



# VIVIEN DEAN

A SENTRY'S  
TOUCH

A Sentry's Touch  
by Vivien Dean

**Linden Bay Romance, LLC**

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## Chapter One

In her dreams, the night always bled.

It was in the unmoving air, black and thick and viscous as she tried to battle her way through scarred saplings clustered too close together to take proper root.

It was in the sky, in the pale stars that seemed to dance on a tapestry she both recognized and didn't, stars that looked like they were falling to earth when she knew they had to reside elsewhere in the universe.

It was in the earth, rivulets of moisture that broke free from the ground, that softened her way and made her stumble when she knew she had to run.

And it was in her flesh, in the scratches on her arms where thorns and branches tore at her fragile skin, in the blisters that ruined her feet for the long distance she needed to travel, in the marks on her hands that burned hotter with every pound of her heart.

Iris ran. There was no other choice, no other option to be had within the realm of her nightmares. Something was out there, something was watching, waiting, and her only choice was to run as far as she could, until her legs were rubber and her lungs ready to explode.

And always, *always*, she felt the eyes follow her path.

Once, she imagined that she had seen whoever it was that watched her flight. She'd fallen against a tree that shouldn't have been blue—though that was likely a trick of the moonlight—and she'd pushed back the hair that had tumbled

over her face, and in that moment, a split second of staring into darkness that wasn't expecting her to witness its secrets, she had seen a pair of emerald eyes, wide and unblinking. The man they belonged to was crouched deep in the foliage. Most of him was hidden or covered, but enough of the harsh lines of his face peeked through the growth to give her a glimpse, and a bare shoulder said that he was at least half-naked if not fully nude.

Iris took a step closer, but a gnarled root tripped her. By the time she looked up again, the man was gone.

But in her dreams, because the night always bled there, Iris battled to keep from adding to the eddies that wanted to drag her down. She knew it more surely than she knew her own name. She had to get away. To stay was to die.

She refused to yield to bleed, too. No more than her body already did.

\* \* \* \*

Her ringing telephone yanked her from sleep, shattering the imaginary in favor of the crystalline demands of real life. Iris reached for the receiver on her nightstand, blinking away the vestiges of her dream as easily as shedding a coat. She had never been one to need hours to wake up.

"Iris?" Ted Hummell's cigarette-soaked voice came over the line, clear and alert. "How does some midnight triage sound?"

She'd started pushing back the blankets as soon as she realized who was calling. "Give me ten," she said, biting back

the wince when she missed her slippers and hit the icy cold floor instead. "Do I need to bring anything?"

Ted sighed. "Just your pretty self and some prayers. Clayton's copter went down. Things don't look good for him or his passenger."

Her stomach plummeted at the mention of the gregarious pilot. He always arrived in Black Bend with surprises for everybody, mail and parcels and sometimes little goodies he swore up and down just happened to jump into his pocket. Whenever he had an overnight stay, he and Iris spent it together, good friends who knew the value of a warm body to share a bed when the need arose. She hoped his injuries weren't as bad as Ted claimed. He was what she'd always considered to be one of the last of a dying breed—a gentleman with a generous soul. The world needed people like Clayton. It needed a lot of them.

She dressed in record time, ignoring the slight plume of her breath as she layered on the clothes. She'd set the furnace too low again, but now wasn't the time to consider how cold her tiny house was going to be when she returned. Now was the time to hightail it out of there, hope her pick-up started on the first try, and get over to their small medical facility to see about taking care of Clayton.

The early winter night was crisp and clear, but the beauty of the Alaska skyline was lost on Iris as she backed her truck out of the driveway. Nobody was up at this time of night, not that Black Bend ever had more than a handful of cars on the roads even at its busiest hours, and it only took three minutes to get across town to the small building used as the local

medical facility. It wasn't a hospital, but it was the closest they had, especially since the nearest one was a thirty-minute helicopter ride away. The two-story renovated house was where she and Dr. Ted Hummell served the medical needs of everybody around, whether it was midwifery, treating Angus Jones' ongoing athlete's foot, or the occasional serious accident.

Like Clayton. And whatever unfortunate soul he had been bringing to Black Bend.

It wasn't until Iris was parking the truck that she realized Clayton must've crashed very close to landing. Otherwise, he would've been taken to the hospital in Livermore. Who had found him? And since when did he miss maintenance on his helicopter to risk such a dangerous accident?

The porch light was on as she stood outside the door and kicked the snow off her boots before entering. Dark droplets on the painted floorboards caught her eye, and Iris hesitated for a moment to stoop and look at them more closely. They were dark red and still wet. She didn't need to touch them to know they were blood. They only prompted her to rush inside even faster.

"Ted?" she called out.

She bypassed the main office and headed for the back room they used as a surgery, dropping her coat and scarf at the coat rack. Light streamed into the hallway, and the low murmur of voices told her Ted wasn't alone. She walked in to see him and Roland Works, the man who'd likely brought Clayton in, standing at the cupboards.



The rooms had once been a kitchen and dining room, but renovations had transformed them into a scrub room and makeshift surgery. Most of the time, it got used for births, but it was functional for more, if the case arose. A glass window separated the two rooms, but when she glanced over, she only saw one patient waiting for them.

"I thought you said it was Clayton and somebody else," she said.

Ted looked up. His rheumy eyes were tired, his face sagging even more than it usually did. Time had not been his friend, especially since he'd turned fifty. "There is somebody else. I had Roland put him in two since Clayton's injuries were more serious." He jerked a thumb toward the cupboard behind him. "I have to run home and get some supplies, but I'll be right back. It'll give you time to scrub up so you're ready when I get back."

"Okay." He and Roland were halfway out the door when she added, "Is it really that bad?"

Roland didn't stop but she heard him sigh. Ted's shoulders visibly slumped.

"Worse."

The house seemed cavernous after they'd gone, silence echoing louder than their voices had. Iris went immediately to the sink, turning on the water as hot as she could stand in order to wash up, but rather than look through the glass to see Clayton's broken body on the other side, she kept her gaze down. It meant watching her fingers twist and twine beneath the water. It meant seeing the scars that covered

her palms and the underside of her hands. It meant being grateful that she'd survived to have scars in the first place.

They told her that she must have grabbed something in her desperation to escape from the fire. Iris didn't know. All she had were the details her aunt had given her when she was little. She had been three, she and her parents had been asleep, and an electrical fault had started the fire that eventually burned their house down. Somehow, Iris got out. Her parents hadn't. She was left orphaned, with the burns on her hands as the only reminder of a life she didn't remember.

Doctors kept saying the burns would fade over time, but if anything, the spider webs of scars had spread, until her palms and fingers were entirely covered. They didn't hurt, though every once in a while her hands felt like they were on fire. Residual memories, she'd always rationalized, but it didn't mean she hated her hands any less. From the top, they looked normal. But as soon as she turned them over, anybody could see, anybody including callous children who mocked her mild deformity. Though Iris had grown accustomed to them over the years, the sense of being different lingered.

She pulled on a pair of rubber gloves, ignoring the slight itch in her palms left from scrubbing them. As soon as Ted returned, she'd be embroiled with treating Clayton. If she wanted to see what had happened to his passenger firsthand so that she didn't get shocked by it later, she needed to slip out now and do it.

The door to treatment room two was ajar, the light on. Iris slipped through the opening, explanations at the ready in

case the passenger was awake. There was no need. The man stretched out on the table was still unconscious.

He was taller than the table was long, his ankles resting on the edge. Blood soaked through his jeans, and one of his shoes was missing, his sock blood-soaked as well. As her gaze traveled up his body, Iris noted the lean muscles, the thin jacket that didn't hide the broad chest, the fresh blood slowly spreading from a gash in his biceps. Bruises mottled his strong neck, more along his jaw. But it was his face that made her eyes widen, and not because of any injury.

He was beautiful. It felt ridiculous putting such a word on a guy, but Iris didn't know how else to describe it. His face was slim, his nose long, and his lashes lush against his pale cheeks. High cheekbones suggested an Eastern European heritage, but the slight slant of his eyes could've been Asian. Mixed ethnicities, it had to be. His eyes were shut, so she couldn't tell the color, but his hair was a closely-cropped white-blond. The entire effect made him look like he'd been carved from marble.

She was skimming a hand over his brow before she thought not to. He didn't move, didn't react in any way, but the heat from his skin jumped to hers. She felt it even through the rubber glove, and the itch in her palm grew fierce.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

The front door slammed with Ted's return, and Iris jerked her hand back, as if she was a kid caught in the cookie jar. She rushed out of the treatment room without looking behind her, but if Ted noticed anything amiss, he didn't say a word.

His nose was chapped from the cold, his eyes watery, and she took the supplies he'd fetched without a word passing between them.

The mystery passenger had to remain a mystery a little bit longer. Right now, Clayton needed her full attention.

\* \* \* \*

Ten minutes into the operation, Iris knew everything was going to be all right. Even faced with the mangled mess that was Clayton's leg, she knew it. Ted was right about the extent of the injuries, but within the first minute of cleaning Clayton off, the bleeding slowed to nonexistence. She held his ankle as she cut away his pants, silently praying for him to fight, and though her gloved fingers grew hot and slick with his blood, Iris knew.

Ted knew, too. His slow exhalation as he began cleaning out the debris in Clayton's leg said it.

They worked in relative silence for the next hour, only his terse instructions breaking the quiet. Iris deliberately focused on the job and not on who she was working on. She didn't want to lift her gaze and see Clayton's pale face, or the tubes Ted had run down his throat. She didn't want to see how slack his full mouth was, or the scar at the corner of his eye, the one he'd gotten when he was thirteen and his older brother had dared him to take the snowmobile out in a storm and he'd crashed before reaching the fence. She needed to think of him as a patient and nothing more.

But it was hard. Every time she touched him, it was impossible not to let her fingers linger a second longer than was necessary.

*Be strong. You can fight this.*

Iris only left the surgery when Ted sent her to go check on their other patient. His injuries had been less severe than Clayton's, and each time she poked her head in, he remained unchanged, still breathing so deep and long that it didn't look like he was breathing at all. His bleeding had stopped as well, and when she brought the news back to Ted, he grunted in approval.

"Your prayers always do the best good," he said between sutures.

Iris didn't know about that. But she wasn't going to argue with anything that might help.

Finally, at nearly five in the morning, Ted yawned and stepped back from the table. "I think that's about all we can do for him right now. I'm going to put a pot of coffee on so that we can get to work on the other one now." As he peeled off his gloves, he nodded toward the drug cabinet. "Give Clayton another shot to carry him through. There's no saying how long it'll be before we get back to him."

The room was too quiet after he left, and Iris hummed under her breath to dispel the gloom. She counted that as the reason she didn't hear him right away. That, and the fact that she had her back to the table.

"I-risss..."

The sibilance of her name sent a chill through her bones, and she whipped her head around to see Clayton gazing in

her direction. In a flash, she was at his side, hand at his wrist checking his pulse.

Steady. Slow, but steady.

When he tried to say her name again, Iris shushed him with a swift frown. "You need to save your strength," she said. His soft brown eyes were fixed on her, keen as ever. If she didn't know what a mess his leg was, or how many stitches Ted had put into his gut, she might have believed everything was normal. "Are you in much pain?"

Clayton blinked, then blinked again, his eyes slightly unfocused as he pondered her question. "I feel ... some," he conceded.

Iris nodded. She thought it was probably an understatement. "I'm going to top you up so that you can get some more sleep. We need time to work on your friend."

Mention of the other man made Clayton stiffen, and he fought against her gentle hands to try and sit up. It took very little to subdue him, though, and when he settled back against the table, he looked even more exhausted.

"Have you talked to him?" he asked.

"No. He's been unconscious since Roland brought you two in. Who is he?"

"Talk to him. You'll see."

The cryptic answer made her frown. "Try to sleep," she said, reaching for the fresh syringe. "I'll be in to check on you as often as I can."

His fight was gone, and he merely blinked in agreement, his lashes fluttering shut as she pumped the drugs into his system. Iris cast him one last look before going out to the

scrub room, peeling off her gloves and tossing them into the trash.

The pungent scent of percolating coffee made her mouth water, and Iris rushed through cleaning up, eager to get her hands wrapped around one of Ted's oversized mugs. She needed the caffeine. It wasn't very often they had midnight emergencies that had her working until the dawn.

She was stopped short from heading for the kitchen by Ted's burly body blocking the hall. "What time did you last check on the passenger?" he barked.

"What?" Her heart pounded. Had they lost him already? "It was the last time you sent me out. About half an hour ago." She rushed for treatment room two. "He was stable then."

"Well, there's no telling what he is now."

Iris shoved the door open with the heel of her hand. "What are you...?" But the question died on her lips. Staring at the bed, she knew exactly what Ted had meant.

The mystery man was gone.

## Chapter Two

Iris stayed with Clayton while Ted scouted around the house for signs of their other patient after putting a call out to Roland. She thought it was obvious what had happened. The other man had woken up, found himself in a strange place that probably didn't look too much like a hospital to him, and took off, more frightened about the unknown than his injuries. It didn't make him safe necessarily, but it made logical sense. To her, at least. She kept it to herself, though, when Ted returned gruff and short-tempered with a numb nose and no evidence that their patient was anywhere to be found nearby.

He left again when Roland arrived, giving her strict instructions on what to do, should the mysterious man return. Personally, Iris thought the odds of that were slim to none. Dawn was still a few hours away, and in the Alaskan night near Black Bend, it was easy to get lost. She would bet her next paycheck that the man would be found frozen to death the next spring when everything thawed. It was a tragedy, but it was a way of life. If you weren't prepared to be smart in Alaska, you had no business being there.

Except he was obviously a friend of Clayton's. Iris hoped for his sake that she was wrong about the entire situation.

Though she was desperate for rest, Iris knew sleep wasn't an option. Clayton needed supervision until they could be sure that he was going to pull through, and they simply didn't have the equipment to monitor all his vitals and alert her



should anything be amiss. She downed two cups of coffee without tasting a drop, and then set about cleaning up the mess from the surgery, throwing away the unused plaster from setting his leg, the bloody sponges, his ruined clothing.

It was while she was taking the trash out to the proper containers that she saw the box next to the front door. In her rush, she hadn't even noticed when she'd arrived, but there it was, one of the cardboard sides bowing slightly from where snow had dampened the corrugation, filled with what looked to be junk. Hastily, Iris took care of the garbage and hurried back to inspect it more closely.

Her eyes widened. It wasn't junk. The leather wallet with the eagle burned into its flap was Clayton's. This had to be stuff that was salvaged from the helicopter accident.

Making a mental note to ask Roland and Ted what had exactly happened, Iris sat down on the floor and began looking through the box's contents. Maybe it would be possible to determine Clayton's passenger by something that had been found with them. She didn't bother going through his wallet; if it came down to something personal, she would ask him when he woke up. But one by one, she pulled things out of the box, setting each aside when it was deemed useless.

A first aid kit with its side smashed in. Most of the bandages were missing. She would remember to scold Clayton for being so ill-prepared—not that a few band-aids would have helped in this kind of crash.

A beat-up copy of *The Stand*. It was Clayton's favorite book. He'd read it before going to bed, and he'd read it

whenever he had to sit for any period of time. Iris knew for a fact he didn't go anywhere without it.

A sheaf of rental agreements and flight contracts, banded together with thick rubber bands and singed at the edges. Had there been a fire of some sort? Clayton hadn't had any burns, and Ted hadn't mentioned anything with the other patient. Maybe it had been a small fire, extinguished by the snow.

There were clothes she recognized as his, a pair of gloves with a hole in one of the fingers, a jacket she knew he preferred in the warmer weather. The only item that looked out of place was an odd leather strap that looked like a leash, but as far as Iris was aware, Clayton didn't have a dog. He complained that he was never in any one place long enough to have a pet or a girlfriend. That left other, less comforting possibilities, but she decided to ignore those for the moment. Maybe the leash belonged to the passenger. Maybe there had been a dog on board as well that had been killed in the crash.

At the bottom of the box was Clayton's well-worn atlas. He used it for everything, and the pages had coffee and ketchup stains to prove it. Iris had seen him on more than one morning thumbing through it as he plotted out his next course. She flipped it open, hoping that it might give a clue as to where he'd picked up his most recent contract, but nothing out of the ordinary jumped out at her. It could've been anywhere.

She sighed as she tossed the maps back into the box. It would just have to wait until Clayton woke up or Ted got back.

Iris was rising from where she'd been sitting on the floor when she saw it. It must have been stuck between pages of the atlas and jostled free when she'd thrown it back. Stooping, she picked it up, letting it dangle from her fingers as she held it up to the light.

It was a necklace. The gold chain was the finest spun she'd ever seen, so delicate that it could have been thread if she didn't look too closely. Even the dim light in the foyer caught small sparkles in the precious metal, and Iris realized it must have been one of those glints that had caught her eye. There was no clasp, but it was long enough to slip over her head if she wished to try, and a single teardrop sapphire hung from its fine filigree.

It was breathtaking in its simplicity. Like the beauty of a pearl created out of nothing. In that moment, Iris had the sudden irrational urge to own it.

Though the last thing she wanted was to return it to the helicopter salvage, Iris carefully placed it safely in the pocket of Clayton's coat. She hadn't found it there, but the thought of it getting damaged from being discarded haphazardly or shoved between the pages of an atlas made her sick. It was a piece of jewelry to be treasured, which raised the question ... why did Clayton have it?

She answered that one almost immediately.

It wasn't Clayton's. It was too pricey for a pilot to own. It was most likely the passenger's.

His bruised face rose before her mind's eye. Beautiful had been the word she'd used to describe him, too, and it seemed fitting that he would have such a perfect necklace. Perhaps he

was bringing it as a gift for someone, a lover or fiancée. Just because they'd crashed near Black Bend didn't mean this had been their final destination. If Clayton had had engine difficulties, he could have steered himself toward the nearest civilization in hopes of making a safe emergency landing.

Whatever the reason, finding the necklace made her fervently wish that Ted found some clue as to his whereabouts.

\* \* \* \*

It was nearly eleven o'clock by the time Ted and Roland returned, and Iris was dead on her feet. Clayton's vitals were stable, but he had yet to awaken, and she struggled to stay alert enough to be there in case anything went wrong. When she heard the front door open, she actually sighed in relief. It would be good to get a short reprieve.

"Any changes?"

The question came without preamble. That meant only one thing. Bad news.

"Still asleep, getting stronger." Her gaze flickered when Roland backed out of the room like a shadow retreating from the sun. "What about you? Did you find anything?"

Ted rolled his shoulders and grunted. "A whole mess of nothing. Whoever he was, he's gone. Let's hope he paid Clayton up front."

From what Clayton had said to her in the brief moments he'd been conscious, Iris was pretty sure that getting paid would be the least of his worries.

"Why don't you head on home and get a few hours of shuteye?" Ted was saying. "I'll call you if anything happens."

It sounded like heaven, but she frowned anyway. "You need some sleep, too. I can just take a catnap here. We'll just spell each other."

"We'll do no such thing. You said it yourself. He hasn't moved. What's the point of both of us getting shortshotted?" He made shooing motions with his hands. "Get out of here before I call Roland back to drag your ass home. I promise, you'll be the first one I bug if something goes wrong." Ted grinned. "Didn't I prove that last night by getting you out of bed in the first place?"

Though she shook her head, Iris matched his smile. "I'll be back at six regardless. And I'll bring some chili because I know you're going to forget to eat."

She left with his bluster at her back, gloved and coated before stepping a foot out the door. The midday sun was cold and bright, blinding where it glinted off the snow, and Iris fumbled with her sunglasses as she climbed into the truck. As she turned around in the street, her gaze automatically went to the trees behind the house. By the light of day, they appeared like they always did—serene and still, a toehold for time gone past. It was hard to consider that they could swallow a man so completely, or maybe all too easy. The wild, even as it was in Black Bend, didn't care too much for intruders.

She drove carefully, heedful of her less than alert state, and pulled into her driveway with eyelids and limbs that felt like they'd been sandbagged. It took several rounds with her

keys for the latch to finally yield, and she stumbled across the threshold, suddenly grateful that Ted was a fussbudget. Sleep was good. Sleeping in her own bed was better.

Iris left a trail of clothes between the front door and the bathroom, tossing her bra onto the back of the toilet last. The chill that had been in the air when Ted woke her was worse now, and her nipples pebbled into tight buds as she leaned over and turned on the tub's hot water. She wouldn't be cold for long. A scalding shower would wash away the past twelve hours. She'd clean up and crawl between the covers, and in a few hours, she'd return to the clinic to make sure Ted and Clayton were all right.

A sigh escaped her the second the hot water hit her skin. Tilting her head back, Iris let it pound against her throat and chest, closing her eyes to focus on the hard massage. The steam seeped into her pores, obliterating even more of her defenses, and she simply stood there for several minutes, letting it flow over her. This was what she'd needed. It would be easier to sleep without dreams now. They would be intolerable with her concern for Clayton—and secondhand, for his passenger—coloring them.

Her hands moved over her body in slow motion, washing away flecks of blood that had been missed in her post-op clean-up, drowning the scent of antiseptic in her favorite tangerine shower gel. The sponge dipped and rose over the curves of her body, too many for her satisfaction, but Iris had long ago given up putting too much stock in the fact that she was more Rubenesque than Twiggy. Clayton and the few partners she'd had over the years claimed to love the fact

that she had real breasts and an ass to hold onto. It could've been worse.

Shampooing was easier. She kept it short for a reason; when her dark blonde hair hit her shoulders, it started to curl. Since it was thick as well, Iris had learned long ago that keeping it cropped was the best way to control it.

She was rinsing her conditioner out when she heard the crash.

Her muscles jumped, her head whipping around to stare out through the translucent shower curtain. The water seemed thunderous now, roaring in her ears, and she edged down to the edge of the tub. The plastic was slick against her fingers where she pulled it back, but though she strained to listen for more, nothing came.

"Get a grip," she muttered to herself. Clearly, she was exhausted. She was hearing things where there were none now.

The second crash echoed just when she was letting go of the shower curtain.

Iris scrambled to turn off the water, uncaring of the conditioner still running down her body. Odds were the crash came from a raccoon or something getting into the kitchen—it had happened once or twice in the past when she'd been less than diligent with the door—but even that wouldn't be pleasant. Of course, the alternative was even worse. So, hungry raccoon. She was going to go with that.

She slipped her robe on, cinching it at the waist as she pressed her ear to the door. There weren't any more crashes, but the distinct sound of floorboards creaking made her heart

race. Any animal that could get into the house wouldn't be heavy enough to make that kind of noise. Not a raccoon. Not any kind of animal.

Well, it was definitely an animal. Just a man-shaped one.

Quickly, Iris grabbed her underwear and slipped them on under her robe, her lethargy gone in the face of this new crisis. Security wasn't a concern in Black Bend. There were fewer than five hundred residents within a ten-mile radius. Everybody knew everything about everybody else, from Roland's weakness for Ben Stiller comedies to Nancy Benson's, the local schoolteacher, psycho ex-husband that she left behind in Texas. Intruders weren't a threat, which meant whoever was in her house was a stranger.

She had to get out of the house, and her mind raced as she considered her options. The crashes sounded like they were coming from the back of the house, which was good. That meant the front was likely clear. If she could get her keys, she could make a run for the truck and get back to the clinic where they could call Sheriff Armstrong to come check it out.

Where had she left her keys?

Iris squeezed her eyes shut, trying to retrace her steps since getting home. She didn't remember. She'd been too tired. They were probably on the stand by the door, since she'd started taking off her clothes right away. It was her habit to leave them there, and if her body was on autopilot, she would have dropped them automatically.

But if she was wrong...



She wasn't going to be wrong. She didn't have time for it. The creaking was getting closer.

Taking a deep breath, Iris tightened her grip on the door knob. She turned it as quietly as she could, and the moment the latch was free, she yanked it open and bolted down the hall. She only made it three steps before powerful hands grasped her upper arms and jerked her to a halt.

Her head whipped back to meet the face of a monster.

Reptilian eyes glittered down at her. Instead of skin, her captor had the finest of scales, an iridescent black and green that shimmered as he moved. They were broken with a multitude of scars, and her heart stopped when the network of webbing over his face leapt in familiarity.

They looked like her hands. She'd stared at her burns for years; she knew them in her sleep. With the exception of being colored by his odd covering, these were exactly the same.

A scream tore from her throat as she began to struggle to get free. Iris lifted her hands and pressed them flat to his broad chest. Her palms immediately grew hot, but whether that was from her fear, or his body, or something else entirely, she had no idea.

"Let me go!" she shouted.

She stumbled backward when his hands abruptly released her. Iris gaped at him in shock, and though his features weren't human, her surprise was mirrored on his face as well, like he'd done something without expecting to.

*Don't stand here like an idiot. Run.*

Her little voice had a very good point. Though he blocked the way to the front door, Iris whirled around and raced for the kitchen. His heavy footsteps pounded after her, but all she concentrated on was running through the narrow galley and exiting the other end, darting through the living room to take the alternate path to the exit. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the broken hinges on the back door where the intruder had forced his way inside. The door looked like it had been torn off. That required a ton of brute strength.

She ran faster. She had no intention of finding out just how strong he was.

Her keys were exactly where she always left them, and Iris snatched them up, the cold metal digging into her palm as she yanked open the front door. Cold assaulted her, but she barely felt it as she ran outside, the bottoms of her feet immediately going numb from the frozen ground. All she needed to do was get in the truck. She'd be safe there. She could get away then.

*Thank god for remote locks.*

Iris pulled open the driver's side door at the same time she heard the creature crash outside. She looked up to see him racing toward her, sleek and deadly in the stark winter light. His mouth—or what she assumed was a mouth—was twisted into a snarl, but she only heard his hissing growls for a moment before slamming the door shut and locking the truck.

Without taking her eyes off him, Iris stabbed the key into the ignition, twisting it to send the engine roaring to life. She was about to throw the truck into reverse, when a shadow appeared over her low roof, swooping lower and lower to the

ground. Her eyes widened at the large white bird. She had no idea what kind it was, but it had a wing span of nearly five feet, and it loomed larger with every foot it came closer. It didn't take a genius to realize it was aiming straight for the monster rushing her truck. She froze in her seat as she anticipated the upcoming attack.

And then it changed.

Literally.

Seconds before its taloned feet skimmed the earth, the bird's wings bent downward, elongating and changing shape. By the time they made contact, they were legs, with paws, and the head and beak were gone, replaced by the sleek lines of a white panther. Its pace never faltered. It hit the ground running and immediately leapt onto the back of the reptilian monster intent on attacking Iris.

The two tumbled to the ground.

The bodies were of equal mass, but the momentum of the bird/cat creature gave it the advantage. It raked dangerous claws across the intruder that left deep gouges spurting blood onto the snow. The reptilian monster tried to twist away, but the cat had it pinned, hurting it further when he sank his powerful jaws into its scaled neck. It thrashed beneath him, and Iris held her breath as she waited for it to somehow toss off the animal attached to its back.

It never happened. Seconds passed, and with each one, her intruder's struggles grew less and less until it finally stopped moving at all. The white panther held on for nearly another minute, during which time all Iris heard was the purr of her idling truck while it waited for her to shift.

*Run.*

Even as the single word command filtered through her brain, even as she grabbed the gear stick and shoved it into reverse, Iris wondered who it was directed to. Her foot pushed the gas pedal hard enough to make the tires squeal, and the truck jerked as she leapt out of the driveway.

*Run.*

Iris slammed on the brakes as soon as she was on the road. Her neck snapped from the force, creating a fresh ache, but there wasn't time to consider her pains. There was just time to run.

Until she made the mistake of glancing back at her front yard.

Iris froze.

The large animal had lifted his head from its dead prey. To watch her.

Eyes the color of clear emerald turned in her direction. Though blood stained the panther's mouth and the surrounding fur, Iris would have sworn that there was a gentleness in the attention he fixed on her.

He. She kept thinking of it like that. Somehow, she knew that she was right.

He didn't move from where he lay crouched over the dead intruder. She didn't know what he was waiting for. For her? If she got out, would she be his next victim? Somehow, she was sure she wouldn't. But what if there were more intruders? She needed to get to safety.

That was when she noticed the blood streaking his back legs. One paw was almost completely caked in it, the strands

of hair dry and clumped where they stuck together. He was hurt, and he'd helped her anyway. Whatever he was.

Slowly, Iris pulled up to the edge of the grass and turned off the engine. With the thrust of flight over, her body was becoming increasingly aware of the cold and her state of near undress. Chills made her shiver, and she pulled her robe more tightly around her. She'd go inside, put her clothes back on, then call Sheriff Armstrong to report the attack. That's what anybody else in her situation would do.

Pushing the door open, she climbed out, careful to step on the balls of her feet as she skirted the scene of the attack. The panther tracked her with his eyes, turning his head as she circled him to get to the porch, but when she reached the door, he opened his mouth and mewled an almost whispered cry.

Iris stopped. Goosebumps erupted along her legs. She wanted to think it was because of the cold, but everything in her screamed that it was a reaction to the panther.

The panther blinked. Gingerly, he set his front paws down on the frozen ground and pushed himself up, a pained growl escaping his throat when he tried to put his weight on his back legs. He bowed his head, and she watched his haunches heave up and down. The powerful muscles rippled beneath the fur, and then she realized, the fur was rippling as well, smoothing out as the animal's shape changed once again.

Paws became hands.

Claws became fingers.

Fur atop its head became closely cropped white-blond hair.

A Sentry's Touch  
*by Vivien Dean*

The panther disappeared, leaving in its place a man on his hands and knees.

She knew before he lifted his head to gaze at her with brilliant green eyes that it was the same man who'd disappeared from the clinic.

## Chapter Three

Iris moved without hesitation, bolting from her front door to race to the man's side. It didn't occur to her to be scared; whatever he was, he'd just saved her life. Besides, she had seen his injuries at the clinic. He was hurt. She was a nurse. There was no way she was turning her back on him now.

He didn't say a word as she crouched down at his side, but the second her palm skimmed over his bare back to help him stand up, an electric shock passed between them. Iris yelped and snatched her hand back, more out of surprise than anything else.

"You're electrified, too?" she said. "What else do you do?"

The man regarded her for several seconds before shaking his head. "It won't happen again." His voice was low and warm, like the crackle of a fire in the deepest winter. "But it means I was right."

"About what? Wait. Don't answer that yet. Let's get you inside. The last thing either one of us needs right now is to be out here naked. Or nearly so, anyway."

Extending her arm again, Iris carefully tapped his skin before touching him this time, as if the small gesture would ground out any additional charge. Nothing came, and she tightened her hold across his muscled back, supporting his weight as he lurched to his feet. The man winced as he tried to stand on his leg, but Iris pulled him closer, forcing him to lean in order to take the weight off it. It shocked her how

warm he was, in spite of his lack of clothing. In this weather, he should have been shivering like she was.

Of course, he shouldn't be able to change from a bird to a cat to a man again, but that was one of those questions she was hoping would get answered once they were inside and dressed.

Iris deliberately kept her eyes up as she helped him into the house. Seeing a man naked when he was a patient was one thing; guiding one onto her couch dressed only in her robe was something else entirely. In spite of the dried blood that caked his feet and calves, she pulled the afghan from the rocking chair for him to drape over his midsection, ignoring the amused tilt of his mouth as he adjusted it accordingly.

"Stay here," she instructed. "I'm going to get stuff to clean you up."

She left before he could stop her, rushing to her bedroom first. Clothes. First priority. Naked nurse was only fun when there weren't any real injuries involved.

By the time she returned to the living room with a warm basin of water and towels to dry him off, Iris half-hoped she'd dreamed the entire incident. It was ludicrous. Men didn't change shape, and monsters didn't exist, especially monsters that looked kind of like lizards and wanted to kill her. But when she stepped out of the hall, the first thing she saw was the man's brilliant green eyes and the dried blood that clung to his legs. She saw the stains on her afghan where he'd wiped the blood from his face. And she knew if she looked out her window, there would be a dead ... thing on her front lawn.



This was real.

Frighteningly so.

"We should get you back down to the clinic after I get you cleaned up," Iris said, sitting down on the floor at his feet. She pushed the blanket up to expose his legs, catching a brief glimpse of his soft cock resting along his thigh. "Ted was going crazy this morning looking for you."

"No." His voice was unexpectedly firm. "I can't let you do that."

She froze in mid-swipe along his calf. "You have to. That was a major accident last night. We almost lost Clayton. Ted needs to give you a thorough examination to make sure there's nothing seriously wrong."

"You can examine me. That's what you do, right?"

"Yes, but ... that's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

Iris stared at him in disbelief. Was he serious? "You're hurt," she enunciated. "And Clayton is worried about you. And I'm not a doctor. And why are you giving me such a hard time about this?"

His gaze softened, and he leaned down to lightly grasp her wrist. She resisted only for a moment before allowing him to turn her hand over and pull the towel from her fingers, but when he tried to unfold it in order to expose her palm, Iris snatched her hand back and balled it into a fist.

He seemed entirely unperturbed by her reaction. "I don't expect you to understand. You've been sheltered from everything that you are."

"That's a fallacy. Just because I'm in Alaska, doesn't mean I don't know about the real world."

"That's not what I meant. I meant you personally. I found you for a reason. I recognized you."

His greater meaning sank in, and her eyes widened. "I am *not* like you!"

He chuckled. "I never said you were."

"So, what *are* you saying?"

His constant talking in circles was giving her a headache, and the brief fear that she was talking to a madman convinced she was exactly like him had sent a frisson of fear through her veins. It was gone now, but its residual effect still left her wary. If she hadn't seen him change with her own eyes, she wouldn't even be sitting here listening to him. But she had. And he'd saved her life. She owed him for that.

Maybe she was the crazy one. Lack of sleep could do that to people.

"There is much you need to know," he said. "That's why I'm here. Shall we start with introductions?" He closed his eyes and bowed his head, holding his hand out to her, palm up. In spite of the deferential posture, the power in his body and the strong lines of his features made him look like a knight bowing before his king. Or queen, as the case may be. "I am Avilius, of the Penverol Clan. You may call me Avi. And it's my tremendous honor to meet you at last, Iris Bridge."

She felt like she was looking through one of the lenses where the world disappeared around the edges and focus was centered on the one thing directly in front of you. This man—this beautiful, odd creature—knew her name. She had the

distinct feeling he'd known it long before killing the thing in her front yard, and probably even before coming to Black Bend in the first place. It should have creeped her out. The details of her life were private and purposefully so. But his gentle demeanor leant itself to trusting him.

It didn't mean she had to believe him blindly, though.

"How do you know who I am?" she asked. Deliberately, she turned back to cleaning his wounds, concentrating on the routine while the bizarre careened out of control around her. "Did Clayton tell you?"

"Clayton told me the details I wasn't privy to," Avi conceded. "But there are details that he knows nothing about."

Iris snorted. "Of course, there are. Clayton's just a friend."

"A very good friend. You've been intimate with him."

Iris refused to look up at him, though maybe she rinsed her cloth a little too vigorously. "You must've gotten Clayton drunk. He's not the kind to kiss and tell."

"Neither are you."

Grabbing his heel, she straightened his leg in order to swab away more of the blood. The injuries had looked much worse the previous night. Now, they looked more like he'd stepped into a bramble patch than crashed in a helicopter.

"So what is it you think you know about me?" she asked, deliberately keeping her tone casual.

"Just the broad strokes. How you were raised by your aunt. How you moved here after finishing nursing school. But those aren't the details that interest me, or frankly, will interest you, once you hear what I have to say."

It wasn't so much a matter of being interested as it was wondering what in the hell was going on. "Let's forget for a second that you've obviously done your fair share of googling to find out what you can on me," Iris said. "Why don't we talk about the dead man out in my yard? I mean, there *is* a dead man out there, right? I didn't dream that?"

"He's not a man. He's—"

"Wait. I know this one." Iris sat back on her heels. "He's really an alien from outer space, sent here to kidnap human women in a bizarre plot to repopulate his home planet. And you're from a rival planet that's at war with his, and that's why you saved me." She frowned in mock contemplation. "Oh, except he was trying to kill me, so maybe it's your planet that needs the repopulating and he's trying to stop you. Am I close?"

Avi surprised her by chuckling, a genuine smile creasing his features. "You'll question the presence of someone attacking you, and you've yet to mention seeing me shift? You're a very intriguing woman, Iris."

He was gorgeous when his face was in repose, but when he laughed, when his eyes and features came to life, Avi looked like no other man she had ever known. Lights danced in the bright green depths, and they spoke of secrets and joys that he seemed eager to share with her. Secrets that it felt she should know. She had discounted the pull to him at the clinic because of his good looks, but now, speaking to him, she knew it was more. She just didn't know how.

"So, not an alien," she said.

"No." Though his smile faded slightly, it didn't go away. "At least, not in the sense you mean."

"Can he change shapes, too?"

"No. With a Lor warrior, what you see is what you get."

"And he really was trying to kill me."

This sobered Avi in ways that her earlier questions hadn't. "Yes," came the solemn response. "You've never seen his kind before?"

"Not outside of the movies."

His eyes closed, and he leaned his head against the back of the couch. "Then I did lead him here," he murmured, though she suspected it was meant more for himself than her. "Damn it."

Iris waited for him to elaborate, but it never came. Rinsing her cloth out again, she processed what he had said so far, trying to find reason within the madness. There was none. If she tried to fit what he said into the realm of the world she knew, she'd go crazy with the jagged pieces. It only fit if she took it at face value and found a new realm for the truth to live.

That was disconcerting, in and of itself.

Neither spoke while she finished cleaning his feet and legs, and Iris left to dump out the basin and get some bandages. However badly he'd appeared hurt at the clinic, the reality when the blood was washed away was much less grim. Some of the scratches were deep, but a quick test of his mobility along the joints said nothing was broken. She hurried back into the living room with antiseptic and gauze to find him

examining his wounds himself, an ankle propped up on his knee as he skimmed long fingers over the cuts.

"I'll stop giving you a hard time about going to the clinic," she said as she took her place at his feet again. "Ted's got his hands full with Clayton anyway. But I have to tell him you showed up here. Otherwise, he's going to worry."

"There's no reason for that."

"Uh, yes, there is. You're his patient."

Avi frowned. "But he doesn't know me."

"He knows you were hurt, and that he didn't get to treat you. For Ted, that's enough." The antiseptic was cool against her fingers as she spread it over the cuts. "Don't you want Clayton to know you're okay, too? He was asking about you."

"It's my fault his helicopter is a wreck. He's better off without me."

Her eyes snapped to the window before jerking back to Avi. "That thing can fly? So is it trying to kill you or me?"

"Both of us, actually. But I'm sure it was trying to stop me from finding you first. You weren't a threat as long as you didn't know what you are."

Iris stopped, her skin suddenly hot. "You keep saying that. What do you mean, what I am? You already said I'm not ... like you."

"You're not." He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, strong enough that she couldn't resist him. Slowly, he turned her hand over and removed the gauze she still clutched, forcing her to expose her palms. "Haven't you ever wondered about these, Iris?" His voice was a soothing lull, and his

fingertips caressed the intricate webbing that marred her skin. "Haven't you ever wondered why it is you have them?"

She swallowed, but it did little to dispel the lump in her throat. "There was a fire..." Her normal explanation faded as Avi shook his head. She had to grit her teeth and look away from his mesmerizing gaze in order to speak again. "There was a fire," she repeated more firmly. "It killed my parents."

He was utterly still, his gaze unmoving, his fingers frozen where the pads touched lightly to hers. "I can't vouch for your parents' death. But I can vouch for the fact that these are not burns. You were born with them."

Iris shook her head. For the first time since seeing him swoop out of the sky, panic rose in the back of her throat. "No. I don't believe that."

"If they were burns, wouldn't they have faded over the years?" Avi pressed. "But they haven't, have they? They've grown. Just like your powers have grown."

She tried to yank her hand away, but his grip was too strong for her to break. "You're crazy. I don't have any powers."

"You do. You wield them when you least expect it. It's in your blood. It's your whole purpose for existing."

He pulled her upward until she had the choice to either sit on his lap or at his side on the couch. There was a moment, as insane as this whole situation was, where she actually wanted to fold her legs across his and press her body against the hard wall of his chest, but Iris squelched it in favor of rational actions. Advantages were few and far between. She needed to hold them as tightly as she could.

"I don't know what you think you know about me," she said. "But I'm not anything special. I don't have any family, I live a simple life, I like my privacy. I can go with the fact that you're ... unusual, because, well, I saw it with my own eyes. But there isn't a single thing you can say to me that'll convince me that I'm anything more than a thirty-year-old nurse who maybe has spent too much time watching old sci-fi movies when she can't sleep."

He regarded her without blinking. Somewhere in the bowels of her house, her furnace groaned as it kicked on, reminding her of how cold it was inside. She'd completely forgotten about how low she'd set the temperature.

"So you'll trust only what you see?" he asked.

There was a trick there in his carefully selected words, but try as she might, Iris couldn't find it. "Yes."

With a nod, he finally let her go. "Then that's what we'll do."

She waited for details that never came. "Is this another guessing game?"

His brows drew together in the moment before he smiled. "It's not my intention to be so cryptic. But I wasn't prepared for you to be so quite so ignorant of the truth."

"Which is?"

He didn't pause. "That you're not quite human. That you were born in a plane of existence that coincides with this one, and when your parents saw in your hands what your destiny was to be, they fled. To this plane."



"And what destiny is that?" Her stomach was in knots, but she forced herself to joke, "Am I supposed to kill my mother and marry my father or something?"

It was only when he began stroking the marks on her palms that Iris realized she hadn't pulled away from him when he gave her the chance. "You're a Sentry. One of the army of Sentries meant to keep our world and way of life secure. And I'm your Guardian."

Sentries. Guardians. Alternate dimensions. If she'd thought it was bewildering seeing a man change his shape right in front of her, this was the icing on the cake.

