



Bloodlines 2: Ancestry

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Chapter One

She collapsed to the ground in utter fatigue. Not just physical but mental and emotional. Keeping Khaelen at bay was tiring. Every day since she left his hurt and outrage rang in Allantra's mind. *Why did you leave without saying goodbye?* He asked the question insistently, demanding an answer. She had tried to tell him through the mind link it was easier for her. She left a coward, too afraid to face him, knowing it would be too hard to say goodbye. They both knew this journey had to be made; the welfare of the people in the Civil Lands depended on it. Eventually she put up a mental block so Khaelen could not mind link with her. Good, this time it worked. She had hurt him this she knew. Every time she thought of him the urge to turn around would be so strong, it was overwhelming. One time she even backtracked a few miles before her sense of duty kicked in.

If that wasn't enough, the journey itself was beating up on her small body. Truly it was not called the Savage Outlands for nothing. She had been attacked by creatures she didn't even know existed, and on many occasions she had barely escaped with her life. She couldn't even count the number of times she'd gotten turned around. That alone ate up so much time. It was hard trying to find a needle in a haystack, or rather purebloods in a savage land. They could be anywhere. Allantra rolled onto her back to glimpse the last of the setting sun. Khaelen would be rising soon. She missed him a great deal. She was also tired, dirty and very hungry. She would have to find shelter soon; she didn't want to be food tonight or any other night. Perhaps she should have planned the journey a little better. With say provisions and a portable tent. A jacket or blanket would have been nice.

Shift to your wolf shape. It can stand the cold of the night much more easily.

Apparently Khaelen had risen. The fact that he was able to transmit a full thought to her spoke volumes about her mental state.

I am too hungry and tired to shift.

The wolf will find you food.

Allantra shook her head as if he could see her. Memories of him as a wolf, hunting, crowded her mind. Could she be so violent? It sickened her to kill another being.

It is your nature, Allantra. I have told you this. Accept all of you. Or die.

Just like that he put it out there, stating facts as cold as they appeared. If she didn't do something soon for food and warmth she would die. All of this would have been for nothing. With the ease of her bloodline she shifted fluidly into her wolf form: a small gray wolf sitting on her hind legs scenting the air.

Allantra let the senses of her wolf take over. She settled at the back of its mind while it began to hunt. The she-wolf grew excited as it caught the scent of game. Immediately, it turned to its left following the enticing aroma. Nose to the ground, the wolf's heartbeat picked up in excitement. Within moments, she flushed the creature out of its hiding space. A fat raccoon scuttled away as Allantra neared it. The wolf let out a sharp yelp as it pursued the raccoon in underbrush. This would be the last night of its life, for the wolf caught it at the nape of the neck and flung it about violently. Dazed the animal fell to the ground, to be immediately set upon at the throat. The warm blood bathed her tongue and she swallowed greedily.

Deep in the mind of the wolf, Allantra flinched. Yet at the same time, found the whole process exciting. She watched the wolf part of her tear at the raccoon and fill its belly. When it was done, Allantra padded around in the tall grass until she pressed it down into a small bed. Her last thought was of warmth and contentment.

Sleep little hunter. Khaelen said affectionately into her mind. *Finish this journey so that you may return to me.* Allantra was already fast asleep.

* * * *

“What do you think?” Masque asked as they surveyed the sleeping wolf.

“She is pureblood,” Dharean answered with a barely perceptible frown.

“This upsets you, *Noir Brujo*?” Masque seemed amused, though one could never tell.

“I do not know of her. She is not of Kynn. I question her purpose here.”

“Do you think she works for the Vampyres?”

“It would not surprise me if they found a traitor to work for them.”

“Nor I.” Masque agreed. “What of the man shadowing her?”

“I do not think she is aware of him. Let us wait before we act. We must see what the vampyres are up to this time. It has been many years, since they hunted for us.”

Masque did not reply, merely grunted his agreement. “I will take first watch, *Brujo*.” With little effort he shifted into a raptor and perched high enough on the tree to watch both the wolf and the man who had been following her. Dharean watched the woman a little longer before he retreated into the thick brush so that even Masque could not detect his presence. Perhaps morning would bring more answers. They had been tracking this woman for days now, since she stumbled into the outskirts of Kynn, their tribal lands. Visitors were not welcome here. Traitors to their kind were killed instantly.

* * * *

Allantra woke up about dawn. She stretched her muscles languidly, reveling in her own sleek form and powerful body. After a massive yawn she settled on her hind legs. It was the scent that caught her attention. The hackles on her neck rose, and she realized that whatever it was had come close to her during the night. She slowly stood on all fours her nose to the ground. Not only had it come close, it had stood right over her, undetected. This bothered her immensely. How could she not have heard nor smelled the intruder with her wolf senses? She shook her fur in agitation.

Someone or something was following her. When she first began the journey she felt a presence, yet every time she doubled back there was no one. Eventually, she began to believe it was the sheer stress of the journey making her paranoid. Now, this strange scent comforted her, she was not paranoid. Someone was indeed following her. Whoever it was could have very well killed her in her sleep. That thought terrified her. It made her question her ability to succeed in her undertaking. She stayed in her wolf form, cautious, and relying heavily on her animal senses and instincts.

After a few hours she began to relax. Rationalizing things in her mind. Perhaps whatever it was had just been curious. It didn’t explain how she was not alerted to its presence, but for the moment it settled her nerves. She followed her instincts hoping that eventually she would run into something or someone that could help her find the true-bloods, provided they still existed. She planned her next course of action while

approaching a delicious looking stream. What if there were no more true-bloods? What if this whole undertaking was a ridiculous exercise in futility? The she-wolf looked around warily before she bent her head to take a drink in the cool stream. She had not smelled the water but found it a wonderful surprise. As soon as she was down far enough to lap her body froze in place and the stream disappeared. She had fallen for an illusion, springing a trap.

Panic immediately set in as she realized she was caught. Her eyes rolled around trying to find the source of the trap, but there was nothing to see. She struggled on the inside trying to move a muscle, trying to wrestle free from the trapping. It was as if an invisible mold had been put around her body. Her ears picked up the sound of rustling feet. Her heart felt as if it would jump right out of her fur. She felt hands clasp a collar of some sort around her neck. It looked suspiciously like one of the discs Wulf had used when he tried to apprehend Khaelen and it burned like hell around her neck. She tried to shift to her other form but the collar prevented it. She howled in pain, but could not move. She saw a figure coming up her left flank. The figure bent low and she felt herself being lifted at the chest and around her hind legs. Whoever it was, had to be incredibly strong. Her mind went frantic as she tried to struggle in vain, her body wouldn't move a muscle.

Without warning, her captor yelled in pain and dropped her roughly to the ground. Allantra began to shake as the collars' energy burned through her body, draining it. Her would be kidnapper rose. A heavily muscled man, dressed in the uniform of a Quarter Guard reached for her again, only to double over again in pain. As he fell to his knees beside her, she caught sight of his eyes, dull and lifeless. He was under a heavy compulsion. Allantra knew if she ever got the chance she would have to kill him. He was obviously under orders and would not stop until he carried them out. He rose again and looked around, looked at her once more before he grunted and disappeared into the green lush forest.

She would have breathed a sigh of relief if common sense hadn't warned her she wasn't out of the woods yet. Whatever had scared her captor off was now out there. She was at their mercy with the collar on. A light breeze blew and she caught a scent. The same scent that had been at her crude camp last night, she was now about to get a face to go with it. Allantra tried to relax, thinking of a way she could possibly get out of the collar before whoever or whatever it was caused her harm.

Even with her wolf hearing she barely caught the sound of his footfalls. Lying on her side she could only see black booted feet and bare muscular legs. As he came closer into view a small black leather cloth covered his most intimate manly parts and bulged in a rather arresting manner. She would have blushed had she been in her other form. When he knelt next to her, she could see tight abs and a muscular chest. The pain from the collar and whatever magic trap she had been in prevented her from lifting her head to see his face.

His hand slowly passed over her body without touching her. She felt incredible warmth, and then the paralysis was gone. The collar, however, still burned like nobody's business. He chanted softly, his deep voice almost causing her to go into a trance it was so lilting and soothing. Within seconds the collar broke in half. Allantra immediately sprang to her feet, shifting to her natural form as she did so, crouching low in an attack stance. She faced her savior ... or could it be an enemy?

