at the small bleeding cut at the corner of his mouth.

"When this is over, we shall see."

Just as Cas was about to pounce once more, Angel and Rook rushed through the door. Saxxon used the distraction to swing another punch, connecting with Caspian's jaw. Cas flew backward with a snarl, but he must have seen that the odds had changed. After a last look of challenge, he turned and ran out the door.

"What the hell is an Aykr demon doing here?"

Kelly looked up in time to see Angel lifting the demon off of her and cuddle the little beast like a favorite niece.

Saxxon stooped to help her stand, then kept his hand on her back, sending tingles down her spine.

"Where's Cas?" she asked him, glancing around the room to see it empty of evil brothers.

"He ran." His tone held both pleasure and disappointment. He had defeated his brother, but it had cost him dearly.

"He ran?" she asked dumbly when what she wanted to do was comfort him for his loss.

"What, you doubt me?" He smiled slightly as if he doubted himself. "Well, Rook did come in and show him some fang." He pulled her into a hug.

The kids all ran back into the room, followed by Rolf. Patrick ran into Kelly's arms, displacing Saxxon for the moment at least.

"Are either of you going to answer my question?" Angel asked with more than a little sarcasm.

"Huh?" Kelly couldn't remember the question. One look Angel's direction reminded her though. "Oh, little Kaylee there... Cas summoned her, I think. How come she's not trying to kill you?"

"Aykrn don't kill. They don't usually even have corporeal form in this realm."

"Um, okay. You did see her trying to pummel me, right?" She hadn't imagined that. The beast had attacked the little girl and then her.

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"She was playing. Weren't you, Kaylee? She's a dream demon. She doesn't kill and shouldn't even be here." Angel tickled the dream demon under its chin, making it purr-growl in pleasure.

"So how do we get rid of it?" If all the bad guys were gone, it seemed like the last detail to clean up before heading for the nearest safe bed to sleep.

"Don't be rude, you'll hurt her feelings."

Hurt the demon's feelings? Now that was rich! "I doubt it."

"Did you hear her full name? I can't send her back without it."

"Ask her."

"I don't speak Aykrn. Fine, I guess I'll have to call Sadrina to come get her."

Kelly flinched at the thought of whoever Angel might call. Anyone protective or parental to the demon wouldn't likely be happy with someone who'd shot it several times. "Sadrina is her mother? I think maybe we should be going while you do that."

"No, she's Grant's mother. Sadrina and her husband, Pahele, rule over the demons, including the Aykrn."

"Oh."

A pillar of smoke swirled into formation right in front of Angel. Out of it stepped a petite woman with dusky skin and long black hair. Although she appeared naked, clothing immediately formed over her perfect body. In the second it took for the smoke to clear, she was dressed in cream jeans and a brown T-shirt that read "Aykr, even when you don't" in red lettering.

"Kaylee, how did you get here, child?" the woman said in the lowest, sexiest voice Kelly had ever heard.

Sweet little misplaced, misunderstood Kaylee tore free of Angel's arms to spring into the woman's. And snuggle in like any happy kitten might.

"Kaylykkee, vykalyn tol Pehele."

Kaylee grumbled in what seemed to be a happy sound and popped out of the realm. Easy as that.

"Who summoned her?" Sadrina asked in the voice of silk that

surely overlaid nothing but angry steel.

"It was my brother who summoned her," Saxxon spoke up.

"If you speak to him, tell him to not do it again. The Aykrn haven't the form for this world. To be here is painful and makes them irritable."

Saxxon nodded. "I don't expect to see him, but I will tell him if the chance comes."

"Thank you." She turned to face Rook who was kneeling on one knee with head dropped in subservience. "And you, child, how has my blood settled?"

"Well, Mistress," he said without raising his head. She'd never seen Rook act so strangely. He wasn't exactly subservient to anyone at the precinct. He just seemed oblivious to rank most of the time.

Angel paled visibly. "You gave him your blood?"

The woman seemed a little annoyed with her actions being questioned. "There was no time for any other. Has he someone to teach him the ways?"

Angel shrugged. "Grant said it was my duty."

"Then, child, you will have to learn the ways of the vampire first, won't you? Even more so since you probably won't be strong enough to hunt him should the need arise."