## Chapter Four

Without saying a word, Iris extricated herself from Avi's grasp and rose from the couch. "You know what?" she said, backing toward the doorway. "I think you need time to rest, and I need time to convince myself this isn't one massive hallucination." He opened his mouth, most likely to try and argue, prompting her to hold up a hand to put him off. "Don't. I don't want to hear it. Not right now. Right now, I'm going to go back to the clinic, tell Ted you're all right, and find out from Clayton what exactly your story is."

"I've already told you—"

"You've told me plenty." She hesitated at the door. As right as she knew this decision was, the further she moved away from Avi, the more her stomach curdled. It was almost a physical pain, unlike anything she'd ever felt before. Her palms burned, and she had to clench the door jamb in order to keep from rubbing them against her jeans. "I'll bring you some clothes back. Just ... don't go anywhere. Get some rest."

She fled the house, ignoring her gloves in favor of an easy exodus. Her heart was pounding by the time she threw the truck into reverse, and all she could see were those emerald eyes boring into hers as she'd left him behind. It was impossible to believe what he said was true. She wasn't anything special; her entire life wasn't a lie.

Except she'd seen what he'd done. She could still see the dead body lying in the snow in the front of her house, the raw

flesh exposed where Avi had torn out its throat. If he had the ability to shapeshift, how could she discount everything else he claimed?

She didn't even remember getting to the clinic. And when she pushed the door open and saw Ted's worried frown, she nearly fell apart.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," he said. Strong hands gripped her upper arms, forcing her to stay upright. "Why are you here?"

"Long story." Iris bowed her head for a moment, taking comfort in the warmth and familiarity of his solid presence. By the time she looked up to meet his gaze, things felt a little more normal again. Only the ache in her stomach that hadn't gone away since she left her house remained to remind her of everything that had happened. "A *really* long story. But Clayton's passenger? I found him. Or he found me. Or something. Anyway, he's resting at my place."

Ted's eyes bugged. "How the hell did he get clear across town? He had a broken ankle and looked like he'd been dragged through a shredder."

"I don't know. But he's fine now." Her eyes slid to the hallway. "Is Clayton awake? I was hoping I could talk to him."

Ted let her go, gesturing toward the surgery. "Woke up right after you left. Go tell him his friend is good. That's all he's been asking about. That, and when were you coming back." A sudden grin split his features. "Shame it had to happen this way, but maybe this is what it takes for Clayton to stick around long enough to see what a catch you are. I'll keep my fingers crossed for you two. You deserve it."

Iris mumbled a quick thanks before bustling down the hall, her cheeks flaming a deep red. Before this morning, she would've been excited about the prospect of spending more time with Clayton. He was a lot of things she had always thought she wanted. But Avi's arrival had done more than save her life. It had changed her perspective on the world. And what she needed from Clayton right now, more than anything else, were answers.

Soft music filtered from a CD player in the corner, but it didn't mask the sound of the door whispering open as she stepped inside the room. Clayton turned his head in her direction, offering a small smile when he recognized her.

"Time's got a way of going funny in here," he said. "I could've sworn Dr. Hummell just told me you wouldn't be back until tonight."

"He probably did." Letting the door slip shut behind her, Iris crossed to the side of the bed, her expert eyes sweeping over him in assessment. The bruising on his face was partially hidden by a day's worth of stubble, but it still made him look more gaunt than usual. Otherwise, his color was better, and his voice was stronger than it had been when he'd woken up in the wee hours of the morning. The painkillers were working better than she could've hoped. "I came back early."

"Not because of me, I hope. You need your sleep. The way I hear it, you two were up all night."

Iris hesitated. "You don't remember talking to me?"

The lines in his brow deepened when he frowned. "I do, but what's that got to do with anything? Doc said they couldn't find Avi."

"They didn't." She watched him carefully. Though he was obviously concerned about his passenger, the fact that he'd gone missing didn't seem to be surprising Clayton too much. "Avi found me."

His frown eased at the same time she heard the slight intake of his breath. For several seconds, his soft eyes searched hers, as if he was waiting for her to add to her statement, but when it didn't come, Clayton merely smiled.

"So you saw," he said. "And now you want me to tell you that you're not crazy."

She stared at him, dumbfounded. "*You* saw?" Her throat was dry, and suddenly, the pain in her stomach seemed far less important. "Why would he show you that?"

Clayton didn't seem the least bit perturbed by her shock. "Probably for the same reason he showed you. To prove to you what he was."

"That's not why he showed me." She shook her head, trying to clear it. She was already saying it all wrong. "He didn't *show* me. There was this thing that broke into my house, and when I ran out to the car to get away from it, I watched him come out of the sky, change from a bird into a big cat, and slaughter the thing that attacked me. And then when he changed into ... himself again, I recognized him from the accident."

He had stiffened as soon as she mentioned the creature in her house, and before she was finished speaking, Clayton was trying to push himself upright. "They came after you? Avi said the whole purpose of coming here was to protect you from those things."

"Which he did." Iris took him by the shoulders and forced him to lie back down, but it wasn't until she had pulled away that she realized what he had said. "Wait. Things? As in plural? What exactly did he tell you was going on?"

Her adamanace made him pause. "He told me everything. There's no way in hell I'd bring a stranger up to see you, Iris. Avi knew it was the only way to convince me that he was on the up and up. He even showed me where it was you two are from."

"Where we're..."

She didn't want to believe him. Part of Iris wanted to explain it away with the accident, that Clayton obviously had a head injury and was imagining everything he might have experienced with Avi. But it wasn't in his nature to lie. It was in his nature to be solid and trustworthy. He was one of the most grounded people she knew, and if he was testifying that he'd seen some other world that gave birth to creatures like Avi, then that was exactly what he had seen.

Iris grabbed one of the stools and pulled it up to the side of the bed, her knees too wobbly to hold her right then. "That's why you wanted me to talk to him," she murmured. "Because he has some secret about what I really am, whatever that means."

Clayton reached to cover her hand, his fingers warm and callused against the back of hers. "You're not any different than you ever were. It's not like he waved a magic wand and turned you into a Sentry. You've been using your hocus pocus on me for years."

She looked up. "What is it I'm supposed to have done?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"I kind of didn't give him much of a chance before I ran out."

He smiled. "I guess it's all a little overwhelming. It took me awhile to wrap my brain around it all, and it didn't even have anything to do with me."

"So what is it I'm supposed to be able to do?"

Gently, Clayton curled his fingers around her hand and turned it over. He was one of the few people Iris didn't mind being so fascinated by her scars, but even that sense of comfort had taken some time to develop. "As far as I can tell," he said, "it's something to do with exerting your will over others. Through touch." He stroked the center of her palm. The gentle caress made her skin itch. "Through these, actually."

"I don't..." But the protestation faded from her lips, almost before it started. Hadn't it just happened only an hour earlier? She'd pushed at the creature attacking her, demanded he let her go, and he'd done so, when it was very clearly not what he wanted to do. And there were other times, maybe less subtle, that it would explain otherwise odd occurrences.

Her eyes traveled down the length of Clayton's covered legs. His situation had been precarious at best when she'd arrived. Yet within minutes of working on him, of silently willing him to fight, he'd grown stronger.

Was that her doing, too?

"How many times have you shooed me out the door?" he was saying. "When all I wanted was to lay in and hold you. How many times did you pull me out of bed and tell me I had

better things to do than waste it doing nothing with you? I always wanted to argue with you and tell you that you couldn't be farther from the truth, but I never did." His hand fell back to his side. "Now I know why."

Clayton might be satisfied with finally having answers, but this kind of information only raised more questions for Iris. "But why now?" she asked. "Why did he pick now to show up? Or these things that are after me?"

"I'm going to guess you didn't give him a chance to explain that to you, either."

Iris colored. "That's probably my cue to go back to the house and let him finish having his say, huh?"

"That's what I would do."

But she wasn't sure she wanted to go back and face Avi yet. If she was smart, she'd bring him in for Ted to look over and make sure he was all right. But then that raised the question, would there be obvious physical differences? She'd seen enough of him in human form to know that at least on the outside, Avi looked anatomically correct. But maybe he had two hearts or three stomachs or something else Ted would pick up on when he gave him a full examination. That couldn't be explained away by a helicopter crash. Then, there were Avi's assertions about not coming back. If she tried to force the issue, she suspected he would just turn into a bird or something and fly away until she dropped it.

To top it all off, there was the fact that he was still naked. She needed to find him clothes. Bringing him in like he was would raise even more brows, and Iris wasn't in the mood for it.



"Did Avi have a suitcase or something?" she asked.

Clayton nodded. "Why? Didn't it get pulled out of the accident?"

"It was too dark for them to find much except what was in the immediate vicinity. Ted's got a box of stuff out front that they retrieved, but if there's more, somebody should probably go back and get it."

This was a plan. This was a very good plan. Most importantly, this was a plan that had Iris busy without having to deal with Avi directly just yet.

"I'm going to leave you to rest some more," she said, pushing back from the bed and returning the stool where it belonged. "I'll be back tonight to see how you're doing."

His warm eyes followed her as she went to the door. "Give him a chance, Iris. Because being alone isn't everything it's cracked up to be."

She nodded and fled, keeping her pace even until she was in the front hall again. The sounds of Ted working in the main office drew her to the entry, and she hovered there as she waited for him to pause.

"Clayton shouldn't give you any more grief about his passenger," she said. "I've given him orders to sleep and behave himself until I get back tonight."

Ted grinned. "Then we both should have easy afternoons. You've always had him wound around your little finger."

She knew he was only teasing, but in light of what Clayton attested she could do, it dampened her rising spirits. "Where exactly did the accident happen? You guys never said."

He waved in the general direction of south. "On the edge of the state park. Near where they found those bear cubs last spring. Clayton barely cleared the trees before they hit."

It was half an hour out of town. There would be plenty of light left in the day to drive out, scout around, and drive back, without having to worry about the frigid darkness of night. Avi would get his clothes, and if there was anything unusual to discover, she would get to it before any of the inspectors.

"You going home to sleep now?" he asked when she moved to leave.

"Yeah," Iris lied. "I'll be back tonight. And I mean that this time."

With a wave, she left and hurried out to the truck. Sleep didn't seem as important any more.

\* \* \* \*

Clouds like spun sugar drifted through the crystal blue sky as Iris sped along the road that led to the state park. It was going to be a gorgeous day, clear and radiant as only Alaska could provide. The trees blanketing the faraway mountains etched the horizon in small jags, and the bounty of color was just as dazzling now as it had been ten years earlier when Iris had first moved there. If she took off her sunglasses, the greens and browns and blues and whites would stretch in the Seurat landscape she loved. Who knew so many shades of white even existed?

This was her home. No matter what Avi or Clayton or anybody else might say, nothing had ever felt like home as

much as Alaska did, and she would fight to her dying breath to keep it that way. Which, if her day so far was anything to go by, was more of a realistic possibility than ever before.

Iris banished the wayward thoughts to focus on the road ahead. Her senses weren't quite as sharp as she would like them to be, and she needed to pay attention if she didn't want to have her own accident. An even speed, stay below the limit. Then she'd look around and hopefully be back at her house for a nap before early afternoon.

The site of the crash was visible from the road, and Iris pulled up as close as she could possibly get to it. Tracks from Roland's rig snaked over the countryside, but she didn't have the traction he did to off-road as easily. Pocketing her keys, she trekked over the packed snow on foot, following the tire treads straight to the wrecked helicopter.

Pieces started blocking her path over a hundred feet away. Scraps of twisted metal spotted the ground, and Iris kept her eye out for anything that might be ancillary to the helicopter itself. Roland and Ted had collected items near it; it made sense that the items that most interested her would be further away.

Nothing out of the ordinary popped up before she hit the actual site, but she stopped anyway, several yards away, where the tracks ended. The copter was a mess. Metal twisted and scorched where it had crashed into the ground. Glass shattered but still held in place by its frame. Two of the blades were snapped in half from the impact, each thrown in different directions from the rotor.

Her stomach lurched. It was a wonder Clayton had walked away from this at all.

Tilting her head, she gazed past the wreckage at the trees lining the state park in the distance. Avi blamed himself for the crash. That implied one of those creatures had attacked them. It was hard to believe that they flew as well, but Iris wasn't past discounting anything any more. But if something had hit the helicopter, wouldn't there have been another body?

She scanned the terrain. Nothing remotely resembling a human form littered the remains, but it could've been trapped beneath the copter's carcass. Nobody would know until the investigators came to clear the debris.

Iris snorted as she turned away to start looking for the suitcase. It was too bad her supposed power didn't make her Supergirl or something. She could've looked underneath it and saved everybody a potential nightmare later on.

She found Clayton's small travel duffel half-buried in the snow. The dark blue canvas was singed on one side, but otherwise, the seams were intact, the zipper still shut. He would appreciate a change of clothes and his own toothbrush, she was sure. Pulling it free, she swung it over her shoulder and continued her search for Avi's belongings, navigating the crash in ever widening circles, but most of what she saw was ruined beyond repair, including Clayton's cell phone in three disparate pieces.

It was near the road that she spotted the backpack. Breaking from her pattern, Iris cut across the snow to check out the black and grey lump that had caught her eye, grateful

as she approached that it wasn't another piece of junk. It didn't look familiar, thank goodness. That increased the odds that it was Avi's and not Clayton's. To be sure, she unzipped the front pocket and peered inside.

A folded shirt. A clean pair of jeans. Socks and underwear that could have belonged to any man in the country. Probably exactly what she was looking for.

Iris closed it back up, but as she picked it up to swing it over her shoulder with Clayton's duffel, the weight of it took her by surprise. She frowned, letting it drop back to her hand. There were more than clothes in there. It felt like he'd packed the kitchen sink.

Her eyes widened when she re-opened the backpack to see what it was. Definitely more than clothes. At the bottom, tucked carefully beneath a Ziploc bag of shampoo and shower gel, were five crystals, each a clear dark blue, each shaped in a teardrop large enough to fill her hand.

They were exactly like the stone in the necklace Ted and Roland had salvaged the previous night.

## Chapter Five

Though she wanted to go back to the clinic first and retrieve the necklace, Iris drove straight home, the fresh flurry of questions that had popped up with the crystals doing enough to keep her awake for the trip. Every once in a while, she looked up into the sky, scouring the brilliant blue for signs of a bird too large to be indigenous. It would be easy to spot, impressive to watch, but why she expected to see him circling overhead, she had no idea. Maybe because he was supposed to be some kind of protector for her. It was almost disappointing to make it all the way back to her house without spotting anything out of the ordinary.

The front yard looked like it always did. Always did, before that morning, that is. Slowly, Iris got out of the truck, her frown deepening as she looked over the snow. There was a dark stain where Avi had killed the intruder, but the body was gone as if it never existed. There weren't even track marks to show that it had been dragged off. It looked like somebody had simply plucked the creature off her yard and carried it away.

The interior of her house was much the same. Nobody was in the living room, and the afghan Avi had used to wipe the blood from his face lay discarded on the couch. Nothing else was out of place, nothing disturbed, but from deeper inside came the muffled sound of the shower. He hadn't left then. Iris dropped Clayton's duffel in the foyer and went to the

closed bathroom door, knocking on it once before calling out his name.

"I think I've got your clothes," she said after he had answered.

"Bring them in, please."

She didn't hesitate until the steam was warming her cheeks. "How about I just leave it here by the sink?" Sliding the backpack from her shoulder, she stretched to drop it in place without venturing further in. "If they're not yours, do what you can. At least the shirt should fit. If the jeans don't, I might have some sweats you can borrow until we get something else." His murmured thanks reminded her of the missing creature from the front yard, and she added, "What did you do while I was gone?"

"Rested," came the reply. "Then when I heard a car drive by, I realized the Lor was still where I'd left it, so I disposed of the body for you. That's why I'm taking a shower. It was a little ... messy."

Iris grimaced. Thank god he didn't supply details. She didn't need the imagery of what he would have done haunting her nightmares.

"Well, yell if you need anything," she said, turning away.

"Can you stay?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the vague outline of the shower curtain get pushed aside in the reflection of the mirror, the condensation keeping the image from being clear. "I'd like to talk."

She was all for talking, but she would have much preferred doing it someplace other than the bathroom. "It can't wait until after you get out?" she tried.

"We're leaving as soon as I'm done. I'd like the air cleared before we go."

"What?!?"

All thoughts of propriety vanished, and Iris pushed the door open to better confront him. Avi was looking out around the edge of the curtain, his hair plastered to his skull, water dripping down the sharp planes of his face, and for a second, she flashed on the appeal of his unusual looks. Her chest tightened, and the ache that had plagued her stomach all day eased, but when the corner of his mouth lifted in a small attempt at a smile, her angry exasperation returned with a vengeance.

"What are you talking about, *leaving*? I'm not going anywhere with you."

Her outburst did nothing to shake his calm appearance. "Why is it you think I'm here?" he asked. "My whole purpose for finding you was to take you back. Our people need you. They need us."

She shook her head. "No. There is no 'our people'. My home is here, and the only people I have are my Aunt Jess, Ted, and Clayton. That's it."

"That's not true." He let the curtain fall as he resumed his shower. "You have me."

Iris stared at the translucent plastic in disbelief. It took a mere five seconds for her to grab the edge he'd just released and yank it out of her way, exposing him beneath the running water. Droplets splattered onto her chest and the edge of the tub, but all she was aware of was her rising frustration with this whole situation.



"Look," she started. "I'm well aware that you've managed to somehow convince one of the best men I know that you're some savior come to rescue me from my so-called boring life. I even understand it a little, because when it comes down to it, Clayton's an old-fashioned romantic. He only sees the best in people. But I don't. I've seen too much shit in my life, and if you think for a second I'm impressed with any of this, you're mistaken."

Avi didn't waver from washing up, bending over to reach for the shampoo in the corner. Muscles rippled across his back, sinew taut and sleek as the water dripped down the sculpted planes. "I would have thought you'd like being told the truth," he said. "From what I've heard—from what I've seen, even—you seem like a very upfront woman."

"That's not the point."

"Oh?" He straightened again. "Do you want to tell me what the point is then?"

She had an answer ready for him. She even thought it was a good one. But as soon as his back was to her, Iris' answer dissipated on her tongue. Her attention was arrested by the latticework of scars riddling his shoulders.

Most of them were faded, narrow ribbons of bone-white that crisscrossed over his shoulder blades. They stretched from arm to arm, cutting across his spine, snaking up his neck, and the skin puckered at the edges from where time was working to erase them from his flesh. They weren't fresh; Iris had seen enough scars in her lifetime to know how to estimate age. But they had been deep at one point and most likely painful. A whip perhaps. A very fine one.

Her silence turned his head, more than her arguments had. Iris tore her gaze away from the scars, but there wasn't an ounce of shame or anger in his eyes.

"I told you," he said. "They need us."

Such a simple statement. Yet, it deflated much of her frustration and left her standing with scattered droplets of water still hitting her chest.

"How did you get those?"

"I was captured when I was fifteen. I refused to tell them what they wished to hear, and I was punished accordingly."

He made it sound like a war. When he'd first told her about the Sentries and Guardians, he'd alluded to the fact that her purpose was to protect this other world. But ... protect them from what?

"What other stuff did you want to clear up?" she asked. More answers might make her feel better about something she had a feeling he wasn't going to budge on.

Avi poured out a dollop of shampoo and rubbed it through his hair. "I never got to tell you about what we are, about where we come from."

Iris tried not to watch the flex of muscles in his strong arms as he washed. "Clayton already told me what he thinks he knows. He also said, he's seen it? How is that possible?"

"I took him there. To prove it to him."

"Why? How?"

"The same way I'll take you there. Because I needed his help in finding you."

"And that's another thing. How did you know Clayton would lead you to me?"

Avi glanced back. An amused glint sparkled in his eyes. "My senses are heightened because of what I am. He carries your scent. I may not have known who you were exactly, but it's impossible for me to mistake the scent of a Sentry. Especially mine."

*Mine.* He said it casually, as a statement of fact. A badge of ownership that he trusted was his. Iris had had her share of relationships in her life, but never had a man laid such claim to her, not even Clayton. Part of that was her doing. She kept people at arms' length. But she had always thought that was a result of losing her parents at such an early age. The way Avi talked, there might be other reasons for it.

"And you were looking for me?"

His eyes softened. "Yes. Since I came of age. Nearly fifteen years now."

He turned back to rinse the shampoo out of his hair, but Iris couldn't move. Fifteen years. That was half her life. That was half *his* life. She couldn't imagine spending so much time on such a focused goal, especially if it meant being separate from the world she knew. The fact that he'd gone to such lengths meant even more than Avi saving her life. He'd been looking for her probably since the time he'd been released from his captivity.

She forced herself to retreat from the edge of the tub, pulling the shower curtain shut to give him back his privacy. Sitting on the toilet, she stared at her hands, turning them over so that her scars were visible.

Not scars, she reminded herself. Brands. Birthmarks. The mark of a Sentry.

Except she'd always been told they came from the fire. If she'd been born with them...

"My Aunt Jess told me I got these when my parents were killed." Her voice was low, a hum beneath the pelting water, but Iris somehow knew Avi heard every word. "If I had my scars before then, why would she lie to me?"

"She probably did it to protect you," Avi replied. "Your parents fled for a reason. She's probably just honoring their wishes."

"Yeah, I suppose that could be it."

But having an explanation wasn't as easy as liking it. And until she knew the truth, it was going to haunt her.

"I need to call her," she said, rising from her seat. "Can we talk some more later?" By talking, she meant arguing about whether or not she was going any place, but at least she could pretend for a little while that it was going to be civilized.

"Of course. Do what you must."

Stepping out of the steam was a welcome relief, but Iris barely felt it as she hurried to her bedroom. Jessica Bridge lived in Washington, where she had raised Iris after her parents' deaths. If she wasn't out shopping or at one of her craft shows, she'd be home. Iris kept her fingers crossed that this was one of those afternoons where her aunt didn't have a life of her own. And if she did, Christmas this year was a cell phone, no two ways about it.

"Hey, Aunt Jess." Though she did her best to sound normal, Iris knew her words came out too fast, her breath a little too uneven. "How is everything?"

"Oh, you know. Same old, same old. I'm waiting for the gas guy to come this afternoon. I think there's a leak in the line outside. The back yard smells something awful. How're you doing? You haven't called in ages. I hope that means you've been too busy finding some nice man to spend time with."

Iris sat down on the bed, hoping that would calm her trembling knees. "That's actually why I'm calling now. I wanted to talk to you about something. And it has to do with Mom and Dad."

The pause was a fraction too long for her comfort, though Iris knew she could be just a trifle paranoid about everything right now. "Whatever you want. Though I think any man that's asking questions about your parents, might be more work than he's worth."

"No, he's not the one asking questions. It's all me." She took a deep breath. "The fire. What *exactly* happened? To them, to me. Because I'm not so sure I've got all the facts right any more."

Aunt Jess' sigh filled the line. "Oh, babydoll, why do you want to go dredging up those kind of memories? It was a long time ago. You don't need to be thinking about things that can't be changed."

"That's just it," Iris argued. "Things are changing, more than you might think. Did I really get my scars from grabbing something in that fire? Or was I born with them? And don't lie to me. I can't deal with that right now."

She wasn't sure how she'd be able to tell if Aunt Jess was lying to her anyway, but the warning accomplished what

she'd hoped. She heard a chair squeak across the hardwood floors she used to sock-skate across, and she heard a drawer open and close.

"I honestly hoped we'd never have this conversation," Jess said. "I can't imagine what good can even come from it."

"The good is knowing the truth. The good is knowing what exactly these marks are. God, Aunt Jess, wouldn't you want to know something major like that?"

"I suppose," came the reluctant reply. "This doesn't have anything to do with a new man in your life, does it? Someone else has been talking to you."

Iris had asked for honesty. The least she could do was give her aunt some in return.

"Yes. A man who calls himself a Guardian. And me a Sentry."

Jess cursed under her breath. "They can never leave well enough alone, can they? They just have to go and uproot everybody's lives."

"So it's true?" Though she had believed Avi, Iris realized there had been a small, secret place in her that hoped it was all a fantasy. That she was normal. That everything she had known wasn't a lie. "Was there even a fire?"

"Oh, there was a fire, all right. They'd found you, and when your parents wouldn't give you back, they decided to try and force their hand. But your dad was smarter than that. He asked me to get you away, and they'd lead the Guardians in the opposite direction, to throw them off the track." She snorted. "Only problem was, the Guardians got to them before they could get on the road."

Her eyes flew to the open doorway. Guardians had killed her parents, and now one was in her shower, ready to take her away from the only life she had ever wanted. Had he known? She wasn't sure he did. But generals didn't always tell soldiers the big picture. Information was on a need to know basis.

"Has he hurt you?" Aunt Jess was saying. "This Guardian, has he done anything at all to you?"

"No," she answered automatically. "He saved me."

"Get away from him. Get down here. I've got money in the bank. We can find a new place for you to live. Get you a new life."

Iris rubbed her eyes. Everybody was trying to give her a new life. All she wanted was the one she had. "Avi says that these Lor warriors are after me," she said. "If they found me once, they'll find me again. I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder."

"So what are you going to do, babydoll? You can't trust Guardians. Do you know they're shapeshifters? Has he told you that?"

"Yes, I saw it with my own eyes." Something about her aunt's tone bothered her, though. "If everything Avi has said is true, does that mean you're from whatever place it is I was born in? Is that how you know all this?"

Jess sighed. "Yes, but what does that matter for anything? Except to tell you, you have to believe me. I know what I'm talking about, and I'm the one person in this world who loves you, who wants the best for you. Please come down here, Iris. Put an old woman's heart at ease."

She was tempted. Very tempted. Aunt Jess was safe and predictable, and if they had to find a new place to live, maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. She could be a nurse anywhere.

But Aunt Jess was wrong about one thing. She wasn't the only person who cared about what happened to Iris. Misguided or not, Clayton would never trust somebody who didn't deserve to be trusted. And he trusted Avi. Like Iris did. Maybe Avi wasn't like the other Guardians, or maybe things had changed in the thirty years since Aunt Jess had fled the home of her birth.

There was only one real way for her to find out.

"I can't," Iris said. "Clayton was just in this really awful accident, and Ted needs me here to help take care of him."

"Clayton? That's that pilot you were dating."

She grimaced. "It wasn't really dating. He's my friend. A very good one, and he needs me right now."

"So his life is more important than yours?"

"I didn't say that."

"But that's what staying in Black Bend means," Jess countered. "This Guardian isn't going to give up, and if your life is in danger—"

"Avi doesn't want anything to happen to me," she interrupted. "He wouldn't have saved me this morning if he did."

Silence filled the line. "You know the Guardian's name?"

Jess' mistrust bled through every word. "I told you I talked to him. What did you think I called him? And you know what, Aunt Jess? I trust him. I don't for a second think he'd let anything happen to me."



"You're making a mistake."

"Maybe," she conceded. "But I can't sit back and pretend none of this happened either. What if I promise to come to you the second I think there's real danger? Would that be okay?"

"I have a feeling that's all you're going to give this old woman."

"I can promise to use my powers, too." Not that she had much of an idea how they worked, but it was something, at least. "However they might help."

"He told you about those? Of course, he did," she said, answering her own question. "Do me a favor, babydoll, will you? Don't forget who you are. Maybe you were born to be one of the Sentries, but that doesn't define you. It's only one, very small, part of what you are. You've had a whole lifetime they haven't touched. Don't forget that."

"I won't," she promised.

She hung up with mixed emotions. As much as she didn't like hurting her aunt's feelings, she hated not knowing the truth even more. Some things just had to be done.

## Chapter Six

The kitchen was finally warming, the scent of chili and onion permeating every corner. Iris stood at the stove, her head bowed in order to better inhale the aromas as she stirred, and ignored the growing quiet from the rest of the house. The shower had ceased minutes earlier. Any time now, Avi would emerge, and he'd try to convince her that they had to go, and Iris had to find some way to get more answers before that happened.

In the interim, however, she wanted something to eat. She could have thawed out the chili in the microwave like she usually did, but then she would have missed the piquancy of it cooking. There was little more satisfying than the smell of a thick, hearty chili on a cold winter day.

When the footsteps came to the kitchen doorway, Iris deliberately refused to look back. "I didn't know if you'd be hungry," she said before he could speak. "But I promised Ted I'd bring some in to him anyway, so there's plenty here if you want some."

"I'm fine," Avi replied. "But thank you."

She didn't hear him approach, but then there he was, leaning against the counter beside her. One glance down said he was barefoot, but otherwise, he wore the clothes that had been in the backpack. They *were* his. They fit too well not to be, all the way down to the creases in the jeans where they pulled across his slim hips. Hurriedly, she tore her gaze away to look at the bubbling chili.

"Did you talk to her?" he asked.

Her nod was slow, her stirring more so. "She wants me to get away from you. She said that I was in more danger from you than anything else."

She listened carefully to gauge his reaction. The outburst to convince her otherwise didn't come, though. Avi simply remained there, unmoving, unperturbed.

"What can I do to convince you that isn't true?" he said.

Iris looked up. His gaze was soft and solemn, fixed on her in unwavering contemplation. "I never said I believed her," she replied. "I don't think you'd protect me like you have just to hurt me later on."

"I *can't* hurt you." Reaching out, Avi ghosted fingertips over her brow, a fragile touch that tickled as much as it made her shiver. "You're my Sentry."

"You keep saying that. I don't know what that means."

"It means..." His hand moved along her cheek and the bridge of her nose, as if learning the contours of her face. "Guardians and Sentries have always worked together," he tried instead. "One for one. They're matched by the powers that protect our world, usually at birth. When one is born, another is called, and vice versa. It's a balance."

"So..." She couldn't look away, even when it meant looking through the lattice of his fingers as he continued to touch her face. "I was born when you were?"

"No. You were the first born." His thumb brushed over her mouth. "I have heard the stories of how you had disappeared since I was small. Though I didn't have a Sentry of my own, they allowed me to train anyway. Well, they grew tired of my

begging to be allowed to train. I never believed them when they said you wouldn't return."

Teams of two, joined together by powers beyond their control, trained and set to protect a world she had never known existed. Except Avi had been one. Alone.

Much as she had spent most of her life alone.

Reaching up, she caught his wrist and pulled it away from her face. "Can I hurt you?"

The question perplexed him. "I don't know," he admitted. "Do you want to?"

Iris smiled. "No. Just wondering." His hand fell back to his side, and she resumed stirring the chili, though it was a matter of killing time than any need for the food. "My aunt claims that Guardians killed my parents," she said without looking at him. "That's why she's afraid for me."

He stiffened. "I can't believe that's true. How does she know that?"

"I didn't press. But she seemed pretty sure."

"She has to be wrong. The Guardians didn't even know where you were. Your entire family vanished soon after you were born."

Iris believed him. Well, she believed that he believed it. Her instincts told her to. But she believed her aunt, too. Jess had no reasons to lie to her. So the truth had to lie somewhere in between.

The truth rested in the one place he wanted to take her, and the place she feared to go.

Turning off the burner, Iris moved away from the stove and opened the cupboard to get a bowl. "Last chance," she said, glancing back as she held the door open.

"You eat. If you like, I can pack what things I think you'll need."

The more he said, the more real it became. Iris ladled out some chili and grabbed a spoon, cradling the hot bowl in her hands as she carried it over to the small table. "I'm going to agree to go with you." He hadn't moved, and it felt easier doing this over a distance. When he was close, her thoughts and actions were not always under her control. "But only for a day or two. Just to check it out."

Avi frowned. "I know you think of this as your home, but that's hardly enough time for you to learn about Varana to decide whether or not to stay."

"I'm not staying. I'm going to try and figure out what exactly happened with my parents."

"That was thirty years ago. Even if Guardians *were* involved somehow, they'd be dead by now. We don't exactly have long life spans in our field, you know. I can think of only a few who would have even been of age then."

"Then those are the few I'll talk to."

She started eating, aware of his heavy gaze. After a moment, he crossed the room and took the chair at her side, his knee pressing against hers.

"I am not going to stop you from ferreting out the truth," he said. "I know I can't. But you're wrong about this, and you're only asking for heartache if you pursue it."

Her bites slowed. "Did you know your parents? Did you get to stay with them once everybody knew you were a Guardian?"

"Yes. I knew them. They were very supportive of me. It's an honor to be what I am, not a burden. Just like it's an honor to be a Sentry."

"I never had the chance to know mine. For reasons of their own, they didn't want me to go down this path, and like it or not, if I can't honor those wishes, I at least need to know why."

When he was lost in thought, Avi's eyes grew darker, the thick lashes surrounding them more noticeable. "Whether you've lived your life as one or not, you have the spirit of a Sentry. But I think once you see Varana, you'll change your mind."

That was a distinct possibility. After all, it had seduced Clayton and he'd only gotten a glimpse of it.

"We'll leave that up to the jury for now." Iris scraped the last bite from the bottom of the bowl. "But I'll let you help me throw a few things together. I have no idea what to take with me."

"You'll like it," he repeated. "It's much like Alaska in many ways."

"We'll see." She tried not to get caught up in the hope that burned in his eyes again and stood to rinse out her dish. "I'm going to run this over to Ted first. When I get back, I'll pack then."

The look on his face said he wanted to argue, but instead, Avi simply nodded.

\* \* \* \*

The clinic was quiet when she arrived, the lights dimmed. This was more like it. The medical needs in a small community like Black Bend were few and far between. Helicopter crashes like Clayton's and the rush that those brought with them were a rare occurrence. So rare that Iris had never heard of one in all the time she'd lived there. It was a shame it had happened to somebody she actually cared about.

She took the Tupperware of chili into the kitchen and put it into the refrigerator. The on light had switched off on the coffee machine, and she took the pot to dump out the cold contents. Ted was probably asleep. If he was catching a nap, Clayton had to be doing better. Iris rushed through putting in a fresh filter and filling the coffee well with water before heading out to check on both of them.

Clayton was first.

He hadn't been moved from the surgery. The lights pulsed at a low dim, and the music that had been playing had been turned off. A thick blanket covered a sleeping Clayton, and Iris held the door knob as it closed in order not to make any noise that might wake him. She didn't need a stethoscope to know that his breathing was regular. The gentle rise and fall of his chest was enough indication. His color was even stronger, as well. He was going to pull through.

Iris flipped through the chart Ted had started, noting the last time the doctor had recorded any stats. Blood pressure normal. Medications still within time of effectiveness. She

hung it back on the hook, knowing everything that could be done for Clayton had been.

Next came Ted. Iris was just as quiet creeping through the halls of the clinic as she had been letting herself into Clayton's room. Ted's office was deserted, as were all the exam rooms. She was just about to head upstairs when she heard a sound from the back of the building.

She froze on the bottom step. Cocking her head, she listened for a repeat of the sound, a chill racing along her skin. This was what she'd done just this morning, only then she'd discounted the attack on her home for a raccoon. The similarity didn't escape her. If anything, it prompted her into movement sooner, returning to Ted's office to get the small pistol he kept there for scaring away wildlife that was better off not getting close.

The metal was cold against her palm, and Iris had the brief, crazy thought of whether or not this so-called will power of hers worked on inanimate objects. *It would make sure I actually hit something, at least.* She stood in the open office door and listened again. If it turned out to be a local with a mosquito bite, she was going to shoot them, just on principle. Front doors were for patients. Back doors were for wild animals and people with death wishes.

A floorboard creaked.

Iris stiffened. She hadn't been moving. And it came from the back of the building.

"Ted?" she called. Her shouts might wake up Clayton, but considering the alternative, she was willing to risk it.

Nothing answered.



*Maybe he didn't hear me.*

*Except it was a floorboard. Inside the house. And Clayton can't walk.*

"Ted?" she tried again, this time louder.

She didn't hear any more creaking. She didn't hear any more of anything. Maybe the entire thing was just a combination of her tiredness, her paranoia about the earlier, and a house settling in its old age.

She wouldn't feel safe until she knew for sure.

Hugging the wall, Iris crept forward, the gun dangling from her hand. She wasn't going to call out again, and this way, if it did turn out to be Ted, she wasn't going to accidentally shoot her boss. The lighting that had felt calm when she'd first arrived now danced with shadows, catching the corner of her eye with every step. It was hard not to jump every time something new looked different, but she kept her pace even, her attention focused on the end of the hall.

This time when she heard the creak, she knew exactly where it was coming from.

Iris froze. The door to the surgery was still shut, just like she'd left it. The sound was coming from inside, but Clayton had been asleep when she'd checked on him, not to mention the fact that he *couldn't walk*. It was possible he'd woken and was trying to get up, but she was sure he would have cried out or made some other kind of noise when it failed.

She was about to take another step when a dark patch on the floor sucked out all the air from her lungs.

It was a smear of blood, wet and thick. Something had been dragged across the floor, and her eyes followed the path all the way to the back door.

Her throat closed. Why hadn't she noticed that when she'd come through the first time?

*Because it's fresh.*

She was torn between following the blood and checking to make sure Clayton okay. It took hearing the distant scream of a bird, muffled by the walls, for her to make her choice.

The threat was inside the house.

*Eliminate the threat.*

Iris edged closer to the door, cocking the gun as she moved. She cringed when the sound echoed in the corridor.

Her fingers were curling around the door handle when the door was yanked from her grasp. The force dragged her inward, lurching her off-balance, and she reached out to grab the jamb in order to keep from falling.

She touched a hard body instead. An arm. Iris looked up just in time to see the Lor warrior knock the gun out of her other hand.

It skittered across the floor, the sound changing to something wet when it hit the trail of blood. The Lor gave no chance to go after it, though. He grabbed her shoulders and shoved her forward, throwing her into the opposite wall of the hall with such force that it knocked her breathless.

Iris slid to the floor, momentarily dazed. She blinked once and saw Clayton's sleeping body past the Lor's outline before the creature was charging. He grasped both her wrists in one strong hand and twisted her arms over her head. Though the

movement hauled her to her feet, he pulled her high enough to keep her toes from touching the floor.

It put them eye to eye. Black, beady reptilian eyes to her wide hazel ones. He had the same latticework of marks over his face as the first creature had, the pattern again looking just like her hands. The question of how they could be the same fluttered through her mind, immediately replaced by a swell of panic when he bared his sharp teeth.

"I don't care about your stupid war!" she cried. "You don't have to do this!"

His eyes narrowed. "Yes," he hissed. "I do."

She wished her hands weren't useless over her head. Obviously, this Lor knew more about what she could do than the first one had. Or the first one had just been stupid. She could use another stupid attacker, right about now.

"Why?" she kept on. "I'm not even there. I'm here. There's no war here."

"Your Guardian is here. That is enough."

"It's not like I invited him!"

His other hand came up to her throat, pressing into her windpipe and cutting off more than her voice. "It does not matter, Sentry."

Black spots danced in front of her eyes. Iris writhed against the wall, kicking out to try and hit anything that would make him loosen his grip, anything to get a lungful of air.

*Not like this. God, I didn't want to go like this...*

The sharp crack of a gun rang throughout the hallway. The Lor jerked, his hand around her throat relaxing enough for

Iris to gulp for breath, and a spray of something wet soaked the front of her shirt. Another shot had the creature letting her go completely, and both of them crumpled to the floor.

Iris lifted her light head to see Ted sprawled in the outline of the open back door, the gun in his hand. One half of his face was scored raw, split open by the obvious rake of the Lor's claws, and blood ran freely from his swollen lower lip, but his eyes were pure fury, the stubborn resolve of the doctor she knew and respected. He spat once, spraying droplets of blood along the wall, then let his arm fall, the weight of the gun too much for him to hold up any longer.

She crawled down the hall to check on him. Every inch was a nightmare, her stomach ready to heave the chili she'd had earlier as she fought the vertigo from almost choking to death. By the time she reached Ted's side, her shirt stuck to her back in wet patches, and beads of sweat dotted her brow.

"Where did it get you?" In spite of her lightheadedness, Iris ran expert hands over his sides and back, trying to find any other injuries.

"Something in my gut. And I won't be winning any beauty pageants any time soon."

"I need to turn you over."

Ted waved her off. "That thing was looking for you, Iris. And it specifically mentioned Clayton. Go check on him. Make sure he's okay."

"But you're—"

"Go!" The barked word was followed by round of wet coughing, and another spray of blood stained the floor. "I'll

try to get to exam three. Come in there once you know Clayton's okay."

It was pointless arguing with him. Rising to her feet, Iris took a single step before her hand shot out to the wall, using it to steady herself as her body threatened to topple over. She groped along until she reached the surgery door, only stopping to look over at the inert form of the Lor warrior. That was two in one day. Avi's fears about her being in danger weren't unfounded.

The Lor had switched on the lights, and Iris had to blink against the brightness. Clayton looked the same through the glass window separating the two rooms, but she went to him anyway, already feeling a little stronger by the time she pressed her fingers to his pulse. It was steady, and a quick scan of his body said the Lor hadn't touched him. She made it back to the outer room and headed straight for the phone.

Her answering machine picked up. Not that she was surprised.

"Avi, pick up. There was another attack." She waited for a second, but when she still heard the open air of the machine, she repeated, a little louder, "Avi, it's Iris. I'm at the clinic, and another of those—"

She sighed in relief when the machine clicked and his voice came over the line. "Iris? Are you hurt? What happened?"

Rubbing her eyes, she leaned her elbows against the counter as she spoke. "I don't have time to get into it. It got Ted pretty bad, and I have to go check on him. But I need you to get down here. I don't know if there's another one out there, and it went after Clayton and I don't know, and I need

you." Her words tumbled faster and faster until she was gasping for air again. It took the soothing tone of Avi's voice to focus her again.

"Don't worry, Iris. I'll be right there. I promise. Take a deep breath, and listen to me." She squeezed her eyes shut and honed in on him, on the calm cadences of his promises as he talked her down from hyperventilating.

"Okay, I'm better," she said. "Just get here as fast as you can. Obviously, I can't do this without you."

"You can," Avi assured. "But we'll talk about that later."

The line went dead. Somehow, Iris found the strength to rise and walk out to see to Ted.

## Chapter Seven

Ted frowned when they heard the front door open and close, his head turning away from Iris to scowl at the shared wall. "When it rains, it pours," he muttered.