To her shock he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Everything about him, screamed natural, raw, primitive, dangerous. She knew when he stood he had to be at least seven feet tall. Night black hair was tied back in a small ponytail. His ears were curiously pointed. Odd looking but beautiful tattoos covered his right shoulder. As she looked into his face she was momentarily trapped in pale gray eyes outlined in thick black lashes. His full lips were curled in a patronizing smile.

“Calm down, *flammulae*.” He said mockingly staring at her nude body, “If I wished you harm I would have killed you last night.”

Did she really believe she posed a threat to him? Dharean rose slowly to his full height, neither to intimidate nor alarm her. She was small and well proportioned; the naked form tells all. He watched her closely as she retrieved her ragged clothes and put them on. Her catlike eyes stared at him with unabashed suspicion. She truly was beautiful; her long hair was twisted in a braid, her eyebrow cocked up in silent questioning.

“I do not wish you harm, *flammulae*.”

“I don’t know what that means, but you were at my camp last night. What were you doing?” Her voice came out strong and steady, but he could hear her rapid heartbeat.

“Observing you.”

“To what end?” she asked flatly. If it weren’t for her heartbeat; he would have sworn he gave her no fear at all.

“You have entered my lands uninvited. I observed you only to judge you friend or foe.”

“I don’t know these lands. If I have trespassed it was unintentional. Let me pass and I’ll be on my way.” She rose slowly from her crouching position; no doubt holding the pose was getting quite tiresome.

“I believe the old human saying of ‘closing the barn doors after the horses have run free’ applies to this situation.” Dharean clasped his hands behind his back as if he were really considering her plight. In truth he had already decided what to do with her.

“Meaning?” Now Allantra stood defiantly, hands on her slim hips.

“Meaning you have already trespassed. Protocol is in order.” He pursed his lips together, more to keep from laughing at her indignant expression, than to appear serious.

“As I have said before it is unintentional. Now if you’ll excuse me.” She tried valiantly to dismiss him and the effect he was having on her. He unnerved her to say the least.

“Does she really believe she can just walk away from us, *Brujo*?” a deep voice resonated behind her. Allantra almost jumped out of her skin. This was getting ridiculous. It was bad enough last night that she had no idea the big guy with the gray eyes was at her camp, now she had neither smelled nor heard this guy behind her. What use were her preternatural senses if they failed her in a life or death situation?

Allantra turned to see a man almost as big as the gray eyed one coming up slowly behind her. Similarly dressed and powerfully built, just slightly smaller in stature, his eyes were green and gold like a cat. Her eyes were immediately drawn to his hands that had claws on the end of them instead of nails. Somebody spent way too much time in feline mode. However, the most amazing feature was his hair. Cut close to his scalp and the color of a sunflower. So strikingly yellow she wondered for a moment if it was natural, until she caught sight of the light dusting of hair on his arms. He looked at her

with no emotion at all. Allantra shifted her position so that she could see both of them clearly on each side.

"It appears our uninvited guest wishes to move further into our lands." Big gray-eyed guy remarked.

"Does she have your permission?" Sunflower Hair asked as he moved closer. Allantra let her hands shift into claws. She was not going down without a fight. Gray Eyes' eyebrows went up at the slight shift.

"I believe she is pureblood." He frowned. They were closing in on both sides of her. Allantra was having a hard time deciding which one of them she would be trying to take on first. If they rushed her together, she had no chance. "I smell vampyre," he added, clearly confused by her scent.

"I smell it as well." Sunflower hair agreed.

"I am a pureblood." Allantra defended herself. Obviously being vampire was bad in this neck of the woods. Considering the bad blood between them, who could blame them?

"You reek of the scent of vampyre." Gray eyes stated in disgust, "Are you mated to one?"

Oh boy, how did she answer this one? She wasn't exactly fully mated to Khaelen, though they shared a temporary blood bond and a mind link. They could smell him on her. "I have a vampire lover." She answered hoping this wouldn't send them to rip her throat out. Instead Sunflower Hair looked at Gray Eyes and gave an almost imperceptible nod. "What?" she asked irritated at the silent communication.

"What is your purpose here?" Gray Eyes stepped closer so suddenly that he was way too close for her to even have a chance at defending herself.

"That is my business." She lifted her eyes to meet his gray ones. She would not be thwarted, no matter how big and powerful he was ... and gorgeous.

"It is mine, little one, these are my lands, and you have trespassed."

"Unintentional."

"Irrelevant."

"Unfair!"

"Law!" he retorted loudly. Sunflower Hair snorted, the only hint of emotion on his emotionless face.

"I am sure, Dharean, that you have much more important matters to see to than standing here trading words with a female. Perhaps we shall deal with her and continue about our day?"

"Excellent observation," the one named Dharean responded. "Let us make haste." He threw the words at Allantra.

"I'm not going anywhere with either one of you. While I thank you for freeing me from that spell ... by the way you must be some kind of talent to reverse it."

"I set it for you."

Allantra let his words sink in a moment before rage consumed her. "You did that to me? You set that disgusting trap for me? That deranged human could have slaughtered..."

"I had to determine if the two of you were together. He has been following you for some time."

"You wanted to see if he would attack me or help me? Oh that's great, what if he would have just come out slicing and dicing? You could have gotten me killed!"

“Your death would have meant nothing to me. My only concern is for my land and for my people.”

“Oh and I love you too!” Allantra spat at him sarcastically. “What threat do I pose?”

“You smell of vampyre yet you are a shifter. The vampyres could have sent you here to find and infiltrate us. I have not decided your guilt or innocence yet. Only that you had nothing to do with that human stomping about after you.”

“Who are you and your people?” Allantra asked now wondering if she had the good luck of running into some people who could point her where she needed to be.

“I am Dharean and this is Masque, we patrol the land of Kynn, tribal lands to the Purebloods.” Allantra could barely contain her joy.

“I’ve been looking for your people; my people.” She gushed out, all earlier verbal exchanges forgotten and ecstatic she finally made a dent in her journey.

“For what reason?” Dharean looked down at the small woman, looking for any signs of lying.

“To make a deal; the Elder Council...” and that was all Allantra managed to get out. In a sudden onset of rage, Dharean pushed her into a sleep, catching her before she fell. Her small, lithe form was almost like the weight of a child. He cradled her to his chest.

“Have you judged her, *Noir Brujo*?” Masque asked in his emotionless voice.

“Yes. But first I believe we need to get some information from her. Then I will send her to her death.” He said through gritted teeth. It was too bad, for his body screamed to join with hers. It was a most unusual pull and one that made him uncomfortable. It was also the only reason he hadn’t killed her instantly at the mention of the vampyres.

* * * *

The sound of voices woke Allantra. Instinctively she lay still as if she were still under the grips of the sleep compulsion that asshole Dharean pushed on her.

“You brought her to me for what reason, Dharean?” an old voice asked gently.

“You can see into her soul, tell me what I need to know,” his deep voice answered.

“Have you learned nothing I have taught you, child?” she lightly admonished him.

“I do not know what you mean,” he answered, confusion lacing his words together.

“You have but to look at her, and all the things surrounding her entrance into Kynn to know her soul.” The old woman answered. At least it sounded like an old woman.

“You are speaking in riddles, Za’rae, I have no time for riddles.” Dharean began to sound irritated. Good, Allantra thought to herself, that makes two of them.

“Life is but one riddle after another, *Brujo*. Do not speak to me of time. I haven’t the time for your foolishness. I am old and tired and I wish to join the spirit of the others.”

“Do not talk like that, Za’rae, the people need you.” He voice gentled considerably.

“The people have what they need now.” The voices grew quiet, and Allantra had the sneaky feeling they were looking in her direction. She didn’t dare open an eye.

“We knew the moment you were awake. Please join us. We wish to humor your silliness no more.” The old woman’s voice held authority even though she spoke gently.

Allantra opened her eyes, and found herself in a rather lavish hut. A blue fire burned in the middle of it, Dharean sat on the opposite side, the old woman sat to his right. Allantra sat up and looked across the fire at Dharean hoping she looked as pissed off as she felt. It was the appearance of the old woman that sent her senses into shock. A tiny figure huddled near the fire sat cross-legged. She was completely bald with bushy snow-

white eyebrows. She appeared to be dressed in a plain brown linen gown that hung in waves around her frail body. But it was her eyes that frightened Allantra, for under the bushy eyebrows coal black shiny eyes stared at her, not one eyelash to speak of. Her eyes were so shiny and black Allantra saw the fire reflected in them. She shivered; the woman just looked plain creepy.