This was the second reference to hunting Rook like an animal, and Kelly was beginning to wonder what they meant by it. Angel had mentioned hunting down a couple other vampires. Were they all considered dangerous and put on an execution list the moment they were vamped? If not, then what crimes warranted a vampire being killed?

Angel looked grim as she answered the woman. "I understand, Sadrina."

"Come see me when you have time. I will teach you myself. I trust you will make time very soon."

"Yes, of course I will."

With that the woman smiled fondly at Rook, then turned with a swirl concealed by lavender scented smoke and disappeared.

"Well, that was interesting," Kelly said.

Just then, Max and Manny burst in through the door. Max had a

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gash across his cheekbone and his sleeve was torn, and Manny cradled one arm that looked like it might be broken.

"We're real sorry, Angel. They got away," Max said. Despite the boys' battered appearance, they didn't look sorry at all. Their exhilarated expressions and flashing grins gave away just how much they had enjoyed the battle.

"We tried," Max added with a cut off giggle.

"That rocket launcher was great, by the way."

Max smacked Manny on the back. "But my aim was off." When his twin let out a moan at the rough handling, Max focused on the injured arm.

"The docks are gone," Manny said. His exposed arm was definitely broken, but even as they all watched in fascination, Max straightened it and, with a pale glow of power, healed it completely. "The boat got off with only a little damage, but we could go after them."

Max added, "Would be happy to. That would be fun."

"No, boys. You don't need to go after them. Though I appreciate the offer, I think we were lucky to get off as well as we did. You two did a great job driving them off."

"Can we keep the launcher?" they said in unison.

"Um...no. You'll have to ask for one from your parents."

"Hey Mom, can I have a rocket launcher?" Patrick asked.

"No, absolutely not," Kelly said with a smile. She was just glad to have Patrick safe and able to ask for things he knew he wouldn't get.

Patrick giggled. "But Mom..."

"No, Patrick. You cannot have a rocket launcher."

He laughed harder. "I just wanted to make you say it." He looked at Saxxon, who had stayed back a bit from mother and son. "So is Saxxon a good guy? I wasn't sure for a while."

"Yes. Saxxon is a good man."

"What about the other one? He was kind to me at first. He looks a lot like Saxxon."

"Cas is not on our side, Patrick," Saxxon said the words, but his voice was filled with pain at being divided from his brother.

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Her heart tightened for him and all he'd lost. At least now Saxxon could help to find Dain.

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Chapter Twenty

Kelly looked around at what an odd bunch they were. Yet they'd worked together pretty well and gotten through all the fighting relatively unscathed. Wait... "Angel, where are Alex and Justin?"

"Oh, they were waiting outside. Why?"

"Is Alex going to be okay?"

"Yeah, but he'll be sore for a while." She moved toward the door. "I guess I'd better go check on them. Their father will not take it too well if they aren't healed up proper."

The silence and lack of enemies left Kelly with a strange urge to scream into the quiet room. The boys must have felt a similar need because Max and Manny both started talking at once to Patrick just as some of the other children broke into quiet murmurs too.

Patrick pulled back from her hands slightly. "Mom, can I go with Max? He wants to show the other kids the motorbikes."

"I..." She wanted to tell him no. She needed to hold him just a little longer. But he needed the normal things to help get through this, and if hanging out with werewolf teenagers made it okay, then he should be able to. "I'll be right behind you." She smiled down at him, letting go enough that he tugged free and darted out the door with the others.

Saxxon stepped close once more. "Are you okay?" His hands drifted around her waist, and the gentle hug was almost tentative.

"I'm well enough. How are you?"

"Honestly? I don't know what to do with myself."

"What...?" Then she understood. He'd expected to either be caught or killed, and instead he was free. "What do you want to do?"

He stared down at her for a long moment. Then his fingers threaded through hers. "You'd better follow where the boys went. Can I walk with you?"

Why would he ask that? "Of course you can." Together they worked their way back out through the house. "Saxxon?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you want to do now that you're free from the APM?" Her breath caught as she waited for his answer. What if he didn't want to stay with her? What if, now that he didn't need her, he didn't...

Saxxon tugged her to a stop. His hands rose to her shoulders, and he faced her squarely.

Oh no! This is where he tells me he's going to move on...