He tried to sit up, and she immediately pressed him back down onto the exam bed. "It doesn't matter how hard it's pouring. Don't move. I'll take care of whoever it is."

She knew exactly whose footsteps she heard in the hall, but if Avi walked in on his own two feet, Ted was going to think his injuries from the Lor were even worse than she'd told him and he was hallucinating. They were bad, yes, but all were treatable. He would be fine as long as he didn't get attacked again.

Silently, she prayed that it was over for him.

She intercepted Avi peering in the office door. He was dressed but barefoot, and his backpack dangled from his hand. Before she had a chance to say anything, his eyes widened, and he dropped the pack, grabbing her by the shoulders to hold her at arms' length.

"You didn't tell me you were hurt," he said. His nose twitched, and his brow furrowed. "Wait. That's not your blood."

Iris glanced down to look at the stains on her shirt. Some were arterial spray from the Lor where Ted had shot him; the rest was Ted's, and she plucked at the fabric to pull it away where it had adhered to her skin.

"It's gotten a little messy in here. I'm still cleaning Ted up." Lifting her head, she tried to smile, but couldn't quite do it, even if it felt really good to have somebody around who could help. "Thanks for getting here so fast."

His hands relaxed where he held her, though he didn't let go. His attention had shifted, upward to her neck, and something hard glinted in his eyes. "You also didn't tell me it strangled you."

Bruises must already be forming, she realized, and she touched her throat without thinking. "I was a little hysterical when I called you, remember? And anyway, it's not important. It didn't succeed."

"And they won't. I'm not leaving you alone again. It doesn't matter how much you argue with me."

She was ready to argue with him now, but Iris dismissed the notion. There were other, more important things to be done, and she was too tired to tackle them alone. "Can I get you to get rid of the body again?" She gestured toward the creature that still slumped in the hall. "I'm going to have to mop up the blood if we don't want too many questions asked. And I've got to finish with Ted, and then there's Clayton—"

"You said it attacked Clayton, too?"

"I don't know about 'attacked'. But Ted said it mentioned Clayton and I caught it coming out of the surgery. It looks like he's untouched, but..." She chewed at her bottom lip. "I don't think he should stay here. I'd like to take him with us."

Iris expected protestation. At the very least, she anticipated reluctance. When Avi nodded, it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders.



"He brought me to you. I owe him much more than protection."

With one less thing to worry about, Iris wriggled free. "I'll poke my head out to check when you're done. The sooner we get out of here, the better I'm going to feel."

Avi grabbed her arm to prevent her from walking away just yet. "Did anything else happen you didn't tell me about? Because surprises don't do either of us any good. You need to be honest with me about everything."

"No. I don't think there was anything else." He was too strong to try and get free of physically, so Iris laid a hand over his to try and reassure him that way. "If I thought it was important, I promise I'd tell you about it. But you have to trust me a little, too, Avi."

It took a moment, but he finally nodded and released her, his hand coming up to ghost over her bruises. "I just don't like seeing you hurt," he murmured. "It means I've failed."

Her throat tightened, and an array of goosebumps rippled down her back. "Hurt is better than dead."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Iris fled then, retreating to the exam room and the easier issue of Ted. She fielded his barrage of questions with a practiced ease, keeping up the chatter to try and block out any noise from the hallway. How Avi was getting rid of the Lor, she didn't know, but she wasn't ready to ask for specifics until she didn't have a choice in the matter. There were some things better left a mystery, no matter how compelled Avi might be to tell the whole story.

Ted was a model patient until she pulled out the morphine. "I don't need any of that," he complained. "Now put it away."

"Because you didn't get skewered less than an hour ago? I don't think so." She filled a glass with water from the sink and carried it with the pills to the bed. "This will get you some sleep. I'm going to call Roland to come and take you home, and then I'm going to get the word out that the clinic's temporarily closed."

After he popped the drugs, she held the glass for him so that he could take a long sip. "What're you going to do?"

Iris ducked her head as she went back to the sink to dump the rest of the water. She wasn't the greatest liar at the best of times, and she had to tread carefully with how much she gave away. "I'm going to hole up for a little while and take care of Clayton. Don't count on me being back for a week or so. At least long enough for him to not need me waiting on him twenty-four seven."

His hand shot out and grabbed her arm. It was shockingly strong, though as soon as she looked up, Ted loosened his fingers. "I don't know what that thing was that broke in," he said. "And I don't want to know. But you've always been like a daughter to me, Iris, and the fact that it came here looking for you ... well, you take as much time as you need. I'll make sure that nothing untoward gets said."

She wanted to hug him. Tears pricked the back of her eyes, brought on by exhaustion, brought on by the overwhelming events of the past twelve hours, brought on by the relief that her trust in this man she considered family long before his declaration wasn't unfounded. It was tempting to

tell him the truth about what really was going on, but his assertions about wanting to be left in the dark stayed her tongue. Instead, she leaned down and kissed his uninjured cheek.

"Get some sleep," Iris murmured. "And don't worry about me."

Ted harrumphed as his eyes closed. "That's like telling me not to breathe."

She smiled as she retreated to the hall, shutting the door silently behind her. When she saw the deserted corridor, though, she froze. No trace of the Lor remained. No blood. There were splinters in the wall where the gunshots must have ricocheted or something, but other than that, it looked like nothing had happened.

The door to the surgery stood open. Iris hurried inside just in time to see Avi lift Clayton from the bed, carrying him as if he was a child. She had assumed he was strong, but seeing the proof with her own eyes was something else entirely. Clayton was not a small man, and yet Avi turned with him in his arms like he wasn't holding anything more cumbersome than folded bedding.

He stilled when their eyes met. "I didn't realize his injuries were so extensive," he said, glancing down at the casts on both of Clayton's legs. "It doesn't seem right that I've been able to heal from mine so quickly, and he will have months of recovery ahead of him."

It was the first time it dawned on Iris that Avi was walking normally. Not only that, he'd been standing in the shower, as if the pain he'd felt when she'd been dressing his calves didn't

exist. "Is that a shifter trait?" she asked. "Super healing powers?"

He shrugged. "A Guardian takes many powers from the animals he forms. It's different for each one. Not everyone is as fortunate as I am." He nodded toward the door. "Can we go now?"

Iris glanced around. She needed to take supplies, but she could always call Roland from her house. Ted was asleep, the hallway was cleaned up, and as far as she knew, nothing else needed to be done.

"I don't see why not. How long does it take to get to ... Varana, did you call it?"

"Not long. I have everything in my pack. Except..." Something almost panicked passed behind his eyes. "Can we go out to where the crash was before we go back to your house? There's something I need to find."

"There wasn't much out there," Iris said. "And what there is, is mostly ruined. What're you looking for?"

Avi glanced at her the moment before he headed for the doorway. "Your key to Varana. So you can travel back and forth of your own free will."

He left her standing in the surgery, wondering about his cryptic responses. The only things in his backpack were his clothes and the large blue crystals. The latter had to be utilized in some way for the travel to Varana, but what did he mean by *her* key?

The connection came when she heard the front door shut again. Hurrying out and down the hall, Iris went straight for the box of salvage from the crash site that sat in the foyer.

She crouched down and rooted inside until she found the delicate necklace she remembered. It looked even more beautiful by the light of day, the chain like golden fire over her fingers. The similarity was there to the crystals, too. She had no doubt this was what Avi had meant.

Slipping it into her pocket, Iris darted back to the supply room to fill her arms with anything and everything she thought they might need. Avi was just coming back inside as she emerged, and her mouth was open to tell him about the necklace when she noticed his bare feet.

"You're going to get frostbit," she said. "Where are your shoes?"

He smiled. "The cold doesn't bother me. Are we ready?"

Iris hurried forward and dropped the supplies into the salvage box. Some of them spilled out, and Avi crouched down at her side in order to replace them. "This should do us. I'm assuming we can take things along?"

"Yes, but only what you can comfortably carry. We'll have a little travel once we get there, and I'll have Clayton."

She sat back on her heels and reached into her jeans. "Is this what you wanted to look for?" she asked, letting the necklace dangle from her fingers.

Immediate relief flooded his face. "Yes," Avi murmured. "Thank goodness. I was afraid it was lost."

"And it's mine?"

"I brought it for you. I had it specially created when I left. I didn't want you to think that I'd deny you anything by taking you back to Varana with me." Taking it from her hand, Avi slipped it over her head, letting the pendant fall between

her breasts. "I can show you to how to use it later. But for now, we have to get going."

Iris nodded, fingering the small stone. "Take this stuff out to the truck. I'll be there in a second."

She sat there on the floor for long seconds after Avi left. The more she learned, the deeper she fell. This was the stuff of fairy tales, the dreams of little girls around the world who never thought they were special. Iris had never had those dreams. She'd always known she was different. She just hadn't known how.

\* \* \* \*

The drive back to her house was quiet, mercifully so. Avi had positioned Clayton across the narrow back seat, which had the unfortunate side effect of forcing him to wake as he sat up. Though he remained like that for the journey, he spent most of the trip with his eyes closed, his mouth tight as he probably focused on ignoring the pick-up's jarring motions. Iris reminded herself to give him some more painkillers when they got home. She had no idea what going to Varana would entail, and the last thing she wanted was to cause Clayton any more pain.

Nobody spoke until she pulled into her driveway.

"Do I want to know what's going on?" Clayton asked from the back.

Iris glanced in her rearview mirror to see him watching them. "The clinic got attacked," she explained. "So we're getting you somewhere safe."

"No offense, but didn't you say your house got attacked this morning?"

"We're going back to Varana, my friend." Avi grinned. "I didn't think you'd have a problem with that."

The change in Clayton was immediate. The worry lines in his brow disappeared, and his mouth softened. "No, definitely not."

He tried to sit up straighter, but as soon as he winced, Avi climbed out of the truck to go around to the back door. Iris left him to carry Clayton inside as she hurried to unlock the house. A blast of heat hit her cheeks, and her stomach rumbled again at the faint scent of chili that still hung in the air. Before they went anywhere, she needed to pack food. She had no idea what was going to be waiting for them in Varana.

With so much to do, it was easy to lose time. Avi settled Clayton on the couch, and she heard the low murmur of their voices as he filled the other man in on everything that had happened. Iris would have liked to hear the details of their conversation, but she had more pressing things on her list, like calling Roland to get Ted taken care of.

"Can you spread the word about us closing the clinic, too?" she said. She divvied up the sliced ham on the open slices of bread, emptying the pack before starting with the sliced cheese. "With Ted out of commission, and me taking care of Clayton, people are going to have to fend for themselves for a little bit."

"Giving you and Clayton time alone together? I don't think there's anybody in town willing to nose in on that."

Iris rolled her eyes, brushing off his matchmaker tone. "Yes, because seducing a man with two broken legs is the height of romance."

"Just means he's not running anywhere. Easy pickings."

"Are you going to take care of telling everyone for me?"

"You know I will. You need me to run anything out for you when I pick up Ted?"

The thought of Roland showing up and seeing Avi made her panic. "No, no, I'm good. I'm all stocked up, and I grabbed plenty of supplies from the clinic, just in case. Just make sure Ted takes it easy. That wild animal that got to him really did a number."

"Means I've got a cast-iron bridge partner for the next few days. Sounds like a win-win to me. Call if you need anything, Iris."

She hung up as she finished putting the sandwiches together. One thing down, about a million more to go.

She was rummaging around in her pantry, trying to decide what they could take that wouldn't require cooking or extra utensils, when Avi appeared in the doorway.

"You should go pack," he said, crouching at her side. "I can gather supplies, but we need to get moving before another Lor finds your home."

Iris sat back on her heels. "How do we get to Varana from here?"

"The crystals open the portal between dimensions. But when we leave, there'll be a trail. The Lor might not find it right away, but they don't give up, and I don't think it'll take long for them to realize you're not here any more."



"Will you tell me more about them at some point?" She toyed with her pendant. "It would be nice to know why they're so determined to kill me. It can't be just because I'm a Sentry. Varana has more than one, right?"

Avi nodded. "As soon as I have you someplace safe, I promise. I'll answer your questions. Now go pack." He called after her as she stood and headed for the bedroom. "And don't worry about bundling up. Varana doesn't have the extreme cold like Alaska does."

Iris gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir."

His chuckle followed her as she went down the hall to the bedroom. Not that cold in Varana. Check.

What else was she going to find in this other world? The answers to everything Avi had introduced? She hoped so. Living in a state of flux was only exciting in the movies.

## Chapter Eight

By the time she came out to the living room with her largest duffel bag bursting at the seams, the room had almost entirely changed. At some point, Avi had rearranged the worn furniture, pushing everything as close to the walls as possible to clear the biggest section of the floor he could manage. The crystals marked a pentagon on the carpet, and along one side, Clayton sat with his legs stretched out in front of him, using the supplies they'd already packed to lean against.

Avi took her duffel and placed it inside the pentagon, indicating for Iris to sit with it. "This is quite simple," he explained. "The crystals act as a focal point, to concentrate the energy that separates this world from ours. Think of it like sheets of paper, one atop another. Opening a portal strips away one to leave anything contained within them on the next. So we won't actually be moving for this to happen. It'll look like the room is dissolving around us, while Varana slowly appears."

Iris curled her legs beneath her, glancing down at the carpet. "Do you get to manipulate where it takes us? Because I don't think I like the idea of suddenly sitting in a puddle of water, or the middle of a lake, or something."

Avi smiled while Clayton chuckled. "It's not a revolving portal," Avi said. "My crystals have a fixed locus in Varana. Any time I return, I always return to the same spot."

"Which is...?"

"A small cave near my parents' home. It's only a few hours trek from there to safety, but it's still far enough away to keep danger from them in case something follows me."

She watched as he began shedding his clothes. It surprised her that Clayton seemed unperturbed by Avi's growing nudity. Maybe because he knew what was coming next.

"So is that where we're going?" she asked, trying not to let her gaze linger on the sculpted muscles that slowly came into view. "Your parents'?"

"For now. My family will protect Clayton, and it'll give us time to rest before I can show you around."

"Do they know about me?"

"They know that I set out to find you. That'll be enough for them." He stepped out of his jeans and carefully placed them atop the duffel. Iris risked a glance at his calves. His wounds were entirely gone. "Don't be worried, Iris," he added, crouching down to meet her eyes. "I think you're going to be pleased with Varana. You'll know it, just like you knew me."

She wanted to toss out there that she hadn't known him, not in the way he was thinking, but already Avi was changing before her eyes. His skin rippled, the pale hair on his head spreading to cover his neck and chest, while his arms lengthened, his legs shortened. His long nose flattened, grew broader, and the slight slant to his green eyes grew more pronounced as the entire shape of his head altered. It took only seconds for him to shift completely into the white panther she'd seen on her lawn, but Iris felt every one of

them, her heart thundering by the time the transformation was done.

"God, you're so beautiful," she breathed, reaching out to stroke him. He ducked his head, pushing back against her hand, and she deepened the caress, burying her fingers in the plush fur. "Do you understand me when you're like this?"

Avi lifted his head and made a sound in his throat that was more like a housecat's chattering.

"I think that's a yes," Clayton said.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from him. Any fears she'd had dissipated, and she skimmed her hand along his neck, edging closer to allow her other hand to reach out and touch a front paw. It was huge, broader across than hers with all her fingers splayed. Retracted claws betrayed his power, but when she slipped her palm beneath it, feeling the rough pads against her scars, a shock not dissimilar to that when they had first touched leapt through her veins.

Her eyes shot wide. When she looked up, Avi was watching her. She almost thought he was smiling.

"I don't know how you can question him, Iris. You should see the way you two are together. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it."

She'd certainly never felt anything like it. It took everything she had to withdraw from petting Avi, and she sat back, her skin flushed, her mind a whirlwind of confusion. Avi crept forward and bowed his head, his wet nose brushing against her cheek. In the next moment, she felt the rough texture of his tongue along her jaw.

"Is this part of opening the portal?" she asked. Her voice was too high. She sounded as breathless as she felt, and she had to struggle not to turn her head and bury her nose in the soft fur.

"I think this is just part of Avi showing you what you need to know," Clayton said behind her.

She squeezed her eyes shut as Avi withdrew, already too aware of his absence. It took a moment to reclaim the rhythm of her breathing. By the time she did, Avi had turned his back to her, trotting to the center of the pentagram and sinking to his belly.

His large head lowered until his nose touched the floor. If he'd been human, she would have sworn he was praying. Considering the circumstances, that was probably what he was doing anyway. A low rumble began to fill the room, but before she made the connection that it was Avi purring, the sharp edges of her world started to blur.

How had he described it? Like a long, slow dissolve.

The walls faded, darkened, grew irregular in shape as the tiny flowers on her wallpaper disappeared. Beneath her bottom, the carpet smoothed out, disintegrating into a fine grit, while the temperature of the room noticeably dropped. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't warm, either. Dank, she decided. The smell of her chili that had never really gone away was replaced by the rich scent of earth and moisture, and as if from a long distance, Iris heard the burble of splashing water.

Clayton let out a careful breath. "First time he did this," he murmured, "I thought he'd slipped drugs into my beer. Are you all right?"

Iris nodded. Sensations were still washing through her, an aching familiarity that Avi had claimed would occur. She hadn't believed him. *How* could she believe him? It shouldn't be like this, shouldn't be so utterly simple. But it was.

In the darkness, it was easier to see the pale light emitted by the crystals. She was pretty sure they hadn't been doing that back in her house, or at least, they hadn't done it prior to Avi's praying. She glanced down. Though it was tucked inside her blouse, her vantage made it clear that the pendant she wore glowed with the same low intensity. Like called to like.

She lifted her head to meet Avi's opened gaze.

He was still in panther form, but the purring had stopped, his muscles completely motionless as he watched her reactions. Iris reached down and scooped up some of the loose dirt, sifting it through her fingers.

"All right," she said. "You win. Maybe that wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be."

Avi gave her that cat-smile of his. He rose to his feet, his back curving as he stretched his long body. When Iris tried to stand, too, he padded over and rested a heavy paw on her thigh.

"Why can't I come with you?"

Pointedly, Avi looked over his shoulder at Clayton.

"Oh." Guilt rushed through her, and she sat back again.

"Are you going to be long?"

A shake of his head. It was amazing how expressive he was in this form.

The moment Avi stepped outside the pentagon, the light in the crystals disappeared, snuffed out like fragile flames. The

dark was nearly complete, and in spite of his instruction to the contrary, Iris crawled forward, dirt grinding beneath her fingernails until she touched the hard plaster of Clayton's cast.

"Can you see anything?" she asked.

"No."

Using his leg as guidance, she edged closer until she felt his solid body at her side. It felt better than being alone. The dark didn't normally bother Iris, but this whole situation wasn't even close to normal.

"Do you know what Avi's doing?"

Clayton's arm came around her back, warm and soothing. "Probably checking to see what's outside the cave so that we don't get ambushed. He did that last time he brought me, though I got to follow him at a distance then. He wasn't going to let me remain alone, even if we are in a cave."

"You like him."

"He's a friend, yes. But I think what you really want to know is do I trust him. And I do, Iris. With my life. Did he tell you he pulled me out of the copter?"

Her head turned toward him in surprise, more out of instinct than any thought she'd actually see his face. "I thought you were both unconscious when Roland and Ted brought you in."

"We were. But I was awake enough when we crashed to be aware that I was wedged in the seat too tight to get free on my own. Avi did that before I passed out." Admiration colored his voice. "I know how hard it is to believe so much of what

he says, but he's a man of honor. You can do far worse than him."

Listening to Clayton talk was exactly why Iris had dismissed Aunt Jess' warnings. Perhaps the Guardians Jess had known were different beasts; Avi was clearly cut from his own cloth. She'd trusted him enough to come with him to Varana, hadn't she? Of course, that had ulterior motives, not the least of which was to keep her friends safe from any more Lor attacks.

She looked around, trying to make out details of the darkness. Where *were* the Lor from? Avi made it sound like they were all from the same dimension. A neighboring culture? Most likely. The real question was, why were they even at war in the first place?

A soft scratching echoed through the cave, and Iris stiffened the second before a flash of white appeared against the dark. In the next instant, the crystals began to glow again, revealing Avi stepping back into the pentagram, his large paws barely disturbing the dirt. He was already shifting back into his human form by the time his tail flicked across the perimeter and turned vivid eyes toward both of them as he reached for his pile of clothes.

"It's clear," he said. "But there's a storm brewing, and odds are very good we'll get caught in it before we reach my parents'."

"When you say storm—"

"Rain. Heavy. But it's warmer outside than it is in here, and we might get lucky and miss it entirely."



Iris glanced at Clayton's legs. "We can't risk it," she said. "If we get caught, it'll ruin the casts, and I didn't bring anything to make new ones."

"Then we'll stay here for the night," Avi said. He buttoned up his jeans, but didn't bother with the shirt, instead going over to the duffel. "I can't attest what kind of supplies my family will have, and we'll be safe enough in here for a few more hours."

"Night? How long did it take us to get here?"

"As long as it felt. But Varana's time is skewed slightly from yours. It's nearly midnight here."

"Oh." That made more sense. "Okay, then."

Though it wasn't, really. It might have been her decision, but Iris wished they didn't have to waste even more time by hiding in the cave. The answers she sought weren't here; they lay beyond the mouth of their sanctuary and in the unknown Varana. How much longer was she going to have to wait to get them?

\* \* \* \*

With an exhausted sigh, Iris stretched out on the makeshift bed Avi had made for her. She couldn't keep her eyes open. So much had happened today, and all she wanted was to sleep. Clayton was already there. After a leisurely meal of sandwiches and fruit, he'd drifted off before Iris could even give him any more morphine. She hoped that meant the pain was more manageable. For his sake.

Avi never stopped moving.

"Clayton needs a stretcher," he said. "And the rain will make things too wet to use easily if I don't make it now."

He left flickering candles for illumination every time he slipped out of the pentagram. It was easier to hear him beyond its perimeter, as if the dancing light sharpened her senses, and she drifted in and out of sleep as he worked, only opening her eyes when he returned to the security of the crystals.

When he came back the final time with a carrier made of sapling branches, she rolled onto her side in order to watch him lean it against the wall. "Are you ever going to sleep?"

A crooked smile creased his features. "The same could be asked of you," he teased.

"At least humor me and lie down. You can always do more after I fall asleep."

Avi grabbed his shirt and rolled it into a ball as he sat down next to her. The crystals cast a blue sheen over his pale skin, and his muscles rippled as he mirrored her position, using his shirt as a pillow as he propped up his head. "Will this do?"

Iris rolled her eyes, but it was all in good fun. "You're mocking me."

"A little." His smile softened, and his free hand brushed over her brow. "It's been a long time since anybody cared about my well-being. It's supposed to be my responsibility to worry about you, not the other way around."

"Aren't we supposed to be partners?" The ghosted touch made her shiver, but she didn't pull away from it. "Partners watch out for each other, last time I checked."

"I thought you wanted to be rid of me."

His fingertips trailed down the side of her face, skimming down her neck. Memories of the electricity that had passed between them when he had been in panther form made her squeeze her eyes shut, and Iris swallowed against the tightness of her throat when his exploration descended further.

"You're kind of handy to have around when things are trying to kill me," she managed to say.

"Is that all?"

His hand was at the open collar of her shirt, stopped by the thudding of her pulse. When she opened her eyes again, his lashes were ducked, his attention hypnotized by the rhythmic pounding. She couldn't see what he was thinking. It dawned on her that she didn't like that.

"I don't understand," Iris whispered. "I shouldn't know you. I shouldn't trust you. The woman who I've always thought of as a second mom wants me as far away from you as possible." He looked up at that, and his eyes glowed in the ambient light. "I shouldn't feel this relaxed with you. But I am."

"That just proves that it's right."

"That what's right?"

"This. Us. What we do together."

"We haven't..."

The words choked when his hand started to move again, trailing down between her breasts, undoing the buttons in its way. No more brushes of skin against skin. He seemed too intent in baring her to his sight.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Clayton is here."

"Clayton's asleep."

"That still doesn't tell me what you're doing."

He tugged her shirt free from her jeans, the last of the buttons falling open. "I just want to see you," Avi murmured. "You've seen me."

Her eyes shot wide. "You were my patient! And every time you shift, you lose your clothes! I don't think it's the same thing." The slow spread of his smile made her blush. "You're jerking me around, aren't you?"

"Maybe I'm teasing a little bit." His hand slipped beneath her shirt, curving along her waist. "But that doesn't mean I still wouldn't like to touch you."

Iris held her breath as he traced along her side. It tickled just enough to make her squirm, but she didn't protest when he reached her breast, cupping the full curve. His thumb brushed across her covered nipple, over and over until it pebbled at his touch. Avi didn't make an attempt to move beneath the fabric, however, and she whimpered softly in the back of her throat when his thumb slowed.

"Do you love Clayton?"

His hushed question took her by surprise, and her gaze darted over his shoulder for a moment before returning to regard him. "I love him as a very, very good friend," Iris replied. "Why?"

"Because you were lovers. And you've gone to him for comfort since meeting me. Clayton's my friend. I wouldn't want to do anything that might offend him."

She had to think for a moment to try and figure out what Avi was talking about. "I went to him because it was dark. No other reason."

His long fingers stretched to caress the skin exposed at the upper swell of her breast. "If I had been here, would you have come to me?"

"If you'd been here, it wouldn't have been dark."

"If we'd been someplace else then," he said, unruffled. "I suppose I wonder if I'm just another friend for you."

"I don't know what you are," Iris admitted. "Twenty-four hours ago, I didn't even know you existed."

"You know now."

Sliding beneath the material at her shoulder, Avi pushed the garment off, guiding it downward to bare her arm completely. The shirt pooled behind her, still half-on, but in spite of the coolness of the cave, Iris didn't feel anything but the heat of his palm as he stroked upward over her biceps.

"Why are you avoiding answering my question?" he asked. "It's a very simple one. All you have to do is tell me that I'm overstepping my bounds, and I'll respect that."

But she couldn't. She didn't know what those bounds were any more.

"Clayton's always been there for me," she said instead. "He never judged me or expected something from me that I didn't want to give. That's important to me."

"Have I done that?"

Sincerity shone in his eyes. On impulse, Iris leaned forward and brushed a kiss across his forehead. Before she pulled away, he slid his hand around her neck and gently

tipped her head. In the next moment, his mouth touched hers.

He was warmer than she anticipated, his lips firmer. A sound came from his throat that was half moan and half sigh, and her thighs quivered when he pressed closer. But it wasn't a matter of his deepening the kiss. It was a matter of how thorough it was. A gentle swipe across her lower lip, a nibble at the corner of her mouth. Her body reacted on instinct, but then again, it had been doing that a lot with Avi lately.

When he broke away, her breathing was ragged. "I don't think you have to worry about Clayton," she said. "He's been throwing me at you ever since he woke up last night."

Any other man might have tossed back a quip about catching her. Avi wasn't any other man. Rolling onto his back, he pulled her with him so that she was nestled securely into his side, his heat mingling with what he'd already generated in hers.

"Sleep," he murmured. She felt the lightest of kisses across the top of her head. "And thank you."

She didn't have time to ask him for what. Between the exhausting events of the past day and the safety of his arms, Iris was asleep before he'd uttered the words.

## Chapter Nine

The closer she got to the cave opening, the more Iris' stomach clenched. The storm had passed, Avi said. There was nothing barring their way to his parents. And now there were no more obstacles stopping her from seeing the world she'd been taken away from over thirty years ago. She was nervous. She didn't know why. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She did know why. She was afraid that seeing Varana with her own two eyes would make all of this real, and then she would have no more excuses to try and explain it all away.

She saw the sunlight streaming across the dirt floor first. It was a deep gold, though that might have been a trick of the rich earth. The color was stuccoed with dark shadows, and they jittered from the slight breeze that filtered through the opening. The next few steps made her blink against the growing brightness, so by the time she stepped outside, her eyes were already well adjusted.

The air was redolent with the scent of rain, the leaves on the tall trees glistening with the droplets that had failed to fall. They blanketed the sky, allowing only peeks of blue to shine through, but the branches were all high, the thick trunks smooth for nearly thirty feet. The ground was covered with a spongy grass, more like moss, without flowers or foliage to break it up. The only thing that marred the smooth expanse of dark green was a trail worn dirt bare, winding away from the cave's mouth.

It could have been anywhere, but Iris knew one thing for certain.

It wasn't Alaska.

While she stopped and stared at her surroundings, Avi and Clayton emerged behind her. Avi was in panther form, the stretcher he'd made strapped to his back. Clayton rested atop it, Iris' sunglasses shielding his eyes from the sun, his body nearly the length of Avi's. Getting him into position had been a minor feat. First, Iris had helped Avi move Clayton onto the stretcher, lashing him down so that any jiggling wouldn't roll him off. Then, Avi had crawled beneath it, securing it around his upper body while still in human form. He'd shifted then, and his powerful feline body had grown to accommodate the bulk of the stretcher, but Iris didn't imagine it was very comfortable for either of them. It was a good thing this wasn't more than a few hours. The morphine she'd used to knock Clayton out wouldn't last much longer than that.

For some reason, it was easier to meet Avi's large eyes when he was in this form. When they had first awakened, his arm had been snugly wrapped around her waist, his nose buried in her neck. It had taken several seconds for her to remember where they were, to remember the shattering kiss the night before and whose hard body it was exactly molded around her back. Even when it all came back in a hot torrent, she hadn't moved right away, too afraid of turning around and having to face him again.

She didn't know what she wanted from him. She knew what her body wanted, all right, but her brain was another matter. And Iris had never been one to allow her passions to



rule over her. She made choices based on pragmatic needs, and getting involved with someone she had known for less than twenty-four hours, could shift into the form of animals at the blink of an eye, and came from another plane of existence was the least rational thing she could ever imagine doing.

But she did. Every time she looked at him. Every time she remembered the hot glide of his fingertips over her breast. Every time she heard his voice, or caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye, or felt his touch glance across hers. It was *all* she could think about, and that was the real crux of her dilemma. There were far more pressing things to be concerned about—like warriors intent on killing her, finding out the truth about her parents' death, learning about her true heritage—and here she was, wondering if she would look like a slut if she kissed Avi again. It was insane.

Iris watched the flick of Avi's long tail disturb dirt along the trail.

It might be crazy, but this was what she'd been dealt. She needed to find a way to balance it all out before somebody took the choice away from her.

The trek was leisurely, Avi maintaining a slow, even pace that Iris found simple to keep up with. What made the traveling difficult was the weight of what she had to carry. While she'd only packed what she felt were essentials, she hadn't taken into consideration that Avi would be toting Clayton, leaving her to manage everything else. So on top of the duffel she'd decided back at her house was about her limit, she was dragging the cooler on wheels with the food and medical supplies. Avi, at least, had placed his backpack

beneath Clayton's head, so she was spared the weight of the crystals. But her exertions took their toll, and every half hour or so, she had to touch Avi's shoulder to get him to stop and take a break.

It was on the third that she found the silence finally getting to her.

Avi was stretched out on his stomach along the mossy ground. His front legs were tucked beneath his chin, and his eyes were shut, though Iris got the distinct impression he wasn't asleep. She took a long drink of the warming water in her bottle, then used her sleeve to wipe the perspiration from her forehead.

"I better lose five pounds off this hike," she said out loud, more out of necessity for noise than in expectation of any response.

Avi opened his eyes, long, lazy blinks that took several seconds for him to focus. He offered that cat smile of his before extending one paw, resting it heavily on her calf.

"We're going to have to figure out some way to communicate when you're like this," she said. "I don't suppose mindreading is part of the Sentry package?"

He shook his head. Well, at least she could get yes and no answers out of him. And amusement, if his smiles were anything to go by.

"Is Clayton too heavy for you to shift into something that can talk back at me on my breaks?"

His head tilted as if he was contemplating her question. After several moments, his eyes closed, and his body began

to alter. He only opened his eyes again after he was back into human form.

"We're not that far now," he said. "You can bathe and rest once we're there."

It hadn't occurred to her that having him change meant having to face the man she'd spent the night with. The very naked man, though his front was pressed to the spongy ground. His strong hip and the curve of his ass were still visible, the muscles tensed as they bore the weight of the stretcher. Her cheeks flamed, and she struggled to sound normal as she spoke again.

"Tell me she's got hot water, at least. The fact that we haven't seen a single power line is making me a little nervous about stepping into the Dark Ages."

Avi chuckled. "It'll be hot," he assured. "And we don't use electricity. We have alternate forms of power that are more ecologically friendly."

"Cars?"

"No."

"How do you get around then?"

"The same way we are now."

Frowning, Iris looked down at her feet. They were going to be swollen when she got them out of her shoes.

"Am I going to have to worry about language barriers?" she asked. "I mean, you probably learned English from my world—"

"No, this is my native tongue. We have a few word variations, but for the most part, you shouldn't have problems understanding."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know," came the response. "I imagine your parents chose to escape to a world where they could blend in easily. But life's simpler here. Small clusters of families. And most of us don't leave those circles."

"You did."

"I had to. I was born a Guardian. That doesn't mean I don't come back every opportunity I get." The corner of his mouth lifted. "This is my home."

Clayton stirred in his sleep, causing the stretcher to move slightly on Avi's back. He grunted and shifted the weight, though only a flicker of discomfort passed behind his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Iris said. "I'm being selfish. You should shift back if that's too much weight to bear."

"It's not. I'm fine. I'd much rather talk to you anyway." When he had shifted, the paw on her leg had turned into his hand, and now, his long fingers massaged her sore muscles through her jeans. "Just so you're warned, my mother is going to want to put us in the same room."

She jerked away, suddenly not so tired any more. "What? Why?"

If he was bothered by her retreat, he didn't show it. "Because you're my Sentry. She knows what my responsibility is toward you."

"Oh. Right." Inwardly, she kicked herself. Maybe Avi didn't consider the night they shared all that unusual. She could very well be making a mountain out of a molehill. "Thanks for the warning, though."

His features smoothed, his gaze contemplative. "You're going to share my bed, too, though, right? We've settled this?"

Her muscles seized up again, as well as her stomach this time. "We have?"

"I thought I made myself clear last night. And you assured me Clayton wasn't a factor for us."

*Us.* It was unnerving the way he said the word so easily. "I didn't do all this for there to be an us," Iris said. "I barely know you. I barely know about this place. And I know even less about what's going on. There really can't be room for an us, can there?"

"There has to be," Avi said softly. "You'll see that eventually."

"Why? Because of some ... *duty* about Sentries and Guardians that I don't know anything about? That's not a reason for people to get sexually involved. That's like ... romance in the workplace. It never works out."

"Never is awfully definitive. And I don't presume to want you just because you're my Sentry. Why can't you accept that I might find you attractive on your own merits? Clayton did."

She pressed her lips together. His argument was so calm and rational that it was difficult to refute. It was also frustrating as hell, because she didn't want it to be so simple.

"Can we try talking about this again when I'm not exhausted and you don't have a man strapped to your back?" she tried to joke.

"Of course," came the immediate reply. "Are you ready to continue?"

She nodded, and as she rose back to her feet, trying to ignore the cracking in her back as her joints protested, Avi shifted back into the panther. Iris hung back to allow him to start down the path first. Presumably, it was to let him lead the way, but even more so, it was to hide her face from him. He had the uncanny ability to know exactly what she was thinking, and with so much food for thought, she wanted time to mull it all without feeling self-conscious.

He wanted to be lovers.

That implied he wanted her for longer than the night or two she thought she'd be staying.

Iris sighed. Life had been easier when she was just a nurse in a tiny Alaska town. Would that ever satisfy someone like Avi?

Even more ... would that satisfy her again after seeing what life was like in Varana?

\* \* \* \*

The trees broke an hour later, opening into a wide field where the mossy ground was broken by patches of short, bright purple flowers. In the near distance, a large house sprang out of the ground, two stories high with rounded curves instead of corners. Avi's pace quickened, and Iris knew without having to ask that this was their destination. He was in too much of a hurry for it not to be.

As they approached, more details became visible. The house looked like it was constructed out of a combination of clay and dirt, wide planking clearly marking the long walls with smooth arches rooting it to the ground. More of the

spongy moss covered the foundation, which gave it the appearance of growing from the earth itself, and an overhang that ringed the first floor gave shelter from the warming sun. A lower building stood behind it, with the same type of canopy. If she didn't know they didn't have cars, she would have thought it was a garage.

It was a curved door in the secondary building that opened first, and a tall figure stepped out, wiping his hands on a cloth. He was halfway to the house when he spotted them, and though they were still a few hundred yards away, she saw his eyes narrow as his pace slowed. Within seconds, his course changed, and a shout out to the main house had that door opening as well.

Her heart thumped as they got closer. Two other people had emerged to follow the first man out onto the path, and now, all three converged on Iris and Avi. When Avi stopped, so did she, even though his immediate shift into human form told her why he'd done so. She watched as they exchanged excited greetings, trying to melt into the background as the trio unstrapped Clayton from Avi's back.

"Something tells me this is going to be a good story," the youngest of the three said. He had the same sharp features as Avi, but his coloring was different, his hair and eyes both dark. "You never come home without something new to tell."

"I came home with something better this time." As he grabbed his backpack, he nodded in her direction. "This is Iris Bridge."

Her name startled all three of them, and all heads snapped to stare at her as they set Clayton to the ground. The first

man, the oldest with streaks of white in his dark hair, was the first to step forward. His black eyes scrutinized every detail, from the tips of her dusty shoes to her sweat-beaded brow. After a beat, she shifted the weight of the duffel to hold out her hand.

"You've got to be Avi's father," she said, trying to hold a friendly smile. "It's an honor to meet you."

Her words made him frown, but slowly, he reached out, not to take her offering, but instead to turn her palm upward. The sight of her marks made the two younger men whisper between them, but Avi's father immediately released her, taking a step back and bowing his head.

"I am Penverol," he said. "Welcome to our home."

Behind them, Avi smiled as he pulled on his jeans. "The rude ones are my brothers, Hai and Malik. Pardon their behavior, but they never believed you existed."

The first one who had spoken whirled on Avi, shoving him good-naturedly. "Not true. We just never thought you'd be smart enough to find her."

"Considering it took him so long, maybe he's not so much smart as just lucky," the other said.

"Enough." Penverol gestured toward Clayton, and the two immediately picked him up again. "Take him inside. Your mother will let you know where to put him up."

They shot Iris one more glance before doing as they were instructed. Slipping on his shirt, Avi called after them, "Don't drop him! He's a friend!"



This was a different Avi than the one she'd come to know. This one was more relaxed, more casual with his jokes. The brotherly banter even made her smile.

"Iris knows nothing of Varana," Avi was saying to Penverol. "After she's rested, I was going to take her out to the sanctuary. I think the other Sentries would like to meet her."

Though Penverol agreed, Iris stepped between them. "You didn't say anything about meeting other Sentries," she argued. "I told you why I wanted to come."

"They need to know you've been targeted," Avi explained.

Penverol stiffened. "She's been targeted? How? You only just found her."

She knew him well enough now to recognize the evasive duck of his head. "They must have been following me," he admitted. "Iris says she'd never seen them prior to my arrival."

"And now you've led them here?"

Avi bristled at the accusation. "I won't let anything happen. You know that. And I needed some place safe. For us, and for Clayton. He almost died getting me to Iris."

"You should have gone straight to the sanctuary."

"I didn't have time—"

"That doesn't give you the right to put this family into danger!"

Avi's nostrils flared. "You mean, more danger than I already do, of course, don't you, Father?"

She hated witnessing their argument. It felt too personal, like she'd inadvertently walked in where she wasn't wanted.

But when she tried to back away, Avi turned his head toward her.

"Don't," he said.

"I'm in the way."

"No." Without asking, he took her hand and entwined their fingers. "I believe *I'm* the one in the way."

She didn't protest when he began leading her toward the house, even when he refused to look behind them. She didn't speak until they were well out of hearing distance, but still far enough away from the front door to get a little privacy.

"If this is going to be too much, I can just go back," she tried.

Avi glanced at her, a line between his brows. "Is that what you really want?"

No. But she didn't want to create more strife for him, either.

"I'll go to Aunt Jess'," she answered instead. "She'll know what to do."

He shook his head. "No offense, but you'll only get both of you killed if you do that. Your aunt isn't one of us. She's been gone too long to understand what the danger is."

"She thinks the danger is you."

"Which proves my point. You know I'm no threat to you."

"Well, maybe not you," Iris conceded. "But you can't speak for all the Guardians. They killed my parents for a reason."

He pulled her to a stop when the front door opened and a slender woman appeared in its frame. "Can I ask one thing while you're here?" he said, bending down to her ear so that she alone could hear it.

"What?"

"Please don't say anything like that in front of my family. Especially my mother. They have their own issues with the Guardians. They don't need yours, as well."

She wouldn't have been so rude to do what he suggested, but Iris agreed anyway, intrigued by what the problems were that he alluded to. His grip was still firm in hers as he resumed their pace, and a smile was on his lips long before they came to a stop before the front door.

Avi bowed his head in deference. "Hello, Mother."

The woman rested a slim hand atop his short hair. "Hello, Avi."

While the structure of his features came from his father, his coloring was all his mother's. Her wide green eyes were warm as they regarded her son, her long white-blond hair plaited down her back. Lines marked the passage of time—strong bows around her mouth, tiny laugh lines at her temples—but her skin was otherwise creamy and smooth. Iris was more than a little awed by her beauty.

"And who do you bring?" she asked, turning her attention to Iris.

Avi straightened. Letting go of her hand, he settled it into the small of her back and pushed her gently forward. "May I present my Sentry, Iris Bridge. Iris, this is my mother, Mila of the Penverol clan."

A surprised light appeared in Mila's eyes, and her wide mouth made a silent o. In the next breath, she had bundled Iris into her arms, pulling her away from Avi as she embraced the younger woman.

A Sentry's Touch  
*by Vivien Dean*

"Welcome home," Mila murmured.