"Do not let my appearance upset you. Sit closer so that I may see the woman that has Dharean so confused."

"I am not confused, Za'rae. I have judged her..."

"And yet here she sits by my fire. I do not recall such mercy toward any before her." Za'rae quipped all the while her coal black eyes were trained on Allantra.

"I merely want to know her intentions."

"We both know you have the means and the magic so see clear through her mind." Za'rae challenged him. "You know the prophecy as well as I, *Brujo*. Perhaps it would behoove you to go to the Tome and familiarize yourself..."

"I am very familiar with the prophecy." Dharean cut her off, rising abruptly. "I will be back for her." With that he rose, spun on the balls of his booted feet and stormed out of the hut.

The people of Kynn scampered to get out of the way of Dharean. It did not matter that he was angry; the people of Kynn *always* got out of his way. He was the *Noir Brujo*. The Black Wizard, the only known shifter to embrace and excel in the dark arts. He was their protector, healing those with no hope, patrolling Kynn steadfastly, but they feared him. They feared him enough that none spoke unless the request of a favor was in order. No one struck up a conversation with him. No one engaged him socially. Even the females, though physically attracted to him, only sought him under the cover of night. After tumbling with him, they left just as quietly without so much as a glance back. He was not marriage material; he was only good enough to make them scream in pleasure.

It was fine by him. At least that's what he told himself. He had hardened his emotions long ago, accepting the role as both protector and outcast among his people. He was the most powerful and the most feared. Za'rae officially was Clan Matriarch, but in reality it was Dharean who ruled the clan. And now the ruler was enraged. He knew the moment he spotted her she was trouble. She even had Za'rae on her side if their exchange was anything to go by. Za'rae would not let him kill her now, though he seriously doubted he could. What was it about her? She already had a lover. Vampyre or not, shifters only kept steady lovers who would turn into mates. Shifters mated for life. She was as good as mated. Even as he told himself this, he could still feel her body pressed against his chest. *Soft and firm in all the right places* a voice whispered in his head. Aside from the scent of the vampyre her natural scent drew him like a moth.

"Consulting the Tome?" Masque asked falling into step as Dharean stormed toward his own isolated hut.

"I have no need for that," he growled, though in truth that's exactly what he was doing.

"Za'rae believes her to be part of the prophecy." Masque stated.

"Za'rae is old." Dharean replied.

"Za'rae has never been wrong." Masque halted his steps. Dharean needed to deal with this alone. "The time has come old friend. Accept your fate."

When Dharean whirled around to give Masque a few choice words he was only met

with his rapidly retreating backside. Only Masque did not fear him. He smirked; he truly needed to consult the Tome, if even Masque sided against him.

Chapter Two

*Touched by evil that flows and ebbs
The Ancients cower from its web
The Scion comes from enemy land
A harbinger for change at hand
Mated first to an enemy that's not
Mated second to a wizards' lot
The three shall form the weapon to be
The catalyst of death to the enemy
If one should falter from the path
T'would bring down destiny's final wrath
The enemies' stronghold shall re-enforce
Survival of the Ancients, shall end its course*

No matter how many times he read it he still refused to believe he was to be mated with *that* shifter and her bloodsucker mate. Dharean closed the Tome forcefully in disgust. What other fate could a *Noir Brujo* expect? The likelihood of any of the unmated women accepting his advances to marry would be met with uproarious laughter.

"You should take greater care with the Tome, Dharean. It did not survive this long to perish under your temper." Za'rae's amused voice floated down to him. He looked up from the Tome to see the almost transparent projection of Za'rae hovering above him across the table, still sitting in her cross-legged position.

"How long have you been here, Matriarch?" Dharean was slightly irritated at the uninvited intrusion, yet was careful to show the wise one respect.

"Long enough to know you have seen that prophecy the whole of your life, and yet you refute it as it comes into being. *If one should falter from the path...*" She let the words hang in the air, waiting for him to pluck the meaning straight from the source.

"You believe it refers to me as the weak link?" Dharean didn't know if he was more shocked or offended by her insinuation.

"You are the only one in denial."

"I am the only one of the three who knows the prophecy." He retorted in sarcasm. "Perhaps we should be fair and gauge the reactions of the other two participants before we deem me the weakest link. Would it be so far fetched that the young wench would refuse her fate? She is, after all, the youngest and has no idea of her ancestry if she was indeed raised in the land of the enemy."

"Well, since you are the one well-versed in the prophecy it would call to order that you would need to be the strongest link in order to teach the other two." Za'rae smiled in triumph.

"You may be old, however, you are still quite the trickster." Dharean smiled in affection. The old woman would take the weakest link and try to make it the strongest. "You know Minn does not like you to project, she always thinks you are dead."

"Bah," Za'rae responded waving her bony hand to emphasize her indifference. "I have been projecting longer than she's been alive, she will have to get used to it. She will know when I am dead, sure enough," Za'rae cackled.

* * * *

Allantra stared in horror at the old woman. She had suddenly gone very still. It looked as if she wasn't breathing. Why did the old woman have to die when *she* was in the hut? This did not bode well for her. It was bad enough Dharean thought her a traitor to the people anyway, when word got out that the leader died while alone with Allantra...

She got up slowly and went around the fire to the side of the old woman. She knelt down next to the woman and waved a hand in front of her eyes. The black eyes only reflected her hand; Allantra snatched back her hand quickly. She wanted to check for breathing but felt if she touched the body it might tip over. Allantra's mind began to race as she thought of a way out of the situation. If she could get out of the hut and into the forest she had a chance. Of course the quest was all shot to hell, but that didn't mean her life had to end right here right now.

Allantra pictured a boa in her mind and waited for the shifting of her body. Nothing happened. Breathing deeply Allantra decided that maybe she was too nervous and needed to calm down. Again she tried; she looked down, she was still in her natural form. *Now* panic began to move in. The hut was obviously spelled against shifting. If she couldn't get out of this hut undetected that would mean she had to fight her way out. That sure reduced her chances of getting out alive. One last look at the still form, she sent up a silent prayer for the woman and herself and began to crawl with her belly as close to the ground as possible and headed for the door of the hut. The door swung open. Allantra froze.

"What are you doing?" a woman's voice asked in puzzlement. Allantra looked at the delicate feet before her. She sighed deeply bent her legs under her and settled her weight on them, then looked up. A rather short slightly plump woman looked down at her in puzzlement, she carried a large bucket filled with liquid. Briefly Allantra wondered if it was tar for her.

"I was uh..." Allantra stumbled over her words as she looked into the woman's kind brown eyes. Eyes that suddenly grew round. Allantra didn't need to follow her line of vision to know she was looking at the old dead woman. What was it about dead bodies, that seemed to find their way to her?

"Za'rae!" she yelped and set the bucket down. It sloshed soapy water over the side. Allantra's heartbeat slowed a notch. At least it wasn't tar. The plump woman ran to Za'rae's side and clutched the old woman's head to her bosom. "Za'rae! Please don't leave us!" she wailed.

"I found her like that, one minute she was staring into the fire..." Allantra began to explain wondering if this would be the only time she got to say her piece.

"What?" the woman stopped wailing and rocking long enough to cast Allantra a tear stained look. "She was looking into the fire?"

"Er yeah, then she got quiet and—." The grieving woman cut off Allantra.

"Seemed to go still as a rock?" she finished, this time the woman seemed to be annoyed.

"Well yes. I know it sounds odd but..."

"Nothing odd about it!" the woman clipped, putting the woman away from her back into her cross-legged position. "I hate it when she does that!" The woman used a thin slip of her dress to wipe her face. Allantra was confused. Just how many times did this woman die like this? "She's not dead, she's projecting," the woman sniffed.

“Projecting?” Allantra queried.

“Yes. Astral projecting, she’s here somewhere in the village.” The woman rose and went to retrieve her bucket. “I’ll have a word with her later. In the meanwhile I am Minn. I am Za’rae’s personal servant. She told me of your arrival and wished me to bathe you.”

“Oh—oh!” Allantra screeched as meaning set in. “I can certainly clean myself, just leave the bucket here and I can tend to my own needs.” This seemed to chafe at Minn.