"Kelly, look at me." He tipped her chin up to meet his gaze. "I'll only leave if you tell me to. I want to stay with my mate."

"Your mate...?"

"You." He pushed back a strand of her hair that had pulled free of her hair tie.

"Oh."

"Oh? I bare my soul and you say 'oh'?" He chuckled. "So do you want me to stay with you? I'm not much of a catch." His lips brushed lightly over hers. "My powers are stunted, my family is messed up, and my presence will almost certainly put you in danger."

"Well, in that case, how can a girl say no?" She reached up and claimed his lips when he still seemed unsure about her response. "Saxxon, I love you. The last two days have been both the best and the worst of my life, but now that we've gotten through them, I wouldn't go back for anything. Will you please stay with me? After you get back on your feet, you can decide what is best for you."

"Why would you say that? Once I am fully recovered, then I will want to be with you and will finally be able to perhaps be an equal to you in our relationship."

"I think you are my equal. I mean, you are a werewolf, after all."

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You have powers that I'll never even understand—"

"Actually," Angel cut in, "Kelly, you'll probably have all the powers that your mate does...eventually."

"What does she mean?" she asked Saxxon.

His expression was puzzled. "I don't know."

"Well, I can tell you a little bit now, and Athair can explain the rest in much more detail when he gets here to read the riot act to Alex and myself. Basically, a mating bond shares the magic between the two and makes both stronger. Exactly how that works will have to come from Athair."

"So you're saying that I'll be able to..." She swallowed over the sudden giggle. "You mean, I'll be a werewolf?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying." Angel pulled out her phone and flipped it open with a muttered, "Hello Romie."

Kelly's laughter burst out uncontrolled.

Saxxon looked at her with a worried stare. "What's wrong? Isn't this a good thing?" He stood with a stillness that stopped her laughter. "Kelly?" he asked uncertainly.

"Saxxon... It's not that. I just never expected to become even more unusual. Please don't be upset. I can handle it. I've been psychic all my life. This will just be different in a different way." She smiled up at him, waiting for the worry to clear from his blue eyes. One hand curled around his neck to stroke over the fine hairs at the back of his neck. The contact sizzled through her. *How I wish we were back at the hotel. What things I plan to do with you...*

Saxxon's eyes brightened. His gaze locked on hers and met her passion equally. *That does sound good.* He crushed her into an embrace and filled her mind with images of the two of them in the enormous tub.

She added bubbles and the scent of strawberries to the scene as she pressed up to meet his kiss.

I like candles... Their dream bath changed to include the flickering of candles over the highlights of her hair.

Kelly couldn't resist reaching up to kiss him. *My hair doesn't look like that.*

It does to me. I love your hair. I love you.

Oh, Saxxon, I love you too. How can it be like this? I barely know you.

He pulled her more firmly into his arms. You know me. Inside and out, I am there in your mind just as you are in mine. That is what terrifies me. You see all my flaws. How long can I rely on your strength? I am flawed and always will be.

Saxxon...

No, it is true and you know it. They have broken parts of me that may never heal. I...The best I can hope for is to live a life that doesn't put you in danger from myself or from others who may yet come after me. He laid a finger over her lips when she would have stopped him. I just want you to know that I understand how precious our time together is, and if it ever becomes too much, tell me to go and I will.

She bit down gently on his finger, then sucked it into her mouth and tickled the pad with her tongue. And finally she found a way to shut him up long enough to get a mental word in. While she had his attention, she continued the ministrations while having her say. *Saxxon, when I share a life with someone, it isn't just for the good times. If you choose to come home with me, I want you to trust that I can see all the problems that might come with you. I don't like them, but you are worth it, and together we can find ways to make it work.* She released his finger and leaned forward to kiss him once more. "Now, since I think everyone is about to leave us behind, why don't we claim one of those motorcycles before the boys decide to leave without us?

"You liked the bike, huh?"

"Oh yeah, I liked the bike."

Just then Angel butted in again. "Hey Saxxon, I just checked in with the big guy, and he says that there have been sightings of Dain. I guess he hightailed it out of the city and has been seen in West Virginia. No one has seen him in anything but wolf form, so we are guessing that he is having trouble recovering control of his magic."

Kelly hugged Saxxon. "That's great news, isn't it, Saxxon?"