## Chapter Ten

With her duffel at her feet, Iris hovered by the open door as Mila glided around the room, pulling down the blankets on the wide bed, drawing wooden slatted blinds in order to block out the afternoon sun. She seemed bound and determined that Iris was going to take a nap after the long hike, despite her protestations that all she needed was a hot shower.

"I know how long it takes to get from those caves," Mila argued. "And there is no reason you can't have a long rest before dinner."

"But I can wash first, right?" She plucked at her shirt. Sweat and dust made it gritty against her skin. "I'd hate to get everything all dusty."

"Oh, of course."

She strode across the room and pulled open a set of double doors. Inside was dimly lit, but Iris made out a large oblong tub with a bevy of shelves ringing it and a freestanding sink, all made out of a translucent material that looked like clouded glass. Mila bustled around for a moment before the sound of running water filled the bedroom and came out wiping her hands on a thick towel.

"Come," she said, tilting her head toward the tub. "I'll show you how to turn it off when you have enough."

It was simple to figure out, and Iris murmured her gratitude when Mila retreated to leave. The older woman was all the way to the door before she paused and looked back.

"It's good that you're here," Mila said. "Avi needs to take his proper place. He can do that now, with you at his side."

Before Iris had the chance to press, she was gone, shutting the bedroom door silently behind her.

While her head was abuzz with questions, the need to bathe was far more urgent. Iris stripped out of her clothes, leaving them in a pile on the cool clay floor, and sank into the scalding water, sighing with relief as she discovered it was deep enough to immerse herself to her shoulders. She tipped her head back, resting it on the rim so that the tips of her hair dragged across the water's surface. Had anything ever felt so good? Iris was pretty sure the answer to that was no.

She didn't know how much time passed like that, but by the time she heard the outer bedroom door whisper open again, her muscles felt like rubber and she had yet to do anything more strenuous than make ripples in the water. It took all her energy to glance over her shoulder, and she sank further beneath the surface when she saw Avi and not Mila approaching the doorway.

"Do I need to get out now?" she asked. Hopefully, he would leave then. Cuddling with him fully clothed was very different from being ogled naked in the bath.

He paused in the entrance. "Only if you're done. I came to see if there was anything you needed."

"No, no, I'm good." To show him, she reached for the soap Mila had set out for her. "I'm washing up now, and then I'm going to take a nap. My back is killing me."

But he wasn't leaving. He even ventured another step closer.

"I can help with that when you get out," he said. She wouldn't qualify the sweep of his eyes as inappropriate, but it was still more attentive than made her comfortable. Probably because her body warmed to it as much as it did. "And you'll sleep better."

Iris snorted. "Yeah, I just bet you can help," she muttered. When it was obvious he wasn't going anywhere, she began cleaning herself with more vigor. The sooner she wasn't on display for him, the more comfortable she would be. "So is this your room? Your mom didn't say."

"This is where I stay when I come home, yes. Normally, it's Malik's, but my mother makes him stay in Hai's room when I'm here."

"It's the four of them then?"

"Five. I have a sister, as well. Marna. She's been busy taking care of Clayton, but you should get to meet her at dinner."

Iris frowned, imagining a young woman joining the two men she'd already met. "Is that common? This communal living?"

When he answered, his tone conveyed a sense of sad nostalgia. "Just within families. In Varana, children usually stay with their parents until they gain partners of their own. None of us have done that yet."

It explained a bit about Mila's hospitality. It also explained Avi's consistent need to demand closeness. He had grown up surrounded by family. It had probably been very difficult for him to be alone while he searched for her.

Ducking her head below the water, Iris resurfaced to see Avi had taken another few steps closer, leaning against the edge of the sink as he watched her bathe. "I don't really need a guard for this, you know," she said. "I doubt very much I'm going to get attacked in the tub."

He smiled. "I like your skin," he said. "I thought last night that I'd never felt anything so soft before."

Her cheeks grew hot. "I thought we were going to wait until I wasn't so tired to talk about this."

"We're not talking about it. I'm complimenting you."

"You're gawking."

"Appreciating."

"Do you have an answer for everything?"

"I try to." His amusement softened, the vague light in the bathroom making his eyes glow. "I'd rather stay if you don't mind, Iris. It's easier being in here with you, than it is being out there with my family."

Echoes of his father's harsh words came back to her, and some of her irritation faded. "I don't want to make things harder for you," she said.

Avi shook his head. "You're not. Father is overprotective. He knows the Lor won't attack this deep into our lands."

She reached for the shampoo, but her wet fingers fumbled with the smooth bottle, dropping it over the side of the tub. It skittered once, out of her reach, and Avi closed the distance, crouching down to pick it up.

"May I?"

Iris stared at the bottle and the long fingers that held it. "Okay," she breathed.



Any resolve she'd had about her nudity vanished as he knelt behind her. Pouring out some of the honey-colored gel, Avi worked it in his hands before massaging it into her scalp. His new position gave him a closer view of her body beneath the sudsy water, but the first touch had her sighing in pleasure, her head tilting back to allow him the ease with which to wash her hair.

"Your mother seemed glad to have you here," she said. "It can't be all bad."

"She worries about me. Any time she can see me and know I'm fine is good for her."

"Are you the only shifter in your family then?"

"The only Guardian, yes. I'm not sure my mother would have survived worrying about two of us."

Mila's exiting words came back to her, and Iris opened her eyes to gaze up at Avi. "Your mother said something to me. About you taking your proper place. What did she mean?"

He took a few moments to respond, his fingers slowing as they threaded through each strand of hair. "My place with the Guardians," Avi said. His attention was studiously fixed on his task. "Without my Sentry, I've never properly been one of them. I was always the odd one out. I think my mother believes your presence will restore some sort of balance."

"She's not going to like it when I go, then."

His lips thinned. "No. No, she's not." His hands withdrew, plunging into the cooling water to rinse off the soap before he sat back on his heels. "But that's not your concern. When you're ready to leave, that's what we'll do."

She didn't know what to say to him. She didn't owe his family anything, just like she didn't owe Varana. But she *was* indebted to Avi, and the more time she spent with him, the more she realized she liked having him around.

She slid down, submerging her head in order to wash away the shampoo. It made other parts of her body appear—her bent knees, the hard tips of her nipples—but Avi's eyes were still too intent on hers to notice, she realized.

"You can hide out in here as long as you want," she said. "It's your room, too, remember."

His slow smile dispelled any lingering doubts. Without a word, he reached down and helped her rinse away the last of the lather, reaching for the towel when she sat up. He held it up for her as she rose out of the water, wrapping it around her shoulders as soon as Iris stepped out of the tub. Through the thick material, his strong fingers massaged away the few kinks the bath hadn't, and she sighed one more time in satisfaction.

"Would you mind if I had a nap as well?" he asked softly.

She was shaking her head before reason told her not to. "I can't even begin to imagine how tired you must be after lugging Clayton so far." She tugged the towel closer, tucking the ends in so that it would stay up as she dug through her duffel for clean clothes. When she moved to drain the tub, Avi darted in her way, pulling the plug before she could. "Are you going to have a bath first?"

"Later, perhaps."

He followed her out into the main room, the cooler air stippling her skin with goosebumps. Iris worked as quickly as

she could, grabbing the first t-shirt her fingers came into contact with and pulling it over her head before letting the towel fall. Behind her, she listened to Avi strip out of his clothes, but she didn't dare look back at him until she'd slipped on a pair of panties as well.

Her breath caught when she realized he was naked. "Asking for a nap wasn't your way of asking for something else instead, was it?"

"You're tired," he said. "I won't take advantage of that."

She tried to make light of it as she crawled into the bed. "But you'll take advantage of other things?" A moan of delight escaped her throat as she sank into the mattress. "Oh, my god, I think I've died and gone to heaven."

Avi chuckled as he climbed in beside her. "Maybe the best way to keep you here is to keep you in bed, then."

"I think maybe you might be right."

His arm came around her waist, gently pulling her against his chest. Her thin t-shirt did little to shield her from his hard muscles, and when she felt his erection against her bottom, she almost pulled away. Avi must have sensed her unease, because his hold loosened, allowing her the freedom to move if she so wished. She didn't, though. He was warm, and the bed was the best she'd ever been in, and she wanted him there, as much for his sake as hers.

When she didn't resist, Avi slid his arm more tightly around her. "I'm glad you're here," he murmured.

In that moment, in his arms, so was Iris.

\* \* \* \*

This time in her dreams, it was the day that bled.

The world was the same, the same broken trees clogging the earth, the same mud seeping with rainwater too heavy to soak. The pale sky, instead of pricked with stars, glowed a pale blue with a rich yellow sun blazing low on the horizon. For the first time, Iris saw the terrain that terrorized her sleep, the brambles ready to pull at her skin, the shadows protecting any who might try to pursue. It was both frightening and reassuring, and she ventured forth with less trepidation than normally.

Sunlight didn't make it easier to avoid getting caught. If anything, it was worse, because she saw each prickle bury itself in her flesh, incapable of stopping them. She tried stepping lightly, tried running faster, tried altering her course, but nothing worked. Where the undergrowth failed to slow her, the mud sucking her feet down succeeded. Each pace was like running through wet concrete. Each pace slowed her even more.

Her legs ached, and her lungs burned, but Iris knew if she stopped—or worse, if she was caught—that would be the end. Part of her didn't think that would be too bad. No more dreams, no more running, no more fear. Peace. But at what price?

Too big of one. She wouldn't stop. She would go on until she had no other choice.

She saw the shadow swooping over the ground ahead of her, and she looked up, cupping her hands around her eyes in order to try and see what in the sky was making it. A bird, with a wingspan of well over six feet, circled high above,

appearing black in the outline of the sun. As soon as it dipped down, though, she realized it was a trick of the light. The bird was white. Gleaming. With eyes like glittering emeralds.

For the first time since taking flight, she fell. Because she was paying too much attention to the bird. The bird she recognized.

The bird she knew now was Avi.

Her mouth opened to call out his name, but mud choked it off, gritting her teeth and tongue to stifle any sound. Iris pushed at the soft earth, but it rebelled against her, refusing her purchase. It oozed between her fingers and tried to suck her down. Digging her toes into the bramble, she ignored the fresh scratches and the scent of her blood to scramble forward that way, but even that was slow going.

A bird's scream—Avi's, she reminded herself—pierced the air, and she craned her neck to try and find him in the sky. She couldn't see him. She couldn't see much of anything, the sweat dripping down into her eyes. Finally getting a hand free of the muck, she wiped her forehead, but when she pulled it away, it wasn't sweat that smeared the mud. It was blood.

This time, the scream she heard was her own.

\* \* \* \*

"Iris!"

Avi's anxious hiss startled her from sleep, and she blinked against the darkness, trying to figure out where she was. The bed was too soft, and the air was too warm, and since when did she wake up with a man pressed naked behind her?

His hand moved from where it had been resting lightly over her mouth. Fresh air barreled into her throat, and she started to gulp as if she'd been deprived of it, long, loud swallows that made her head spin.

"Take it easy," Avi said. "Breathe. In. Out. Slow. Don't push it. You're going to hyperventilate."

She thought she already was, but she tried to focus on his soothing voice, squeezing her eyes shut. He rubbed her shoulder, continuing his low murmurs, and slowly, gradually, the vise around her chest began to ease, loosening to allow air to pass without impediment.

"You were whimpering." His voice was still dark with worry, his mouth right at her ear. "I tried to wake you up, but then you started to scream, and I didn't think you wanted my family running in here to see us like this."

His words made her roll onto her back, opening her eyes to gaze up at him. "I was ... what?"

It was too dark to even see him. All she made out was the pale glint of his hair. "You must have been dreaming. It sounded like a bad one."

Iris shook her head. "No, it was ... I've always had those dreams."

"Nightmares, you mean."

"No, just dreams. They're anxiety-related. Classic chases. I've had them since I was little."

"Being chased?" He wasn't letting this go. "By what?"

"I don't know. Why is it important? I don't have them all the time. I didn't have one last night."

"But you did now. And don't tell me it wasn't a bad one. You're still shaking from it."

He had a point. Though her breathing was better in control, the rest of her body wasn't, trembling like a feral animal trapped in a cage. Iris pushed back the blankets, ready to try and get out of the bed, but Avi's firm grip around her wrist stopped her.

"I just need to walk this off," she said.

He didn't let go. "Tell me why this one was different."

Her brain worked to come up with a detail that she could share. "It was daytime. It's usually night. So I could see where I was going. But it wasn't helping, so I was probably more anxious because of that."

"Where were you?"

"I don't know. Not Alaska. It didn't look like anyplace I had ever been. The ground's always wet, and mucky, and it's like running through a briar patch." She pulled at his hold.

"Please, Avi, I need to walk around or something. I can't sit here like this."

He sighed as he let her go. "I'll come with you, then. I can smell the dinner my mother made. My stomach keeps growling because of it."

She couldn't see to get up, but followed him when he rose from bed anyway. There was a small click, and a pale light mounted on the wall came on at her side. It hadn't been this dark when she'd fallen asleep.

"What time is it?"

Avi went to a small dresser and pulled open the bottom drawer. "Late. The others have all gone to bed already. We

missed evening meal, but I'm sure Mother left some for us. She knows I never sleep the night through."

Hastily, Iris pulled on a pair of jeans from her duffel. "They're going to think I'm awful." She turned around to see Avi getting dressed as well. She caught a glimpse of his well-toned ass before it disappeared beneath a pair of cotton pants. "Can I do something to make up for being such a terrible houseguest?"

"They're going to think you're tired, that's all." He wasn't bothering with a shirt. All Iris saw as he approached was the sharp definition of his arms and chest as he strode forward and took her hand. "Relax. You're thinking about this too much."

He was probably right. But as she allowed him to lead her out of the room, Iris knew there was little she could do to stop it. It wasn't his world that had been turned topsy-turvy.



## Chapter Eleven

Sleeping for a good part of the day was not conducive to sleeping at night, no matter how much hiking she had done in the morning. Iris was too accustomed to getting by without much at all. Her body woke up with just a few hours, and only pushing it would allow it to rest again. So now here she was, stuck, the kitchen already clean from where she and Avi had reheated and eaten their dinner, nothing else to do but regard Avi with wide eyes and wonder what came next.

"Would you like to take a walk?" he asked, tilting his head toward the door.

Apparently, a midnight stroll came next.

"Is it safe?"

He smiled. "I didn't mean for you to go out alone." He held out his hand. "Come on. The night's clear. It'll be fun."

Iris wasn't sure if he meant it was going to be fun for her or for him, but she took his offering anyway, following him out the back door. The air was cooler than she expected, but not nearly as frigid as she would brave in the same clothing back in Black Bend, and she stepped out from beneath the overhang onto the spongy grass. It felt different in her bare feet. It was like walking on deep, plush velvet, and the dark green nap enveloped her toes, encouraging her to stop and wiggle them against the baby fine filaments.

"My mother used to chase after me with my shoes." She was startled to realize Avi was at her side, standing as perfectly still as she was, with the same fixation on his feet.

"Sometimes I would shift to get away, just so that I could run around in the grass, just like this."

"I'm not sure I'd ever wear them if this is what I had to walk on."

"You might have a different opinion with the first snowfall."

Iris took a few steps, meandering in loose arcs before turning back to face the house. "So when am I going to get to see the parts of Varana that don't make it look like some kind of utopia? Because this is nice, but I know it's not completely real."

"Oh, it's real enough." His eyes glowed in the moonlight as he came out into the yard, wandering in his own abstract paths. "But you're right. It's not all there is. When I take you to the sanctuary in the morning, you'll see that."

"I suppose it's probably rude to go have a visit tonight."

He chuckled, a warm sound that carried on the cool evening wind. "More of a waste of time. If anyone is awake, they're on patrol, and we really shouldn't interrupt that. We'll make a better impression when they won't automatically think we're intruders."

He was winding further and further from the house. Against the ebony night, his exposed skin was a white flame, radiating with strength. He caught her eye and smiled. It was so tender and innocent that it made her chest tighten. He really was a beautiful creature. She had thought he fit against the wild of the Alaskan horizon, but this was where he truly belonged.

"What do you do when you're not nursing?"

The question came out of the blue, though Avi didn't pause in his wandering. "Not a lot," Iris answered honestly. She sank down to the grass, burying her hands into the plush undergrowth. "My life is pretty quiet."

"You spent time with Clayton. What did the two of you do?"

Her body warmed with the memories. "You already know that."

"Other than the sex. You're friends, too. You spent a lot of time together."

"Not a lot," she amended. "Clayton was always traveling. I only saw him once a month, if that."

Avi joined her on the ground, stretching out to lie on his back. "I would have loved even half that with you. I was so jealous of Clayton when I first found out you were friends," he said. "Until I finally told him what I was, what you were, he was extremely private about your relationship. It was very frustrating."

Laying down next to him, Iris stared up at the endless sky with his arm brushing against hers. Something about the dark tapestry dotted with stars seemed familiar, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Maybe a residual memory from when she'd been an infant, she thought. Or maybe the sky was the same, no matter what dimension you were in, and it was just the order of them that changed.

"We talked a lot," she murmured. "He liked to talk about all the places he went to, and I liked to listen to him. It was almost like I had been to those places, too."

"Did you ever ask him to take you?"

"Oh, no. That would've been too presumptuous. Our relationship wasn't like that."

A bird darted across the sky, flickering out of sight before she had the chance to turn her head and follow it. "I think that was a restriction you put on your relationship with Clayton," Avi mused. "I think if you had asked, he would have done almost anything you wished."

The denial was on the tip of her tongue, but something in Avi's tone stopped her from voicing it. It might not have been in the spirit he suggested, but she knew Clayton well enough to believe that he would likely do exactly as Avi said, if only because he considered her a friend.

"What about you?" She rolled onto her side, propping her head up in order to regard him better. "You must have traveled a lot looking for me. Where have you been?"

"Everywhere. Nowhere. A little bit in between." His eyes darkened as he glanced at her, and in the next moment, he was shifting so that he rested on his side as well. "The first place I ever saw outside of Varana was Miami. That's where the Guardians claimed your family had run to. Have you ever been there?" She shook her head. "I didn't think so. I couldn't find a trace of any of your family."

"So what did you do?"

"I went north. Bigger cities, at first. They had better records. But then I figured anybody who had lived here could never manage to live for long in a place without nature all around. So I started looking at less populated areas."

"How did you find Clayton?"

Avi chuckled. "I didn't. He found me."

She listened as he told the story of soaring over the Washington coast, taking some rare time to simply enjoy the shape and freedom of his bird form. He'd nested in a large tree near the shore, but in the morning, the sound of a helicopter had woken him. He hadn't had time to escape before the pilot had seen him, and when the human had deliberately tossed him some scraps for a meal, Avi had decided to seek him out elsewhere as well.

"I was just lonely," he said. He toyed with the grass between them. "I hadn't been back to Varana in a couple years, and traveling around so much ... So I pretended to run into him at a bar, and we started talking. I think we were friends first before I even discovered that he knew you."

"Clayton's good for that."

Her breath caught when he lifted a hand and pushed back a strand of her wayward hair. "And us? I know what I've said to you, Iris, but I'd like to be friends with you, too."

Friends. Lovers. Guardian. She wondered how much of it meant the same to Avi and how much of it was distinct. "You're greedy," she said, trying to make a joke of the situation. That was easier than considering what exactly he was saying.

Except he was serious. "Perhaps. I've spent a good part of my life just wishing you still existed."

Her smile faded. "And now that you know I do?"

"I'm not letting you go."

His fingers cupped her cheek, holding her still as he closed the gap between them. She shouldn't let him kiss her again; it was a mistake of the highest order if she wanted to

maintain any sort of distance in their relationship. But they had already gone too far, and with each inch devoured between them, she became less and less certain that this wasn't what she had wanted all along.

Iris held her breath when his lips touched hers, closing her eyes to savor the careful trace of his tongue along the seam of her mouth. He didn't stop at the corner, tilting his head to skim the same soft kisses along her cheek, only to veer down her neck when he reached her ear. He paused when he reached the crook of her shoulder, and his warm, even breath tickled along her skin.

"How does your throat feel?" he murmured. "Does it hurt?"

It took a moment for her to realize he meant the bruising from the Lor's attempted strangulation the day before. "No," she replied. "It probably looks worse than it is."

She whimpered when he kissed one particularly tender spot, not because of any pain it induced but from the exploration of his tongue after his mouth parted. Turning her head, she sought out his skin as well, tasting the salt along his temple in a gentle caress. Neither of them was injured now. Neither of them was tired. Nothing was holding them back, except whatever lingering doubts Iris might have had, and even those were so inconsequential in the face of her rising desire that they might as well not have existed.

The touch of her lips had Avi lifting his head. "Would you like to go back inside?" he whispered.

"No." She wanted somewhere private, and with so many people in the house, she'd end up being too self-conscious, just as she'd been in front of Clayton in the cave.

"Is there somewhere we can go?"

A pleased smile split his features, and he bounded to his feet, grabbing her hands to pull her with him. "How tired are you?" He led her away from the house, not in the direction from which they'd come that morning, but back behind the outbuilding, toward a swell in the distance. "It's not far, but I usually fly so my estimations can be a little off."

"I'm not. Where are we going?"

His eyes twinkled. "Think of it as a surprise."

Avi stopped talking in favor of speeding up his pace, practically running over the soft earth. Iris had no choice but to try and keep up, and by the time they crested the small hill, her skin glistened with a fine layer of sweat. He angled them toward a copse of saplings, their leaves fluttering in the night breeze. It wasn't until they were nearly on top of them that she saw the mouth of another cave in the hill behind it.

She tugged free and stopped. "No offense, but you're not taking me to another cave, are you?"

Some of his delight faded with the reluctance in her voice. "It's not the same as the other. I promise."

"But it's a cave."

"Think of it as a doorway." He held out his hand. "Trust me, Iris. You'll love this."

Hesitant, Iris took his offering, but she walked slower this time, forcing Avi to stay with her. "Is this another of your hiding places from your family?"

"No, I used to train here. It's a ... special place for me. The other cave is more about convenience than anything else."

Keeping my family safe by being far enough away. This ... is just mine."

They reached the opening, and she had to follow Avi's example and duck in order step inside. The earthen walls didn't swallow the light like she expected. Flecks of something pale managed to capture what little illumination reached inside and scattered across the floor, lighting the way. Avi went first, keeping their fingers entwined, and helped her manage the decline that led deeper into the low-ceilinged passageway. It was easier in her bare feet, she realized. If she'd been wearing shoes, she had a feeling the loose dirt would have had her slipping and sliding all the way down. As it was, Avi's firm hold kept their steps steady.

Soon enough, it opened into a wide open cavern, stalagmites breaking the smooth ground to stretch to a ceiling high overhead. It was cooler here, the air damp. The hollow sound of dripping water echoed against the far walls, and pools of it filled random spaces between the irregular stone emerging from the earth. It painted hints of color against the ochre walls, yellows and blues and spots of scarlet that made it seem completely otherworldly.

Her breathless, "Whoa," was the only response she could muster. It was by far the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Other than Avi.

Avi's attention was locked on her, gauging her reaction. "I used to practice my shifting in here. Flying, and climbing, and anything else I could manage."

He let her go as she stepped forward. The colors shifted every time her angle changed, and when she reached the



edge of one of the pools, she crouched down to dip her fingers in the water.

The crystal in her necklace flared a brilliant blue.

Iris yanked her hand back, staring at the water clinging to her fingertips. When she wiped them off on her jeans, the glow in the pendant faded away, gone completely by the time her hand was dry again.

"Okay, that was weird," she commented, then laughed. "And I really can't believe I picked that out of everything to call weird."

Avi appeared at her side. "It's just the connection between you and the crystal and Varana. It's probably going to do that whenever you come into contact with natural elements here."

She fingered the delicate chain. "It didn't do it with the grass. It doesn't come more natural than that."

"Then I don't know." He took her hands from it and gently eased it over her head. Setting it on the ground beside her, he led her back to the pool, encouraging her to touch it again.

The necklace remained dormant.

"But see?" His smile was contagious. "It needs you."

"To complete the circuit, so to speak."

"Yes."

He seemed satisfied with the explanation, though questions still niggled in the back of Iris' mind. Those were banished as he lifted her wet fingers to his mouth.

"Nobody comes here but me," Avi said.

His tongue traced over the back of her hand, but the second it touched her scarred fingertips, a jolt shot through her veins. Iris gasped. Her flesh prickled in heat, and the

further his mouth advanced, the stronger the charge became. It reminded her of touching his paw when he'd been in panther shape, but this was far more intense. This was the difference of going through her normal life wearing gloves, and then taking the gloves off to sink her hands into the hottest water she could stand.

"Do you feel that?" Her eyes flew to his face, waiting until he lifted his thick lashes to regard her. "Is that just me?"

Avi shook his head. "Not just you," he assured.

"Can I..." She reached out and stroked his chest, testing to see if she could reproduce the electricity without his mouth. It was milder, his skin like satin, but it was the thud of his heartbeat radiating through her that made her breath quicken. She felt it. Not in her head or imagination, but in her muscles, a secondary pulse that compounded her own.

His body lured her closer, and she bent her head to run her mouth over the prominent line of his collarbone. A sound that could have been a whimper echoed from his throat. It encouraged her to explore further, licking and nibbling downward, over the sculpted muscles until she reached a dusky flat nipple. She circled it once with the tip of her tongue, then felt it tighten when she licked across its surface.

"I should be doing this to you," Avi rasped.

Her hand skimmed over the other side of his chest, her fingers mimicking what her mouth was still doing. She had been dying to touch him like this ever since she'd first seen him in the exam room at the clinic. The perfection of his body was sinful, and the fact that he'd allow her to indulge like this—and more, that he *wanted* her to—made her feel like a

teenager on a first date. The knowledge that they'd practically snuck out of the house only added to the feeling.

Avi shuddered when her teeth caught the hard tip of his nipple. "Enough," he muttered.

Powerful hands gripped her shoulders, and the world raked around her, the earth hard at her back instead of beneath her bottom. Avi loomed above her, his long body covering hers, and his mouth crashed down, taking hers in a ferocious kiss that contradicted his earlier gentleness. Iris responded immediately to his desire, lust coursing through her blood as she wrapped her arms around his broad back. She couldn't deny their hunger any longer.

His teeth caught her lower lip, and his normally careful hands pushed at her shirt. "I need to feel you," he said.

She needed it, too. Tearing away from his mouth, she grabbed the hem of her tee and yanked it over her head. Her nipples hardened even more at the first touch of the cool air, but Avi swiftly lowered his head, catching the nearest between his teeth. Fire arced through her as she tossed aside her shirt, and she scrambled to hold onto him as he sucked it hard against the roof of his mouth.

The muscles danced beneath her palms. Her skin felt paper-thin, ready to combust with heat as she smoothed her hands over his back. Iris didn't know which sensations were strongest—the hard pull of his mouth at her breast, the flames skittering through her scars, or the pressure of his weight as it bore her into the earth. She fought to breathe, but her lungs had long ago stopped working right. She had to settle for short gasps that only managed to fuel the fire.

Avi lifted his head. His eyes had darkened, pupils so expanded that only a corona of green ringed the black. Sliding his hand up her arm, he grasped her wrist and guided it downward, saying, "Touch me."

Her heart hammered as she took the initiative and slid her hand between their bodies. The hard line of his arousal already pressed into the cleft of her thighs, but she knew that his request wasn't just about palming its length. Her deft fingers undid the fastenings of his pants. Avi watched, rapt, unblinking until her hand smoothed beneath the thin fabric.

They both felt it. A charge like that in the water. Avi jerked into her grip, and Iris tightened it convulsively, neither willing to break the connection. She stroked him slowly, each pull harder than the last.

"You're not going to want me to stop," she teased.

He groaned when she caught her thumbnail in the slit, smearing the fluid collecting there. "As amazing as this is, I want you too much not to take what you're offering." He swallowed, and for the first time, she saw uncertainty shade his eyes. "You are offering, right? Please tell me—"

She shut him up with a kiss, pulling him back down so that she could sweep past his soft lips and into his hot mouth. Avi surrendered to her command with another moan. His desire was contagious, rampaging through her, and she shivered when he abandoned holding her wrist to attack the zipper on her jeans.

As soon the fastenings were done, Iris pushed him away, wriggling out of the suddenly too-tight denim. Avi took the spare seconds to shed the rest of his own clothing, until he

knelt beside her, his long cock jutting out from his body. He fisted his length, his hungry gaze drinking in her plush curves.

"Come here," Iris said.

She tugged at his arms, but he refused to cover her as quickly as she wished, his eyes lingering on her soft breasts before those, too, were cloaked by his body.

The blunt tip of his cock nudged against her wet folds. "Have I told you how beautiful you are?" he said.

She shook her head. It was as much a denial of his words as it was a response to his question.

Avi shifted his hips, angling them so that his length slipped between her thighs. She opened her legs, unable to tear away from his intense gaze, and held her breath as he dragged along her slit.

He took his time to press inside her slick channel, so that she felt every throbbing inch. The instant he was fully sheathed, they both froze. Fantasies and experience were all well and good, but those would always be pale imitations of the real thing. *This* was the real thing. This, his thick length filling and stretching her, the coarse hair rasping against her clit as he settled his weight. Her blood thundered inside her veins as she waited for Avi to move, to do anything, but he seemed as stuck in the moment as she was.

His mouth worked as if to speak. Avi swallowed once and then again, but no sound came out, his tongue instead darting out to moisten his lips. It drew her eyes away from his, and without thought, Iris lifted her head to claim him in a fresh kiss.

This one was different than the others. This one held back no more secrets.

His strong hands tightened on her hips as he kissed her back, finally allowing his muscles to take control and begin pulling out of her. She marveled at his restraint. She just wanted to let their bodies follow their instincts, come together over and over again until they were spent. But Avi had different ideas. He took his time with his exit, stopping only when the head of his cock was still in her. His second stroke was just as slow as the first, but this time, he didn't hesitate to start a deliberate, even rhythm.

The earth was gritty at her back, but Avi's pace kept it from scraping across her skin. His arms helped as well, forearms beneath her shoulders in order to keep her from sliding. It kept her gaze fixed on him, on the way the sweat beaded on his forehead or the way he had to constantly fight for breath.

Iris deliberately ran her hands down his back to firmly cup Avi's ass. His cock jerked inside her as a fresh charge jumped between them.

"It's not just you," she murmured. Regardless of what her feelings had been upon waking, she knew this to be true now. She was too tactile not to feel the proof of it with her own hands.

Her confession brought a smile to Avi's face, and his mouth met hers at the same time he sped up his strokes. The burn that had been threatening to overwhelm her spread, stoking her pleasure to heights she hadn't imagined. Avi hadn't anticipated it, either. She could see it in the convulsive

swallows of his throat and the awe in his eyes. Even when his thrusts grew erratic, grinding into her clit hard enough to make her cry out, she knew it amazed him.

Iris buried her face in his neck, hands clutching at his back, as Avi quickened his strokes. The short, sharp gasps that substituted for breath made her lungs burn, but they were the best she could manage as everything tightened to a knot inside her, flesh ready to unfurl, skin ready to spring. It only took the return of Avi's mouth to hers and the abrupt shift of angle in his hips for her to come, dizzy and unrelenting as her orgasm exploded within her.

He came seconds later, but whether he'd been holding off on waiting for hers or it was her clamping around his cock that had triggered it, Iris didn't know. She was too busy drowning in the sensations that suddenly swamped her to care about analyzing it, trying desperately to stay rooted in the here and the now.

Slowly, he eased his strokes, finally ending with his semi-hard cock still buried inside her. "It's not exactly my bed, but I didn't miss it," he said with a half-smile. "Did you?"

She pretended to seriously consider the question. "It *is* a really nice bed."

"Next time." He rolled to his back, taking Iris with him so that she was stretched out along his length. "Though I think I'd like to try it like this. The bed won't make a difference to you then."

It took a second to realize he was teasing her, and Iris slapped at his sweaty chest. A spark leapt between them,

making her pussy clench reflexively. Avi jerked beneath her, his hands squeezing her ass.

"I'm going to have to remember that," she said with a grin. "Do you think this is how other Sentries keep their Guardians in line?"

"I honestly don't know." His eyes sobered. "Do you see it that way now? That I'm your Guardian?"

She nodded without pause, though her smile remained. "Though it might take some more testing to make it impossible for me to forget."

Avi smoothed his hands up her back. "We've got all night."



## Chapter Twelve

The next morning was bright and sunny, and Iris woke up feeling more refreshed than she had had in ages. It was more than spending hours with Avi in his training cavern. It was more than the pleasant ache in muscles that hadn't been used in, well, ever. *Sorry, Clayton.* It was even more than feeling his protective arm wrapped around her waist, his body strong and solid behind her.

It was a feeling of knowing who she was. Accepting the magnitude of her birthright. She might not know everything that was involved with being a Sentry, but there was no denying that's what she was any more. She'd felt too much of it firsthand to disbelieve it any longer.

"Good morning," Avi murmured in her ear. His lips skimmed along her neck, his fingers stroking her stomach. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Oh, yes." Iris burrowed more deeply into her pillows. "I love this bed. We need to take it with us."

His deep chuckle reverberated through her. "Malik might have something to say about that. But if you decide to stay in Varana, we can always get one of our own."

*Us. We.* They were bandying the terms around without thought. For the first time since seeing him in the clinic it felt right.

Iris rolled around in his arms, resting her head on his powerful biceps. "The plan's to go to the sanctuary today, right?"

"If that's what you wish."

"Will there be Guardians there for me to talk to, as well as Sentries?"

"Some, most likely." His mood sobered. "You don't really intend to speak to them about your parents, do you?"

She frowned. "That's half why I'm even here. Of course, I'm going to talk to them. What they did wasn't right."

"You don't even know that they had anything to do with their deaths. You can't go accusing Guardians of such misdeeds without real proof."

"Aunt Jess' word is proof enough for me."

Dropping a kiss to her cheek, Avi eased her out of his arms and climbed out of bed. "All I ask is that you be wary of what you say to them." He stretched and grabbed his pants, slipping them on as Iris sat up. "Guardians and Sentries are considered untouchable in Varana. To blame them of something like murder may have consequences you don't anticipate."

He seemed done with the topic and turned his back on her as he got dressed. Scratches scored along his spine from her nails. There were corresponding marks on her body, including more than one hickey upon her breasts, but at least she was going to be covered up. Avi looked ready to walk out of the room with his torso bare.

"Aren't you going to put a shirt on?"

He paused, frowning as he glanced down. "Why?"

Sliding out of bed, Iris gestured toward the scratches as she went to her open duffel. "Because everybody will see."

His frown smoothed, to be replaced with an amused shake of his head. "I'm not ashamed of what we do," he said. "And my family probably expects that we're already lovers. Does it bother you?"

"No, I'm just..." She flushed in embarrassment and turned away, digging in the bag for clean clothes. "I'm not used to being so open about it all. It's just been me for a long time, remember. And society isn't exactly hopping in Black Bend."

She jumped when he pressed behind her, his mouth skimming across her shoulder. "I promise not to embarrass you at the sanctuary." Before she could turn around, he was gone, the door clicking softly behind him.

He was sincere, just as he'd been sincere about how she should deal with the Guardians. Iris wanted to talk about it more, but his instruction to wear sensible shoes dismissed the subject. They were going to go, and she would just have to be careful about how she went in search of the answers she needed. Avi didn't understand. His parents were still alive.

It took only a few minutes to make herself presentable, but her sense of anticipation faded once the bedroom door was shut behind her. This was real. Unknown. Her first instinct was to go in search of Avi. He would lead the way.

Rounding a corner, she was forced to a halt when she nearly collided with a broad chest. Looking up, she met the dark eyes of one of Avi's brothers, though for the life of her, she didn't know which one was which.

"Lost?" he asked. His voice was deeper than Avi's, though it was clear that he was younger.

Iris put on her friendliest smile. "So far, the only places I can find are my bed and the kitchen, and I only found the kitchen in the dark."

His eyes twinkled as he leaned down. He smelled of fresh air and sweat, and she wondered what exactly the family did when Avi wasn't around. "That would be my bed you're finding. But Avi always did have better luck than I did."

She colored at the slight innuendo in his voice, but at least she knew which brother she was dealing with now. "Have you seen Avi?" she asked. "I wanted to check on my friend to see how he's doing before we left for the sanctuary."

Malik jerked a thumb toward the corridor behind him. "Your friend's in the guest room. But you don't need Avi for that. I'll show you the way."

Though she would have preferred Avi as a guide, Iris followed Malik down the hall anyway, drinking in the details of the house that had been lost to her the previous day. The walls were much like the floor in the bedroom, clay-like and smooth, with a pale matte finish. Garlands made of dried flowers wound along the edges of the floor and ceiling, while the scent of something citrus hung in the air. Most of the doors were shut, and Malik came to a stop at the one on the very end.

"Can I ask you something before we go in?" he said, blocking the way.

"Okay," she replied warily.

His thick lashes ducked. "Can I see your hands? I've never seen a Sentry up close before."

There was something earnest about his request, his words quick and breathless almost as if he was afraid to ask. If they had been back in Alaska, she would have refused. She was self-conscious enough about her scars, without feeling like she was on parade. That was the whole purpose of the gloves. But this was different, and though she was still uncomfortable with showing someone she barely knew, she held her palms up for him to see.

His eyes glittered. The twitch of his hands made it clear that he wanted to touch the marks, but he kept them clenched at his sides, his gaze never settling.

"They don't hurt, right?"

Iris smiled. "No. Well, not most of the time. Sometimes they get really hot."

"And you can really make anybody do anything you want?"

This question wasn't quite as innocent as his first. "That's what Avi says," she said, pulling them away. She stuffed them into her jeans pockets, just to be safe. "I'll probably know more about it after I talk to the others at the sanctuary."

"Father says Avi should have taken you there in the first place, but then again, he's never liked that Avi's a Guardian. He doesn't understand what an honor it is, or how lucky—"

The door behind him opened, and a beautiful young woman stood in the frame. In the earthy atmosphere of the house, she looked like a hothouse flower, green eyes flashing with anger, dark hair cut short to highlight the angular lines of her face. Avi's sister carried the same gene that made a person sit up and call them beautiful without blinking.

"Are you *trying* to wake him up?" she snapped at Malik. Fire danced in her face, evidence of a spirit that seemed bigger than an isolated house in the middle of nowhere. She was ready to continue laying into her brother when she noticed Iris, and immediately she paled and shrank away. "Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't realize—"

"It's okay." Iris didn't want Marna to be afraid of her. Out of everybody she'd met so far, Marna seemed like the one she'd most like. "I just wanted to check on Clayton. Is he in there?"

Marna glanced over her shoulder, but she didn't move from blocking the doorway. "He is, but he's still sleeping. He needs his rest."

"Iris wants to see her friend, Mar."

Marna lifted her chin in rebellion of her brother's statement, though the furtive glance she shot Iris said she was less than sure that she should be doing what she was about to do. "And I said he needs his rest. She can see him later."

"That's all right." She recognized a caretaker when she saw one. "I know how bad his injuries are. Will you tell him I stopped by to check on him? I'll try again tonight."

Marna nodded, and Iris retreated to the stairwell again, aware that Malik was right on her heels. She was spared any more embarrassing questions by Avi appearing at the bottom of the stairs, and she hurried up in order to join him.

"Are we going now?" she asked. The anticipation that had ebbed was back. All she wanted was to get out of the house

and away from probing questions that made her uncomfortable.

His eyes darted over her shoulder for a moment. "What about breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry, actually. I just want to get this over with."

Though she sensed Malik hovering at the top of the stairs, she wasn't about to tell Avi what had happened. When he didn't press any further, relief flooded through her, and she followed him back to their room so that he could finish dressing, feeling Malik's eyes on her every step of the way.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they left the house, the sun was vibrant, the promise of higher temperatures already coming to fruition. Avi seemed oblivious to the heat, but Iris plucked at her t-shirt, wishing she had thought to bring shorts instead of jeans.

She kept expecting Avi to shift into one of his animal forms as they walked along, but he remained at her side, pointing out various plants they passed or talking more about his travels when he was looking for her. It was comforting, and by the time they reached the trail he said led to the sanctuary, Iris had slipped her hand into his. Avi paused for a moment in his chatting when their fingers intertwined, but after one glance at their clasped hands, he simply resumed the conversation. As if nothing had changed at all.

So caught up in his storytelling, Iris forgot about their surroundings until they rounded a bend in the path. A sudden

gust of wind choked the air out of her lungs, and she stumbled against his arm, nails raking along his skin as she fought for her balance.

Avi's other hand shot out to catch her. "What is it?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

She looked up and met his worried gaze. "You didn't feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"The wind."

Avi frowned. Lifting his head, he scanned the calm trees, drawing her attention to just how still the air really was.

"There is no wind."

It hadn't been her imagination. She knew that. But he was so clearly concerned that she shook her head.

"It's probably nothing." She gestured toward the path. "Are we almost there?"

"You're here."

The third voice startled her, but Avi didn't seem fazed by the older man standing behind them. When they turned to address the stranger, he bowed his head in deference.

"My pardon, Titus," he said. "I should have announced our arrival."

Titus narrowed his eyes, taking in the closeness of their bodies, the protective lean of Avi's toward Iris. He was older than either of them, with dark blond hair shorn close to his head. Deep lines furrowed his face, his skin leathered from long hours exposed to the sun, and his eyes were so brown that they appeared almost black. His wiry body was as hard as his appearance.



"I didn't know you were back in Varana," Titus said. "When did you return, boy?"

Though the other man's almost rude treatment made Iris bristle, Avi didn't lift his head. "Just yesterday. We rested before venturing here."

"We? And who is it you bring to the sanctuary?"

She was tired of his behavior. "Iris Bridge," she introduced, stepping forward and sticking out her hand.

He had glanced at her greeting in confusion, but uttering her name snapped him out of it. Shrewd eyes jumped from her to Avi and back again, like he almost expected this entire event to be a charade. When he looked down at her outstretched hand again, Iris deliberately turned it over to expose her scars.

"Apparently, I belong here," she said.