“*Your* requests mean nothing to me. My mistress has instructed me and I am duty bound to follow. Now please remove your clothing.” Minn gave her a rather pointed brown stare. Allantra stared right back. She didn’t come this far to be pushed around by a servant.

“Are you sure you want to challenge me, young one?” Minn asked sweetly, though there was no sugar in her intentions.

“I am not challenging you; I am standing up for myself.”

“Which means you are standing *against* me,” Minn quipped.

“Nothing personal, Minn, I have been bathing myself for quite some time now. I believe I have the hang of it.” Allantra replied just as sweetly. Minn smiled right back and whispered something so softly Allantra couldn’t understand the words. But in seconds she was completely naked and Minn was doing everything she could not to burst out laughing at the perplexed look on Allantra’s face. “How did you do that?”

“Tis a simple spell. Surely you learned it as a whelp as well?”

“I don’t know any spells.” Allantra said in distraction as she used her small hands to try and cover her more intimate parts.

“How is it you don’t know any spells?” Minn narrowed her eyes at Allantra. “You were not born in the Savage Outlands?”

“I believe I was born in the Savage Outlands, but I was raised in the Civil Lands.” Frustrated at her inability to cover herself she gave up and just looked up at Minn whose mouth was gaped wide open.

“You were raised in the enemy lands?” she whispered almost to herself. “*The Scion comes from enemy land.*” She looked at Allantra a little more closely. “You are...”

“To be bathed as I instructed.” Za’rae’s sharp tone cut Minn’s words. Both Minn and Allantra jumped, as the mistaken-corpse-that-wasn’t began to speak suddenly. “She has need of a few creature comforts.”

“I was getting on that.” Minn responded looking at Za’rae curiously before approaching Allantra.

“I was telling Minn I am quite capable of doing it myself.” Allantra replied still resisting Minn’s services.

“You will allow this, Allantra. It is my will. Believe me you will enjoy the bath.” With that, Za’rae completely vanished.

“She’s amazing.” Allantra breathed.

“She also is used to getting her way.” Minn said with a smile, setting the bucket next to Allantra. Minn then went into a far corner of the hut and retrieved a beautifully woven multi-colored mat. She unrolled it next to Allantra.

“There is no need for that.” Allantra said trying to save the situation from violence.

“Stretch out on the mat for me.” Minn said conversationally. To the disbelief of Allantra she found her body obeying Minn’s commands.

“What the hell?” Allantra watched as her traitorous body obediently lay down on the

mat.

“This is Za’rae’s hut, young one. Whatever she wills in it, it shall be done. It is the strength of her magic.” Minn smiled at her as if trying to console her. “Do you think it odd that Dharean brought you here? He did so because he knows you pose no threat to Za’rae, and she will keep you detained in comfort. It is better than what he does for his other prisoners.”

“This is only temporary,” Allantra bit out, embarrassed beyond belief to be naked and supine in front of a woman she did not know. Not only that, she was about to be intimately washed by this woman.

“We will see,” Minn simply stated and pulled an odd looking sponge from the bucket. “Relax, you will enjoy this,” Minn said kindly, seeing Allantra’s hands rolled into fists. Immediately they relaxed.

Allantra closed her eyes and tried to go to a happy place. Was this really necessary? Why couldn’t she wash herself? It wasn’t as if she had concealed weapons inside of her.

The warm soapy sponge touched her foot first. Minn slowly worked the soft sponge around her feet. Allantra hated to admit it, but the sponge almost felt as if it were licking her. Bolts of arousal began to shoot through her body much to Allantra’s shame. “You should not be embarrassed by any arousal you feel, young one. This sponge was designed to bring pleasure in this way.” Minn dipped the sponge again. “The ointment in the water makes your skin susceptible and sensitive to the feel of the sponge,” she explained as she slowly moved the sponge up towards Allantra’s ankles.

Allantra closed her eyes, as the sensations would not be ignored. She felt herself warming up as the arousal took over. Minn parted her legs to pay special attention to each one separately. The sponge sucked and licked at her as Minn ran it over her body, first one leg, then the other. Allantra found herself anticipating the sponge at her cleft. To her disappointment Minn skipped it entirely, opting instead to jump to her stomach. Allantra’s back arched, as the sponge seemed to kiss her intimately at her belly button. She heard Minn’s low chuckle. “That’s right, enjoy it,” she urged, dipping the sponge again this time letting the water saturate Allantra’s small breast.

Minn skillfully worked the sponge around her nipple until Allantra was ready to scream. Then Minn switched to the other breast, causing her to hiss in pleasure. “I have a surprise for you,” the woman whispered.

Allantra was so wrapped up in the sensations she barely registered the words until she found another sponge seeming to suck at her clit. Minn indeed was an expert at bathing, for she worked both sponges simultaneously, one at the breasts the other at her core. Allantra couldn’t help but gyrate in abandon as Minn worked her clit with the sponge. Her nipples only seemed a continuation of her clit. Minn re-dipped both sponges, making her even more sensitive and wet. She worked them faster as Allantra’s breathing became raspier. It seemed all sound ceased as the orgasm rocked Allantra. Wave after wave of pleasure rippled through her body, making her back bow in response. Her hands clutched at the mat as she tried to keep from shattering completely.

Slowly she came down off the orgasmic high, which was so strong that ripples still made themselves known now and then. When she finally had some sense of time and reality she opened her eyes, to find Minn looking down kindly upon her. “You’re all clean now,” she smiled, plopping the sponges in the bucket.

“Why?” Allantra croaked out as her voice finally reappeared. She didn’t understand

why Za'rae would insist on this. Was the old woman some kind of pervert? Minn stood with the bucket.

"Because during orgasm your mind is open to probing," came Dharean's voice.

Allantra sat up to see Dharean standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest, and a raging hard-on that seemed to point straight at her.

Orgasm forgotten, rage ruling, Allantra forgot to cover her nakedness and stood. Thank goodness she had control of her body again. "How long have you been here?" she spat at him, not really sure if her anger stemmed from her privacy being violated or embarrassment at what she had clearly enjoyed.

"Long enough to probe your mind," Dharean replied flatly, though his voice was a deceiver of his emotions. He was churning inside with desire, confusion and most of all disgust at his inability to control his emotions whenever he was around her. "You will be happy to know I found no corrupt thoughts, at least pertaining to betrayal and our people."

"If you would have but let me finish, we could have avoided all of this." Allantra could feel the anger boiling dangerously close to the surface. Though she knew she could never take this wizard on and win, she didn't care. She was pissed off and she wanted him to know it.

"But then you wouldn't have had the benefit of Minn's ministrations. They are legendary as I understand it." Dharean smiled, this woman was way too easy to embarrass. Minn blushed prettily until she caught the expression on Allantra's face then hastily excused herself, leaving the door creaking in the wake of her hasty exit.

"I understand Za'rae ordered the—uh" she faltered, her tongue having a hard time voicing what her mind was quite frank with. "Bath," she finished, turning away as she said the word. She was reminded suddenly that she was naked, and this powerful man was aroused. She eyed the hut trying to find a blanket anything that would cover her.

"Yes, Za'rae has the innate ability to see inside one's soul; every now and then she likes to double check, just to make sure her years aren't interfering with her wisdom. The hut is spelled to detect any corrupt thoughts that mean her or her people harm. What are you doing?" he frowned at her, irritated by the fact that she seemed distracted.

"Isn't it obvious, oh wise one?" she replied sarcastically sweet. "Or did you not notice I am the only one naked here?" The minute the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. She had a smart mouth and boy did it get her into trouble—a lot.

"Well if you wished me naked you had only to ask. Just because you are a prisoner does not mean that you don't have certain rights." For the first time he truly smiled at her, and one dimple popped out on the left side of his face. Allantra caught her breath at the sheer beauty of the man. She stood frozen as he tore the loincloth effortlessly from around his waist. Her eyes followed the cloth as it fluttered gently to the floor. Then slowly her traitorous, greedy eyes took in the impressive cock pointing at her in accusation. It seemed to accuse her for its state of arousal. Guilty as charged and so willing to take the punishment...