Saxxon nodded, but he seemed hesitant too. "I want to go after him as soon as I can. If he can be saved, I have to try."

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"I understand. And I'm pretty good at finding people too. So as soon as we can get the kids all settled and make sure the bad guys aren't lurking, why don't we both go?"

"Kelly, Saxxon, I've been recalled." Angel said. "So unless you need help tracking him, I have to head back to headquarters. I was told that you could use the hotel for tonight if you need to. The boys will be sleeping over there until Athair and Romach get here to check them out tomorrow."

"What about you and Rook?" Kelly said.

"He wants to go back to his apartment, but he'll have to come with me, whether he wants to or not."

"So what will it be? Head out now for home, or stay over and meet a werewolf who isn't a child?" Kelly asked Saxxon.

"Unless you have a preference, I would rather stay. I have so much to learn, and before it's all over, I may be the last of the Lynx Clan."

"No, we'll save Dain, and I haven't completely given up hope on Caspian either."

"I..."

"No, hear me out. Cas could have killed us several times, and yet he didn't. I don't know what his plans were, but just consider that maybe he hasn't had any more choice than you've had."

"Kelly, I was there. You saw what happened through my memories. And that wasn't the worst or even close to it. Don't defend him."

"Okay, Saxxon, I won't." She kept the rest of her argument to herself, but still had her doubts. "Well then, we'll just focus on saving Dain."

"That is for tomorrow or the next day." Tonight I will focus on you and only you.

Hmm... Then it'll only be fair if I return the favor. And I will, once we get all the kids tucked in, since it looks like we got stuck with babysitting. "I don't think that will be too hard. The police will be here soon for the kidnapped children, and the older boys can watch over Patrick for at least part of tonight..."

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*Then tonight you are mine and all mine.
Tonight and every night.*

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Author Bio

L. Shannon came into existence in June of 2004. When Shannon isn't busy bothering her hubby, she shows her dogs, gardens, and watches over her four Butterfly Koi ponds. For her, writing started as a battle against insomnia and has steadily grown into a war against reality. Her friends kindly say that reality never stood a chance.

L. Shannon

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Chapter One

Warren, Pennsylvania August 26, 1980

If Life Bites, Bite Back

Hope

Obviously she, Hope Carter, was insane. She sighed and shifted her weight away from the rough brick wall. What else could one call a person hiding outside her place of work at three in the morning? The word *coward* might fit, too. She'd ducked out the door only minutes after calling her best friend to come pick her up. Steve, her pity chauffeur, would be here soon. Despite the brisk night, she was waiting outside. She was *not* going back into the veterinary clinic just to be shanghaied into another shift.

She limped to the corner of the building where a small bench sat hidden from the doorway. She sank to the bench and buttoned up her light jacket against the cool air.

Steve's station wagon pulled around and parked illegally right in front of the bench. The car's engine purred in the eerie quiet, until it too

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became silent.

"Hey, why are you lurking back here?" He swung from the car entirely too energetically for the time of night, and Hope felt even more worn out by comparison.

"Sandy wanted me to work another shift," she explained.

"But you've already worked a double. She's taking her title a little too seriously. That's crazy!" Steve picked up her small bag.

"I thought the same thing." His cologne swamped over her, making her sneeze. *Steve needed to learn the word moderation.* She sneezed again and fanned the air with her hand. "Joe never showed up, so they're short handed again."

"You could have told them no and waited inside." He frowned at her and shifted his weight from heel to toe, then back again.

"I almost agreed to do the shift. If it weren't for the weather being so crummy today, my legs might have held up for a while longer."

"No way. You shouldn't even have done the double and I'll tell Sandy exactly that."

"You don't have to do that, Steve. I'm fine, really. Let's just go." What was with him tonight? He was wired and almost dancing in place.

"Is Julie on tonight?"

"Yeah." So the receptionist was the cause of his excitement. He was more than a bit sweet on the new girl, and she wanted them to hit it off, but not while the romance kept her from reaching her much desired bed.

"Great! Go start the car. I'll be right back." He bolted for the front of the building.

"Steve—" Hope broke off. He paused in his fast escape, but she could see he was already mentally browsing through his stock pick-up lines. She could go with him and ask the girl for her phone number, but then she'd have to listen to Steve gripe the whole trip home. So instead, she frowned. "Please hurry. It's late."