Titus made no move to respond to her greeting. In fact, he retreated a few steps, putting more distance between them. "You know where to go, boy," he said to Avi, though he didn't look away from Iris. "Next time, announce your arrival."

The weight of Avi's hand at her elbow guided her back to the path. "What the hell was that about?" she whispered when they'd walked away. She glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see Titus still there, but the trail behind them was empty, as if they had just traversed it alone. Her eyes automatically went up, searching the skies, but the clear blue was mostly blocked by the unmoving trees.

"Titus is one of the senior Guardians," Avi explained. "His Sentry minds the sanctuary. He's very protective of her, even here."

"I'm guessing he's one of the ones you didn't want me running into in the dark of night."

"Yes." Though he kept his voice flat, there was a spark in Avi's eyes that suggested he wasn't as noncommittal on this subject as he'd pretended to be with Titus. "He's always been a strike first, ask questions later sort. I would not want to encounter him without warning."

In spite of Avi's repeated assertions that the Guardians were a safe lot, the more Iris learned about them, the more certain she got that Aunt Jess had been telling the truth. If someone like Titus had gone off on official duty, she had no doubts that he would do whatever he thought necessary to get the job done. Killing innocents would just be an unfortunate side effect for him.

The path cut through the trees and led them through a carved archway. Her eyes widened when she recognized some of the patterns, but their pace didn't slow until they were well past it, and they stood at the end of the trail.

Avi stepped aside, gesturing for Iris to continue. "This is as far as I may go without invitation," he said.

For all her bluster, she really didn't want to go alone. "Can't I invite you?"

"No." He leaned down and kissed her cheek, a whisper of a caress that was more comfort than anything else. "You're safe here. Don't worry."

Safe. She'd never thought about that word so much in her life. Now, it seemed to dictate where she went, who she talked to, the chances she took. She'd never wanted a life about safe. She'd just wanted a life about peace.

The end of the path opened into a grassy clearing. The trees formed a canopy overhead that blocked out the sky, and Iris imagined that on a rainy day they probably kept the ground dry as well. Furrows were etched into the earth, breaking up the soft green, but those looked random, wending into knots the further from the trail they got.

Iris took a step onto the grass. A wind blasted over her, much like the one that she'd felt before running into Titus, and she gasped to catch her breath.

"I do not know you."

From nowhere, a woman materialized in front of her. She was older than Iris by a decade, steel-gray hair long in the back with thick braids hanging over her full breasts. Everything about the woman was full—a wide face, broad hips, and plenty of padding over all of it. She looked like somebody's grandmother, except her nondescript eyes were cold and uncompromising.

Iris looked automatically at the woman's hands. The same marks that spidered Iris' palms and fingers practically covered them.

Silently, Iris held out her hands for the other woman to see. The stranger approached, her steps delicate and graceful in spite of her bulk, but if she was surprised to see matching scars, she didn't let it show.

"This still doesn't tell me who you are or why you come," she said.

Iris held herself straighter. It was a little ridiculous how she felt like a schoolgirl, but if she wanted to learn anything from someone who was just like her, she knew it was a

necessary evil. "My name is Iris Bridge," she said. "And my Guardian, Avilius of the Penverol Clan, brought me here."

A flicker of interest brightened the woman's features. "Iris? We presumed you dead."

"Yeah, that seems to be the general consensus. But obviously, I'm not. And until a couple days ago, I didn't even know this place existed."

Some of the coldness returned. "Your parents were wrong to take you from us, but here you are, so we must work with what we've been given." She inclined her head. "I am Jonell. I mind the sanctuary for the Sentries when they return. Welcome."

## Chapter Thirteen

If Jonell was meant to be a kindly presence, there to soothe ruffled feathers or heal wounds of Sentries returned to the fold, she failed miserably. Even after knowing who she was, Iris got the distinct feeling of distance from her, a polite coldness that felt more like charity than anything else. Briefly, she wondered if Titus was her Guardian. It would explain a lot. It also meant that Iris was luckier than she could ever have imagined to get Avi.

"I haven't returned," Iris said. "I have no intention of staying."

The declaration took Jonell by surprise. Lifting a thick brow, she circled Iris as if inspecting her. "This is where you belong. This is your home."

In spite of the urge to move with the woman to thwart whatever inquest she was trying to conduct, Iris remained still. "No, this is where I came from. That's a big difference from calling it home."

Jonell came to a stop again. "Then why return at all? Why not remain in hiding, pretending you aren't what you are?"

The disdain in her voice was enough to make every ounce of annoyance Iris had felt outside surge to the surface. "You make it sound like I had some say in the matter," she snapped. "I didn't *know*. That's not pretending. And I'm sure as hell starting to wish I'd never agreed to this in the first place. If everybody here is like you and that Guardian out front, I'm better off back in Alaska, trying to fight off those

Lor things on my own. At least then, I don't have to worry about people questioning my integrity or treating Avi like he's nothing."

Everything about Jonell was motionless. She didn't even blink. "The Lor have attacked you? Somewhere other than Varana?"

Hadn't she heard anything else Iris had said? "Two. And a third one tried killing my Guardian."

"In this ... Alaska."

"Isn't that what I just told you?"

"And you've survived." Her gaze flickered to Iris' neck. "Relatively unscathed."

"No, you're talking to Zuul and I'm looking for the Keymaster." Iris snorted. "If you always ask such stupid questions, it's no wonder Avi thinks I'll make a difference in whatever war you've got going on."

Jonell seemed impervious to sarcasm, though her eyes flashed at the word "stupid." "If you didn't know what you are, how did you fight them off?"

"I only managed to fight off the one. I told him to let me go, and he did. Avi killed that one, and then my friend shot the other when it was trying to strangle me. And what does any of this matter about anything?"

"Because the Lor have never ventured beyond Varana to destroy us," came the reply. "They shouldn't even have known you existed. You've been gone for thirty years, and we've made no mention of you in most of that time."

Iris wondered if that was true. It made sense for Avi's family to recognize her name, but Titus had known exactly

who she was. Someone had talked about her in her absence, and they'd done it enough for her name to be known. Why would Jonell lie about something like that?"

"Yet, the Lor still managed to find you," she was saying. "More, they found you and considered you enough of a threat to try and eradicate you, even without you knowing what you are." Jonell gestured for Iris to follow. "Come. There is much we need to discuss."

Though Jonell began to retreat toward the rear of the clearing, Iris didn't move. After several steps, Jonell stopped and looked back expectantly.

"No offense," Iris said. "But I don't know you from jack. I'm not going anywhere without Avi."

She had no idea if Avi could hear anything behind her, or even if he was still standing there. But she wasn't going anywhere alone with someone who clearly didn't like her, especially in a place she'd never been before. Did everybody around here think she was dumb?

"The Guardians know their place," Jonell said. "Though Avi has always been a poor student."

Iris bit her tongue at the obvious slur. "Those are my terms. Either he comes with us, or I walk out right now. Trust me. I've got no problems leaving this place."

Something ugly curled in Jonell's gaze as she glanced over Iris' shoulder. "It would seem even Sentries separated from their Guardians take on some of their characteristics. Very well. I grant him entry. But be quick about gathering him."

Iris didn't wait before whirling on her heel and racing back toward the archways. Another gust followed her through the

first, and her heart beat in excitement when she saw Avi still waiting outside the main entry.

"Jonell has invited you in," she said as she approached. Taking his hand, she tugged him forward, though his reluctance slowed them down. "I'm telling you it's okay. I refused to go with her without you, so she said it was all right."

Avi's worried gaze flickered over the archway, but he took her hand and followed her down the path, albeit at a much more hesitant pace. He stiffened as they passed beneath it, his fingers tightening convulsively around hers. It was enough to make Iris laugh.

"What did you think was going to happen?" she teased.

"There's a reason this is a sanctuary," he said. "Only Sentries can enter unharmed, and Guardians may only do so with express permission from those already within its protection. Any Guardian who tries to enter without it is killed, as is everybody else, period."

It felt like she'd been sucker punched. It was a good thing she hadn't known about the limitations prior to stepping inside herself. She might not have been so quick to agree.

Jonell was in the same spot, waiting for her to return. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Avi, but she didn't speak, simply turning and resuming the path she had started before. Iris and Avi fell into step behind her, but nobody said a word as they left the clearing.

The landscaping was different than what Iris had already seen. Some of the trees were the same, towering high above with the thick branches that erased out the sky, but there



were others, whip-thin saplings and chunky stumps. Not all the leaves were green, either. Some had a bluish tinge, while others were more crimson. All of them vibrated from the same gentle breeze.

Avi seemed engrossed by the ground. Every once in a while, he would change his step—press down harder, speed it up, bounce a little. Iris watched for a few seconds before leaning in and asking, "What are you doing?"

He didn't look away from the grass. "It's damp. It didn't rain last night."

He was right. Now that he'd brought it to her attention, Iris felt the springiness of the ground, the way moisture welled up around her shoe if she stepped particularly heavily. She glanced at the trees, but those were perfectly dry.

Jonell came to an abrupt halt. So absorbed with her surroundings, Iris hadn't seen them approach the small stone structure, but there was little time to look at it more closely before Jonell was pushing the door open and gesturing for them to follow.

Avi let her go first. His hand remained in the small of her back, but the support was unnecessary. The interior of the house was as unassuming as its exterior, with only a small table and chairs at its center, and a row of cots lining the walls.

"Sit," Jonell instructed. She took the chair facing the door, waiting for Iris and Avi to do as they were told. "Tell me about the Lor attacks. I need to know everything."

Iris was even more glad that she'd insisted Avi came along. Slowly, she told the story of the first encounter,

starting with her late night and the reason for it. Jonell kept glancing at Avi as Iris talked, but she never interrupted, even when Avi contributed details Iris had forgotten. They told about the helicopter crash, the attack at her house, the one back at the clinic where Ted had shot their assailant. She didn't say anything until after they were all done.

"Lor have never traveled through planes of existence before," Jonell observed. Her meaty fingers drummed silently on the tabletop. "We weren't even aware that they had the capability." Her shrewd eyes fixed on Avi. "Is there a possibility they followed you from Varana?"

Avi shook his head. "It's been over a year since I last came back. And I would have known if they'd been following me that entire time."

Jonell sighed. "The other Sentries will need to be told. And Titus. He can alert the other Guardians that they must be more careful when they're traveling."

"I've told you what you wanted," Iris said. "Now I want to know what the hell is going on. Who these Lor are, why they're trying to kill me, what this whole war is about in the first place."

"Your Guardian didn't tell you?"

"I was more concerned in keeping her alive," Avi interjected. "And bringing her back to Varana in one piece."

Another sigh. Every time she learned something new, Jonell's shoulders sagged even further. "So many years wasted," she muttered. "By the time you have all the answers you seek, the Lor will have won."

"Then I suggest you start talking." Iris settled back in her seat, making herself comfortable. "I've got all day."

\* \* \* \*

"Three hundred years ago," Jonell started, "the Lor and our people lived in peace. They were content to stay in their corner of Varana, while we flourished here. But that wasn't enough for them, and they started to encroach upon our lands. They started small. Killing livestock. Burning crops. But when we attempted to defend ourselves, they grew malevolent and turned their violent ways toward our people instead. When they started killing children, we knew it was time to put a stop to them. That's when we prayed to our gods and asked for help. The first Sentry was born a week later, with her twin brother as her Guardian."

"This has been going on for three hundred years?" Iris asked in disbelief. "Why hasn't anybody tried to call a peace?"

"The Lor have never been happy with our attempts. Until they're willing to concede that they were in the wrong for attacking us in the first place, the war continues. Or until they're eradicated. Unfortunately, that requires a great deal more effort."

"How did you understand the Sentry and Guardian dynamic at first? It's not like you have a manual to check or something. Oh." She looked at Avi, who seemed just as interested as she was in Jonell's stories. "Unless you have some sort of Bible?"

Avi shook his head. "I was always told the first Guardian changed into a bird and flew out of his cradle. That was how his mother knew he was different."

"That's correct." For once, Jonell didn't look at Avi like he was the idiot child. "Another pair was born the following month, and again, and again, until by the end of the year, there were twelve Sentries and twelve Guardians. Since then, there have always been twelve."

"When one dies, another is born to replace her," Avi said softly. She felt his hand stroke her thigh beneath the table, a gesture so soft and comforting that she shifted automatically in her chair to allow him to continue. "There must always be twelve."

"We've only had eleven for the past thirty years, though," Jonell said. "Ever since your parents decided to alter your destiny for you, Iris."

That wasn't the way she saw it. It looked to her like her parents didn't want her delegated to a life she didn't choose, especially if it wasn't guaranteed to be a long one. It wouldn't surprise her to find out that a Sentry like Jonell had condoned killing her parents in order to bring her back, but even more, it made her wonder whether they were all like that.

"If there have only been eleven for that long," Iris said, "the Lor probably figured it out on their own. They can count, right?"

Jonell stiffened at her sarcastic tone. "Not all are in service at any one time. We protect the young ones until they've learned enough and are strong enough to fight effectively."

Currently, only seven of us are protecting Varana. The other four remain under close guard while they are trained."

"To do what?"

"Control their powers. Strengthen them. We have the ability to change almost anything, Iris, simply by laying our hands on someone or something and willing it so. The power that gives us is tremendous."

She contemplated that for a moment. "Like me telling that Lor to let me go. He looked at me like I was crazy, but he did it anyway."

"Exactly. Though that is a very small thing in the grand scheme. You also carry with you the power of life and death, though such extremes can take their toll on a Sentry if they're abused."

"What do you..." Her breath caught, and her eyes widened. "I can *kill* somebody? Why on earth would I do that?"

Jonell hardened. Sitting up straighter in her chair, she held her head high, as if she was royalty and Iris something she had scraped off the bottom of her shoe. "Do not presume you understand how our society works. When you're at war, you do what needs to be done. You'll find that out for yourself, soon enough."

The more she heard, the less she wanted to stay. She didn't like the Sentries, she didn't like the idea of being at war, and she certainly didn't like the idea of having to kill things—even the Lor—if she didn't have to.

"So the Lor are just trying to kill all the Sentries?" she asked. "That's why they came after me?"

"The Sentries have always been their primary target, yes. But the Guardians are usually sufficient to keep the Sentries safe. Very rarely have any of us been in serious danger from an unexpected attack." She didn't even look at Avi as she added, "But then again, your circumstances are very different. Avi is certainly not indicative of what a typical Guardian should be."

The hand on her thigh disappeared, but rather than let him retreat at Jonell's harsh words, Iris grabbed it back, holding it tight. "You know, I'm going to have to ask you to stop doing that," she said, her voice cold, her eyes colder. She rose from her chair, pulling Avi with her. "In fact, I'm not going to sit here any more and listen to you disparage Avi. If you can say things like that about him, it's clear you don't understand what kind of a man he is, which means you don't understand what kind of a person I am."

Though he didn't fight the pull of her hand as she led him to the doorway, she felt his reluctance with every slow step. He probably hadn't expected this, she realized. Clearly, Jonell hadn't, either. She was stunned into silence all the way until Iris opened the door.

"I thought you had questions," she said. Her chair scraped across the floor when she stood. "You can't get those if you run away."

"I know more than enough." Iris risked a glance up at Avi. His brows were drawn tight, but he gave her an almost imperceptible nod, easing the slight hesitation she had in dragging him out without asking. She looked back at Jonell,

glad she could finally say what she wanted. "If I need anything, I know where to find you."

Nothing stopped them from walking out of the sanctuary, though Iris realized as they crossed beneath the second archway that she was practically running to get away. She kept an eye out for anything that could be Titus, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary, just the trees and the grass and the path that wound back down the hill. Avi finally spoke up when they stepped off the trail and angled toward his home, tugging her to a halt.

"I know this must seem very unorthodox to you," he said. "But don't dismiss the sanctuary or the other Sentries. Jonell and Titus can be intimidating, I know, but—"

"I'm not intimidated, I'm pissed off." Iris searched his eyes, but he was sincere in his belief. She sighed. "Have you had to be treated like that your whole life?" she asked, softening her tone. "Have they always been that dismissive?"

Avi shrugged. "I was an anomaly. They were hardly going to baby me, just because I didn't have a Sentry."

"There's a difference between not taking it easy on you and treating you like you're not worth their time." His mother's hopes made a lot more sense now. Iris made a mental note to talk to Mila the first chance she got. "Will you answer one thing for me? Will you tell me you don't believe the line they're trying to feed you?"

Her question genuinely confused him. "Which line?"

"All of it. This thinking that they're better than you, or that you've done something wrong in what you've told me. And

this belief that it's okay for me to just kill willy nilly. You don't believe that, do you?"

"There's a *war*, Iris. You saw how those Lor came after you. You didn't have a problem with me killing them, so why should you have issue with doing it yourself?"

She knew it was hypocritical, but she didn't know how to explain it without making it sound worse. "That was in self-defense," she said, knowing it was a lame argument. "That's different."

"That's what this war is. We're defending our people. It's what we have to do."

"For three hundred years?" She shook her head. "I don't care what you say, there's something wrong with that. There's more to that story than the Lor not willing to negotiate for peace."

Letting go of her hand, Avi resumed walking. "This is what we have to do," he repeated. "This is all I know."

Iris did double-time to catch up with his rapid steps. She didn't think she'd ever seen him so upset. It was unsettling to see him like this. "You've lived in my world," she said. "So this isn't all you know. This is all you're letting yourself know."

He didn't answer. He didn't say another word for another hundred yards. "I'm going to fly the rest of the way home. Please pick up my clothes and just follow."

There wasn't time to argue before he was shifting, his shirt and pants falling to the ground as his body changed shape and took to the air. Iris was left standing and watching in disbelief as he soared high overhead. It was the first time



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he'd simply taken off on her like that. It took only a moment to realize she didn't like it.

## Chapter Fourteen

"I can help you clean up."

Mila's brows shot up at the offer, and her gaze jumped immediately to Avi at Iris' side. There were surprised stares from others at the dinner table, but it was the deliberate way Avi didn't look up from finishing the slice of meat in front of him that seemed to be the response Mila was looking for. If he wasn't going to protest, there was no reason not to accept.

She relaxed and smiled at Iris, tilting her head toward the kitchen. "That would be appreciated. Thank you."

Iris rose and worked quickly, stacking the dirty dishes in order to better carry them out to the kitchen. The men handed her their empty plates, and she hovered at Avi's elbow, waiting for him to scrape up the last bite before taking his as well. Their fingers brushed in the exchange, but in spite of the shiver that ran through her, he didn't look up. He stood and hurried out of the room, the echo of the front door opening and closing filling the dining area.

"I'll get that," Marna said, when Iris reached for the platter in the middle of the table.

Iris waved her off. "Clayton needs you more than a few dirty dishes. And pitching in is the least I can do to repay for the hospitality." Before any more aid could be offered, she carried her load out of the room, grateful to escape the curious glances from the men.

"You don't have to do this," Mila said as Iris scraped the remains on the plates into a bucket. "I'm sure there are other

things you'd rather be doing. Maybe you and Avi could go out tonight. He can show you more of Varana."

Iris smiled. "No, I want to help." She didn't say that Avi hadn't said a word to her since flying away after they'd left the sanctuary. She was almost nervous about what was going to happen when they went to bed later.

They worked in silence, Mila washing as Iris dried. Simple gestures told her where things were stowed, but they worked with such quick efficiency that conversation felt clumsy. She had questions upon questions piled up that she wanted to ask. It wasn't until Mila was washing down the counter that anything was said.

"Avi has never gained the respect he deserves from the others," Mila commented. She didn't look up from her brisk strokes with the washrag; the observation was made as if they'd been discussing it all along. "Without his own Sentry, Pen always felt they should have absolved Avi of his duties."

"What did he want Avi to do instead?"

"Work with him. Stay here with Hai and Malik. Anything than be with the Guardians." The glance Mila shot her was curious. "Guardians do not live very long, in case Avi never told you. They get caught up in the war, and protecting their Sentries, and they never have the opportunity for their own lives. Pen wants more for his family."

Avi had been open about their longevity, but hearing it from his parents' perspective colored it in more melancholy shades. Their attitudes hadn't been about disrespecting what he did or what he was; they'd been about wanting the most

for their son. It was easier, now, to think about Pen's harsh words in a different light.

It also changed her impressions of her presence in their home. They wanted a normal life for their son. They respected what she was, but as long as she was in Varana, she would be a constant reminder of everything Avi couldn't have. She would always be an object of curiosity and tolerance, no matter what she did.

"Does the war with the Lor ever touch you here?" Iris asked.

"It touches all of us. We've been fortunate not to have any deaths among our loved ones, but that doesn't mean we're not affected."

"Mila."

Penverol's deep voice in the doorway startled both of them, but only Iris looked in his direction. He seemed tired, wearing the years of his burden more heavily this evening, but there was no anger in his unflinching gaze.

"I say nothing that isn't true, Pen." Mila wrung the water out of her rag and hung it on a hook by the window. "Is there something you need?"

"I'd like Iris to join me in the other room. I'd like to speak to her in private."

That dragged Mila's attention away from cleaning up, but outside of a glance between the two, she gave no indication of worry. "We're done here, Iris. You're free to go if you wish."

No, she didn't wish, but she knew she couldn't refuse. Drying her hands, she handed Mila her towel before following

Penverol out of the kitchen, winding through the quiet halls until he opened a door into a room she hadn't been in yet. Her palms itched as she crossed the threshold, and she hid them behind her back as she rubbed it away.

The same soft lighting suffused the small room that filtered throughout the entire house. If there had been books lining the walls, she would have called it a private library. But these were covered with ornaments she didn't recognize, most of them worked metal. Artifacts, maybe. Not weapons. They didn't look dangerous enough to inflict any harm. They were almost elegant in their design, polished circlets and whorls and plaques that held no meaning for her whatsoever.

Nobody else was in the room. Penverol took a seat in the worn, padded chair near the window and gestured for her to sit in the straight-backed seat opposite him.

Iris perched on the edge, feeling like a kid called into the principal's office for some unknown offense. In the dimmer light, it was next to impossible to read him, and she wished fervently that Avi hadn't disappeared.

"How was your trip to the sanctuary today?" he asked.

She regarded him warily. "Fine. Educational, to say the least."

"Educational is a rather broad description. Though it's more than I could get Avi to admit to."

The resignation in his voice surprised her. For all his domineering attitude upon their arrival, it was clear Penverol knew just how little control over his son he actually had. He might present himself in one way to Avi, but behind closed doors, his walls came down.

"I think Avi was a little overwhelmed about actually being invited inside," she said, trying to mitigate the effects of Avi's mood.

Penverol stiffened. "Why would they do that?"

"Because I asked them to." Iris leaned forward. "I know we don't know each other, sir, and I might not know everything there is about Sentries and Guardians, but I am not about to leave Avi out of anything that is going to affect his life. He's the only reason I'm even alive right now to be able to get some answers. I owe him far too much to be so selfish to leave him out."

Her answer made the lines in his forehead deepen. "You only just met my son."

"That doesn't mean I can't tell what kind of a man he is. And he's a good one. One of the best I've ever met."

Penverol settled back into his chair, looking more relaxed than she had ever seen him. For the first time, a ghost of a smile haunted his face. "You remind me so much of your father," he mused. "He always claimed he could know the caliber of a man's character within minutes of meeting him, too."

It was Iris' turn to be taken by surprise. "You knew my father?"

"Of course. I knew both of your parents. We had to. You and Avi were bound together at birth."

Her heart beat a little bit faster. Beyond the few stories she'd managed to wrangle out of Aunt Jess, Iris knew very little about her parents. And of course, it made sense that the

two families would be in contact. This was a big thing in Varana society.

"How did they ever explain your hands to you?" Penverol was asking. "I figured Les would keep the secret, but I never thought he'd be able to get Serina to stick to it."

"Didn't Avi tell you?" Her eyes welled with tears she didn't need right now, tears she didn't expect. But so much had happened today, her emotions so tightly wound, that it probably made sense that it would get unleashed at this particular topic. "My parents died when I was very young. My Aunt Jess raised me."

The sorrow that passed over his eyes was genuine. "I didn't know. My apologies. Your parents were good people." He sighed. "But that explains much. Jess agreed with me about what was best for you children."

"Wait." Her mind worked, mulling over these details. "How much did you know about they're leaving Varana?"

Penverol rubbed his thumb along his jaw, weighing his words before speaking. "It was my suggestion they go," he said slowly. "Les and I both thought that your lives would be better if you weren't caught in the middle of a war that shouldn't be tearing this world apart in the first place. Mila and I already had Hai, as well. It was easier for him to go than us."

"You planned it together."

He shook his head. "Once we decided who was leaving, he kept me in the dark on the details. He didn't want my family at risk, in case the Sentries chose to make things difficult."

"It wasn't the Sentries. According to Aunt Jess, Guardians killed my parents."

His moods were quixotic. In the blink of an eye, Penverol could go from sad, to angry, to contemplative, and then back to angry again, without anything in between. Avi certainly hadn't gotten his even temper from his father.

When he bolted from his chair, Iris flinched. His fist slammed into the wall hard enough to make the hanging ornaments rattle on their hooks. He circled the room like a dark panther trying to escape its cage, and when he finally whirled to address her again, his eyes sparked with fury.

"This is exactly why I never wanted Avi to be a Guardian in the first place," he railed. "He's better than that, and he's too soft to realize that he's being used."

"Used for what?" Iris couldn't resist asking.

"What else?" He gestured wildly, his callused fingers knocking a wrought iron whorl from the wall. "This war. This stasis they've caught our world in. If he'd listened to me and stayed out when they tried to expel him, at least the both of you would be living normal lives now."

More comments about the war. It didn't surprise Iris to hear dissenting opinions; war had that effect, no matter what world it happened in. But they made her feel better about her original impressions on Jonell and Titus. She didn't like them, and she didn't like their superior attitudes. From the sounds of it, they weren't that unusual from other proponents of this war with the Lor.

"So it doesn't surprise you to hear that Guardians were responsible?" Iris pressed. "Avi didn't want to believe me."



"Because Avi needs to believe in the Guardians," he said. "He's always needed that. Even after everything, he looks for their approval." Penverol stopped in front of her, crouching down to put them at eye level and gripping the sides of her chair. "Why did you come? Is it because you believe in this same brainwashing that Avi does?"

Iris shook her head. "I came to get the truth. About me, and about my parents. But I'm starting to think that I've got all the truth I need."

"To do what?"

She didn't know.

But Penverol did.

"You need to leave," he said. "Go back to where you came from. It's the only chance either of you have to get on with your lives."

"But the Lor are after me."

"They only found you because of Avi. I know that. You can hide from them again."

It was the same argument she'd used on Aunt Jess. Somehow, coming from Penverol, it lacked the same cogency.

"Avi's the one who brought me here. I don't even know how to get back if I wanted to."

Penverol reached forward and picked up the pendant that still hung around her neck. "I can teach you how to use this. Avi showed us how to travel through the dimension, on the off chance we'd need to one day."

He had an answer for everything. What was worse, Iris knew he was at least partially right. She didn't belong here. She and Avi didn't view their positions in the same way, and

she didn't want to be a part of this battle that had waged for far too long. Her parents had wanted her to have her own life. If she really wanted to honor them, she'd leave Varana and never look back.

The only thing wrong with that was that leaving Varana meant leaving Avi, as well. And the truest peace and satisfaction she had ever known had been in his arms.

"What is here for you if you stay?" Penverol pressed gently. "You'll be conscripted to fight, even if you choose not to. And you have the power to do whatever it is you wish. Take that as your real Sentry gift, Iris. Don't let the others dictate how you must live your life."

He was very convincing. What he described was exactly what she wanted, and all it would take was going home. Even if the Lor came after her again, she knew what it took to stop them. She just had to be fast about it. She could forget this entire week ever existed, if she did it right.

Though she highly doubted she would ever forget Avi.

"I need to say good bye to Avi then," she said. As she started to stand, however, Penverol pushed her back onto the chair, his face firming.

"You mustn't tell him you're going," he said. "He'll stop you."

"But I know him. He'll follow me. I have to convince him this is the best way."

Penverol shook his head. "You won't be able to do that. You go, and leave him to me. I'll make sure that he doesn't come after you."

She didn't like the sound of that, but it was the only way. She wasn't so blinded by her growing feelings for Avi not to see that. Nodding wordlessly, she waited until Penverol sat back on his heels before rising to her feet.

"Take only what you can carry," he instructed. "The crystal only works for what's on your body, not like the crystals in the cave. I'll write down what you must do and bring it to you."

"All right." She was at the door when she hesitated. "Will you explain it all to him?" she asked. "I don't want him to think I'm running away from him."

Slowly, Penverol nodded. "He'll understand. I promise."

She fled then, before she had the chance to change her mind. This was the right choice. She'd known that all along. She needed to do what was best for everybody.

Her eyes stung by the time she reached the bedroom and shut the door behind her. All the pent-up energy she'd had dissipated, and she sagged against the edge of the bed. She stayed like that for minutes, blocking out the image of Avi's face looming over hers in the underground cavern, or the feel of his body spooned around hers when she woke up. Though she had started the day knowing exactly what she was, she was ending it knowing none of that mattered. In the end, she was the same woman she had always been, and the last thing she ever wanted was to drag a man too decent for his own good down a path that would only leave him killed.

Iris wiped away the dampness from her cheeks. She didn't have much time. Penverol would be up soon, and then she would be going. She needed to be ready when he arrived.

*A Sentry's Touch*  
*by Vivien Dean*

She was on her knees by her large duffel, pawing through it as she tried to decide what was essential and what wasn't, when the knock came at the door.

"Come in," she called out automatically.

She only glanced up when she heard the sharp intake of breath.

"What are you doing?" Avi asked.

## Chapter Fifteen

There was a streak of dirt across his cheek, and his fingernails were grimy and broken, fresh blood welling up in a deep scratch that ran across the back of his wrist. It looked like he had been in a fight. He'd left the house, though, and his shirt dangled from his hand like he hadn't bothered to put it back on after shifting. Had something attacked him? She was ready to ask, when his frown darkened even further. Iris leapt to her feet, retreating another step when he stepped into the room.

"What are you doing?" Avi repeated. He pushed the door shut behind him, and her stomach sank. Her only means of escape was now barred.

Iris fingered her pendant. "I was just looking for something," she said, though the words came out too fast and too high to be believable. She swallowed and tried again. "What happened to you? Something bad enough that you decided to talk to me again?"

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't rise to her bait. "It's of no consequence. But I do need to bathe, and I didn't want to intrude if you were. What are you looking for?"

"Why does it matter?"

Avi pursed his lips together, and something dark passed over his face. "You're hiding something," he announced. Dropping the shirt to the floor, he covered the distance between them with long strides that made it look like he was

pouncing. "Don't make me ask again, Iris. I'm not in the mood to be trifled with. Tell me what's going on."

Frustration flared inside her. Iris lifted her chin and glared at him, folding her arms over her breasts. "So now it's okay to bully me into doing whatever you want? I don't think so. It's bad enough you spend most of the day sulking, just because I didn't agree with your little vision of the world. You don't get to turn around and poke your nose in, just because I'm not spilling on every detail."

She expected him to back down. He had every other time. She was gambling on it, actually. She didn't want to have to explain to him what her intentions were.

She didn't expect him to grab her shoulders. And she didn't anticipate him pushing until her back was pressed to the wall. And she definitely didn't think he'd bring his mouth so close to hers, all she had to do was tilt her head to kiss him.

She didn't do that, though. She was too transfixed by the brilliance of his eyes.

"You have been driving me crazy all day," he said. "First you treat me like an equal at the sanctuary, but then when I try to act like one afterward and give you my opinion, you cut me off. You practically called me a child for how I'm trying to view all this. So I stay away, because frankly, I'm not sure any more *how* I'm supposed to be treating you, just to come back and have you lie to me?" A muscle in his jaw twitched, and his nostrils flared. The grip of his fingers was almost painful. "There's only so much you can expect me to take."

"I never asked you to take anything," she shot back. She jabbed him in the chest, marking her points. "You're the one who announced yourself my so-called protector. You're the one who decided we were going to be lovers. I think I've been pretty easy going so far, considering you've been calling all the shots."

Before she could poke him again, he caught her wrist, twisting her arm up and over her head. "Somehow, I think I haven't called enough," he murmured. "I'm only going to ask one more time, Iris. And don't lie to me. You're all that I have, remember?"

It was the most devastating thing to her defenses that he could say. As angry as she was, as frustrated with the situation as she was, there was no denying what he said was true. At least to him. He didn't want his father's overprotection. The Guardians didn't want him without a Sentry, but he'd persevered anyway. He'd gone back, time and time again, and when that hadn't been enough, he'd gone in search of her. All to gain a place that he still didn't have. He might have a home to come back to, but it wasn't truly his.

She was. She was it.

She had warned Penverol that Avi would try to stop her. She just hadn't realized that she'd bend to it so readily. *Who's the one with the persuasive powers here?* she wondered.

"I was going to leave." Her heart felt just beneath her skin, fluttering in a maelstrom. "I was going home."

His stricken look said that wasn't even a possibility he'd considered. "You can't," he argued. "Not without me."

"I have the crystal."

He glanced down at the pendant that hung between her breasts. "Why? Why would you leave after one disagreement?"

"Because you're better off without me, that's why."

The fingers around her wrist tightened, and his eyes grew hard. "I think I'll be the judge of that. Not you, and definitely not my mother."

Iris blinked. "It wasn't her."

"Then..."

It took a moment of genuine confusion before he grasped the answer. The change was instantaneous.

With a growl, Avi let her go and pivoted on his heel, stalking for the door. Iris darted around and planted herself in his way.

"Don't!" She braced her hands against his chest, feeling the charge chase the heat through her palms. Avi stopped, though she knew it was a reflection of his own restraint rather than any effect she might be having on him. "I won't go yet. But I don't want any fighting."

The muscles rippled beneath her hands, like it took every ounce of his willpower to hold himself back. "He's always done this," Avi ground out. "He's never understood what it means to be what I am."

"And he never will," Iris added. "Fighting with him isn't going to accomplish anything."

"Why would you even listen to him? After everything we've discussed?"



She was tempted to tell him of Penverol's involvement in her parents' departure, but decided against it. Avi would see it as yet another means of trying to take away the importance of being a Guardian instead of the act of love it was meant to be.

"Because I thought you might not want me around after what happened today." It was partially true. "I didn't know if our difference of opinion about the Sentries and this whole war was going to get between us."

A rivulet of blood snaked down the back of his hand, dripping onto the floor. "Tell me what you expect from me, that you won't condescend to me just because our minds differ, and it won't," Avi said.

"I won't," Iris promised.

A knock at the door behind her made her jump, and Avi pushed past her to open it. Penverol stood on the other side, and when he saw his son, his eyes narrowed into a frown.

"I thought you were out," he said.

"Clearly, I'm not."

Penverol glanced at Iris. "There's a matter—"

"No," Avi interrupted. Unseen to his father, his knuckles whitened where they gripped the edge of the door. "It didn't work. Iris isn't going anywhere. Not yet, at least."

The withering look Penverol sent her this time made her want to crawl into a corner. The only thing that kept Iris from backing away was seeing Avi standing firm.

"You condemn both of you," Penverol said, though she wasn't sure to which of them he was directing the accusation.

Avi shook his head. "Only if we follow the other Sentries and Guardians."

Her brows shot up. It was the first time Avi had made such a concession out loud.

"If you'll excuse us..." He was closing the door on his father's face, a gesture that did not please Penverol. "We've had a very long day. I'd like to clean up so that Iris and I might discuss our plans for tomorrow."

"Good night, sir," Iris said, just in case he thought she wasn't fully behind Avi's plan. "We'll see you in the morning."

The door clicked shut with a satisfying finality. Without a word, Avi grabbed her hand and began leading her to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?"

He glanced back, eyes dark with unknown emotion. "Convincing you that leaving is the worst decision you could ever make."

Her skin sizzled. There was no room for argument before he was bending over the tub, turning on the water without any concern for its heat, then turning to start stripping her of her clothes.

He never spoke. His eyes were dark and intent as he peeled the t-shirt over her head, tossing it aside without a thought before reaching around her back to undo her bra. The rising moisture in the room made her shiver, and her nipples pebbled as soon as they were exposed to the warm air. Avi didn't even look away when he undid her jeans, though he left a streak of blood across her soft stomach as he pushed

them down. Maybe he was afraid she'd disappear if he did. She was all of a sudden glad she hadn't.

"I'm—"

He cut off her apology with a kiss, his mouth hard and demanding as it plundered hers. Iris didn't resist, melting against him as she clutched at his shoulders. When his lips parted, his tongue scalded where it tangled with hers, and her lungs burned the longer he refused to part. Every inch of her licked with flames. If she thought about it, she'd wonder just how Avi thought this was going to prove anything, but that level of coherent rationale escaped her.

His arm curved around her waist, scooping her against his hard body. The room spun around her as he lifted her up, turned her around, carried her with him as he stepped into the tub. The water molded his pants to his powerful legs, and the long line of his erection became even more prominent. As Iris tore apart to twist and turn the tap, Avi bent and captured her nipple between his teeth, biting down hard enough for her to gasp at the immediate shock that went to her clit.

Her fingers scrabbled for a hold, but his wet skin made it impossible to find. The second her palms came into contact with his back, however, the familiar charge that had jumped between them in the cavern came back with a vengeance. Both of them arched away as the electricity surged through them, only to slam back together, mouths fusing in a desperate need that was as much about their near separation as it was the Sentry bond.

Water splashed over the side. His waistband was rough against her skin, made worse by the grinding of their hips, and Iris shoved her hands beneath the surface, trying to free him of the garment. Between the rocking of their bodies and the heavy material, her efforts failed, and she growled in dissatisfaction when they finally parted.

"Get these off," she panted.

Avi moved automatically to comply, only to stop in mid-motion. "Promise me you won't try leaving again," he said, his eyes flashing.

Droplets of water clung to his jaw. On impulse, Iris leaned forward and licked them off. "You're not really going to make that a condition, are you?"

She squeaked when he slipped his hand between her thighs and thrust two long fingers into her passage. "Yes," he replied. His thumb grazed over her clit, relentless in its attention. "You know this is right. We're right. I want your word you're not going to run away from us."

Iris writhed against the strokes, her hands flying out to grip the edge of the tub in order to keep from sliding beneath the surface. It took away the full charge of his blood calling to hers, but the dark determination in his gaze and the forceful drive of his fingers more than compensated.

"All right," she panted, squeezing her eyes shut. "All right. I promise. I won't run away."

She cried out when his weight vanished. When her eyes flew open, she saw Avi kneeling in the water, working the fastenings on his pants to shove them down his slim hips. Her mouth watered at the sight of the swollen head, followed by

the smooth length of his shaft, but there was no time to appreciate it before he was back over her, his cock pushing against her folds.

"You're mine," Avi said. He pushed inside, refusing to be gentle. "Just as I will always be yours. Nothing you can say or do will ever change that, Iris."

She believed him, but all she could do was tighten her arms and legs around his body. Matching his insistent strokes, Iris buried her face in his neck, tasting the salt of his skin as she scraped her teeth along his muscle. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, strong and deadly in strokes and pressure. Ragged nails over her hip, callused fingertips encircling a taut nipple, palms sure as they kneaded tense muscles. It was both too much sensation and not enough, driving off any residual fears she'd had about their futures.

The water seeped between their bodies, slicking the glide of skin across skin. Every time it ebbed away, exposing another inch to the sultry air, Iris shivered, only to have Avi cover the naked flesh with his mouth. The best she could manage was to nip and lick at his neck, biting into the lobe when she reached his ear.

"Iris..." Her name came out in a long, drawn hiss that slithered as much as it seduced. "It was never like this before. Never."

"No," she agreed. His thrusts slammed her harder into the edge of the tub, but she was oblivious to the jolts through her body, too enrapt by the way he filled and stretched her pussy. "I'm so sorry, Avi. So sorry."

"Don't."

His mouth came back to hers, the single word a prayer on his lips. He silenced any more with his sweeping kiss, and she tumbled into the pleasure headfirst, her internal muscles poised on the brink of orgasm as his strengthened his strokes. When his fingers found her clit, everything unleashed, her body wracking with pleasure as she clawed at his back.

She was barely aware of his release, or the way he continued to drive into her long after she was sure he was done. Her watery limbs eased their tight hold, but Avi had enough remaining strength for both of them, keeping her close as their kisses slowed and deepened. They shifted into tiny nibbles, soft caresses peppering the other's jaw, until Iris had to stop, her chest tight with the need to breathe.

Avi used the momentum of the water to roll off her and to the side, pulling her with him so that their bodies were still joined. "I would have followed you if you'd gone," he murmured. He pushed the wet tendrils of her hair off her forehead. "Did you really think I'd give up that easily?"

"No. I knew you'd come." She leaned into his touch. The heat still radiated from his body, more an effect of their lovemaking than the bath they hadn't really taken advantage of yet. "It really did sound like the best idea when I was talking to your father."

Avi sighed. "He does have a way of sounding reasonable, even when you know he's not. I suppose I can't hold it against you that you fell prey to his sway."

He dragged his hand down her shoulder to cup her full breast floating in the water. As he gently caressed the outline of her nipple, Iris noticed the now clean scratch raked along his wrist.

"What *did* happen to you?" she asked softly.

His hand slowed, his lashes lowered. "I went to the sanctuary. To talk to Titus."

Iris caught her breath. "What? Why?"

"Because of your concerns. Because I wanted to know how valid they were."

Guilt swelled through her for ever doubting him. On the heels of that, though, was anger. Not at Avi, but at Titus. Because if Avi was bleeding, that meant the talk had turned ugly.

"I'm going to guess he wasn't very receptive," she said.

"To put it mildly." The eyes he lifted to hers were dark and haunted. "I should be the one apologizing to you. Titus refused to even answer the simplest of my questions, and when I dared to broach the subject of your parents, he attacked me. He has never done that before."

Iris pressed closer, shifting their positions to straddle him in the water. "Were you going to tell me? If you hadn't found me here?"

"In the morning. I wanted the night to try and formulate a plan for what we should do next."