"Do I meet your approval, Scion?" he inquired softly, reveling in the effect he had on her. "Or is your mind occupied with your vampyre lover?" Dharean had no idea what was wrong with him or why he was even baiting her. But he couldn't help himself. He was jealous; yes jealous of the vampyre he had never met, never even knew existed until he met her hours ago. He approached her on silent predatory feet until his body was

vertically flushed with hers, though he towered over her. He could feel the heat from her body brushing against his. "Do you compare us, little one?" he chided.

"You are both ... desirable." She fumbled over her words, wanting to step away from him but drawn into his net. Her voice sounded airy, far away.

"Then perhaps I need an advantage. I was never one for tying or losing," he whispered into the shell of her ear.

All of her senses warned her to simply step away from him. To scream, do anything but stand there and wait to see what he wanted to do to her. Her feet stayed glued to the mat. Her will for the moment his. It must be a spell, she thought frantically. She would never betray Khaelen this way, and yet she seemed to be in Dharean's thrall.

His tongue snaked out, following the delicate curves of her ears. Warm hands lightly grasped each shoulder and slowly traveled down. When they reached midway down her arms, he brought them up slowly and each hand brushed a side of her breasts. In unison his thumbs playfully encircled the sides of the firm small globes. As he nibbled her ears, his thumbs found her nipples and tweaked them, Allontra moaned softly hoping only she heard the sound. She was wrong, for Dharean's sharp hearing picked up the moan and it only encouraged him further. He began to kiss his way down her neck, alternating between biting and sucking. One hand wound its way down between her legs, where she was already moist from Minn's attentions.

It was so easy to slip inside her folds; she brought one leg up against his hips. His thumb teased her clit while his fingers lightly pushed in and out of her. Allontra masturbated against his hand, while his other one sensually massaged her breast, without warning his teeth sank into her neck, not to draw blood, but to claim dominance, demand submission. It was the way of the shifter.

Though Allontra had not been raised among purebloods, instinct told her what this meant and instantly she rebelled. She would not be dominated by anyone. So close to orgasm, she brought her leg down. "Get your teeth out of my neck," she demanded.

Startled at the interruption, Dharean withdrew and looked down at her. His eyes were heavy with arousal, his cock a physical reminder between them of his desire to release. "I know you want me, Allontra from the Civil Lands." He said arrogantly. Though the women around here would never testify to it during the reign of the sun, he knew under the cover of night there was no denying him. He was an excellent lover and well he knew that.

"Yes, but I will not be dominated." Her voice hard, she attempted to push him away, he didn't move but she was sure he got the message.

"It is in a woman's nature to be dominated," he said matter-of-factly.

"Not this woman!" Allontra's voice began to rise.

"Perhaps not now, but you will," he laughed. He *laughed* at her. Allontra was seething now. How could she have allowed this barbarian to even touch her so intimately? It had to be a spell. "I came here looking for purebloods, to end the reign of the vampires in the Civil Lands. I did not come here looking for a roll in the hay." Her voice dripped venom as she looked into his gray eyes. Mistake—again. His eyes, aroused, looked even sexier, and though she was pissed at him, his eyes made her want to...

"And yet, here we are, getting off to a great start," he said. Yes, he made her want to kick the shit out of him.

“You will be getting off by yourself,” she retorted, finally spotting a blanket under some odds and ends. She marched right to it and began yanking it, sending pots and pans, bottles and beads rolling in all directions. After getting the blanket wrapped around her toga style she faced him, well aware of the fact that he had watched not only her retreat, but also her ass as she bent to retrieve the blanket. She tried to toss those small facts aside as she faced him with the confidence of a blanket wrapped around her. “I am aware that this is not my hut, but could you get the hell out?” she asked, lifting one eyebrow in expectation. “After all, prisoners do have certain rights and I believe one of those is not seeing an unwelcome visitor.” She knew she was pulling the tail of a really big tiger that probably didn’t play well with others, but she needed to be alone and right now she was willing to take just about any risk to achieve that.

Dharean walked back; absolutely confident of where his cloth lay. He summoned it onto his body as a small display of power. Letting her know just who and what she was dealing with. “Do not forget, young one, your life is in my hands, and my hands alone. Za’rae would never take your side against me. You will do well to seek my favor,” he warned her. He left so quickly she didn’t see him move. Did he teleport as well? She thought that to be only a power a vampire held.

Speaking of vampires her heart immediately felt guilty. She had let another touch her. It wasn’t like she and Khaelen had agreed to be exclusive. Truth be told, they had not even discussed the nature of their relationship or even where it was going. But she knew in her soul that he was committed to her, as she had committed herself to him. Then why was she so ready to jump Dharean’s bones?

She couldn’t deny the similarities of the situations. They both were men of power, leaders to their people. They both held her life in their hands. She was equally and insanely attracted to them both. The only difference being, she had gotten to know Khaelen and had actual feelings for him. She had just met Dharean and he stirred the same lust in her as Khaelen did when she first met him. What did that mean? What exactly was she missing here? Her mind snagged on something Dharean had called her. *Scion*. Why would he call her that? She shook her head, as it began to crowd with too many questions and not enough answers. Khaelen had not tried to contact her. Even with her shields up she only felt a shadow of him. Perhaps the blood link was waning because he had not taken her blood in awhile. She was beginning to feel desperate without him, she felt a strong pull to be by his side, she had to convince these people quickly to come back with her, and she wanted to go back home. Worst of all she was freaking horny and unsatisfied.

* * * *

The Quarter Guard fell heavily to his knees at the intrusion of Dominica. On all fours he breathed raggedly fighting the pain of the intrusion in his mind.

“*What do you have for me, human?*” she hissed as she searched through his memories. She watched as they played out the tracking of the bitch Allantra. She gasped in delight as she saw his capture of her; it was immediately diminished when she saw his prisoner freed just as quickly.

She searched the human’s memories thoroughly. The shifter who freed Allantra seemed quite powerful indeed, yet he was pureblood. At least she knew for certain now that more existed. She would have to tread carefully around this shape shifter, for he

carried old magic within him. The same kind of powerful magic the others carried long ago.

Pick up the trail of that bitch, and, this time, bring me back what I need.

Yes, Dominica.

This time, do not get caught unawares. I need them alive.

Yes, Dominica.

If you fail me, human, death would be too good for you.

Yes, Dominica.

Nourish yourself fool, you do me no good half starved! I will send reinforcements.

Then she retreated from the humans' mind. He felt the nausea build up and quickly the bile followed. Her power was too much for his human mind and often caused him physical illness, but that was not the concern of the Elder. His existence was for her benefit alone. He rose slowly wiping the remnants of spittle from his mouth. He retrieved a knife from the holster at his hip and looked around for game. He would nourish himself and then he would track down Shifters for his Elder.

Chapter Three

The woman pissed him off to no end! He wanted to strangle her perfectly formed beautiful neck. How dare she practically *order* him out of the hut! Wasn't she the prisoner after all? Dharean grunted loudly not caring if he scared the nearby women. Why Za'rae kept insisting she was the one was beyond him. Where in the prophecy did it say it was the first woman to come from the Civil Lands? For all any of them knew, there could be another one on her way right now, that was much more pleasant and willing. Of course he knew they couldn't possibly be as beautiful. He grunted again, he was like a whelp scenting his first female.

Indeed he had read her mind and knew exactly why she was here. She was the one and he knew it, he just wished it wasn't her. It had never occurred to him that the prophecy was referring to him in particular. Was he just cursed? Dharean marched into his own hut and closed the door without latching it. No one dared barge in on him. Besides it made it difficult for the village women to sneak in to him when desiring his favors. With that thought, his cock didn't stir as it normally did. He had but one woman on his mind, and though he thoroughly detested her right now, there was no denying he wanted her. He consoled himself that he did not desire other women right now simply because she posed a challenge that he meant to overcome. The fascination wouldn't last once he had her in his bed. He smiled wickedly to himself. Tomorrow was another day. Tomorrow was a good day to teach wenches from the Civil Lands a little bit about the *Noir Brujo*.

* * * *

Allantra held her tongue as Minn clucked about, ordering her to hurry and eat. She had slept fitfully the night before. The plain sack of a dress she had been given to wear was itchy and contributed to her restless night. Dharean kept entering her dreams and for a while she believed that he could enter her dreams at will. Eventually she talked herself out of that foolishness, or was it? No matter what she dreamed he appeared looking at her with lustful intent. He whispered words in her ear making her melt and yearn for his touch. However, each time she fought him off, feeling that if she gave in to him in the dream somehow it would carry over into the waking world.