"I know." He halted and glanced longingly at the clinic. "But this is my best chance to talk with her. She's mostly on nights and I really want to ask her out."

"Oh fine, just hurry. It's been a long day." *To say the least.*

"Thanks, Hope!" He tossed her the keys and jogged toward the front of the clinic. Soon he was out of sight. She juggled the keys and dropped them to the sidewalk.

Damn. She glared down at the keys, then over at the car, which surely glared back at her. She would be warmer in it than sitting outside in the cool night air, but she couldn't force her legs to carry her toward the evil beast. She'd rather wait until Steve returned before getting in for the drive home. She choked back a laugh. Nothing like more evidence to support her insanity plea. She relied almost completely on him to drive her places.

She slouched on the bench and focused on stretching her cramping legs. Fifteen years ago, a car accident had left her a mangled mess. Her body had never properly healed, and she hadn't yet recovered her trust in the everyday machine most people took for granted. As far as she was concerned, cars were her enemy and she only held a tentative treaty with the dangerous beasts.

She picked up the keys and debated the rudeness of shouting for Steve, when she saw movement in the alley across from the clinic. With only a glimpse, she had the impression of some large dark animal, a fast moving shadow, and a flash of dark fur.

Please, not tonight. All Hope wanted was her warm bed. Instead, she was about to chase off after a stray. The poor thing was probably someone's house pet that wandered off. She *had* to try to catch it. No animal should be left loose to starve, reproduce, or be hit by a car.

Hope placed her weight on her aching legs and limped slowly across the street toward the alley. Here, alone in the dark, she had no reason to camouflage her uneven steps. She slipped Steve's keys into her jacket pocket and pulled out a flimsy kennel lead designed to slip over the heads of small dogs. *Big as the critter seemed, he'd better be gentle.*

She peered into the alley, looking for the dog, or any sign of which way it went. Light from the full moon filtered through the clouds, doing little to cut the deep shadows caused by the crowding buildings.

There, about thirty feet away, another movement caught her eye. She made out several elusive shapes.

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Not a stray. A pack.

Four large dogs moved toward the other end of the alley. In this urban area, a pack of scavenging, possibly feral dogs would be a menace. A shiver slid down Hope's spine. The animals crept forward with a stealth that felt threatening and dangerous, as if they were hunting.

But hunting what?

She felt helpless. Tracking a pack was the responsibility of animal control. Already the dogs were far down the alley, nearly out of sight at the other end. With a shrug she turned to go back to the clinic. Her feet froze when she heard a short, cut-off scream. *What the hell?* She spun back, dropping the lead in shock at what she saw.

The dogs were gone, and in their place were men.

The scream had come from a terrified woman who continued whimpering as she was pinned against the wall by the biggest of the brutes.

Three others surrounded them.

Hope followed her instincts and yelled down the alley, "Hey, you! Stop!" She had to help the woman any way she could. *Oh, shit. Damn her misleading instincts!*

All eyes turned in her direction.

Hope's heart slammed painfully in her chest, while time seemed to hold the world within the moment.

The man holding the woman slammed her violently against the wall and dropped her on the ground in an unmoving heap, then stalked toward Hope. In the darkness of the alley, the shadows seemed to cling. They were too far away and too dark. The men's features were blurred beyond identification.

The man kept coming.

She stepped back. Fear shivered through her. *She wasn't getting out of this one.* Tonight, her legs barely managed a walk. She gasped as each jarring step drove shards of pain through her leg from knee to hip.

What would he do to her? Somehow she knew he wasn't simply planning to chase her off. She could almost feel his cruel intentions in the touch of his angry gaze. He'd hurt her, kill her, or worse.

Still forty or fifty feet from the clinic door, she halted. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Help!" Hope yelled. *No one will hear you.* The streets were empty, and the clinic was the only all-night business on the block. But she screamed again anyway. She also turned and quickened her awkward steps, praying to at least reach the road with its slightly better lighting.

She looked back. Two of the other men now flanked the first. The fourth stayed with the woman, kneeling beside her, doing who knew what.

Strange. They'd yet to make a single sound. There were no threatening words. No heavy breathing. No sound of footsteps. *Hell*, not even their damned clothing rubbed together. The only sounds she heard were her own pounding heart, gasping breath, and dragging footsteps.