"What options do we even have? Let's both go back. We'll find someplace other than Alaska to live. Where the Lor can't find us."

"And leave Clayton here?" He shook his head. "I can't. When we leave, he goes with us."

"So what else is there?"

"I don't know."

The possibility, when it popped into her head, was absurd. She knew it. She knew exactly how Avi was going to react.

She suggested it anyway.

"Well, if Jonell won't give us the answers we want," Iris said carefully, "maybe we should try and get answers from somebody else."

Avi frowned. "There *is* nobody else."

"Yes, there is." She took a deep breath. "The Lor."



## Chapter Sixteen

Avi stared at her like she was crazy. "The Lor are trying to kill us," he said. "They don't have answers. They're part of the problem."

"Because they think we're part of the problem," Iris argued. "How do we know that they're not just following orders like you always have? When was the last time the Sentries tried to negotiate peace?"

The water splashed as Avi sat up, though she remained straddled over his lap. "It doesn't matter. It's suicide. I won't—"

He stopped himself before he said the words, but Iris knew exactly what his intent had been. "So you'll protect me. And I'll do what I can to protect you. If I've been listening to you correctly, that's kind of what we do."

"I wouldn't even know how to find ones that wouldn't automatically see us as the enemy."

"I'm not suggesting we go charging in. We'll be careful. You fly around and scope things out, and then once you know where we should go, come back and get me."

Avi was shaking his head before she'd even finished the sentence. "I'm not leaving you alone again. We've been through this. And the closer we get to Lor lands, the greater the danger to you. To both of us."

She chewed the inside of her cheek. This didn't have to be insurmountable. There had to be a way.

Avi reached behind to grab a sponge, dipping it into the water to wet it. "What do you want?" he asked. "Forget the Lor, forget the Sentries, forget the Guardians. You and I, Iris. Tell me what it is you want for us."

"I want to know the truth about my parents," she said without hesitating. "And I want to know if it was worth it to kill them for this stupid war. What I'd really like is to meet other Sentries and get their opinions. Not everybody can be like Jonell. If everybody feels the way we do, maybe it'll be easier to figure out a peaceful solution."

Avi drew the sponge gently over her breasts. "They've been indoctrinated, just as I have. You mustn't get your hopes up."

Iris sighed. "I know. But it's doable, right?"

"Yes. They'll be scattered, though. It'll require more travel."

His ragged nails scraped over her skin, reminding her of how much he'd already pushed himself. This was asking a lot. How hard had Avi already pushed himself, just to find her? Then there was the crash, the journey from the crystals and cave, the fight with Titus. Could he take much more? Was she asking too much? Because if Avi was only doing this because he was worried about losing her, Iris would never forgive herself.

"Would you tell me if it was too much for you?" she asked.

His thick lashes ducked, and she had the sudden fear he was going to lie to her. "Probably not," he admitted. He soaked the sponge again, drawing fresh water over her chest.

"But I can tell you that I'm fine now. More travel isn't going to put a strain on me, if that's what you wish."

It would have to do. And at least they were being honest with each other again.

"Then I'd like to try. If it doesn't pan out, I'm willing to come back and try to talk to Jonell again."

His eyes shone when he looked up at her again, his smile brilliant. Iris smiled back. He wasn't the only one who could make concessions.

"It might be possible to both talk to a Sentry or two and try and communicate with the Lor at the same time," Avi said. "If they find out where we are, Jonell and Titus can hardly argue with us if we're patrolling the borders of our own accord."

She hadn't considered that. All told, it was an excellent plan. It satisfied their needs, without compromising either of their beliefs. Only one niggle remained.

"I'd rather not kill anybody unless we don't have any other choice."

He nodded without pause. "Agreed." Dipping his empty hand beneath the water, he caressed her inner thighs. Her desire was sated, but the thickening of his cock against her bottom said that Avi wanted more. "Are we settled now? Will you allow me to wash you the way I'd like to?"

She plucked the sponge out of his hands. "How about I wash you?" she teased.

The pleased gleam in his eye made it all worth it.

\* \* \* \*

Iris slept peacefully, her cheek pressed to Avi's bare chest, an arm flung across his waist, and while he knew he had to rise, he was reluctant to break away from her soft heat. Their long bath had exhausted both of them, and he wanted nothing more than to sleep the night away. But that wasn't possible yet. That might not be possible again for a very long time.

Only because they were in his parents' home did Avi feel comfortable leaving her alone in their bed. Brushing a kiss over her temple, he eased out from beneath Iris. His pants were still damp, draped over the back of a chair to dry from their dunking in the tub, so he grabbed a pair of Malik's shorts and slipped those on instead. He had to loosen the drawstring on the waistband to accommodate his slightly broader frame. A shirt wasn't necessary. He was only going downstairs.

In her sleep, Iris stirred and smothered a small sigh when she buried her face in her pillow. Avi paused, waiting to see if she would wake from his absence, but she remained motionless, the long, slow hitch of her shoulders as she breathed the only indication that she was alive.

Looking at her was as thrilling now as it had been when he'd first seen her in Alaska. Together. Finally. There had been a single, terrifying moment when she had confessed to leaving that he'd thought she would be lost to him. Again. So much gained, only to be taken away. Didn't she see how much the same they were? He might have had his family in a peripheral way growing up, but he was as alone as she had always been. Finding her had brought a new light to his

existence. It was more than fighting in a war she questioned. It was having someone in his corner, someone who understood what he was. Though Iris couldn't shift, she'd known a world of difference.

She knew him. Whether she was cognizant of it or not.

He left her, as much as he didn't wish to, and closed the door silently behind him. Creeping down the hallway of the slumbering house, he listened for any signs of possible interference at every step.

Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound. Even Avi's steps stayed silent.

They had agreed to leave before dawn, and there were things that needed to be done before they could go. Provisions needed to be prepared, messages left. His father would see this as a failure, choosing to believe Avi was running away again instead of the truth the note would say, while his mother would simply be disappointed his visit wasn't going to be longer. Frankly, Avi wasn't sure how he could return at all after what had happened with his father the night before. A part of him ached at the loss that represented.

The small light coming from the kitchen surprised him. For a second, Avi debated entering. He didn't want to have to make explanations to anybody who might be up, because those kinds of summaries would only end up rousing the whole house. But if he didn't get ready now, they'd still be there when the sun came up, and then he really would have to justify what they were doing. This was the lesser of two evils. Having to make this kind of a choice wasn't an uncommon circumstance for him.

Marna stood at the sink, filling the kettle with water. Of everyone he might have had to confront, she was the easiest to deflect. She glanced back when he entered, but registered no surprise to see him up. Everybody in the house knew Avi's sleep patterns were erratic at best.

"It's a little late for you, isn't it?" Avi commented, leaning against the counter at her side. "What are you doing?"

"Clayton can't sleep. I'm making some tea for him."

In all his concern about Iris, Avi hadn't given a second thought to his friend. Guilt drove him to ask, "Is he all right?"

"He's strong. He's recovering well."

He paused. Her cagy tone didn't sound like the sister he knew and adored. Marna usually had no problem expressing her opinion about anything, from her brothers' behavior to the quality of goods purchased from the nearby town. This was too diplomatic for her.

"So he's been awake then," he said, keeping it casual. "You've talked to him?"

This time, there was a fresh bloom to her cheeks, one she tried to hide by turning off the tap and marching away from him. "Well, he can't do much else. He's stuck in bed all day. Somebody has to keep him company." She rushed onward, her desperation to change the subject obvious. "Do you want some tea, too? It'll help you sleep."

"No. I'm fine."

He wouldn't tease Marna about her interest in Clayton. His friend was a good man, and Avi could think of worse things than the two finding companionship together.

"How's Iris doing?" Marna asked. Her hands practically flew as she prepared the tray, a blur of expertise. "Have you apologized to her yet about how you were treating her at dinner?"

Avi started. "What do you mean, how I was treating her? I barely said two words to her at dinner."

"Exactly. Considering she's been your only topic of choice since you were ten, it's more than a little noticeable when you're being an ass and sulking."

"I wasn't—"

"You were. What's wrong? Did you find out she's actually got an opinion of her own?"

His mouth clamped shut. Leave it to Marna and her blunt tongue to say it like it was.

She stirred the tea, the spoon clinking against the ceramic pot. When he didn't answer her right away, she looked back at him with raised brows.

"So is Iris all right?" she prompted.

"Yes," he conceded. "We talked things over when I came back in from my flight."

"What were you fighting about?"

"It wasn't a fight."

"It was something. Did something happen at the sanctuary today?"

Avi sighed. She wasn't going to let this go. Maybe he *should* use Clayton as a distraction. "She met Titus," he admitted. He had no idea what Iris might have otherwise mentioned.

Marna wrinkled her nose. "Well, no wonder both of you were in a bad mood. He's enough to make any good woman give up on men altogether."

His mouth twitched in amusement. "Are you saying Jonell isn't a good woman?"

"I'm not even going to bother dignifying that with a response." Leaning down, she inhaled the scent of the tea before resuming her stirring. "So did Iris get a chance to meet the potential bane of her existence?"

"Yes." He paused. "She also got me invited inside the sanctuary."

The spoon clattered where Marna dropped it to the counter. "She did what?" Her brilliant eyes, so like his own, were wide with shock. "Why? How? What did you do?"

Avi shrugged. "I went in. She refused to speak with Jonell unless I went with her."

In three long steps, Marna crossed the room and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Ow!" It didn't really hurt, but his bewilderment prompted the response. "What was that for?"

"Because I'm sure Iris is too nice to hit you for being an idiot," Marna snapped. Her hands balled into fists, and she rested them on her hips. "She demanded you be treated like her equal, that you don't get shamed like you always did growing up, and you pick a fight with her? Why are you down here and not up in bed if you've patched things up? Did Iris refuse your apology? I would have."

His skin stung from the force of Marna's blow. He wanted to protest his sister's irritation with him, but he knew it was



merited, at least in part. As he rubbed his shoulder, Avi debated the wisdom in telling her the truth about his presence downstairs. Marna wouldn't like it. In fact, she'd hate it. But of everybody in the family, she was also the one person who would side with Iris. The others were caught up in the fact that she was a Sentry. Marna was the sole person who would see her as an individual woman.

"You'll find out in the morning anyway, I suppose," he said. "But what I'm about to tell you can't go to Mother and Father. I don't need that kind of headache on top of everything else.

"What are you going to do?"

Avi took a deep breath. "Iris and I are going off to try and find some of the other Sentries. She doesn't believe that the war is necessary."

Marna waited for him to continue speaking, but when he didn't, she frowned. "So? Most of us don't think the war is necessary. But the Lor won't stop."

This was a little more sensitive than simply going off to patrol. "Well ... Iris isn't convinced of that, either."

His sister had never been a foolish girl. She knew how to put puzzle pieces together, often in ways that eluded everybody else.

"She wants to talk to the Lor?"

Avi nodded.

"Even though the Lor have tried to kill her. Twice."

He nodded again, bracing himself for the protestations or attempts to dissuade him from going to start spewing from his sister's mouth.

They never came.

"Clayton has been telling me about Iris, about what her life was like in Alaska." Marna poured out the tea. Avi saw that she had automatically taken out three cups in spite of his earlier refusal. "He says she's very intelligent. Very devoted to doing the right thing and helping people."

"She is."

Carrying the cup of tea to where he still leaned against the counter, Marna met Avi's eyes as she held it out.

"Sometimes, devotion means taking risks," she said. "It's about time you found somebody as brave as you."

Her support was like a warm embrace, soft and soothing. Avi hadn't realized how badly he needed it until it washed over him, prompting him to take the tea she offered without argument.

"I can only hope that Mother and Father see it the same way," he said. "Though I highly doubt they'll be as open-minded about it as you are."

Marna snorted and returned to the tray. "I'm just glad I have a reason to hide tomorrow. Father will be in a foul mood until you return. He always is." Balancing the tea in one expert hand, she went silently to the door, her skirt swishing around her legs. "Be safe, Avi," she said from the kitchen's exit. "Be well."

"I will."

Her exodus left him alone. It was time to prepare. The sooner they left, the better it would be for everyone.

## Chapter Seventeen

They had been traveling for more than an hour before the sun began to crack over the horizon, slivers of orange making the earth's crust glow and setting the trunks of the tall trees on fire. It banished the pre-dawn chill, but Iris kept on her thick sweater, hugging it tightly around her body as she followed Avi along the narrow path he'd chosen. Varana was not an industrialized world, in spite of its other advantages. The best means of travel were worn strips of ground that hid holes capable of breaking ankles. She had to watch Avi's able footing carefully in order to best avoid them.

Avi had outlined their journey when they'd left the house.

"Lor lands are to the south," he said. "Most Sentries in service stay close to the borders in order to stop the Lor from crossing. But if we travel the path that leads to the sanctuary, we increase our odds of encountering Sentries returning for rest. We might not, but regardless, we'll be in the right region by nightfall if we travel straight and true."

More walking. Her legs were going to look great by the time she was done here in Varana.

Morning was uneventful. They kept conversation to a minimum, conserving strength in order to journey as far as possible. It made for a very boring walk, so that by the time the sun was high overhead, Iris was ready to say, "You know what? This was a dumb idea. Let's go home." At least there, she had a soft bed and running water to ease the boredom.

She wasn't a frontier woman, whether she lived in Alaska or not.

But she held her tongue and trudged on. She had fought Avi hard and long for this right to try and get some answers. She wasn't going to give up just because she was numb with monotony.

The path remained empty of only them. By the time Avi strayed from the narrow strip of dirt, daylight was waning, the sun long gone behind the trees. Her legs ached, and there was a strip of sweat beneath one butt cheek that was starting to chafe from her jeans. The night was going to be cold, but Iris was going to strip out of her clothes anyway. She needed to let her skin breathe. And she was going to pray that tomorrow would be easier.

"So how much farther?" she asked.

Avi looked up, his strong profile etched against the fading light. His nostrils flared. Iris wondered what it was he smelled. "We're here."

It all looked the same to her. "You're sure?"

He shot her a smile before slipping the pack he'd worn without a word of complaint all day from his shoulders. "I'm sure."

Avi had the tent he'd packed pitched and ready in minutes. Iris stayed out of his way, scoping out their surroundings, but there was little of interest. More trees. More of the soft grass. More path. It was lonelier than the wilds outside Black Bend.

"How many people are actually *in* Varana?" she asked.

"I don't know." His voice was muffled from inside the tent, and he poked his head out to frown at her. "Why?"

Iris gestured toward the wilderness surrounding them.

"Because I never see anybody. Where does everybody live?"

"North, primarily. The southern border is the most vulnerable to attack. Why would you raise a family here if you were living under the constant threat of death?"

She hadn't considered that. "But your family only lives a day away."

"Let's just say, my father is a very stubborn man."

"And the Sentries? Where are they?"

Avi cocked his head. "Anybody patrolling the borders finds their own way of life." He sounded like he was reciting from a textbook.

"And that means...?"

Avi pointed off toward a break in the trees. "There is a ridge over there that drops down to the sea separating us. Some of the Sentries make homes in the caves because they're fairly secure. The only way in or out is through flight or scaling the wall. Or they can build something more permanent, if they wish. I think there are a few cabins scattered around, but I'm not entirely sure where."

It felt like banishment. Children born into a life of service, without choice, and then sent off to the edge of their world as soon as they were old enough to not get themselves killed. Nobody else lived here. It was just a Sentry and her Guardian. No wonder Avi had been so hungry to find her.

Iris sat down on the grass next to him, her thigh brushing against his arm. "Is this how you saw us living?" she asked. "If I hadn't questioned the war, or if I'd been somebody else, is this what you imagined your life would be like?"

"It was the only possibility that had ever been presented to me," he said softly. "Ultimately, I never thought it would be so bad. Protecting my family. Protecting my Sentry. Are those really such awful ambitions?"

Not when he said it like that. Not when he looked at her with such unabashed certainty.

Leaning down, Iris skimmed a soft kiss over his mouth. "I think right now, it's a good thing it's just you and me. The only ambition I have is to curl up next to you in that tent and get some sleep."

Avi caught her hand when she tried to pull away. "Let me tend to our security first." He kissed her palm, the contact of his mouth sending a shock along her scars. "I'll be with you as soon as I can."

He climbed out of the tent, giving her room to crawl inside. The lone bed he'd prepared made her smile.

\* \* \* \*

Avi had been asleep for less than an hour when he heard it. A stamping of hooves, heavy against the earth, making the soil vibrate beneath his head. Iris wouldn't feel it. Only Guardians were attuned enough to sense such things, a connection to the world surrounding them that only death had the power to break.

Sitting up, Avi sniffed at the air, searching past the scents of dirt and trees and night to seek out the beast that was in the vicinity. It was large and muscular, sweating profusely enough to make his nose twitch. But more ominous than its

exertions was the smell of blood that grew stronger with every rumble.

He started shifting as soon as his head poked out of the tent. Sinew stretched, flesh grew warm as his pelt thickened to protect it. The tip of his tail flickered across Iris' arm before he was completely out, and he silently prayed that she would stay asleep.

Being a white panther had its drawbacks. Avi was strong and deadly, but at midnight when the world lay in darkness, he felt like he glowed, a beacon for any and all to see, no matter how stealthy he was. His coloring had been an advantage in Alaska, but here in Varana, and especially along the southern border, it did him no favors. It was yet another reason why he had been scorned by the other Guardians when he'd been growing up. His shifting didn't allow him to fight the genes with which he'd been blessed.

There was another option, taking flight and circling high overhead where his coloring wasn't quite as bright. But that would leave Iris unprotected and him too far away to strike swiftly. He had made a promise to be there for her at all costs, and he wasn't going to break it.

He prowled in tight circles around their small camp. A slight wind carried the approaching scents to him in stronger and stronger waves, making his hackles rise and his claws itch to rake across unsuspecting flesh. His feral gaze swept over the shadows, searching for movement, searching for life, searching for anything that might spring before he could. The stranger got closer. Avi tightened his pace, slinking lower to the cold ground, until his belly dragged along the grass.

Then he stopped moving altogether.

It wasn't just one beast. There were two heartbeats.

His ears flattened, eyes narrowing to slits. He only felt a single set of steps, those that belonged to whatever four-legged creature that was now only twenty or so yards away. It carried a passenger, and as the vibrations grew louder, Avi caught its outline in the dark.

A stallion, broad and black, solidified into a formidable presence. On its back, something pale and gossamer draped over the powerful muscle, and it wasn't until the stallion slowed to a walk and then stopped that it moved.

A woman, waifish and wan, pushed herself upright, lifting her head to seek out the reason her ride had halted. Her long black hair hung in lank strands around her hollow cheeks, and she looked as if she hadn't had a square meal in weeks. The beast in Avi wanted to strike. She screamed *prey*. The Guardian in Avi went straight to the hands clutching the horse's mane.

As soon as he saw the web of lines scoring her skin, he started to change form.

"You're a Guardian," she said in confusion once he stood before her. "I don't know you."

Avi bowed his head. If Titus knew he was greeting a Sentry nude, there would be punishment, but circumstances on the border couldn't wait for propriety. He'd deal with whatever repercussions there were once they returned.

"I am Avilius, of the Penverol Clan. I've been out of Varana for much of recent years."

"Where's your Sentry?"



"Asleep. I heard your approach, but didn't wish to rouse her. We've traveled a good deal today and she needs her rest."

"And who *is* your Sentry?"

He kept his head bowed. "Iris, of the Bridge Clan."

The stallion snorted and pawed at the ground. Avi looked up through his lashes to see the unknown Sentry bend down and run a soothing hand over his neck.

That was when he saw the blood running down her arm.

"You're hurt," he said, forgetting decorum to step forward. As soon as he moved, the horse danced back, chestnut eyes glaring at his boldness. Avi stopped. "What happened?"

"It was an accident. But Brace worries too much and insisted we travel back to the sanctuary tonight." Her eyes were dark pools in the night, glistening with pain. "So if you would kindly let us pass..."

"Iris is a nurse." Avi gestured toward the tent. "I can wake her and see if she can help. Maybe it'll save you a trip to the sanctuary."

The Sentry followed the line of his hand. He had a feeling it was her discomfort that eventually settled the matter.

"That would be appreciated. Thank you." Releasing her hold on the stallion's mane, she slid off his back. Immediately, she swayed, and Avi darted forward in order to keep her from toppling over. Her tiny hand, so small that it might have been a child's, clutched at his arm. Droplets of blood splattered onto his skin. "And thank you again."

"Let her go."

Avi hadn't seen the horse shift, but he refused to let the Sentry go until a strong grip pried his arm away, replacing it with another. He looked up and met furious eyes, the same shade as the stallion's, but the Guardian couldn't have been much more than twenty. A shock of unruly dark hair fell across a wide brow, and pockmarks still mottled his swarthy skin. With his Sentry cradled against his chest, they looked even younger, children trying on grown-ups' clothing and failing miserably.

He didn't recognize them. They clearly didn't know him. Even Iris' name hadn't sparked recognition. They had matured and were sent on duty in his absence.

It was the first time he thought he understood the alienation Iris had talked about.

"I'll wake her," Avi said, backing toward the tent. "I'll be right back."

He kept them in his sights for as long as possible, but the pair never moved. When he ducked through the opening, Iris was exactly as he had left her. He shook his head. She woke up on the turn of a dime, but while she slept, the world disappeared around her.

"Iris." His hand was gentle on her shoulder, his voice low. "Wake up."

Her eyes opened. There was a crease on her cheek from her pillow. "Is it morning yet?" She looked through the open tent flap and answered her own question. "Why are you up so early? What's wrong?"

He went to the small pack and pulled out her change of clothes. "It's not early. You've only been asleep for a little while."

"So why are we leaving?"

"We're not." He sat back on his heels and met her inquisitive eyes. He loved how they were never the same color. Right now, he would have called them brown if he hadn't seen them fleck with green and gold by the light of day. "There's a Sentry outside, and she's hurt. I was thinking—"

But there was no reason for him to finish his thought. Iris was already reaching for her clothes and pulling them on over her plush curves.

Brace and the young girl stood exactly where he'd left them when he emerged, properly clothed this time with Iris on his heels. Iris pushed past Avi without introduction, going straight to the couple. She stopped right in front of them and held her hands out to them, palm up.

"Let me help," she said, allowing them to inspect the markings.

The girl sagged almost immediately, and Iris was there, taking Brace's place and guiding her closer to the tent. "I'm Hilma," she introduced. "Avilius said your name was Iris?"

"That's right."

"Why don't I know you?"

Avi caught Iris' eyes as she eased the girl into a seated position on the ground. "It's a long story," she replied. "How about I promise to tell you all about it once we get you patched up?"

Hilma nodded feebly.

"I need fresh water." He recognized the tone of her voice. He'd heard it when Iris was tending his own injuries. "Avi, get my kit."

"There's a stream just a little bit south of here," Brace offered.

Avi went back into the tent and returned with the small first aid box Iris had insisted they bring and both of their water flasks. He gave the kit to Iris and the containers to Brace.

"Be swift," he instructed the younger man. "I'll watch her while you're gone."

His running footsteps changed from the soft human tread to pounding hooves within seconds, the flask straps trapped in his large, equine teeth. Avi watched him until he was out of sight, then turned back to follow through on his promise.

Iris had a way of mesmerizing him, whether she was lost in thought as they walked along, or writhing beneath him as he sampled her luscious body, or bowed over a young woman's arm, spraying a local anesthetic in order to save the girl some pain. He would not tell her for fear of pushing too hard too soon—he'd certainly learned that lesson already—but it didn't stop the emotions from being real.

He loved her. Not the Sentry, the fantasy he'd fostered for years. He loved Iris, the woman who braved leaving behind everything she had ever known to put her trust in him, the woman who cast aside her own needs to tend to others, the woman who touched him and made him want to forget

A Sentry's Touch  
*by Vivien Dean*

everything he knew about duty or responsibility and wallow in the pleasure of their flesh.

He loved her.

Eventually, he would find the courage to tell her.

## Chapter Eighteen

Iris learned a lot, stitching up the gashes in Hilma's shoulder. She learned that she and Brace hadn't seen their families in nearly six months, that they lived in solitude in a cabin he had built for them in a small copse of trees near the border. She learned that in the time since being sent out by Jonell, Hilma had never seen nor heard a Lor warrior, though she couldn't say for sure whether Brace had or not. Brace spent part of their days gathering provisions or flying around making sure there were no unwanted incursions.

She also learned that Hilma was pregnant, though Brace had yet to find out.

"Please don't tell him." Her dark eyes pleaded with Iris, glancing furtively over her shoulder to watch her Guardian pacing at the edge of the camp. "He'll do something drastic, I know he will."

Iris cleaned away the last of the blood dripping through the sutures. "Why? What will he want to do?"

"He'll want to marry me. And he'll want to run away to protect the baby."

"And that's a bad thing?"

Hilma looked like Iris had just suggested she cut off her own head. "Well, yes, of course it is. We can't just disappear. What about our duties?"

Pursing her lips together, Iris bit back the instant response she had about these so-called duties. More brainwashing, it

sounded like to her. Fighting a war that hadn't even let itself be known to these young people, this close to the border.

"What are you planning to do then?" she asked. "You can't keep it a secret from him forever. Babies have a way of making themselves known sooner rather than later."

Hilma's shoulders slumped. It made her seem even tinier than she already was. "I was going to ask Jonell for advice. She would know what to do. But now we're not going, so I don't know. Brace already suspects I'm unwell. He's going to know the truth very soon, I'm sure of it."

"Do you want this baby?"

"What kind of life can I give it?"

"That wasn't what I asked."

Her small hands twisted in her lap. Iris noticed that the young woman's marks weren't nearly as advanced as hers and wondered briefly if their abilities worked on other Sentries. She was tempted to try, to convince Hilma to follow her heart and not her duty, but if it failed, she'd shatter whatever trust Hilma had in her.

"I love Brace," Hilma whispered. She couldn't even meet Iris' gaze, like her confession was a dirty secret certain to condemn her. "I want this for both of us."

That made up her mind.

"I can't speak for Jonell, but I can speak as a woman who's seen a little more of life than you have," Iris murmured. She stroked Hilma's hands soothingly. "You have a home already, and if you haven't seen a threat from the Lor in all this time, it's very likely you never will. Don't deny yourself something

you want because of a 'what if' that might never happen. Take it, and then do everything in your power not to lose it."

Hilma lifted her head, but it was the men standing behind Iris that drew her attention. "I've always thought Guardians would make wonderful fathers. Brace, especially. Your Avilius seems the same."

Iris was murmuring her agreement before it dawned on her how Hilma had phrased it. *Your Avilius*. She twisted to see the men regarding them, and immediately matched Avi's soft smile with her own. That assessment wasn't wrong, actually. Iris knew he was hers for as long as she wanted.

"That sounds like you know what it is you want to do," she said gently.

"Does that make me selfish?"

"No, not in the slightest."

Hilma looked down at the hands that covered hers, turning them over to see the network of scars covering Iris' fingers. "You must be very powerful," she commented. "The only hands I've seen like yours are Jonell's."

Iris wanted to pull away from the scrutiny, but she knew the younger woman meant nothing malicious about it. Besides, this was what Iris had wanted. Answers given by the innocent in order to better understand what was going on.

"I'm not anything special." Better to downplay the fact that she had very little idea how her powers worked at all. "I've never been on the border, in fact."

"So you've never seen a Lor?"

"Oh, well, yes, I have. Twice. They attacked me in my home."



Hilma's sharp intake of breath caught the attention of the two men, but neither approached when she remained sitting.

"Your home?" she repeated. "What did you do?"

"Avi killed one, and a friend helped with the other."

"Friend? You haven't been isolated?"

Iris smiled. "It's a very long story, and you need to rest." She gathered up her first aid kit. "Sleep in the tent with Brace. Avi and I will take watch out here."

"Oh, that wouldn't—"

"Don't argue with me. I'm the doctor here, and you're the patient, so what I say goes." She softened the words by squeezing Hilma's hands in support. "You can make it up to me by promising you'll tell Brace. He deserves to know, regardless of what you think he might do."

Slowly, Hilma wobbled to her feet. Brace was at her side before Iris could reach out for her, encircling her waist with his arm.

"No more naked Twister," Iris warned. Avi was the only one to laugh at her joke. "Now shoo. I want to go fetch some more water to clean up." She waited until the young couple was firmly ensconced in the tent before grimacing. "So much for my good night's sleep."

"Stay here and rest," Avi instructed. Picking up the flasks, he hung them around his neck. "I'll return with fresh water for you."

There wasn't time to argue with him. He brushed a kiss over her cheek and then was gone.

Iris went to the tent and lifted the flap, smiling when she saw Hilma and Brace curled up beneath a single blanket. They

were both asleep already. She would bet they hadn't lasted a minute before losing that particular battle.

Working quietly, she took out her sweater and the other blanket, carrying them out to the dying embers of the fire Avi had built earlier. She stoked the coals, urging them to come back to life, and huddled next to the ambient heat. She hadn't felt the chilly night the entire time she'd been helping Hilma, but now, it was seeping into her bones. Avi better come back soon. She could use some added body heat to get warm again.

There were small flames licking to life when the pad of his footsteps returned to the camp. Iris looked up and met his green panther eyes, a charge of recognition shooting through her. He stopped in front of her and laid on his belly, making it easy for her to slip the flasks off his powerful neck.

"Thanks," she said. His thick fur was soft and warmer than the fire. "You're probably better off staying like that. You won't get cold that way."

Avi cocked his head, his thoughts clear. As Iris gulped at the clean water, he rose and came around her. His broad head nudged at her shoulder blades, knocking her slightly off-balance.

The water dribbled out of her mouth, and she sputtered as she wiped her chin. "What?" She twisted and scowled at him. "Aren't you going to change?"

He shook his head and nudged at her again. That's when she understood.

Iris recapped the flask and set it aside, stretching out along the ground beside the fire. Avi mirrored the position at

her back. Lifting a powerful leg, he curled it around her body and tightened the circle, forcing Iris to burrow back into the soft fur of his abdomen.

"God, you're so warm," she murmured.

A rear leg pinned hers so that he was half on top of her. His weight pressed her into the ground, but it wasn't suffocating. If anything, it was soporific, driving her eyes shut, wrapping her in enough heat to relax all of her muscles.

"A girl could get used to this," Iris breathed.

Something tickled at her ear, followed by something wet. In the next heartbeat, Avi dragged his tongue along the side of her neck. The rough texture brought goosebumps to the surface of her skin, and she shivered when he did it again.

"I don't know why you're doing this, but don't stop. It's very relaxing." She stroked the short fur covering his paw, letting her fingertips linger at his retracted claws on each caress. "I'd like to escort Hilma and Brace home tomorrow. I think they're going to need a lot of help."

She took the slight hitch in his licking as a question.

"Because it's not going to be just the two of them for much longer." It was hard to imagine the waifish Hilma swollen with pregnancy, and even harder to imagine who she would rely on to help deliver it. "I've been thinking. Maybe I'll do more good down here in a nursing capacity than fighting," she mused. "Why should they have to go all the way back to the sanctuary if they don't have to?"

His wet nose burrowed into her neck, and a definite vibration began to echo from his solid body into hers. Iris smiled. Avi was purring.

"I just hope things stay easy for them." Her words were growing quieter, exhaustion taking over. "Thank you for waking me up."

She fell asleep to the lulling rhythm of his tongue along her skin and the slow thud of his heart at her back.

\* \* \* \*

Traveling with Brace and Hilma made journeying through the lands of Varana infinitely more entertaining. The young Guardian refused to allow Hilma to walk on her own, and she rode him at an easy pace, leading Iris and Avi to their small home. Avi was far more loquacious on this leg of their trip, asking many of the same questions of Hilma that Iris had the night before. He avoided the issue of her pregnancy, though. Iris was grateful for his discretion.

They reached the small house by midday. When Hilma had stressed how small it was, she hadn't been exaggerating. The interior was a single room, one side curtained off to hide a tidily made double bed. Soft rugs and throws covered every available clay surface, an explosion of color that took Iris by surprise. She wouldn't have expected it from Hilma. She had to remind herself that the Sentry was barely an adult.

"What do you do all day?" Iris asked.

Hilma smiled and gestured toward the nearest scarlet covering. "You see it. I weave when Brace isn't around."

Avi was the one who ventured forth to finger the delicate fabric. "These are exceptional," he said. "Have you considered selling them? I imagine they would do well in the cities."

A stain crept up Hilma's neck. "Oh, this is just a hobby. Commerce will detract from my duties. Jonell says—"

"Jonell isn't here." Avi retreated to the door again. "Is there game in the area? I can go out and bring something for an evening meal."

Brace nodded. "I'll show you where it's best."

Iris waited until the men were gone before sitting down in the chair Hilma had first offered. "Have you told Brace yet?"

Shaking her head, Hilma bustled at her tiny kitchen, pulling out plates and cutlery that would serve at dinnertime. "I'll probably wait until you and Avilius move on," she said. "He'll be more likely to give me an honest response then. Your presence reminds him of our responsibilities."

"Don't you ever see any of the others? I thought they were all down here."

"Not all of them. And we're scattered." Hilma pulled a long knife out from a drawer, along with a whetstone. "The border is quite long, you know. And we have to do what we can to protect it."

She didn't know how much protecting a Sentry could do, holed up in a cabin weaving all day, but Iris bit her tongue. It was entirely possible Brace kept all the danger as far away from Hilma as he possibly could. He certainly cared about her enough. But then what was the point of the Sentries being in the line of danger anyway? They couldn't do anything until they got into touching distance, and by then, if the Lor was aware of who they are, it could very well be too late. The attack at the clinic was proof that they would keep Sentries from using their abilities if they could.

"Do you mind if I go out and look around?" she asked.  
"This is all still new to me."

Hilma looked up from where she was sharpening her knife and frowned. "Without Avilius? That isn't safe."

Iris rolled her eyes and stood. "You've lived here for six months and never even seen a Lor. I think I'll manage a few minutes outside on my own."

She didn't give Hilma time to argue. Slipping out of the tiny cabin cleared some of the claustrophobia that had threatened to unloose her tongue. There was only so much she could say to the girl before it was too much, and Iris feared she was fast approaching that limit.

The day was clear, the sky a wash of azure that calmed just by looking at it. The trees that surrounded the cabin were a mix of the same tall trunks and smaller bushier ones, lending a cozier air to the clearing than much of what they'd passed through already. There were more flowers, too, but Iris didn't have to look too closely to know that they had been planted there rather than grown wild. Hilma had done everything she could to make this tiny house a home. If that didn't say something about what she wanted with her life, Iris didn't know what would.

She followed a worn path in the soft grass away from the house, the soft burble of water growing louder with each step. A narrow creek split the earth, barely a trickle in some stretches while wider in others. Kneeling at the bank, Iris bent down and scooped up a handful of the clear water, shivering in pleased anticipation at how cold it was against her fingers. The charge that she'd felt in the cavern that night

with Avi was here, too, flooding through her with a surprising calm. When she lifted her hand to her mouth, the water was even cooler on her tongue, slightly sweet and scented of sun.

The tranquility was addictive. If she spent so much of her time surrounded by this, Iris thought she'd be reluctant to leave it for the unknown, too.

A rustling further down the creek turned her head, but all she saw was the rustic landscape, the trees dancing in the slight breeze. The wind, most likely, and she shook her head at her silliness. All the talk of the Lor had her looking for them in every nook and cranny. Hilma was very adamant about not seeing any of them here; this was just another figment of Iris' imagination.

Rising to her feet, she stepped away from the creek's edge, turning on her heel to return to the cabin. She had only gone a few steps when the rustling came again, though this time, she didn't allow herself to be distracted from her path.

The cabin was just visible through the trees when she heard a new sound. This wasn't a rustling. This was more menacing, a low growl that made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. Though her pace didn't falter, Iris stiffened, tilting her head slightly in the sound's direction.

A shadow passed in the corner of her eye. She barely had time to turn around before powerful hands gripped her shoulders and shoved her to the earth.

Iris landed with a bone-jarring thump, her hands splaying out to the sides to find grips in the lush grass. Her head snapped up, and her heart immediately went into double-time.

A Sentry's Touch  
*by Vivien Dean*

A Lor warrior stood in her path, its black reptilian eyes glaring at her in hatred.

"You should not have come," it hissed.

Iris was beginning to think the exact same thing.



## Chapter Nineteen

Avi liked Brace. He didn't say much, and he had very definite opinions about where they should hunt, but from everything he'd seen—the way he protected Hilma, his determination to drive himself as far as he could—the young man was someone he would have been proud to call a friend. Avi wasn't entirely sure that was a possibility in the long run, but he distracted himself for the short-term by wondering how his Guardian training would have been different if he and Brace had been comparable ages. It might have been more tolerable, or there was the distinct possibility that Brace would have joined in with the jeers. Avi was going to believe in the former.

They found a warren with little problem, and together, he and Brace captured a half dozen rabbits, enough to see the young couple through for days after Avi and Iris left. Both men shifted back to human form in order to skin and clean them, and they worked in comfortable silence, both pleased with their results.

It was Brace who spoke first, as his nimble fingers tied the carcasses together for the trip back to the cabin.

"Have you ever killed a Lor?"

The question was posed with eyes averted, uttered with a deliberate casualness that said much about how curious Brace was to the answer. Avi didn't break in his work, keeping the same nonchalant air, and nodded in response.

"Is that how you got those scars on your back?"

Truth be told, he did his best not to think about the scars left from the whippings at the hands of the Lor. He'd dissociated from them long ago; if he hadn't, the nightmares would have become unbearable. Only when Iris had asked about them had he considered the ramifications from all those years ago. The eldest Guardian had never given him sympathy for what had happened when he'd been captured. He hadn't even given him praise for not breaking. It had been that callous treatment that had finally driven Avi to go off in search of Iris on his own.

"I got these when I was younger than you are now," Avi replied. "Think of it as proof that we're doing the right thing."

The answer seemed to satisfy Brace, at least temporarily, and they finished off the rabbits without any more interruptions. As they set foot back on the trail to the cabin, Avi caught his occasional glance in his direction, always at his back, always looking away quickly when Avi would notice.

"If there's something you want to know, just ask," Avi finally said.

Brace colored. "I guess I wondered how something like that could happen to you, and I've never heard of it. It would seem both a valuable lesson and an inspiration for the younger Guardians."

"Perhaps they didn't wish to scare you."

"Perhaps. But I've never heard of a Guardian being captured and living to tell the tale. That would seem far more important than frightening us."

Avi would have said the same thing. But he wasn't the one in charge of the Guardians. Titus was the eldest now, and clearly Brace would have been trained under his tutelage.

"When you patrol," he asked, "haven't you ever had to face a Lor incursion?"

Brace shook his head. "I sometimes wonder if Titus assigned me to this particular section of the border because he knew we wouldn't have any threats here. I wasn't the best of his students."

Something about his tone made Avi clap a hand of reassurance onto his shoulder. "From what I've seen, you're doing more than your duty. Hilma is safe and healthy. That's what truly matters in the end."

Though Brace smiled, he ducked his head as if embarrassed to show it. Nothing more was said as they continued on down the path. Nothing more needed to be.

\* \* \* \*

Iris remained unmoving, watching the warrior. So much for the lack of Lor sightings. *How do I always get so lucky?* She almost wondered if Hilma had lied to her, but that suggestion bordered on ludicrous. Iris was pretty sure it was impossible for someone like the young Sentry to deceive both her and Avi.

Her blood ran cold.

Avi. Who was nowhere around to help her this time.

Her shoulders ached where he had grabbed her, but she ignored the discomfort to slowly push herself up onto her

knuckles. "If my presence bothers you," she said, "feel free to just mosey on along. Don't let me stop you."

Its mouth curled into a sneer. "You cannot. You're an abomination and must be destroyed."

Not being thrilled with her newfound heritage was one thing. Being called names about it was something else entirely.

"Two of your kind have already tried that and don't live to tell the story." An idea occurred to Iris, something rash and untested, but in these particular circumstances, there was no time to consider the efficacy of what she was about to try. Curling her fingers through the thick grass, she imagined what it was she wanted and forced her will outward. "I'd hate to add you to the list."

The Lor snorted. "It doesn't matter. If I fail, someone else will succeed."

That was kind of what she was afraid of.

Her hands were growing hot, her fingers tingling from the power she felt surging through her. The soil began to vibrate, tiny oscillations that alluded to larger things, and Iris concentrated harder, imagining a quake strong enough to knock the Lor to his feet. It was a risk, she knew. As far as she knew, the ability to exert her will was supposed to only work on sentient beings. But every contact she had had with the land of Varana had been charged with something stronger, and the world was alive in its own way. Trying to get it to obey her desires seemed like a reasonable possibility.

Especially when she lacked many other options.

The Lor took a step closer, eyes narrowed as he assessed how best to attack again.

Fear like liquid fire surged through her veins. Blades of grass tore out of the ground from how tightly she clutched at it, and her head throbbed with the force of her desires.

"Don't do it," she warned.

The ground was noticeably quaking now, enough for her knees to slip sideways. The Lor stumbled, but righted himself quickly, taking yet another step toward her.

Then he stopped. His obsidian eyes fixed on her. Not on her face, though. They looked lower. At her throat, or...

Iris glanced down.

Her necklace had swung free of her sweater. Now, the blue crystal dangled over the vibrant grass, jostling with the same tempo as the earth. But it wasn't its movements that captivated him.

It was the way the crystal blazed, bright and brilliant so that it cast shards of color across the ground. It was exactly what the crystals had done when Avi had brought her to Varana.

The leaves rustled audibly as the earth continued to shake. The louder it got, the tighter Iris held on. If she let go, it would stop. If she let go, the Lor would waste no time to attack. If she let go, she was a dead woman because with each passing second, she felt another ounce of her strength fading.

She wouldn't let go. Not until the ground tore itself away from her.

The Lor fell to his knees. His hand shot out to grab the nearby tree trunk, but a sudden wrench lurched him backwards. A loud, cracking sound split the air, and she watched, frozen, as his eyes rolled back into his head. Blood poured from an open gash on the side of his head. He must have hit it, she realized. Was he unconscious?