She concentrated hard and late into the night, he finally stopped appearing but other things began to haunt her dreams. Screams. They came from a woman who looked like her. The woman's face was dirty and streaked with the path of many tears. Her hair hung long and matted as if it hadn't been washed in a long time. She seemed to be looking right at Allantra and begging her ... for what she didn't know. The woman was chained brutally against a wall and seemed close to death. She felt the dream was important as well as the woman, she sighed in frustration as she tried to remember what the woman was trying to tell her. Next thing she knew, Minn was shaking her telling her she had to awaken, for there was a long day prepared for her. Allantra wanted desperately to bite her head off, but figured it was about time she got allies in this place. She needed an escape route if the Purebloods here wouldn't hear her out. She would just have to find another

way or maybe other shifters to aid her; these seemed powerful but very old world. She looked up to see Minn staring at her as she gulped her last bite of eggs.

“What?” Allantra asked around a mouthful of eggs. Minn hesitated before answering.

“How is it that you don’t even know simple spells?”

“I told you before; I grew up in the Civil Lands. Hell, it’s just recently I found out I was even a Pureblood.” Allantra swallowed the last of her breakfast. Minn was a good cook.

“I thought the Vampyres killed all the Purebloods in the Civil Lands.” Minn looked at Allantra with more than a little bit of suspicion.

“They did. A human raised me. Maybe she thought I was of mixed blood.”

“Possible.” Minn said carefully she sat her plump body down rather delicately across from Allantra. “If you are a True Blood your power is innate. A few teachings and you too can do simple spells.” Allantra shrugged wondering what the woman was up to.

“Would you be willing to try?” she looked closely at Allantra for a reaction.

“Why don’t you just come out and say or ask what it is you want. Seeing as how I keep finding myself someone’s prisoner I assure you I am quite used to interrogation.” Allantra let her catlike eyes train on the servant, giving her a look meant to make her uneasy. Bingo! Minn shifted nervously.

“There is a whispering in the village about you.”

“Boy, am I surprised.” Allantra bit out dryly.

“Some believe the prophecy is about to be given a chance to be fulfilled. Others think you are with the vampyres, searching us out to eradicate the rest of us. They cry for your blood immediately.”

This sent the dry humor right out of Allantra’s mouth. They were ready to stone her? Maybe tie her to a stake? Hell she had to get out of here. Allantra swallowed slowly trying to appear calm. “What exactly is stopping them?”

“Za’rae; she would never allow it, that and the fact that Dharean didn’t kill you outright.”

Allantra let out a deep breath. The woman turned her blood cold, but right now that funny looking old lady was the only thing keeping her butt alive. “Why did he not kill you?” Minn asked almost as if talking to herself.

“What of you, Minn? Do you think I am in league with the vampires?”

“I know you spoke of them. You smelled faintly of one when you were found. It was also part of the reason Za’rae wanted you bathed. The herbs and ointment in the water can remove all kinds of scents. She thought it would be easier for the people to listen to you with a fair ear, if you had not the scent of a vampyre on you.”

“It certainly makes sense. But you haven’t answered my question.”

“I reserve my opinion. Za’rae is wise and has led us strong. We have flourished and, though slow, our numbers are increasing. Za’rae believes you are the one in the prophecy and that carries much weight with me. Za’rae, however, believes everyone should make up their own mind. So I wait to see what your actions say to me.”

“Thank you, Minn.”

“For what?”

“For giving me a fair chance; I promise I will not disappoint you.”

“You should concern yourself less with disappointing the servants. I am the one you

need to impress.” Dharean’s deep cool voice resonated in the small hut. Again he had managed to enter with his presence not being known. A gift indeed, but it was getting on Allontra’s nerves.

“You, *Noir Brujo*, do not refer to me as a servant. I am the mother of your godchildren. You show respect!” Minn clipped at him.

“You are right.” Dharean smiled apologetically “I am sorry, Minn, I am just a little testy this morning. How are the little ones?” Minn began to preen at the mention of her cubs.

“They do well, Dharean. They wish to know when you will come do tricks for them.”

“Tell them I will as soon as I can.” He smiled kindly to Minn as she began to leave the hut.

“Please tell that wayward brother of mine to come and see his nephews. He should never be too busy for a family visit.”

“I will tell Masque of your demand.” Dharean replied, the kind expression still on his face-until he turned to Allontra, then irritation ruled. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” Allontra asked nonchalantly though she was seething on the inside. *Impress him?* Not likely.

“Did Minn not tell you that today would be a long day?”

“Every day is long, Dharean. The solar system decrees it that way.” Allontra pretended to flick a crumb off the mat she was eating on.

“You will tell me of your reasons for being here, and then I have something planned if all goes well.”

“And if it does not?” she sent another imaginary crumb flying across the mat. Not used to being ignored, Dharean grabbed Allontra by the arm and hoisted her up unceremoniously.

“You will show me respect, little one.” He growled in her ear, with a soft jerk bringing her closer. “I am law here, your fate is in these hands, and you will do well to cooperate.”

“I thought Za’rae to be the power here,” she said sweetly looking in his gorgeous pale gray eyes. Her heart sped up as she saw swirls of black like a small tornado in his eyes. She refused to show her fear. “Besides I know you have been inside my mind, you know why I am here.”

“I would like to *hear* it from you.”

“No, you want to see if I will lie or keep something from you. You want me to be some kind of traitor, for it will give you a good reason to try and execute me. I will not play your game, *Noir Brujo*.”

“You are smart for one of the Civil Lands.” He smiled reluctantly, and released her, the inky tornados subsiding.

“I am smart because I was born that way, where I was raised has no bearing on it.” She rubbed her arm where he grabbed her, not because it hurt, but because it tingled, in a delicious sort of way.

“You will address the people post haste, they gather at the Place of Honor.”

“Place of Honor?”

“It is where our most revered shifters are remembered. You will please show respect, no matter what good intentions you have. If you show disrespect in any way they will

stone you on the spot, and not even Za'rae can save you." He extended his arm pleasantly enough, indicating she should walk ahead of him. After they left the hut, Allantra finally asked the question that had begun to sear her mind.

"What do I do, when I enter the Place of Honor?" she asked softly.

Of course this would be the time to get rid of her if there ever was one. He could mislead her and make the people revolt, but Za'rae would never forgive him. No telling what the old one would do, he held great respect for her, her power was the only one that exceeded his own. But then again, the thought of her getting hurt did something to his insides and made them twist and lurch uncomfortably. "As soon as you are at the entrance, there will be a pot of ash to your right. Adorn your forehead, heart and feet with this. Then bow low, do not move until Za'rae bid you welcome."

"What does that symbolize?" He didn't know why, but the fact that she asked warmed him. He thought she would merely do as she was told to save her hide, however her question seemed genuine and spoke of interest.

"Ash is the result of burning. Burning is purification. It symbolizes the purity in your mind, in your heart, and journey through life. Bowing asks for judgment and you wait to be found worthy and invited into such an honored place."

"That is so beautiful." She replied looking back at him with her beautiful brown eyes. "Your people must have such culture and tradition," she observed wistfully.

"Are they not your people as well?" he found himself saying, somehow wanting her to feel part of the people. Yes, he indeed had gone insane; she was a prisoner after all.

"I suppose that is what we are trying to discern now isn't it?" she laughed shortly. But he had seen the sadness in her eyes. If she indeed had grown up in the Civil Lands she had missed a lot. Humans only lived so long and the Civil Lands were not kind to ones that were not vampyres. Within moments they reached the Place of Honor.

"Let us hope fairness is in my people's heart this morning." Dharean responded. At their approach a man turned and pointed at Allantra as they approached.

"There, behold the Vampyre's pawn and whore!" The crowd turned and Dharean found himself staring into the eyes of his very angry people.

Dharean watched in concealed horror as the heads of all assembled outside of the Place of Honor turned towards them. The man pointed again at Allantra "The Vampyres' Whore is among us. She comes as a harbinger of our end; she must be put to death!" At this statement Dharean's anger rose faster than he had ever known it to. His muscular arm, lined with tattoos, shot out toward the villager, slowly he curled his hand into a ball, and against his will the frightened man found himself being dragged by unseen hands toward the angry wizard.