She limped away from them, looking back several times, trying desperately to see the man's features so she could identify him if she did get away. Not if, *when* she got away.

Almost to the road! The leader's stalk turned into a languid jog. The other two men froze in place.

The rumble of an engine cut into the quiet. Headlights and relief flooded over Hope as the car drew closer. She stumbled onto the edge of the road, waving her hands and yelling to get the driver's attention. With his or her help she'd scare off the men, and then call the police and an ambulance. The woman on the ground needed medical attention.

Hope glanced back down the alley to see which way the men went so she could tell the police. But they hadn't left. They'd only sunk back into the shadows, into near invisibility.

The Buick slowed at her waving, and then went right by. The driver and his passenger stared at her out the window.

How could they not stop?

Shit. She'd have to take a rain check on salvation. Just her kind of luck. She'd have to save herself, so she'd better keep moving.

Only the leader continued toward her. The others were gone. No. They'd gone back to the woman. One threw her limp body over his shoulder. Was she unconscious, or dead?

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At the other side of the road, Hope wondered why the man only walked, as if to taunt her. As if he had no doubt about his ability to do whatever he wished to her or to anyone.

And, to be honest, she believed it, too. *It's all too creepy.* The confusing facts didn't add up. The men's intensity. Their lack of sound. The *damned* shadows that clung to them.

The man, not more than fifteen feet away now, walked directly at her, yet she still couldn't make out any facial details. He was tall and broad shouldered, but like a shadow, he lacked any details to identify. All the features the police would want. She couldn't tell what clothes he wore, his face, eye color, or even his hair color.

Even if she got away they'd never catch this man. Self disgust filled her at the thought of being a helpless victim all because she chased after a stupid homeless dog. She stumbled forward another step, then another. She had to make it to the clinic. She had to...

She didn't. The attacker's massive weight slammed into her back, knocking her from her feet. Hope grunted when she hit the pavement hard, face first. She let out a strangled cry as her attacker rolled her over, straddling her. His weight trapped her in place. Her scream was cut short as he slammed his fist into her face. Horrible pain shot through her head once, then again. Black peace clouded the darkness around her. Pain and a burning need for air finally cleared her vision and brought her back to her senses.

He lifted her easily onto his shoulder and started back toward the alley. Hope sucked in the cool night air and began to struggle and scream again. There was no way in hell she would go down without a fight. Frustrated by not being able to kick hard enough to hurt the bastard, she flung herself sideways and pounded his back with her fists, managing to throw him off balance.

He growled and threw her back to the pavement. This time when he fell on her, he followed his punch with a painful, fierce grip on her hair, pulling her head back.

His breath blew hot and foul into her face. "That's right. Fight me." The crazy psycho licked up across her cheek. He followed it with a biting

nip to her jaw. "Humans are the best prey for so many reasons," he growled in a dry harsh voice as he tore his hand across her chest. Her jacket and blouse ripped open easily and his nails clawed her flesh.

If the asshole wanted her to fight, she'd oblige him. She braced her arms and heaving her body upwards in a sharp arch. When his forearm brushed her face, she turned into it and bit him deeply, tasting the copper of his blood.

He yelped and pulled back, and she kicked him with her stronger leg, solidly connecting with his groin. Surely she caused him no lasting harm, but his pain was enough of a distraction to give her another chance to scream and crawl the few yards back onto the road.

The clinic door slammed open and Steve stepped into sight calling, "Hope? Are you out here?"

"Steve! Help me!" she cried. What a wonderful man. She'd never tease him for being late again. His timing was perfect.

The man's grabbing hands let go of her and his weight disappeared. She looked up, but her attacker was gone. Just gone. She lay on the edge of the street, alone.

No, not alone. Two eyes in the shadows glowed malevolent green, feral eyes promising all the agonies of hell. They were the eyes of her attacker, no matter how strange they seemed now. She'd remember them even if she never saw another feature of his face. Those hate-filled, glittering green eyes.

Steve reached her side, firing questions at her. "What happened? Did I hear you scream?" He squatted down and wrapped his arm around her. "Did you fall? Are you hurt?"

"Steve, look," she said, trying to draw his attention to the deep shadows of the alley.