He was too far away for her to see. If she wanted to know for sure, she would have to let go of her hold and go to him.

Iris looked down at her hands. The scars visible at the sides of her fingers were livid against her pale skin, raised enough from the surface to make them look like vines crawling and wrapping around her hands. She couldn't let go. Not yet. It could be a ruse to make her stop.

The quaking grew more violent, leaves fluttering to the ground, small branches snapping like brittle bones. Her stomach lurched, and Iris was suddenly very glad they had yet to eat lunch. She would have been sick otherwise. Each second was another where her strength ebbed, sucked away by the force of what she was doing and the effort to hang on.

The Lor started stirring just moments before she heard Avi's panicked shouts.

"Over here!" But her voice lacked the power to carry far. Iris cleared her throat and tried again. "I'm here!"

The Lor lifted his head. Blinking against the blood that dripped into his eye, he pushed up onto his hands and knees, and crawled toward her in excruciating deliberation.

Her lungs constricted. Beads of sweat peppered her brow. Then, another of Avi's cries reached her ears, and Iris was

able to tear her gaze away from the encroaching Lor to see a white-blond streak breaking through the shaking trees.

"Avi! Be careful!"

Her warning was unnecessary. He and the Lor spotted the other at the same time, each veering their approach accordingly. As soon as Iris saw Avi shift, it dawned on her what he was going to do.

"Don't kill him!" Her grip on the grass loosened, and the quaking immediately eased. "We can't get answers from him if he's dead."

Avi didn't slow, his heavy paws silent over the ground. Behind him, Brace paled and faltered, but his elder's unfailing attack seemed to fortify him to push onward, long limbs feathering as he changed into an enormous dark hawk.

The Lor rolled out of the way of Avi's leap, bringing him closer to Iris. It was almost touching distance. With her strength waning and her fingers aching, she reacted on instinct, not quite as fearful of harm with Avi and Brace so near.

She let go of the grass. In an instant, the quaking ceased. The abrupt change surprised both Avi and the Lor, knocking them off-balance, but it was only her would-be attacker that interested Iris. Crawling forward the few inches that separated them, she grabbed the Lor's ankle and curled her scorching fingers around the scaled muscle.

"Stop."

The power still coursed through her veins. This time, she felt it make the jump between them, to swell somewhere deep in the pit of her stomach and tumble outward, crossing

through skin, barreling through hide, to make the Lor freeze in place. One leg was lifted off the ground, the knee inches above the grass, as he prepared to take some new position—most likely, closer to her. But now, he couldn't. Didn't. Because Iris forbade him to.

Avi prowled toward them, newfound footing sure and sleek. His teeth were bared, and a low growl in his throat set a new warning to the air. He stopped at the Lor's head and deliberately pushed a paw down onto the warrior's shoulder, pressing him flat to the ground without breaking Iris' grasp.

Next to them, Brace glided to the ground, but before he could shift back, Iris met his eyes.

"Go get something to bind him with," she instructed.

Brace flapped his wings in protest.

"I'm not going to kill him," she reiterated. How many times was she going to have to say it? "But the sooner you get back to the cabin and get that rope, the sooner you find out whether or not Hilma's okay. The quake probably took her by surprise."

It was dirty pool. She knew it. But Brace immediately lifted his head to look off in the direction of the house. In the next moment, he'd taken flight again with a flurry of rustling feathers.

"If you think to torture me, you will fail," the Lor snarled.

"Yeah, that's not really my bag, either," Iris shot back. "All I want is for you to answer some questions for me."

He made a sound that might have been a snort. Otherwise, he remained completely still.



"Do you have any idea how badly Avi wants to tear out your throat?" she tried instead. "And if I let go, he'd do it, without blinking."

"Death is preferable to whatever it is you think to accomplish."

"What is so wrong with wanting to end this damn war?" She was beginning to think there was something seriously messed up with these Lor and Sentries, if they couldn't even conceive of the possibility of peace. When he made no attempt to answer or give her more rhetoric, she shook his leg. "Answer me. And you will tell me the truth, because I'm sick and tired of getting the runaround in this place."

"We will not end the war and sacrifice our lives," the Lor ground out. He squeezed his eyes shut, clearly disgusted with his responsiveness.

"Nobody's asking you to."

"That's your entire purpose, Sentry."

"And if that was the case, do you really think I'd be insisting that neither of these Guardians hurt you?"

His mouth pressed tight. Apparently, her powers considered that a rhetorical question.

"Why won't you try and negotiate peace?" she tried instead.

"We have."

The answer took her by surprise. From the way Avi looked back at her, she thought it probably took him by surprise, too.

"I meant, why haven't you tried recently?" she said. Maybe that would garner a different response. Her first question might not have been articulated clearly enough.

"We have."

That came as an even bigger shock.

"With who?" Iris demanded. "Jonell?"

"Yes," the Lor growled. "The deal has been struck."

Jonell hadn't said a word. She'd claimed that the war was still going on, and there were certainly enough warriors coming after Iris to back that up.

But none had gone after Hilma. She'd lay odds that Brace hadn't seen any, either.

Iris glanced at Avi. "Does Titus know?" she asked the Lor.

"Of course, he does. He is her Guardian."

The whirlwind of information, all of it conflicting with everything she already knew and thought to be true, made Iris' eyeballs pound inside her skull. Squeezing her lids shut, she concentrated for long seconds to try and ease the headache forming, but all it did was focus her on the barrage of new questions his responses elicited.

"What kind of deal did you make with Jonell?" She posed the query without opening her eyes. Her strength was ebbing, and she needed to direct what little she had in asserting her will.

"Kill Iris Bridge, and bring peace to both our peoples."

The soft cry that came from her throat accompanied the slight loosening of her fingers. In that instant, the Lor kicked at her head, connecting with her temple. The pain was instant. Her head snapped back, and her ears rang as he

A Sentry's Touch  
*by Vivien Dean*

broke free. The approaching blackness followed just as swiftly, and Iris crumpled to the grass, unconscious to the world.

## Chapter Twenty

She woke up with a splitting headache.

Blinking against the pain, Iris tried to lift a hand to touch her forehead, only to have warm fingers wrap around her wrist and guide it back down to her side.

"Relax." Avi's voice sounded like it was coming to her through thick pillows. "No moving."

It took a moment for her to realize she was lying on Hilma and Brace's bed in the cabin, the curtain pulled across to mask away the light. The vague outline of Avi at the side of the bed gradually took on focus, but as he did, so did her recollection of what had happened.

"That thing kicked me," she said in sudden annoyance. "Please tell me you beat the crap out of it for such a dirty trick."

His lashes ducked, and Avi bent to reach for something unseen. When he straightened again, he held a damp cloth that he pressed into her forehead.

"The Lor is dead," he said carefully. "And before you yell at me for killing him when you said not to, he didn't give me a choice. You were unconscious, and he was going after you. I did what I had to."

Her mouth was open to argue, but it snapped shut again by the time he finished. She couldn't blame him. He'd said how many times that he would protect her, no matter what the costs. Faced with the decision of choosing between heeding her request and saving her, with Iris unable to

defend herself, there was no other alternative. Besides, it wasn't like they hadn't already killed two of them back in Alaska.

Iris sighed. "It would've been nice to get some more answers from him, but all right. No yelling."

When the cloth started to cool, Avi removed it again to warm it up in the bowl of water she now knew rested on the floor. "I must agree," he murmured. "It would have been good to have Hilma and Brace witness his confessions as well. The things he claimed..." His eyes burned when they lifted again to meet hers, shadows of desolation making him look older than his thirty years. "I know you were forcing him to tell the truth, but I don't know how to believe him."

Apparently, it was one thing to not argue with Iris when she voiced her conflicting viewpoint. It was something else entirely to hear it validated—and worse—by an external source.

"What I don't understand is why bother killing me," Iris said. "I'd gladly go home and forget about this place, if that's what they wanted. If that's what it took for this stupid war to be over."

"I don't know." His shoulders slumped. "I don't know how to understand any of this."

"Maybe we should go back to the sanctuary and talk to Jonell again."

Avi stiffened. "He said Jonell was the one to order your death in the first place. I won't let you face that risk. She's powerful, and she'll have the upper hand."

"She's also the only one with the answers we need. If she really wants me gone, I want to know why."

"Your trick with the Lor won't work on Jonell," he warned. "She won't let you touch her, and even if you did get that close, Titus would be on you in a moment."

Iris offered what she hoped was a perky smile. "That's why you're coming with me. You already have an invitation."

His jaw tightened. "And I lost to Titus the last time I encountered him. Or have you forgotten that?"

"All the more incentive to kick his ass this time."

Avi rose from the stool upon which he sat and paced in the narrow space afforded them by the curtain. "There has to be another way," he said under his breath. "I'll hunt for another Lor—"

She snorted. "Give it a day. I'll bet another one finds me." In spite of her aching head, Iris pushed herself into a sitting position, ignoring the wave of dizziness that washed over her. "But if we do that, we put Hilma and Brace at risk, and I'm not willing to make that trade. This is the only way, Avi. Jonell's not crazy. If she really thinks I'm such a threat, I'll leave. That's all there is to it. She has to see that that's the best solution for everybody."

He still looked unconvinced, but her refusal to be still drew him back to crouch in front of her. "Regardless of how insane it is, we're not doing anything until you've rested." Gently, he pushed at her shoulders and forced her to lie down again. "I'll promise to consider it, if you promise not to move again. I'm not going to lose you to something as ridiculous as a kick in the head."

His joke made her smile, but he was right. She needed to take it easy. "You know that saying about doctors making the worst patients?" she said. "Well, it goes double for nurses."

Avi smoothed a large hand over her brow, pushing her hair back from her eyes. His touch was far more soothing than the cloth had been. "You are a stubborn woman, Iris Bridge."

"Hey, I've been called worse." Already, her eyelids were feeling heavy, drooping further with each caress of his palm.

"I take it Hilma wasn't hurt in the earthquake?"

"No, she's fine." His other hand reached to stroke over the back of her fingers. "I did not know you could do such a thing," he admitted, awe in his voice. "How did you?"

"I didn't. But I didn't have a choice, and I thought, well, the earth's alive, too. Why not take a shot?"

"I don't think even Jonell would attempt such a thing. You have greatness in you, Iris."

"No, I had desperation."

But his suggestion lingered long after she let her eyes drift shut. Jonell wanted to get rid of her for some reason. Did she see Iris as a threat somehow? Was it a seniority thing and she didn't want to lose her position of power with another Sentry closer to her own age so near? It couldn't be about power. Iris had no idea how to use hers as effectively as Jonell did. Frankly, the earthquake was a fluke as far as she was concerned.

So what was it?

The question was still haunting her when she slipped back into sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Avi thought it was a mistake. Going to the sanctuary for any purpose was low on his list of things he liked to do, but going with the express goal of confronting the most powerful Sentry currently alive bordered on insane. The Lor had to be mistaken. There was no way Jonell could be responsible for all the attacks on Iris. Sentries didn't attack other Sentries; it just wasn't done.

But as soon as the Lor had broken his hold on Iris, he'd turned to kill her again. He had been under her control, and she had told him to tell the truth. So if nothing else, the Lor believed the tales he told to be fact.

What did that mean for Varana? Everybody wanted the war over. Was Iris really the key to that?

Regardless of whatever Jonell wanted, however, Avi would never let her harm Iris. It was more than being her Guardian at this point. He loved Iris, though even that seemed an insufficient word to describe how she made him feel. Iris was friend as well as lover, confidante more than responsibility. If she left to return to Alaska, he would be there at her side. Maybe beyond the borders of Varana, they could build a life together. He would miss home, but he had spent enough years away from both hearth and family to know he could put roots down elsewhere. He wanted his roots to remain with Iris.

But on this one thing, Iris was adamant. She hadn't said another word when she'd awakened for dinner, sipping the soup Hilma had made with only the scantest of conversation. As soon as they were alone again, she said in no uncertain



terms that she wanted to leave as soon as their hosts were asleep. Avi had no choice but to agree.

He waited outside, gazing up at the stars as he listened to the world settle for the night. A slight breeze made the leaves rustle, and the earth was damp and cold at his back, the grass tickling where it brushed against his bare arms. Unthinking, he toyed with the dancing blades, remembering how Iris had looked with her hands knotted in the greenery. It was the first time he had ever seen her exert her power, and while he had tempered his response when they talked about it, he still found it awe-inspiring.

She glowed. She was already a beautiful woman, but in the throes of unleashing her will, there had been a fierce blaze in her clear, hazel eyes, a raw power emanating from her skin. Even thinking about it now got Avi hard, his cock aching as he wondered what it would be like to sink into her when her body was brimming with the force of her exertions.

He was still thinking about it when the door opened silently behind him and Iris stepped out into the moonlight.

"Hilma and Brace are asleep," she said. "I wrote them a quick note so they don't worry about us in the morning."

Avi stood, his gaze searching her for any signs of weakness. "We don't have to do this," he said for what felt like the hundredth time. "Another day of rest—"

"Will drive me crazy," Iris finished. "It's going to take us long enough to get there. I don't want word to get back to Jonell that we've abandoned the border already. She'll think something is up."

Avi was of the opinion that Jonell would know, regardless of when they left, but he held his tongue. It was fruitless to argue. Iris needed her strength for the journey.

"Give me the pack."

He took it from her without allowing her room to argue and slipped it effortlessly over his shoulder. Iris tipped her head to look up at him, and the nocturnal illumination rimmed her eyes in silver. Unable to resist, Avi cupped the back of her head, held her still, and lowered his mouth to hers.

She tasted of fire and herbs, hints of Hilma's supper in the sweeps of her tongue. It thrilled Avi to know that Iris responded to his touch without hesitation, that she opened to him at first contact of skin to skin. When he had first broached the subject of their intimacy, her reactions had been skittish at best, and he feared that they would remain so, in spite of his desire for more. Taking her to his favorite place in Varana, making love to her there for the first time instead of someplace more impersonal, had been unplanned but fortuitous in hindsight. He had simply meant to share something valuable to him and hoped she would appreciate its beauty.

In the end, he had revealed more than he had dared.

Iris was breathless when the kiss ended, her eyes brilliant. "If that's your sneaky way of distracting me from leaving, it's not going to work."

Her tone said otherwise.

Avi smiled. "I've already promised to take you. And as delightful a distraction as you can be, I know you want this." Tilting his head toward the trees, he laced his fingers through

hers and tugged. "Let's go. We should take advantage of your strength while we can."

They walked in silence along the path, side by side, hand in hand. It was a slower pace than they had taken to arrive, their companionship easier. The occasional cry of a bird high overhead made him stiffen, but though he kept his senses alert, there were no signs that they were being followed. It was only a shame his land animal wasn't a horse like Brace's. He and Iris would make it to the sanctuary in a fraction of the time.

She faltered in the third hour.

Beads of sweat dotted her brow, and though her gaze remained fixed in front of them, Avi didn't miss the rapid rise and fall of her chest. She was winded, and she was refusing to say anything, for fear of losing time.

"Time to take a break," he said, pulling her to a stop.

Iris tugged at his hand. "We can't stop now. We only just got started."

"Three hours ago. And you're struggling." Dropping the pack, he rested his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her to sit. "We're taking a break."

She scowled, but the slight resistance she offered was only further proof of her exhaustion. "Sometimes, this protectiveness of yours is a little smothering," she complained. When he knelt at her feet, she tried to yank them out of his reach, but Avi simply grasped her ankles and brought them back. "You should consider another profession. Like being a mother hen..."

Her words trailed off in an ecstatic sigh as he slipped off her shoe and started to massage her instep. She wasn't accustomed to all their walking. Even the short distance they had come had her feet swelling up inside the restrictive leather.

"How is your head?"

Iris rolled her neck. "Not too bad. I probably look worse than I feel." She touched her temple gingerly, testing the area. "Please tell me I don't have a foot-shaped bruise on my face."

Avi chuckled. "It's not foot-shaped, no. Just make sure you tell my mother that it wasn't me who hit you. We'll end up matching when she boxes my ears."

His small joke did what he hoped. Iris relaxed even more against the stone she leaned on, regarding him silently as he rubbed her feet. When he finished the left, he turned to the right, removing that shoe as well and setting it aside. If he had his way, she wouldn't put them on again until morning. She needed a good night's sleep.

"What do you want?"

The query came out of the blue, unexpected enough to make Avi lift his head. "What do you mean?"

Iris shrugged. "With your life. If I go back to Alaska, and you follow me, what are you going to do?"

"I thought that was simple. My job is to protect you."

"I know that, but let's say you don't need to. I talk to Jonell, we clear the air, and I go home without having to worry about a trail of Lor warriors following me like ants. Are

you just going to sit around the house all day while I'm at work? That'll be awfully boring."

He'd never given it much thought. He'd focused for so long on simply finding Iris that the aftermath hadn't concerned him nearly as much as the actual act. Then when he did think about the future, it was fighting on the borders, protecting her as she protected Varana. That was what he was. That was what he did.

Now it looked like that wouldn't happen at all.

"I don't know," Avi admitted. "I worked various odd jobs while I was looking for you. I could probably find something to do." He set her foot down and smiled. "Being strong has its advantages sometimes."

"And a family? Or your family? What do those mean to you?"

He told her what he'd always believed.

"Family strengthens us. Mine helped as I was growing up. My brothers, my mother, my sister. Even my father, in his own way. But family's not about blood, Iris. It's about kinship." He shifted so that he was sitting next to her, his thigh pressing to hers, their shoulders brushing. Resting his hand over hers, he caressed the soft skin, reveling in the sharp intake of breath his touch created in her. "You and I are family, even without the bonds of our heritage. Nothing will ever change that."

Iris leaned her head against his shoulder, the weight warm and comforting. "We'll have to come up with a good cover story for Ted about you living with me out of the blue. Maybe

... we've been penpals for years, and you were surprising me with a visit when Clayton's copter crashed."

"I like that."

He left unvoiced how her words made him feel. Well, maybe not the words themselves, but the nonchalance with which she spoke them. She was ready to welcome him into her life. Partners. Living together. He knew she was attracted to him, but a woman who didn't have some measure of feelings as well wouldn't agree to a living arrangement.

He thought on it some more, hypnotizing both of them with the tiny circles he kept drawing on her hand.

Perhaps *some* women might.

Iris wouldn't.

Careful not to disturb where she rested her head, Avi slipped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her even closer into his body. Her hand went to his waist, easing beneath his loose shirt, and at the first contact of her hot fingertips against his skin, Avi hissed.

Iris immediately sat back.

"Are you all right?" Her gaze swept over him, searching for injury. "You didn't tell me the Lor hurt you, too."

"He didn't."

He put a halt to her concern by taking her wrist and pulling her back onto his lap, his thickening cock pressing between her thighs. Her eyes widened for the moment before she smiled, and Iris looped her arms around his neck.

"We're supposed to be walking," she chastised.

"Your feet hurt."

"And that's an excuse to sweep me off them?"

"You're the one on top of me. I would say I'm the one who's been swept."

Iris glanced down at their hips. "You're right," she mused, as if the thought had only just occurred to her. "I am on top. I should probably take advantage of that while I can."

His cock jumped, and while he suspected Iris felt it, neither of them otherwise acknowledged the surge of desire. "We're supposed to be walking," he said, repeating her earlier warning.

"We both know you don't want me to walk any more tonight."

Further protest was stifled by her mouth on his, hungry and warm, her eager tongue sliding past his defenses. Every time her palms skimmed over his shoulders, the charge of her power seared his skin, though his thin shirt muted the overall effect. He wanted to strip it out of her way, but that would mean stopping long enough to get it off and Avi wasn't ready for that yet. She tasted too good to abandon.

Her teeth caught on his lower lip, nibbling at the tender flesh. "You make me feel like anything is possible." When she pulled back, her blown pupils had swallowed most of the color in her eyes. "My plan to confront Jonell is half-baked at best, and yet, you haven't given me hell for it."

His mouth slanted. "I distinctly remember not liking this idea when you first came up with it. I think pacing was involved."

"But you didn't stop me." She caressed his nape, the direct contact making him shiver as the charges rolled straight down his spine. "You could have."

"Could is not the same as would."

"My point exactly."

Iris bent her head, but instead of another kiss, the tip of her tongue left a sizzling trail along his jaw, catching on the fine stubble that was starting to grow there. His eyes fluttered shut as he tilted his head to the side, and she continued onward, along the tight muscle of his neck until she had to push the collar of his shirt aside in order to reach bare skin.

His hands tightened on her hips. The force of her want was mind-reeling. Avi had to tamp down the instincts to push her to the grass and pound into her. It would come soon enough, if he was patient. But at that moment, patience seemed beyond his grasp.

When her hands reached between their bodies to his waistband, he groaned. "Take me out," he breathed.

Iris never stopped kissing and licking at his collarbone as her fingers worked with the tie. In seconds, her hot palm was pressed against his shaft, and the same shocks that had gone down his spine now went straight into his groin.

Avi bucked slightly into her touch. When he tried to slip his hands inside her jeans, however, Iris sat back onto his thighs.

"What if this was all I wanted?" The strokes along his cock were long and slow, and Iris deliberately ran her palm over the wet tip on each one. She smiled when he shuddered. "I kind of like watching you be all helpless."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't believe you."

"You can't prove me wrong."

"No, but I can smell how wet you are." Avi licked his lips. "You want me as badly as I want you."



She didn't speak, her head tilting as she regarded him with desire-dark eyes. The strokes slowed, then stopped, and she ran her fingers across the sensitive tip one more time before letting his cock slip away. Bracing against his shoulders, she rose to her feet, one on either side of his hips, and slowly undid her jeans.

Her scent assailed him as soon as she began to push the denim down her legs. Avi caught her hands on her thighs, stopping her from going any further, and pulled her toward his waiting mouth. She resisted at first, but as soon as she caught his eye and the deliberate swipe along the edge of his teeth, Iris smiled and relinquished the fight.

His nose brushed against her soft curls, inhaling her musky aroma. Beneath his hands, her muscles trembled. Avi had wanted to taste her more than once, but time and circumstance had kept it beyond his reach. Now, however, it looked like he would finally get to satisfy that desire.

He flicked his tongue out, skimming over the soft outer lips without going any deeper. Iris squirmed at the slight contact, but when she attempted for more, Avi tightened his hold.

"You were teasing me," he murmured. "Now it's my turn to tease you."

Nibbling along her inner thigh, Avi worked his way back up to her folds. He used his strength to force her to widen her stance a little more, and the first peek of her clit, pink and succulent, made his mouth water. Nothing had ever looked so appetizing, and he had to fight the urge to succumb to his baser wants and sink his teeth into it first. But he held firm,

licking lower, sliding his tongue between her lips to trace her wet opening.

Iris gasped. One hand broke free of where Avi had been holding it and went to the back of his head, molding over his skull. He thought for a moment she was going to try and press his mouth closer, but she seemed content simply holding on. He didn't blame her. Her legs wouldn't stop quivering beneath his palms. It was heady and frightening, all at the same time.

Her juices coated his lips, and Avi turned his head slightly in order to delve deeper into her passage. The angle made it easier to avoid touching her clit, and with each caress against her silken inner walls, Iris moaned a little bit louder.

"If you're going to do that with your tongue," she said, "you might as well let me ride you. We'll both come that way."

Avi pulled back to gaze up at her. In the moonlight, her eyes glittered, and her mouth looked swollen from their earlier kisses. "Only if you let me do this again after."

"God, please..."

It was all he needed to hear.

He pushed her jeans further down her legs, but before they were all the way off, Iris fell to her knees, lifting her hips just enough to catch the tip of his cock with her pussy and angle it away from his body. Slamming her mouth to his, she sank down his length, sighing in satisfaction once he was fully sheathed.

There was something ultimately thrilling about the weight of her against him, the way her body pulsed beneath his

hands, the sounds she made whenever he touched her. Avi could almost let himself think that the deeper feelings he hoped she had were akin to love when she responded like this, but now wasn't the time to ponder it. Now was the time to guide her up and down his shaft, to savor each clench of her pussy, to shiver each time her palms glanced across his skin. Now was the time to appreciate what he had with Iris. Because the time might come where that might not be possible.

Avi banished his traitorous thoughts to focus on her ravenous kisses and the way he could feel her heart pounding every time he held her close. Though her knees kept slipping against the grass, Iris corrected her rhythm each time, keeping it steady and hard as she rode up and down his cock. Every once in a while, she rolled her hips, grinding her clit into his coarse hair. That was when her hands grew a little more desperate, a little more needy.

"Iris..." Her name came out as a gasp, strangled in his throat when she unexpectedly squeezed around his shaft. Avi tried again. "Want you to know..."

But the declaration he'd been about to make was stopped by the sudden trembling overtaking her body, and the way her head tilted back, exposing the long line of her throat. Her muscles seized around his cock, and the orgasm he wasn't expecting suddenly unfurled inside him, making his thrusts erratic as he shot deep inside her channel. Sweaty hands scrabbled for a hold, and together, they rode out the waves, quivering and liquid by the time the sensations had ebbed.

*A Sentry's Touch*  
*by Vivien Dean*

With her breath ragged, Iris dropped her forehead to Avi's shoulder and simply clung to him. "I don't know how you do it," she rasped.

His hands smoothed up and over her back. "Do what?"

"Make me feel like this." She settled into his body, a warm weight that threatened to put him to sleep now that he was sated. "Thanks for making us stop."

Avi smiled. Perhaps he wasn't so far off in his assessment of her feelings. And soon enough, he'd tell her the truth about his own. When the timing was just a little more fortuitous.

## Chapter Twenty-one

The landscape didn't start looking familiar again to Iris until the sun was setting, hidden by the trees so that all she saw was the faint orange glow rimming the world. Their pace that day had been slower than their journey away, moderated by holding hands, time filled by hours upon hours of conversation. The more she and Avi talked, the stronger her feelings grew. The connection between them wasn't just about some duty that had bound them together at birth. It was about kindred spirits discovering they had much, much more in common than either had ever imagined.

He told stories about his time in her world, jobs he'd held as he'd looked for her, people he had known. More than once, she laughed when the tale grew deprecating. He had a keen eye for observation, and once he was comfortable doing so, a dry wit that separated the wheat from the chaff without cutting too deep. It dawned on Iris as they neared his family's home that for all his talk about Varana, he carried a fondness for her home as well. It put her at ease a bit knowing it wouldn't be as much of a hardship for him if they ended up leaving after all.

"I don't want to go to the sanctuary tonight," he said out of the blue. When she looked at him, his face was in shadows, his earlier mirth gone. "I know you want to get this over with as soon as possible, but I can't do this except by light of day, Iris. The risk is too great otherwise."

Considering how little argument he'd put up ever since she suggested it, Iris knew she wouldn't deny him this one thing. "It'll be better if we're rested anyway. I make more sense after a good night's sleep."

"Would you mind..." A muscle in his jaw twitched. "I'd like to spend the night in the cavern, too."

"Why? What's wrong with your parents' home?" She flashed on the fight he'd had with Penverol right before they'd left. "Oh, unless you don't want to face your father."

Avi shook his head. "It's not that. I don't want to risk putting them in danger, even this far away from the border. Us sleeping at the cavern is safer for everybody involved."

She hadn't considered the danger she might be putting his family in. Between Avi's distractions, she'd been too busy trying to figure out Jonell's problem with her.

"Whatever you want." Iris squeezed his hand, smiling up at him. "I'm putting you in charge until we get to the sanctuary tomorrow."

He returned the gesture. "Only until then?"

"You don't trust me to be calm and rational with Jonell? Because I seem to remember a certain someone getting into a fight with Titus—"

Avi laughed. "Point taken."

They cleared the trees that led to the open fields surrounding the house. The sun was no longer visible, leaving only a residual glow along the horizon, and the air was already cooling to the point where Iris wanted to go digging around the pack for her sweater. In the distance, the house beckoned for them to approach.

She sighed. After so many nights sleeping on the ground, that amazing bed had sounded wonderful. Oh, well. One more night wasn't going to kill her.

They were still well over fifty yards away from the front door when Avi stiffened. He came to an abrupt stop, everything about him crisp in outline. His nostrils flared. Iris sniffed at the cool air, but everything smelled the same to her. Something was amiss, though. Avi tore his hand from her, took two running steps, and immediately shifted into the white panther.

Iris took off after him, but he quickly outdistanced her. His body was a sleek shadow across the grass, almost a blur as he ran, and when he circumvented the front door to go for the kitchen entrance, she altered her course to match. Without breaking stride, he changed back into human form the second he hit the step, his naked form disappearing inside.

By the time she reached the broken door, her lungs burned and her breath came in long, ragged gasps. Iris stumbled inside, but she stopped almost immediately. It hadn't been noticeable outside, and there was no way she would have been able to detect it from as far away as Avi had, but the strong scent of blood hung in the air. Shattered glass littered the floor, and there was a bloody handprint on the wall leading out to the dining room.

Footsteps made her tense, ready to flee. Avi appeared in the doorway, his face drawn and pale.

"They're gone."

Her heart lodged in her throat. "What do you mean, they're gone?"

"Just that. Gone." He waved vaguely behind him. "They put up a fight, and Father's study door is smashed in, but they're all ... just not here."

"What about Clayton?"

"He's gone, too."

"They took all of them."

The unexpected voice behind her made Iris jump, and she whirled to see a grimy Malik standing in the door. His face was cast in shadows, and his bloody knuckles gripped the edge, as if he was having a hard time standing up. She immediately went to him, but his free hand came up and shoved her back.

"Don't touch me," he growled. "This is all your fault."

Avi's firm grip kept her from falling. The shock of Malik's vehement accusation kept her from speaking.

"What happened?" Avi asked. "Who did this?"

Malik's handsome face twisted into a pained grimace. "Titus. And a handful of others. I think they were all Guardians, but I didn't..." His gaze ducked. "I didn't stick around long enough to be sure."

Everything in her froze. "Why would..." But she knew why. Because Jonell wanted her dead. And if the Lor weren't going to do it for her, she was going to take matters into her own hands until she got exactly what she wanted.

"Where did they take them?"

"How am I supposed to know, Avi?" Malik jabbed his thumb toward the outbuilding. "That's where I've been for the



past twelve hours. Buried beneath the muck in the corner because I didn't want them to trace my scent."

"But they took everybody else."

Malik nodded. "Titus knocked on the door, and Father answered. I was in here, helping Mother get breakfast on the table. When they started arguing, she went to go see what was wrong. I ran when I heard Marna scream."

"Marna screamed? What did they do to her?"

"I don't know!"

His frustrated cry was punctuated by a slam of his fist into the wall, splitting open the barely healed scratches on his knuckles. Iris tore free of Avi's hold, but rather than risk approaching Malik when he was so clearly agitated, she went to the sink to wet a cloth.

He wiped his hand across his face, smearing the dust and grime in a bloody streak. "I think Marna was struggling with them. Before I hid in the muck, I was watching through the window, and I saw them dragging her out. I heard her call out your friend's name a couple times." He looked past Avi at the doorway. "They didn't kill him, did they?"

"No. He's gone, too." Taking the wet cloth from Iris, he went over to his brother and grabbed his wrist, forcing Malik to hold his hand out while Avi washed away the worst of the blood. "I want you to go to the caves and hide until I come get you," he instructed. "Pack enough food and supplies for a couple days."

"What about you?" He looked over Avi's shoulder to Iris, his fury barely disguised. "What about her?"

"Don't worry about us," Avi replied. "The less you know, the safer you're going to be. I'll come get you once I've brought everybody home."

She thought Malik was going to argue, or at the very least throw another punch, this time at something a little less inanimate than the wall. When he finally dropped his eyes and nodded, she let out a long, low breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Don't let anything happen to them." He took the cloth from Avi and bound it around his bleeding hand as he retreated for the interior of the house. Though he addressed his brother, Malik's intense gaze never left Iris. "I know you and Father had a fight before you left, but he lied for you to them. To protect you. Don't let that be the last thing he ever did."

Avi remained grim, long after Malik's pounding footsteps disappeared upstairs. "Grab some food," he said, whirling on his heel.

"Where are we going?"

"The cavern. You're going to spend the night there. Just like I said."

It wasn't until he had melted into the growing darkness outside that Iris realized he'd said *you*. Not *we*. He was going to leave her there while he went off and confronted Titus on his own.

He'd already lost one fight with Titus. And he was angry. Distracted. How could he think going there now was a good idea?

Ignoring his order, Iris bolted for the door. Avi was well on his way to picking up the pack and clothes that had been left behind when he'd shifted, but she could still pick out his pale hair in the darkness, using it as a beacon to guide her path. He didn't look back as she approached, and it wasn't until she grabbed his arm to stop him that he acknowledged her at all.

"There's nothing to eat in the cavern," he said before she could speak. "Don't be foolish."

"*Me* be foolish?" Iris gazed up at him, unsure this was really the man she'd spent the past week with. His face was closed, his jaw so rigid she could hear his teeth grinding. She slapped at his bare chest. "You're the one about to go all Rambo on a flock of Guardians. And for what? To get yourself killed?"

"To get my family back. I would do the same for you."

"And you'd still die as a result."

"You don't know that."

"And *you* don't know if you'll succeed." When he started to walk again, Iris darted in front of his path and put her hands up to his chest to stop him. Immediately, the charge surged through her. "Stop it."

Avi stiffened. Grabbing her wrists, he slowly pushed them away from his body, his brilliant eyes boring into her. But it was the hurt that glowed there that stripped her of her fight.

"If you're not going to get food for the cavern, I'll tell Malik to take you with him. Do you really want to put him in jeopardy, too?"

It was a low blow. So low that it slammed into her gut and made her want to throw up. "You know that's not what I want," she said.

Something in him softened, but she only caught a glimpse of it before he pushed past her again. "Then go pack what you're going to need. The longer I take, the colder the trail."

He was going to do this, with or without her approval. He was going to run to Titus, and he was going to confront him, and he was going to get himself killed. Nothing she could do or say was going to stop him.

Fingering the pendant hanging between her breasts, Iris backed toward the house, watching Avi's stiff shoulders for as long as she could before turning on her heel and running. The wind whipped across her cheeks, cold and dangerous, but she was oblivious to the chill. All that consumed her was thoughts of Avi—his bloody fingernails the last time he'd fought Titus, the ripple of muscles beneath her hand when he'd warmed her with this long panther body that night they'd found Hilma and Brace, the burn in his eyes when she'd fallen to her knees and taken him inside her just the night before.

If he did this, she was going to lose him.

What was the point of being bound by destiny if destiny was just going to tear them apart again?

Destiny obviously needed a little help.

Iris ran a little bit faster.

## Chapter Twenty-two

His sullen silence held all the way until they'd reached the cavern. Though having her shoes as traction almost made it unnecessary, Iris accepted his help in navigating the slippery entrance, his fingers warm and solid as they navigated the passage. Avi was the one to disengage once they got into the primary grotto. That was a first.

She hung back as he dropped the two packs to the side of the nearest pool. "I'll be back in the morning," he said. "Try and get a good night's sleep. If I can't find my family, we'll get the answers from Jonell, instead."

He still stood with his back facing her, but Iris nodded anyway. It didn't matter what she replied. Anything but affirmation would provoke another fight, and while that might be enough to keep him in the cavern for a few minutes longer, it would send him off even more distracted than he already was. And he didn't really need her to say "yes, sir," anyway.

Avi had walked past her by several yards when she heard his foot turn in the loose grit of the floor. She looked back in time for him to grab her arm and pull her against him, his mouth coming down to hers in a hungry, desperate kiss. Iris melted against him automatically, forgetting everything in the space of a single breath.

Forgetting until he pushed her away again.

"I love you," he said. Then he let her go. He turned back around and practically fled for the exit.

Iris stood there, rooted in place, watching the space he had just filled. Her heart pounded so hard, it felt like her ears were vibrating. He loved her. When had that happened? But she knew the answer to that, just as she knew he'd meant it. He'd probably been holding it in for days now, waiting for the right time to tell her.

She seriously doubted, however, that this moment qualified as the best choice. It made her want to chase after him, grab his arm, and kiss him all over again. It was a silly, teenaged girl crush thing to do, but that was the natural response it invoked.

The next one was to chase, grab, and demand he stay.

Iris did neither. Demanding he not go had done less than good when they'd been at the house. All it would do now would sour the sincerity of his testimony.

She waited until all she heard was the water steadily dripping into the pools before moving. Picking up the packs he'd left, she stowed them against the wall, out of immediate sight in case someone unwanted found the cavern in her absence. Getting out was a lot harder than getting in. The steep angle upward meant she was both climbing and struggling not to slip and fall. Avi had provided much needed anchorage the last time she'd done this. By the time she felt the cool whisper of night, her cheeks were flushed and her brow sweaty.

Moonbeams lit the countryside almost as clearly as day. The grass rustled like liquid silver in the breeze, and the shadows of nearby trees were long and slender. Her gaze swept over the horizon. This was only the second time she

had been here, and both times, they'd come from Avi's home. How did she get to the sanctuary from here? She didn't want to have to walk back to the house and start again. That would waste time.

Time she didn't have. Time Avi didn't have.

Sitting down on the grass, Iris closed her eyes and imagined the path Avi had taken to bring her to his special place. Then, she focused on the way to the sanctuary. Trying to overlay them and figure out where they diverged, however, wasn't nearly as simple. Her skin had completely dried of sweat by the time she felt secure enough about which direction to take.

She walked. Again. She would forever be walking, she felt, to or from, here to there. It made her muse about destinations, about the company she kept while she traveled, about the paths she chose and didn't along the way, but the most important thing was, it kept her mind off what she was about to attempt. Avi was not going to be pleased when he found out she'd gone to see Jonell alone. He'd be even less pleased that she was going to try and barter for his family's lives.

If he even survived confronting Titus about it.

The path appeared out of nowhere. Iris only recognized it by the familiar s-curve it made as it ducked out of sight behind a small rise. Taking a deep breath, she set foot to it, ready this time when the sudden gust of wind hit her in the face. No choking or stumbling for her, she thought, pleased with herself. She looked to the skies automatically, searching for signs of a Guardian protecting the pathway.

The scant bit of sky visible through the unmoving trees remained devoid of anything but pale stars.

When she reached the carved archway over the trail, Iris paused. Avi had led her straight through it on their last visit, with no stopping to investigate its markings. She didn't have much time, but she stepped off the worn path to look at the swirls and jagged lines more closely.

The arch was sculpted from pale wood, smooth everywhere but in the grooves created by the deeply gouged carving. Lifting a shaking hand, Iris traced the pattern that looked most familiar, holding her other palm outward next to it to compare.

They were the same. Considering this was a Sentry sanctuary, that wasn't odd.

What *did* strike her as weird was realizing why else it felt like she knew it.

She'd seen it. Three times. On the face of the Lor warriors when they attacked her.

It was one of the unanswered questions that drove her craziest. The Lor were enemies of Varana, but for some inexplicable reason, their scale patterns looked like the Sentry scars. According to everything she'd been told by Jonell and Avi, the first Sentry wasn't even born until after the Lor attacks grew worse. There was a connection there. More importantly, why wasn't anybody *asking* about that connection?

Though she longed to examine the rest of the arch, Iris let her hand drop and continued down the path. The trees grew thicker overhead, so that by the time she stepped off the trail



and onto the grass, the stars and sky were gone. That stole whatever illumination she'd had, leaving Iris to stand utterly still while her eyes fought to adjust. Only the wind whipping past her made any movement at all.

Then that was gone, too.

She had the urge to call out a greeting. The last time she'd been here, Jonell had appeared in front of her, without being bidden. The difference was, now it was the middle of the night, when normal people slept. Jonell was probably in that small stone house, asleep on one of those cots bowing under her weight. Even if she wasn't, others might be. Iris didn't want to create a scene. That would only exacerbate what was likely to be an uncomfortable situation.

Iris crossed the clearing with slow, careful steps. At the other side, she paused and looked back. Slashes of shadow separated earth from grass, and she remembered that the ground hadn't been perfectly smooth. Something had sliced into it. Crouching down, she skated over the soft blades until she felt the cool dirt.

A shock went up her arm.

In the next second, her pendant blazed. It threw off enough light to cast a bluish glaze over the furrow.

It was deep, at least a foot, and when she leaned over to look inside, the way the necklace dangled over the ground made the light dance across the earth's surface. Iris reached in. What looked like metallic flecks turned to simple soil on her fingers, but the shocks continued to surge through her veins.

She sat back on her heels, wiping her hand off on her jeans. The lack of contact extinguished the light in the pendant.

It all meant something. She was sure of it. This was just one big puzzle, with a ton of pieces that didn't really fit, and somewhere in the jumble was an answer that made sense. The trick was in finding it.

When she stood back up, Iris gasped. The clearing felt warmer, like the temperature had gone up twenty degrees. Beads of perspiration stippled her brow, and when she took a deep breath, the air felt like it got caught in her lungs before she could let it out again. Her palms burned, too. They hadn't been hot when she'd been touching the ground.

Iris knelt back down again. As soon as her fingers sifted through the dirt, the burning sensation went away.

That was new. Usually, her hands got hot whenever she exerted her will. But she hadn't been doing that when she noticed the heat.

"What are you doing here?"

The unexpected voice made her jerk. Iris pulled her hands out of the dirt and looked up to see the vague outline of someone standing at the sanctuary's entrance. Without the illumination from her necklace, it was too dark to see details, but she knew that voice. Even though the coldness in it chilled her blood.

"It's a sanctuary for Sentries, isn't it?" Iris held herself straight. Jonell scared the crap out of her, but she wasn't going to buckle in front of her. "So, I'm a Sentry. And I guess that means I'm seeking sanctuary."

Jonell didn't move. "Are you hurt?"

She couldn't fake an injury. She was pretty sure Jonell would see through that right away. "No."

"Where is your Guardian?"

"I don't know." It was the truth, after all.

"I was under the impression that you had gone to the borders. Did something happen?"

"Gone. Came back. So, so boring."