When he was within a hair's breadth, practically nose-to-nose he could see the black funnels swirling violently in the wizard's eyes.

"Our ways are not barbaric. We do not kill needlessly. Have you any proof of your claims?" Dharean bit out menacingly.

"We have all heard she is from the Civil Lands. We all know the prophecy, *Noir Brujo*. Perhaps the Vampyres sent her to let down our guard, how do we know she is the one?"

"And you think the only way to find this out is to kill her on sight? Make her a pariah; turn the people against her before she has had a chance to prove her innocence?"

"We have all worked hard to replenish our numbers, I do not want to see that

jeopardized.” Before he could finish, Dharean roared loudly, the sound so intense the people, including Allantra covered their ears. He sounded like an enraged beast.

“Tell me, Dysil,” his voice gravelly, sounding more animal than man. “When last did you protect these borders, kill to protect a people who fear and shun you? Made decisions that have damned your soul, all to protect the people who thrive here now?”

Dysil now visibly shook as the funnels in Dharean’s eyes began to bleed out, turning his pale gray eyes inky black. “I-I have not done those things-you have.” His words stumbled over his tongue in absolute fear.

“Then do not tell me what *you* do not want to see happen. You have cowered under my protection and now you are brave because you think to attack a woman? You think to turn a whole village on a woman who has braved death many times to save people she does not know here and in the Civil Lands as well. She is who she claims to be. If Za’rae trusts her and I have not killed her, judgment is not for you to make!” With that he flung the man away with nothing but a thought and turned his slate gaze onto the other True Bloods who all held the same look of terror. “Would there be anyone else who challenges the decision Za’rae and I have made?” The crowd met his question with complete silence.

One by one the crowd began to file into the Place of Honor. By the time Dharean looked at Allantra his beautiful light stormy eyes were back.

“That is not true you know,” she said to him, stepping close and putting her small hand to his cheek.

“What?” he asked breathing a little hard from battling the demons that had threatened to surface in his anger.

“Your soul is not damned. Who would damn a soul with so much self-sacrifice for his people?” She knew not what came over her; she stood on the tips of her toes and placed a soft kiss on the opposite cheek. “Thank you, Dharean.” Then bravely she took the last place in the line.

At last Allantra stepped to the entrance where a beautiful wide mouthed urn sat on a carved stand to her right. She dipped her fingers in the ashes and dipped her covered fingers to her forehead, heart and feet. She bowed low and waited. And waited. Minutes began to tick by in utter silence; a light sweat began to form on her brow as she began to contemplate if she had done something wrong.

“Very good child,” came Za’rae’s scratchy voice. “You have much patience and trust. Please find your seat in the Place of Honor.” She rose on cramped legs but did not complain. As she stepped inside the light was low, but not so low she couldn’t make out the beautiful carved statues. Various shifters, some in human form some in half animal form lined the walls of the hall. Underneath there was an inscription that Allantra suspected told of the person’s name and the reason for their honored state. The hall ended at a large doorframe which had various animals carved along its frame. It was truly magnificent. Entering the large doorframe, to her right sat many seats at many levels like the old stadiums in the Civil Lands. Right in front of her one chair stood and to her immediate left sat two large ornate chairs. On those chairs sat Dharean and Za’rae. Za’rae as usual sat cross-legged style in her seat. Dharean’s large frame took up the whole chair; he motioned for her to sit in the lone chair in the middle of the large room. She sat down and waited for yet another interrogation.

“Please tell everyone your name,” Za’rae said kindly trying to relax Allantra.

“I am Allantra”

“From where do you hail, Allantra?”

“I was raised in the Civil Lands.” Allantra could have cringed when a small murmur rippled through the assembly.

“What has brought you here, child?”

Allantra took a deep breath and stood. She clasped her shaking hands behind her back and cursed herself for taking on such a task. “In the Civil Lands, there are shifters as well as various other creatures. We are called the Low-enders, the undesirables. We are executed for petty crimes while the vampires get away with—well murder. Life is hard for us. I am by no means asking you to feel sorry for me, I committed petty crimes to eat and live. One day I found myself set up by vampires for a murder I didn’t commit. It was all a good plan really; apparently the vampires felt that the low-enders’ numbers were getting too high, they were planning a slaughter. They used me as a catalyst to start it, only it didn’t work out as they wanted...”

Allantra proceeded to tell them everything she and Khaelen had learned about the Mass Execution and the true reasons behind it. Of course she glossed over the parts about her involvement with Khaelen, but she sensed Dharean in her head every time she mentioned the vampire, he was a staring hole in her back.

“It’s why I made the deal. If I can bring two Purebloods back, the government will change for all the people who live there. We have a chance to thrive in a healthy environment; your people will no longer be hunted.” The assembly began to talk at the same time; none ever knew the true reason for the execution only educated guesses. There was outrage that they had been wiped out for power and nothing more. Some loudly proclaimed they would gladly go back with her, others felt she might be lying. Still others wanted to know what did the Civil Lands have to do with them? They were thriving again and saw no reason to jeopardize their survival. Eventually Dharean stood and commanded silence with this action alone.

“Allantra will answer any question that is recognized by Za’rae and myself. Chaos is not an option. Anyone who causes a disturbance will immediately be emitted from the premises. Remember, this is the Place of Honor and despite the volatile subject at hand I expect everyone to remain in control of their faculties. Is that understood?” All assembled nodded their heads in agreement.

Allantra turned to Dharean. “Please, may I have some water?” Za’rae waved her hand and a jug of water appeared at Allantra’s feet. After she drank her fill, one by one Za’rae and Dharean let the people question Allantra.

He had to admit she kept her composure during the whole meeting; truly admirable. It had to be hard facing hostile people in a place where no one wanted or trusted you, but she held her ground. Projecting complete confidence and honesty when he knew she was trembling inside. However, when she spoke of the vampyre Dharean felt her affection and knew she had a deep connection. That knowledge burned in his gut. He even caught a few of the unbidden images of the two of them fucking from Allantra’s mind. As much as he tried to block it out, the image was burned in his mind. He was determined to replace it with images of him. Za’rae pointed to a villager who began to question her more about her home and her life, seeming to try and trip her up. But Allantra was being completely honest and so she always presented a unified story. Dharean pointed to a woman who was patient as she was continuously chosen over another.

“What guarantee do you have the vampyres aren’t setting another trap? Couldn’t

they very well be using you to flush us out to finish us off once and for all?"

"I have the word of their leader, and I know no one here trusts the word of a vampire but he is tired of the state he is in as the others are. The Executioner himself feels he was telling the truth."

"But the Executioner is just another vampyre is he not?"

For the first time he saw Allontra flinch. Yes, this was a hard issue to skirt but she held her head up and answered the woman.

"Yes, but he is the one who fought by my side. He is the one who fought fairly for the low-enders, it is the only reason their numbers were given a chance to climb in the first place."

"That does not change the fact that he is vampyre. It could all be an elaborate set up. Not to mention there was one who was totally against this. What has been done about that vampyre? Is the vampyre allowed to roam free and possibly wage war against us once we arrive?"

"A very good question. I do not know what they have done to her honestly. Khaelen stayed behind to keep anarchy from taking place and keep the peace. I have to trust he is doing his job as he is trusting me to do mine here."

"How will it be decided who goes?" the woman asked, Dharean bade her to sit down after her last question he rose to answer it instead of Allontra.

"I will go, as well as Masque." The crowd buzzed and the same villager who had called Allontra a whore begged to be called upon, Za'rae humored him. "If things are as she says, then I will call for one more volunteer." He cast her a sly look ready for her to protest, but she merely nodded her head in agreement, a small smile played at her lips.

"You two are our strongest, who will protect Za'rae and the rest of us while you are gone? What if it is the plan to separate us to conquer us?" The man named Dysil yelled out.

"I have not been teaching you all these years for nothing, Dysil. You and the rest of the people must learn to help defend yourselves. As for Za'rae," Dharean chuckled, as he looked at the wrinkled old woman, "Za'rae will leave us when it is her desire no one else's." Dysil sat down somewhat satisfied. "Allontra is tired so this meeting will cease. I want it known that she is no longer to be treated as a prisoner but as a guest. I will personally see to the death of any one who causes her harm." The people silently began to file out, she turned to see Za'rae was all ready gone, she wondered if her body was actually ever here or did she project her image. Dharean approached her, "We will eat, then we have business to attend." He informed her.