He followed her gaze, but the man was no longer there. All Hope saw was movement and a quick glimpse of black fur and a bushy tail. If she didn't know better, she would have said it looked wolf-like. But must have been the stray dog.

Had the dog been with the man? Had there been more forming a pack? What had happened to the woman? What could she tell the police

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to help them catch this man?

Steve tried to help her stand, but her weak leg buckled. He more than half carried her back to the clinic. As they reached the dim light at the front of the building, Steve let out a gasp. "What the hell! Who did this to you? What happened?" His fingers brushed her tangled hair back from her battered face.

She knew she must be quite a sight. Suddenly, she was too tired to explain. Her whole body ached and her head throbbed.

"You're going to the hospital. No arguments."

Hope didn't argue. She barely nodded before slipping into the welcoming black of unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Despair crawled over Athair's skin and tore at his heart. He knew this fog-shrouded clearing and was sickened by the sight of the ravaged village before him. The acrid smell of their smoldering homes burned his senses. Dead sounds echoed through his soul, crying out the last emotions of many who had died. His family and friends had been killed here only hours before he returned. Sorrow rooted his feet to the ground, holding him in this moment, drawing out his pain.

On the verge of an anguished howl, Athair pulled himself sharply from the dream. The same dream, always the same. But it wasn't just a dream. This nightmare was a memory from the day the clan had been torn apart. He and his two brothers were the only adults of the clan left alive after that horrible day. Barely into maturity, he'd become the second eldest of what remained of the Eagle Clan.

They'd been unprepared for the Irish hunters. No one had expected them to find the clan's village despite their regular hunts. The humans never understood the truth, only believed what they saw in the few who were deranged and dangerous, or drunk on power. Their fear exaggerated the lie behind the legend of the werewolf. The common man saw wolves as evil and a man-wolf as an abomination that stole children and fed on human flesh. If they saw the more noble side of the canines of the world, maybe his clan and the rest of the Valàfrn could someday be accepted.

Athair dreamed of the day when he and his family could live without fear.

A discreet cough drew Athair's attention to the doorway, where a young man stood. Young was a relative term; the man was nearly three hundred years younger than Athair.

Rath tensed, his body motionless but rippling with discomfort. His golden eyes flicked towards the exit, showing his desire to be done and away. *What could be so important?*

Quietly, Athair asked "What is it, Rath?" He hid the strain the nightmare always brought and willed the tension from his own body. He extended his empathy. Yet from the sympathy Athair felt in Rath's emotions, his effort was wasted.

"Romie and Mo are trying to kill each other. Dàn said to come get you," Rath answered in Gaelic, their native language.

"What?" Athair shook his head, *He must still be asleep. Only in a nightmare would the light-hearted twins turn on each other.* "Where are they? What happened?"

"What do you think happened? Romach walked in on Molach and Allaidh," he said with a snort. "She is not always clear about when she has moved on to her next partner." Rath was the oldest of the children saved from the village massacre of Athair's dream. Nine children were found hiding in a cave with his brother, Sgrios' mate, Cairistione.

In the past two hundred years, Allaidh had shared her beautiful body with the young men of the clan. For a time, her actions helped to keep their wild libidos at least somewhat spent, but recently, the urge for long-term bonds overrode their good sense and caused bickering and bloodshed. *Why didn't they realize that Allaidh would not bond with any of them?*

"How serious do they fight?" Athair's words were muffled as he pulled on a lightly woven shirt and followed the younger man from his small lodge.

"Rather, Father. From what I saw, the fight began nearly an hour ago. Allaidh must have run before it started."

The children called him "Father" as a show of respect and appreciation for raising them as his own. Several of the younger ones

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didn't remember their parents and he tried to fill the role as best he could. Only his stories kept their lost families close, but that would never be enough. Valàfrn thrived within the clan, but suffered greatly without the strength of an extended family.

Growling and snarling pierced the quiet before they reached the front of the dugout lodge the twins shared. The sounds came from the back, so Athair and Rath jogged around the brush that covered one side of the roof. Athair spotted two gray wolves circling each other, each looking for an opening to attack. Their large bodies were both marked by small cuts and bites, but they were not yet badly injured.