Silence fell between them. If Jonell admitted to knowing of the Lor attack, it would give Iris an opening. If she didn't ... well, she wasn't sure what she was going to do then.

The shadows shifted. It took a moment for Iris to realize that Jonell was advancing.

"You'll never find the house on your own." Her brusque tone only grew more so the closer she got. "Follow me."

Jonell didn't even look at her as she passed. Rolling her eyes, Iris fell into step behind her, keeping an eye on the ground to keep from stumbling. Avi had commented about how damp it felt before, and if anything, it was even more so. Water oozed up through the grass, but without light, it looked brackish and thick.

*Like the earth's bleeding.*

The heat grew worse, the deeper into the trees they went. More than once, Iris wiped her sleeve across her forehead. As soon as she did, though, sweat rose to the surface again. It was oppressive enough to slow her pace, so that the distance between her and Jonell grew even more.

"Aren't you hot?" she finally asked.

Jonell didn't answer.

"Wait."

But Jonell didn't stop.

Iris had had enough.

"I know you're trying to have me killed."

That did the trick.

The shadow of Jonell's broad back came to a halt, and the other Sentry slowly turned around. The darkness hid everything but her jaw from view, and even that was only visible in glimpses. It was almost like she wasn't even there, more a part of the sanctuary than the trees themselves.

"That's a very serious accusation," Jonell said. She could have been talking about the weather for as even as her voice was. "I would not level it without proof if I were you."

"And who would I level it at?" A drop of sweat trickled into Iris' eye, and she blinked it away before it could sting. "You're the boss around here, and I'm going to bet you don't have some sort of equal opportunity human resources department to deal with complaints from the staff."

"There is no need to deal with complaints. Sentries have one purpose, and one purpose only. They know what they must do."

"You mean, kill the Lor? Right. Except the Lor aren't really a threat to Varana when you've got them all aimed at me."

"You're being ridiculous."

"Really? When was the last time there was an active attack on Varana soil? When was the last time there was a casualty?"

Jonell's hesitation was damning. Iris only wished she could see what was going on in the woman's face.

"I know it was you," she continued. "I made the last Lor that tried to kill me tell me what the hell was going on. And he pointed his finger right at you."

Jonell snorted. "You capture a prisoner of war, and then expect he's going to tell you the truth? Are you really that naïve, Iris?"

"I don't expect it. That's why I didn't give him a choice."

Her pulse raced, and the heat turned her stomach. The faint rustling of leaves overhead made her skin itch, but Iris held perfectly still as Jonell advanced.

"That's unfortunate," Jonell said. "Though I suppose it doesn't change the end result."

It was the way she said those final two words that made Iris finally move. Jonell was too close now anyway, almost touching distance, and the last thing she wanted was for that cold-hearted bitch to get her hands anywhere near Iris' skin. What was it Jonell had said?

*When you're at war, you do what needs to be done.*

But who exactly was Jonell at war with? More and more, Iris wasn't sure it was the Lor.

And when she saw the three shadows disengage behind Jonell, approach and take shape to stand tall and scaly at her back, Iris was certain.

## Chapter Twenty-three

Her throat went dry at the sight of the three Lor. Iris had expected it, but seeing it with her own two eyes was something else. Jonell remained unflinching, even when one of the Lor growled.

"If your end result is just to get rid of me," Iris said, "all you had to do was ask. I didn't want to stay in Varana anyway."

"Life is never really that simple, is it? Of course, if you'd died in the fire like you were supposed to, all of this would have been unnecessary." Jonell's teeth gleamed in the darkness when her lips curled back into a snarl. "You're an abomination, Iris Bridge. And I won't let you be the cause of more deaths."

She heard the threat in Jonell's voice, but her brain was stuck on the earlier words. The fire that had killed her parents hadn't been meant for them at all. They had been trying to kill her. If Jonell knew about it—condoned it—then it wasn't just the fault of the Guardians. They were simply the weapons the Sentries had aimed at the Bridge family. And her parents had been the casualties.

Iris swallowed the urge to bend over and retch into the grass. Swallowing down the bile that was burning her throat, she took a step back, trying to gain more distance between her and the Lor.

"I haven't done anything wrong," she said. "Whatever you think it is I've done, it's not true."

"You were born. That's enough."

Iris saw the twitch of Jonell's finger the second before the Lor surged forward. Whirling on her heels, she ran as fast as she could through the trees, weaving amidst the thick trunks as she scrambled to get away. Her feet stuck in the grass, the wet soil seeping around her shoes. More than once, she stumbled, and mud stained the knees of her jeans before she could get back upright.

Something caught on her shirt and tore, exposing her arm to the humid air. The next time she fell, Iris scraped it across a bramble, leaving a deep gouge in her skin that looked black. It stung, but there wasn't time to think about it before she was pushing off the ground again and taking flight.

Within fifty yards from where she'd fled, she felt the first powerful hand grab her shoulder.

Claws cut through her shirt, digging into her flesh as the Lor pulled her to a halt. Her elbow shot back on instinct. College self-defense classes were more deeply rooted than she'd thought. He grunted, but it didn't stop him, and his hands grabbed each side of her head as if to break her neck.

*This is it. I can't believe I'm going to die here of all places.*

But she wasn't ready to die. She wasn't ready to give Jonell the satisfaction of winning. She wasn't ready to leave Avi behind.

Struggling in the Lor's grip, Iris flailed for a second before her hand connected with its hip. Her palm seared. With the sounds of the other warriors crashing through the trees filling her ears, she uttered the first thing to come to mind.

"Help me."

The pressure on her skull eased, but didn't disappear. Iris squeezed her eyes shut to focus and try again.

"Don't do it. Please. Don't let them kill me."

The growls grew louder. Iris didn't dare move her hand yet, though she knew from the way the power was surging through her body that her intent had been conveyed. It wasn't until the Lor let her go and the earth rushed up to meet her as she crumpled to the ground that she realized that it had worked.

Her hands sank into the grass, cooling almost instantly. Whipping her head around, Iris saw the Lor who'd been holding her turn to face his companions, his body bowed and ready to attack if they tried to rush past him. They slowed, obviously confused, but didn't try to stop. Instead, one went wide, while the other attempted to duck under her Lor's outstretched arm.

The pair tangled as they crashed to the ground. Iris didn't have time to watch to see how the fight was going, though, not with the third circumventing the fracas. He was still intent on reaching her, and she lurched back to her feet to resume her flight.

Running should have felt good against her skin, with the wind flowing over her heated flesh. But the temperature never broke, and if anything, her body felt hotter without the ground to cool it. Her hands especially. Every furious beat of her heart made her palms pulse in a sympathetic rhythm. She had to clench them into fists in order not to let it distract her.

She stumbled against a tree. When her hand shot out to steady herself, the sight of the blue bark only inches from her



face made her hesitate long enough to feel the Lor's claws catch in the back of her shirt. The screech of a bird high overhead jerked her out of her reverie, but the advantage she'd gained was lost. Each step she took came with the echo of the Lor's. It almost felt like its breath whispered along her neck.

The bird's cry came again, louder and more explicit. The sound crawled with *déjà vu*, and she glanced up at the curtain of trees to see a huge shadow swooping down toward her. Hope flooded her heart, and the name tore from her lips before she thought to stop it.

"Avi!"

He screamed again. The wicked curve of his beak slashed through the air as he flew over her shoulder, and she risked a glance back to see his ready talons scoring the Lor's eyes.

Blood spurted down the warrior's face, and he stopped to clutch at the eyeball dangling from the left socket. Behind him, Avi did a tight circle and came back at him, angling around the tight thick of trees so that his wingspan was almost perpendicular to the ground. The Lor tried to twist out of the way, but Avi's claws sank into his scaled neck, tearing at the flesh. Before her eyes, the yellow feet turned into thickly furred paws, and panther and warrior fell to the earth.

It took only seconds for Avi to tear out his throat. When he lifted his blood-stained muzzle to gaze at Iris, the sense of the familiar slammed through her again, especially when his attention shifted to her bleeding arm.

Those eyes. The night. The wet, sucking ground.

How many times had she had these dreams? How many times had she been chased to exhaustion?

She sank to her knees, overwhelmed by the influx of images. Her fingers were shaking as she tried to wipe away the worst of the blood, but on the first swipe, Avi's strong hand caught and stilled them, his touch refreshingly cool as he pulled her hand away.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

A slightly hysterical giggle bubbled to her lips. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?" With her free hand, she reached out to cup his cheek, ignoring the Lor's blood that stained his face. "Did you find them?"

His thick lashes ducked, and he shook his head. "I went to check on Malik, to make sure he was safe. By the time I got back to the house..."

She didn't press when his voice faded away. It was too much of a relief just to have him there in the first place. His arms came around her, tight and reassuring, and she rested her cheek against his bare chest as she tried to relax the strain of her tense muscles.

"You still haven't told me what happened." His voice was muffled where his lips brushed the top of her head, but it held none of the recrimination she had feared if he'd discovered her absence. "How did Lor break into the sanctuary? Did they kill Jonell?"

Iris squeezed her eyes shut. "Are you kidding? She's the one who sent them after me."

"Did they chase you into the sanctuary?"

"No. I came here on my own. But when I tried to talk to Jonell about what the Lor at the border said, she sicced her goons on me."

His body twisted as he looked behind him. "How is that possible?" he asked. She looked up to see his frown had deepened, his eyes shadowed as they stared at the dead warrior. "No one can enter the sanctuary but Sentries and Guardians. And even Guardians must be invited. Everyone else suffers death."

She had forgotten about that. It should have been impossible for the Lor to be there in the first place, let alone be under Jonell's command. Clearly, Jonell had invited them, but how had they escaped the death penalty with their entrance?

"Something is seriously wrong here," Iris said. In spite of her protesting body, she pushed herself upright, tugging at Avi's hands. "We have to get out. Regroup somehow, and figure out what to do next."

He made no argument, rising effortlessly. When he slipped his arm around her body to support her, though, he nearly pulled back.

"Why are you so warm?"

She frowned. "Aren't you?"

Avi shook his head. "I thought it was a little cool, actually. But you're flushed, and you're sweating like it's a hundred degrees."

"That's because it feels like a hundred degrees." Wiping away another trickle out of her eye, Iris began heading back in the direction of the exit. "Let's talk about it when we get

out of here. I don't know how many more Lor Jonell's got waiting in the wings."

Even with Avi's help, each of her steps sank into the sodden earth. She had made better progress when she had been running, moving too quickly to get trapped, but the effects of her flight and all the walking she'd done in the past week were taking their toll. The best Iris managed was a steady pace, pulling her legs free every time they threatened to get stuck.

They reached the edge of the clearing without further interruption, but as soon as they left the cover of the thick trees, the leaves overhead began to rustle. Iris looked up. It was more than rustling. It was a full-blown gale. Yet, there wasn't any type of breeze rushing over her skin.

Avi glanced upward as well. "I think you might be right," he said, his voice so low she almost couldn't make out the individual words. "Something is definitely wrong."

At least she wasn't going crazy, thinking she was the only one aware of all the weird events of the sanctuary. But when she moved cross the clearing for the exit, Iris stumbled, falling to her knees.

Power surged through her as soon as her palms hit the ground, and she gasped as her head spun. Avi crouched at her side, but Iris wasn't aware of his presence. She was blinded by the pain that accompanied the electricity shooting through her veins, a skin-clawing, ears-bleeding ache that made her want to scream until her voice disappeared. Her first instinct was to pull her hands away, but those refused to

move, even going so far as curling deeper into the loose soil where she'd caught her fall in one of the furrows.

In her ear, she heard Avi calling her name, and she vaguely felt the pull of his hands as he tried to lift her off the ground. But as the pain buffeted through her body, Iris stared at where her fingers were half-hidden by the earth and the moisture that was seeping through the loose grains.

It was warm. Thick, almost. It coated her skin and slipped beneath her fingernails. It carried a scent, too, more than dirt, more than water trapped deep beneath the ground, but Iris couldn't put her finger on what it was exactly. It just smelled ... *alive*.

"I should probably thank you for coming."

Jonell's voice cut through the pain, calling to her as if from a great distance. Iris lifted her head to see Avi move to stand in front of her, fists balled at his sides, but it was the sight of the Sentry that worried her the most. She didn't know where Titus was, and she wasn't sure if Avi had the wherewithal to actually attack someone of Jonell's power, as much as he might want to. He'd been indoctrinated to venerate the woman. Anything could happen.

"Your warriors are dead," Avi growled. "Your plan has failed."

A cryptic smile curved Jonell's mouth. "Well, they're dead, at least."

"Why would you do something like this? Iris is one of yours—"

"*Iris*—" Jonell spat her name, like it tasted bad in her mouth. "—should have been destroyed years ago. As soon as

her parents saw what she could do, they should have handed her over to us to take care of."

Iris gritted her teeth against the pain in order to speak. "I can't do anything you can't, you bitch. And if you think I'm happy about any of this, you're crazier than I thought you were."

"But you can," Jonell hissed. "You could even in the cradle. No Sentry before you and none since have the power you do. Your very existence destroys everything we've been working towards."

"You mean, *peace*?" Iris snorted. "You're not interested in stopping this war. You've had ample opportunities, and you've passed on them, every single time."

A vicious sneer turned Jonell's features even uglier. "Stopping this war? We wish to *win*. Otherwise, what's the point of having it in the first place?"

Her arms were shaking. Iris felt like her whole body was going to fly apart at any moment, but she couldn't look away from the disaster unfolding before her eyes.

"You're insane. And you're insane if you think I've got anything to contribute to this. I didn't even know about your stupid war until Avi found me!"

"And it should have stayed that way."

"Why?"

"Because Varana will be destroyed if you're allowed to continue," Jonell said. "Can't you feel it, even now? You bleed, so Varana bleeds. You've always held power over the earth, when no other Sentry was capable of it."

The air was sucked out of her lungs as she stared at the other woman. Even Avi froze and glanced back at Iris. Because they both knew that at least part of what she claimed was true.

She'd created the earthquake at the border.

She touched the soil or the water, and her powers arced.

Iris looked down at her hands, at the angry red scratch exposed on her arm.

*You bleed, so Varana bleeds.*

It all made sense. Horrifying, sickening sense.

"Don't you see what she's doing, Avilius?" Jonell was saying. "How can you protect her when she's going to tear apart everything you are? Everything we are? Everything we know?"

She couldn't see his eyes well. The darkness shadowed them from her.

"If ever there was a time to consider your duty, it's now." Still addressing Avi, Jonell took a step closer, and pain stabbed through Iris' palms. "You exist to protect Varana. Do what needs to be done, and get rid of the abomination. For once in your sorry existence, Avilius, do the right thing."

The irrational thought that she'd get further with Avi by being nice to him flitted across Iris' mind. But any fears she might harbor that he'd listen to Jonell were banished with his next words.

"She's not an abomination. She's my Sentry. And I refuse to kill the woman I love." Slowly, his head swiveled back to glare at Jonell. "I'll never do your dirty work for you, so if you

dare to take one more step toward me, I swear, I'll rip your throat out."

Jonell froze. Iris stifled the overwhelming urge to stick out her tongue at the bitch.

"You're such a foolish boy," Jonell said. "Our ranks will be so much stronger, once you both are dead."

"You won't kill us."

"You're right. They will."

The shadows came to life. All around them, black separated from black as figures took shape. Her heart sank when she saw the half-dozen or so Lor warriors ringing them. Avi could manage a few, but there was no way they weren't outnumbered.

The first footfall into the clearing, however, shot fresh pain through her body. Iris cried out from the unexpected force of it.

More water oozed around her fingers.

*Varana bleeds.*

"It's not me," she breathed. Through heavy pants, trying to manage the agony searing through her, Iris lifted her head to stare at the approaching Lor. "It's them."

Nobody heard her. Avi's attention was focused on the warriors, Jonell's on Avi. Iris didn't think her voice would carry through the whistling wind anyway.

That didn't make the understanding any less true, though.

Her gaze fixed on the ground. When the nearest Lor took another step, a fissure widened, rumbling just enough to make her fingers vibrate.



Jonell might have managed to circumvent the protection on the sanctuary to allow the Lor entry, but the sanctuary was protesting it with every second. The furrows in the earth had been there the first time Iris had visited. They grew deeper with the advent of the soldiers' steps.

And Jonell's logic didn't hold up.

If Iris was that connected to Varana, her death would mean its death. To kill her would be committing suicide.

It wasn't that Iris controlled the earth. It was the earth controlling Iris. Speaking to her. Responding to her will.

Begging for her help.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you sooner," she whispered.

Taking a deep breath, she plunged her hands deeper into the soil, immersing them to the wrists as she focused every ounce of strength and will she had left into calling forth what Varana needed.

It was easier this time. Before, Iris hadn't been sure the tactic would even work. This time, she saw it in her mind's eye, clear as day. The earth groaned as it began to tremble, but at the first quake, Avi finally jerked his attention away from the Lor to stare back at her. Confusion darkened his face. He probably thought she was trying to help his fight, like she'd done at the border.

*I am. Trust me.*

Almost immediately, the ground shook with bone-rattling force. The furrows already cleaving the ground split wider, the earth bursting open at the seams. Within seconds, all of the Lor had lost their balance. Even Jonell was on her hands and knees, trying desperately to get to Iris.

Avi shifted at the first advance, long wings beating against the wind overhead. He dove at Jonell, and though she ducked her head, his talons left a long cut along her shoulder. When he circled to attack again, another shriek came from above, and Iris glanced up to see another monstrous bird plummeting toward him.

She had no doubt it was Titus. But she couldn't do anything to help Avi right now.

With all her targets now on the earth, some stuck in holes more like ditches, Iris changed her intent. The quaking continued, but now she felt the earth itself changing, growing softer, wetter, losing its firmness. It did so even beneath her, though she wasn't afraid for her own wellbeing. This was the only way. Jonell had desecrated sanctuary lands, and now it was time to take the threat away, once and for all.

The nearest Lor was sinking, dirt gone grainy like wet sand to suck him into its bowels. The others were trying to free themselves, struggling and tearing at the grass. But Iris kept her eyes glued to Jonell, watching the panic in the older woman's eyes as the earth opened up underneath her.

"What are you doing?" she screamed at Iris.

*Stopping you.*

She couldn't say it out loud. It was taking all her will to concentrate. Sweat dripped into her eyes, blurring and stinging, but Iris held on, her hands and knees sinking further and further into the ground.

*Can't run away now.*

Feathers drifted to the grass in front of her, and she tilted her head back to see the two birds still clashing in the sky.

One looked slower than the other, but it was too dark to know which one was Avi. She had to trust that he was okay, because if she started to think that he might not be, she was going to lose what little advantage she had.

From the force of the quake, a tree snapped at the edge of the clearing. The sound boomed across the open space, making her ears ring. Her gaze shot to its thick trunk. It was tilting, leaning toward the earth. As it fell, however, it seemed to do so in slow motion, breaking away from its powerful roots to slice across the soft earth. And when its knotted branches passed over the clear sky behind it, she thought—for a moment—that she saw something familiar outlined in their sanctuary.

Iris realized where exactly it was going to land at the same time Jonell did.

The world erupted with sound and chaos when the thick trunk crushed Jonell into the ground. A wave of power rippled over the broken clearing, and at each point a Lor was buried or even half so, screams of agony tore through the air. It hit Iris and sent her flying backwards, wrenching her out of the soil and into a tree ten feet back.

The quaking stopped.

In the split second before her world went black, something moved out of the branches of the fallen tree.

## Chapter Twenty-four

The soft sound of a woman humming slowly penetrated her foggy head, and Iris opened her eyes to gaze up at candlelight flickering across a stone ceiling. A pillow softened the pallet she rested upon, while a scratchy blanket was tucked beneath her chin. She felt like a rag doll that had been soaked in the wash and wrung out with powerful hands. It took all her strength to turn her head in the direction of the humming.

"You're awake." Hilma filled her vision, her features swimming for a moment before sharpening. Her warm hand touched Iris' brow. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell," she answered truthfully. Her voice came out as a croak, prompting Hilma to reach for a glass of water. "Are you going to tell me this was all a dream? Because I'd have to scream then."

"No, it's not a dream."

She held the glass for Iris to sip from, but Iris could only hold her head up for a few seconds before letting it fall heavily back to the pillow.

"So where am I?"

"Still at the sanctuary."

Iris frowned. "So why are you here?"

Setting aside the glass of water, Hilma sat back on her heels. "Brace and I both thought your note sounded odd. So he followed your trail back north." The candlelight danced across her face, but her wide-set eyes were haunted. "I saw

Jonell. I heard what she said to you, how she set the Lor to attack you and Avilius. I never knew..."

"You couldn't." She didn't want to hear the hurt in Hilma's voice. It was a big deal to know the woman you'd revered and trusted wasn't nearly the paragon you thought she was. "But you didn't get me here all on your own. Where's Avi?"

"He and Brace went with Titus to free his family." She chewed at her lip. "Did they really kidnap them?"

Iris nodded, though it hurt to move her head. "A bargaining chip to get to me. Which doesn't make me feel very good about it all."

A shiver ran through her, and Hilma tightened the blankets around her arms. "You should sleep some more," she said. "What you did took a lot out of you. You're cold as ice."

Her smile was wan. "I'm always either too hot or too cold in this place."

"I'll make some soup." Hilma stood and turned away from the pallet. "It'll do both of us—"

Something thudded against the door. It was enough to make both women jump, but when Hilma only stared at the heavy wood, Iris struggled to sit up.

"That's probably Avi."

Hilma shook her head. "It's too soon. They haven't been gone that long."

Though she felt frozen through, Iris pushed the blankets off and wobbled to her feet. "If it's not Avi, then it's a Sentry, and either way, whoever it is isn't letting themselves in. That means they need our help."

Before she took two steps, Hilma was there, pressing her to sit back down. "Don't push yourself. You've done too much already." She waited until Iris had stopped swaying, then walked to the door, opening it with far more bravado than she had shown earlier.

Her scream pierced the air when a Lor tumbled forward at her feet.

Hilma scrambled to the farthest corner of the room long before her screams had faded. In spite of her exhaustion, everything in Iris honed to razor sharpness, her heart thudding with a fresh fury.

One had escaped. She hadn't stopped them. And she was too tired now to do anything but wonder where everything had gone wrong.

Then it lifted its head. Iris gasped.

This Lor was different from the others. Its scales were lighter, smoother where the markings didn't leave deep furrows in its flesh. Its eyes were different, too, not the beady obsidian that sent chills through her veins just thinking about. These were a deep blue, with round pupils contracting in the cabin's light.

"You are ... Iris Bridge," it rasped. It sounded as drained as she felt.

What was there to say to that, but ... "I am."

Bracing its hands on the floor, it pushed itself up to a sitting position in agonizing slowness, each shift of its body drawing a new whimper from Hilma in the corner. It exposed the barely healed injuries that marred its chest and arms,

dried blood coagulating in scratches and gouges that tore open with every change in its muscles.

"You killed the others."

Her throat was dry. "I had to."

It blinked once, then nodded. "I know. They ... do not understand what we can do."

"What do you mean..." She leaned forward, her pulse racing. "...what we can do?"

The Lor didn't speak. Instead, it set its hand down on the packed dirt floor and closed its eyes.

The second before the earth began to rumble, Iris felt her palms burn. She could have been back out facing Jonell, her hands wrist-deep in the muck, or she could have been in Avi's cavern, feeling the water run through her fingers. But this wasn't her. This was the Lor. Doing something no Lor should have been able to do.

It lasted only for a few seconds, long enough for Hilma to be struck silent and for Iris to stumble from the bed and go to the door. The moment she crouched down and covered the Lor's hands with hers, the ground stopped moving.

The Lor didn't pull away. It looked up and met her gaze with steady eyes.

"My people wish for this war to be over," it said. "But the warriors have been lied to for years."

"Same here. But what can we do about it?"

"We end it. No more lies."

"Negotiate for peace."

It nodded. "It's time."

Though she agreed with it—probably more whole-heartedly than it realized—Iris frowned. "Can we do that?" she asked.

"Why would anybody believe us?"

The Lor threaded its fingers through hers so that their palms were touching. Its scaled skin felt odd against hers, but the surge of electricity was more than familiar. That was when she understood. And smiled.

"Because we speak for Varana," Iris said. "And that's all that matters."

\* \* \* \*

He had never fought so hard in his life, but even with the fingers of his left hand throbbing—he was pretty sure he'd broken at least one of them—and blood dripping from a vicious cut down his bare back, Avi felt hope with every step. Titus had lost. He shuffled along between Avi and Brace like a man who had nothing. Perhaps, with Jonell's death, he didn't. Avi knew that if anything ever happened to Iris, he would most likely shut down the same way Titus had.

But Iris was safe at the moment, with Hilma to take care of her. The Lor were dead, and without Jonell's charms or whatever she had done to circumvent the protection around the sanctuary, they could no longer defile the holy ground. That gave Avi some precious time to free his family and take away what little power Titus had left.

"Through there," Titus muttered, nodding with his head toward a break in the trees.



They weren't far from the sanctuary. Avi should have known that Titus would keep prisoners close by. If he'd bothered to scent them out here...

But then he wouldn't have been there for Iris. She might not have survived without his intervention. He had done the right thing.

Brace never said a word. He followed along with Avi's orders, and if he had any doubts about what they were doing, he kept them to himself. Avi knew Hilma was the reason for that; she had gone racing back to Brace once the Lor were dead to tell him what had happened. But the boy was still shaken. As much as Hilma had been. Avi didn't blame them. It was all still a little much to believe.

They passed through the trees and immediately came upon a small house, guarded by two Guardians Avi recognized by face but not name. Both men went on alert, muscles tense and the scent of pheromones flooding the air. One of them growled when they saw the state Titus was in. Avi tightened his grip.

"Tell them to let us in," he hissed, his gaze unwavering from the front door.

Titus lifted his head. For a moment, he looked like the leader Avi had always feared.

"It's time to release the prisoners." His voice was loud and clear, as authoritative as ever. "Let Avilius pass."

The two guards exchanged a glance. "But, sir—"

"You're not questioning me, are you?"

They both straightened. They had been taught well. "No, sir."

Titus tensed as Avi waited for the guards to unlock the door, but he didn't utter another word as they entered, not even when Hai leapt forward from where the others sat in the living room, ready to protect them.

"Avi!"

Marna bounded from the couch to throw her arms around him, heedless of the panicked cry of their mother. She squeezed hard enough to make him grunt with pain, but he hugged her back anyway, grateful that he simply could.

"Is everybody all right?" he asked, his eyes darting around the room.

Slowly, Penverol rose to his feet. "What's going on?"

Though he looked to Avi, all the nervous energy was aimed at Titus. The elder Guardian cleared his throat and stepped out of the way of the door.

"You may go home," Titus said.

The room held its breath, waiting for more to be said. It didn't come.

"Until the next time you decide to intrude on the lives of private citizens?" Penverol jabbed a furious finger at Titus. "Don't think I won't let this treatment be known. You won't be able to get away with such tactics again. I don't care if you *are* a Guardian."

"Father..." Avi waited until his attention had swiveled back. "Don't worry. It's not going to happen again."

"You don't know that. You're not the one who's supposedly in charge."

"I do. Because I know things are about to change. For the better."

The confidence in his voice drew his mother to her feet. "What happened?" Mila asked. "What's going on?"

Titus stiffened. When the muscles twitched in his jaw, Avi almost thought the man was going to put up another fight. Brace stepped forward and grabbed his arm, though, yanking him back so that it was clear he wasn't the one in charge.

More than one set of eyes widened.

"It's a long story, Mother," Avi said. "And I think Iris needs to be a part of telling it."

Behind him, Titus snorted in derision.

Marna looked past Avi's shoulder. "Where *is* Iris?"

"At the sanctuary. As soon as I get you home, I'll bring her back so that we can explain everything that's happened. But she's going to need a few days to rest." He looked to his parents. "May we stay with you?"

He had never asked for permission to stay at home before, but with the way he had left things, and the story that was going to come out, Avi felt he needed to do so now. His mother looked shocked that he would ask, but the nod of Penverol's head said he understood Avi's motivation.

"For as long as you need," he added. He gestured toward the blood that dripped from Avi's broken fingers onto the floor. "It looks like Marna will have a couple more patients to mind."

Mention of patients swept Avi's gaze around the room again. "Where's Clayton? They didn't hurt him any more, did they?"

"He's sleeping in the other room," Marna assured. The stubborn set of her jaw and the fierce glint in her eye as she

glared at Titus didn't go unnoticed by Avi. "Not any thanks to what happened."

Brace coughed discreetly. "We should hurry, Avilius. Hilma will need your assistance."

Avi nodded. They'd lingered enough already. His family was safe, Titus could do no more harm, and each second he was away from Iris was a second too long.

Never again.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Avi returned to the sanctuary, the Lor was gone, with promises that they would meet again very soon. Hilma remained pale and silent throughout the entire encounter, but as she set to preparing the soup she had promised Iris, her head remained cocked while she clung to every uttered word. Iris knew it was hard for her. She didn't question the younger woman's need to know. But hopefully, hearing it from the Lor's mouth made it more palatable, the knowledge that differences were feared no matter what the race drawing them closer together.

Avi looked as exhausted as she felt, but as he carried her back to the pallet, scolding her softly for exerting herself unnecessarily, his eyes were bright. "The warriors are gone," he said, laying her down. "I checked the clearing, but the earth looks whole again."

Iris smiled wearily and let her eyes flutter shut. Of course, he'd checked. She was simply glad he hadn't found her newfound ally. That would be hard enough to explain when she was strong enough to do so.

"She needs to sleep," Hilma said.

"I know."

But their soft exchange faded into the background as Iris succumbed to slumber. Everything would be all right now.

Varana could heal, and so would she.

With Avi at her side.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

When she woke up the second time, the pillow beneath her head was different, the blankets wrapped around her softer. The most noticeable difference, however, was the hard body pressed behind her, the strong arm curled around her waist. Iris smiled as she burrowed more deeply into the embrace. She didn't need to open her eyes to know where she was this time, or who she was lying with.

Lips brushed against the back of her neck.

"Morning," Avi murmured.

"Is it?" She cracked her eyelids and promptly squeezed them shut again as the brilliant sunlight bored into her brain. "You couldn't have closed the curtains before coming to bed?"

He chuckled. "You've been out of it for over a day. We thought the sunshine would be welcome after the sanctuary."

"It would be welcome if it didn't make my eyes throb."

The arm around her disappeared, and the mattress shifted as Avi crawled down to the end of the bed to reach the window. She heard the gentle swoosh as he covered it and waited until his weight was settled behind her again before attempting to look again.

The murk was easier on her aching head, and she rolled onto her back to see Avi gazing down at her. Fading bruises shadowed his cheekbones, and a long jagged cut had sliced open his jaw. It was healing now, but the erratic pattern and the thin line of scabbing told her it had likely been caused by a very sharp talon.

One of Titus'.

Her sense of peace was shattered as she looked him over for other injuries. The edge of a bandage was visible at the top of his back, and two of the fingers on his left hand were set in splints. There were more flowering bruises, more cuts, more bandages at various points of his bare body, but when she looked back into his face, Iris didn't see pain. She saw relief, and it dawned on her what exactly he had said.

"I've been unconscious that long?" she asked. The last thing she remembered was his return to the sanctuary so soon after the Lor had left. She knew she had been tired, but not that much. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine. You used a lot of energy. Your body needed time to rest."

"And your family?"

His mouth curved into a smile. "We're home, aren't we? Titus led us straight to where they were being held. Nobody was hurt, and now everybody is back where they belong."

Not everybody, Iris thought. The Lor warriors were gone, but she'd seen the tree crush Jonell, felt the life rush out of her. The knowledge that she'd killed the woman made her stomach churn.

It must have been written on her face, because Avi reached out and smoothed the hair off her forehead. "You did what you had to do," he said gently. "The Sentries were determined you were going to die. It was either you or Jonell."

"I know. It's still hard to think about, though. I don't kill people. I'm supposed to help them."

"You did. Jonell has been keeping the war going for years, using you as an excuse to focus the Lor. She's the one who showed the Lor how to follow me to your world, and it was Sentry orders who had me kidnapped before I left Varana."

"How do you know all this?"

"Titus. And yes, before you say it, I know he could be covering for the Guardians, but he doesn't have a purpose with them any more, not with Jonell gone. Even the others can see that."

Iris wasn't sure she'd believe anything that came out of Titus' mouth, not after everything that had happened. But a lot of time had elapsed since the fight at the sanctuary, and any number of things could have happened in the duration. The fact that she was snuggled in the bed they shared at his parents' house was certainly proof enough that Avi's mind was eased. She didn't think he would be comfortable being out in the open if they weren't home and safe, after all.

"Why were they so determined to kill me? Did Titus explain that?" Jonell had never said.

Avi hesitated. "Titus was never completely certain," he admitted. "Apparently, when you were a baby, you got your hands on a flower that was dying and brought it back to life. Your parents were surprised enough to ask the Sentries about it. They claimed that went beyond the realm of Sentry abilities, and everything escalated from that."

It agreed with what Jonell had alluded to, though she'd hinted at a darker purpose behind Iris' particular skill. It also explained why her parents would have been so eager to leave, to volunteer when Penverol had his own family to



protect. The Guardians were simply the weapon the Sentries had wielded.

With a sigh, she sank back into her pillow, closing her eyes. It did nothing to block out the images that flooded through her head, the way the earth had bent and buckled beneath her as it fought the Lor's presence, or the vicious fury in Jonell's face when she'd spat out her vitriol.

"My family wishes answers," Avi said. "I've been putting them off until you woke up, but ... if you don't wish to discuss what happened, I'll tell them myself."

Iris shook her head. "You weren't there for all of it. You don't know everything that happened."

"I wouldn't make you relive it if it's going to cause you pain."

"And I don't want everybody to think I'm as bad as Jonell," she countered.

"They would never think that."

"Wouldn't they?" This time, she opened her eyes. "Your father hates what we are, Avi. He hates what we have to do. Look at what happened to them because of me."

"They don't blame you."

"Malik did."

"He was hurt, and he was scared. Once he knows the whole story, he'll understand." Avi curled an arm around her, drawing her close when she really wanted to run. "The only way any of them can understand is if they're told the truth. But that doesn't mean we have to stay in Varana afterward. Say the word and we can leave."

It's what she had been waiting for. Coming to Varana was supposed to be about learning the truth of what she was, discovering what had really happened with her parents, satisfying curiosity Avi had awakened. While those had been fulfilled, what she'd actually found was so much more than that.

There had been purposes to her dreams all along. Those dreams of flight through unfamiliar landscapes. A world calling to her for help, when she was the only who could do it. There were others who, even if they understood their powers, questioned the rules that had been dictated to them. The Lor who could do as she did, who wanted to negotiate for peace, because this was what Varana needed.

Then there was Avi. This was his home. His family was here.

And he loved her.

He hadn't said it again since leaving her at the cavern, but that didn't make it any less true. Circumstances had kept him from repeating it. But the intent was there in every stroke of his hand, every caress of his eyes. She only had to look at him to know he meant it.

"Something happened while you were rescuing your family."

Carefully, Iris relayed the story of the Lor at the cabin, making sure to leave out none of the details. Avi's mouth grew tighter with each turn of the tale, but he held his tongue, allowing her the time to tell it as it needed. Only when she finished did he speak up.

"And you believe him?"

Iris nodded. "He's suffered for what he can do."

"He could be telling you exactly what you wanted to hear so that you wouldn't kill him as well."

"He could have," she conceded. "Except he has the same ability I do. And you said yourself, when you came back, everything was at peace. The earth looked whole. That wouldn't be possible if he was an unwanted intruder."

"So where is he now? Why run?"

"He's gone home. To pave the way." She paused. "Kind of like what I'm going to have to do here."

His eyes searched hers for several seconds. "There will be doubters."

"I know. But people deserve to know what's been going on. They deserve peace. I don't want them to think that Sentries are untouchable, because we're not. And I know it's going to take time."

Avi smiled. "You just want Hilma and Brace to be able to raise their child without having to hide."

"Well, yeah, that. And I want a life for myself, too." Carefully, Iris stretched a hand and ran her palm over his bare chest, savoring each sizzle that leapt between them at the contact. "This is our home. This is where we belong."

He didn't question her newfound belief. Taking her hand in his, Avi held it to his skin, bowing his head to skim his mouth across her fingertips.

"You are my home," he said, love in every word.

"And you're mine."

When his lips touched hers, she felt him smile the moment before his parted. It tickled in a spot deep inside her belly, a

spot only Avi could reach, and her head spun as they both deepened the caress at the same time. Her hands stroked his back, leaving his free to explore the soft curves of her body, and when he positioned himself on top of her, she spread her legs for the insistent press of his cock against her folds.

"Whatever it takes," Avi murmured. "I'll be there to support you however you need."

"I know." Wrapping her calves around his, she caught his mouth again, unwilling to break that tender connection. "We'll do it together."

Avi growled in the back of his throat, angling his body so that the tip of his cock dragged across her opening. In the next moment, he sheathed himself inside, holding still while each adjusted to the tight fit. Iris gasped as the seconds passed, her clit pressing deliciously against his coarse hair, his balls hanging heavy against the crack of her ass. It took tightening her legs around him for either of them to move.

She realized on the first stroke that Avi was deliberately holding back on her. "Don't be afraid," she whispered as his tongue traced nonsense along her neck.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. You can't."

Gripping his nape, Iris tugged his mouth back to hers. There was no more need for speaking; this was a conversation their bodies could recite with only the softest of prompts, and the last thing she wanted was to interrupt it.

When she felt the quivering, she thought for a second that it was her. Then Avi pushed himself up, not missing the rhythm of sliding in and out of her heat, and held his weight

propped on his knuckles as he fought for control. Her hands came up to press to his chest, and there it was again, the quivering, muscles spasming, not from over-exertion but from something else she was scared to put a finger on.

Their eyes met. He didn't say the words, but she could see them there anyway, half-formed on kiss-swollen lips, waiting for permission to fall. But she didn't want to grant permission. She wanted something else. And as her body raced toward orgasm, she admitted it to both of them.

"I love you," Iris murmured.

It took the longest moment for it to sink in. When it did, the joy that lit up Avi's face erased all traces of doubt. Slowly, he lowered his upper body back down, quickening the sure piston of his hips as his mouth swooped to taste hers, and Iris sighed into the kiss as the liquid heat between her legs started to escalate. Her release was swift, but his followed soon after, and she held him close as he whispered words she couldn't make out into her skin.

The day was not going to be easy. Neither would tomorrow, or the day after that, or even the day after that. Life would be difficult in Varana until they settled the war with the Lor, but as long as she had Avi at her side, she could face it without fear.

She could face anything.

The End

**About the Author:**

Vivien was born in a house very familiar with the written word. The daughter of an author/sportswriter, she fell in love early on with the stories that played inside her head, transposing the first of those at the age of 5. She moved on to explore other formats, including getting involved in producing plays and film, but always came back to her storytelling prose roots.

Currently, Vivien resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children. She's thrilled to be back to her romantic roots, and looks forward to sharing with you some of the voices that have been living inside her head.

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### **Other works by Vivien Dean:**

#### **Chains of Jericho**

Declan Jericho is a vampire with a purpose. His best hope for success is a brilliant young cancer specialist, but unfortunately, saving the undead isn't exactly the career path Dr. Maya Sheldon has in mind.

Maya finds her entire belief system thrown into question when Dec kidnaps her from her hospital, taking her to his home so that she can develop a cure for the mysterious illness that is killing the young vampires in his care. Her instincts as a doctor kick in quickly. Vampires or not, she's unable to abandon her charges. Working with Dec, it soon becomes clear that there's more than a professional interest between them, but as their attraction grows, darker secrets threaten their newfound relationship. Dec has his own reasons for wanting the young vampires cured, and he's not telling.

Vivien Dean has written a wonderful tale of love and making amends. The chemistry between Dec and Maya sizzles and erupts, drawing you right along with them, all the way to the nail-biting finish.

#### **Two Lives in Waltz Time**

Art restorer Maddy Cardinale loves her job. In fact, the only downside to working the night shift at her prestigious New York museum is fellow restorer Cash Vinci. As charismatic as they come, Cash is the most confident man she has ever known. He's also handsome, sexy as hell, and determined to get under her skin, no matter what the cost.

*A Sentry's Touch*  
*by Vivien Dean*

When an unusual painting arrives at the museum, neither of them anticipates the magic unleashed by a fleeting touch of the canvas. Suddenly, Cash and Maddy aren't in their workshop any more. They are both dressed to kill, plunged into the alternate reality of the posh 1940's nightclub portrayed in the painting. Even worse, the couple learns all too quickly that the club sells more than drinks, and the only reason Maddy doesn't have to offer more than a dance to the male clientele is because everyone believes she is engaged to Cash.

Dependent on one another as never before, the pair must work together in order to unravel the spell that has them trapped. Vengeful ex-girlfriends, jealous mobsters, and surprise enemies drive the couple into each other's beds and hearts, sharing secrets as well as passions. The only question is, will they survive long enough to admit their true feelings to each other? Or will their dance be cut short?



A Sentry's Touch  
*by Vivien Dean*

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**Recommended Read:**

Walking Wounded by Lee Rowan

John Hanson joined the military because he wanted to serve his country. Lacking a home and family of his own, the idealistic young man longed to be a part of something bigger than himself. He didn't expect to find love in officer's training—so when an assignment took him away from Kevin Kendrick, the love of his life, he sacrificed personal happiness and did his duty.

Kevin has made his own sacrifices. Career came first and the impressionable Army brat, tired of living in his father's shadow, pledged his loyalty to his country and followed his ambition.

Now seven years later when the Army that Kevin so faithfully served has made him the scapegoat for their latest Middle East snafu, he can only think of one place to go, one man who can provide solace and heal his wounds—John.

Reunited, the two war-torn lovers once again discover their passion for life, love, and one another. But Kevin's past isn't through with him yet, and when an old enemy surfaces the two men realize that they must together face the nightmares of the past if they are to have the future they dream of.

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