Athair stepped between them before either used his appearance as a distraction to initiate another attack. "Romach and Molach! I am ashamed of you. Brothers should strengthen one another, not weaken each of you. Never should it come to this." Although he'd said their names in a low growl, the rest of Athair's words flowed in his usual quiet, firm voice. The two wolves stood still, their flanks heaving, panting and bleeding, but no longer snarling as the anger faded from their identical, flashing blue eyes. "Blood is too precious to ever fall to the ground between brothers. You will heal each other and come find me this evening to explain your actions."

He used his empathy to read them deeply. They were done with their fight. Both were feeling hurt, but not angry. The only reason their fight had continued so long was because neither of them had wanted to give in first.

Athair gave the brothers one last chastising frown, which encouraged them to drop their hostility and begin licking their wounds clean. A moment later he caught their remorseful emotions as Romie began licking a nasty cut on Molach's cheek. Satisfied the incident was under control, Athair considered their deeper underlying problem. The young men needed mates. At nearly four hundred years of age, they needed emotional attachment more than simple sexual release. Unfortunately, their sheltered, secluded lives didn't offer much choice. The time had come to consider other options.

"Rath, do you know where Sgrios is?" Athair asked.

"No, but Dàn does. He's down by the stream."

Of course Dàn would know. "I would like to thank him anyway."

Athair wondered if the other clans held to the old traditions. They'd lost so much with the deaths of their elders. *How were the other clans dealing with changing times?* Perhaps they would soon find out.

He and Rath walked down the slight hill toward Dàn's favorite spot by the stream. Athair worried about the strangest of his adopted sons. Lately, Dàn had pulled further away from their group, wanting to stay by himself most of the time. While raising the others had challenged Athair, Dàn had always been lost to his care. There was some element Athair could not provide, no matter how hard he tried.

"You should speak English now, Rath," Athair said, remembering Rath's use of Gaelic during their conversation.

"Why?" Rath shrugged in frustration. "We don't see other people often enough to bother. Why speak another language when we are among ourselves?" He said this in Gaelic, of course.

Calmly, because Athair partly agreed with the younger man, he said, "Because, it is safest to be prepared for the time when we must deal with humans." This was his usual answer to this question, but it might take on new meaning if his brothers agreed with the drastic measures he was about to suggest.

As expected, Rath had no verbal response for Athair's often repeated reply, other than a low grumble as he turned to leave. He continued with a few choice Gaelic phrases, descriptive enough to make Athair smile.

Such lack of respect. Still, it was only stress that made Rath speak so. Rath, like the others, needed a true mate with which to bond. Allaidh leaving him for the twins had brought the lack of a mate into focus. Her loss was even more difficult because it wasn't in their nature to give up possessions easily, even uncomfortable ones.

Athair walked down to the small woodland stream, where he found Dàn staring at the water as it bubbled peacefully past.

Dàn nodded in deference. His expression remained impassive when he looked up and greeted Athair, "Father."

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"Thank you, Dàn, for having Rath awaken me."

Dàn's gaze dropped back to the stream. Athair reached out with his empathy and tried to read Dàn's feelings. He looked so uncertain. Athair felt fear, and then nothing as the boy's defenses fell into place. Being able to read emotions and sometimes thoughts of the younger clan members made Athair's parenting somewhat easier. But some, like Dàn, had learned how to block being read. It had been quite some time since Dàn had allowed his emotions to be felt without immediately withdrawing behind his wall of protection.

"Dàn, do you know where I can find Sgrios?"

"He hunted to the west last week, but is with Acair now. You'll be able to find them both behind the meeting lodge cutting firewood." Dàn continued to stare at the stream. "He plans to leave soon. I'll have Lasair ask him to wait for you." Only Lasair dared to speak with Sgrios telepathically, so only she could convince him to wait.

"Thank you." Something was definitely bothering Dàn, but Athair knew better than to push him. If he needed to know, then Dàn would come to him with whatever problem had appeared in his visions.

He could have mentally contacted his twin brother, Acair, but he hesitated to do so. He wanted to offer his plan to both his brothers at once and Acair was so strong Athair would be unable to hold back information from him. If he connected with him, Acair immediately would know why he wanted to meet. This impromptu meeting could change everything for them. So much of the clan's future depended Acair's experienced leadership of and Sgrios' violent distrust.