"I thought I was no longer a prisoner?" she scratched at the dress.

"You are not but I think it best you remain with me, Dysil at best is untrustworthy and sneaky."

"No harm can befall me when I am in Za'rae's hut."

"But you must venture outside of the hut from time to time, besides," he began as he strode toward the carved doorway "You will no longer be residing with Za'rae. Your new quarters are with me."

Chapter Four

She didn't know if it was a blessing or a curse, she had not felt her arms and legs for a long time. Occasionally, she would shift her body weight as best she could to keep some kind of circulation going, but not anymore. She was too tired, and too weak. She had not heard anything from her mate in days now. He hung lifeless against the wall. In the beginning she knew him to be unconscious but now, she felt no life force, no energy at all. She knew her mate had finally succumbed to all the beatings and sparse feedings for at least a century. And like him, she too was dying. It was the only reason she could see her long lost daughter in her dreams.

Taraema was dying, that scab of a vampyre had beaten and starved her to the breaking point. There were times when she didn't even know if she was actually asleep or awake her mind was so fragile. But this she knew she had seen her daughter in the dream plane. Perhaps she had been drawn to see her daughter because that had been her driving force for survival ever since she was captured. She had seen her and knew because she looked just like Taraema. Allantra was alive. Just saying the words to herself gave her hope, joy. Taraema's unsteady footing in the world of the living caused her to waver in the spectral plane, the dream plane. Did her daughter know she was still alive? Did she even recognize her? It had been so long, and Allantra being so young, Taraema doubted her daughter even remembered what she looked like.

Why she was even still alive was beyond her. All these years she and Pase had survived simply because of the other. Now he was gone and... Taraema's heart lurched with pain. A prince of people should not die like this. He was a good man and would have made an excellent king. But now the people would never know. Were there more of them out there? Surely there had to be, the deranged bloodsucker seemed pretty intent on finding her people to break the curse, a double-edged sword. On the one hand Taraema prayed fervently that her people survived. However, their survival meant Dominica had a chance to kill them and once again become corporeal. She was already powerful in this state. Taraema shivered at what she would be able to achieve when she became flesh and blood again. Taraema also knew from her many demented rantings that Dominica had found the necessary reversal spell. She knew the vampyre practiced the dark arts. That alone would make it almost impossible to stop her. There were truly talented wizards in her clan but Taraema wasn't sure if they could stand up against Dominica.

Then a small memory began to glimmer, something she had been taught as a child. Something they all had been taught as the child. The Prophecy. Of course it was sheer ignorance to not realize their coming to the Civil Lands to seek equal representation in government would trigger the Prophecy. They had been rash and thoughtless. But what's fated is fated. Could it be possible that there were more shifters and that perhaps there was a wizard strong enough to face the Council and Dominica? Taraema's heart beat in an unsteady rhythm, it was a portent of her dying body, she willed it to beat steady and strong, eventually it beat a normal but slowed pattern. If the end of the vampyre reign was in sight could she hold on long enough to see it? To see the destruction of the one who killed her husband infused energy in her that she had not experienced since being captured. Not to mention the possibility of seeing her little girl, now a woman, after so

long. Holding on to her sanity would be precarious at best, holding on to her faltering life force would prove something of a challenge, but it was a challenge she was willing to die for to undertake.

Taraema could not actually hear the psychotic vampyre approach, she always felt her. It was like a cold wind preceded her entrance. She knew the vampyre went to her husband first and could feel the disgust and disappointment in his death; a death that she herself had caused. Then she felt Dominica's presence in front of her. Taraema's long hair pooled around her body and fell in dirty rivulets across her legs. The small goose bumps on her thighs where no hair lay supported the knowledge that the vampyre stood before her angry as hell.

* * * *

Her human servants still had not carried out her wishes. Dominica glided into the prison she kept secluded. The existence of the prison was not known to the other council members. Panic enveloped her as she realized the male was not breathing. Perhaps she had gone overboard that night in her anger at the servant for letting the she-bitch Allandra escape. As she hovered above him she entered his mind and found nothing but darkness. Not even the barest flicker of life. He had been dead many hours. Dominica cursed and now found herself in a rather sticky situation. She now had to find three more true bloods instead of two. With that thought she turned to the other shifter who hung almost as lifeless as the dead one. No, this one was still alive. Carefully she entered the mind of the woman and found she was clinging to—hope? Was this one serious? What hope did this pathetic creature have? Did she not know the fate that awaited her?

It was not as if she were going to perform a nice clean cut and only take enough blood to change her form. No she was going to slice her throat, a complete bloodletting. There was no way she was going to leave this one alive for the other council members to use and return to their former state. She intended to be the only one. And from her studies in the dark arts, she knew dead blood wouldn't work. No this time Dominica would be much more careful with her pet. She telepathically ordered the guard to bring the woman food and water. But not too much, just enough to sustain her for Dominica's purposes. There was no telling when those fools would bring her what she needed. Her life force was flickering and she couldn't afford another death, not yet anyway.

* * * *

The Quarter Guard, having filled his belly with wild roasted rabbit, sat back on his haunches and watched as the small fire began to spittle and die. He knew the location of the shapeshifters now and mindlessly waited for an opportunity to capture—his small thought process was abruptly cut short when a wave of nausea hit him. It was his Mistress, and he could tell, as always she was not in a good mood.

Plans have changed.

What is it that you wish?

It is not what I wish, rattlebrain, it is what I want. Understand that. It will always be what I want. I always get what I want.

Having been thoroughly reamed the Quarter Guard tried again to appease the nasty one. *What is it that you want, Mistress?* Dominica paused in pleasure before she

continued.

I will need three more truebloods instead of two. Your support guard should catch up to you very soon. Stay where you are I will direct them to your location.

And just like that she withdrew from his mind. Causing a violent wave of nausea that immediately spilled over and caused the mindless guard to retch almost uncontrollably. So much for the full stomach. The guard breathed deeply until everything that wasn't evicted settled, then he reached into his boot and pulled his knife, perhaps he had time for a quick hunt and meal before the support guards arrived.

* * * *

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Allantra demanded when she caught up with the long strided wizard. He stopped abruptly and faced her, his beautiful eyes making her forget for just a second that he was the enemy.

"You're awfully rude for a houseguest," he quipped, the corners of his mouth just barely turned up in a sarcastic smile.

"Fine, then leave me where I am."

"Are you telling me you'd rather stay with Za'rae?" One eyebrow jerked up with the query. "I've seen you look at her, little one. She scares you. I'd be willing to bet that she scared the hell out of you when she projected, didn't she?"

Okay so Allantra didn't know if she was more unsettled by the fact that he had noticed her slightly terrified reaction to the old lady or he had pegged her good. In her own defense Allantra had never seen anyone so—old. Not to mention she was damn powerful. Allantra wasn't easily intimidated but that old lady gave her the creeps. "For your information she doesn't bother me in the least." Allantra lied easily. "Besides, if you mean to take advantage of me, forget it. I'm involved with someone. And just how long do you think I'm staying here anyway? Hello, did you forget I said I was on a quest not a vacation? It's my understanding that a on a quest one is always on some sort of time crunch." She placed her hands on her hips to keep from wringing them in front of her. This man bothered the hell out of her. He narrowed his eyes, crossed his arms in front of his very muscular chest, and stared at her for what seemed forever before he spoke.

"Are you referring to the vampyre?" he spoke the words low, almost in menace. It took a second for Allantra to understand the vein of conversation he chose to pursue.

"Yes, I am," she said defiant to the end.

"Are you in love with him?" He stared intently at her now. Allantra squirmed, while she should have been shouting it from the rooftops she now seemed uncertain about passing this bit of information on.

"That's personal. You don't see me asking you about your personal life." She threw back at him, thankful for her clever brain; clever because it actually started working again under extreme stress.

"You want to know about my personal life, acolyte? You want to know about all the beauties that seek my touch when the moon is high? You want to know how I make them scream my name, repeatedly make their bodies burn for my touch and my touch alone?"

Even as he was doing it he didn't know why. She got to him. She had a talent for getting right on his nerves and at the same time made him want to throw her down and plow into her. He didn't know why, but he purposefully mesmerized her with his words, chanting in his mind the slightest compulsion for her to feel everything he said to her. He

wanted her to burn for *him*. Not the vampyre. He wanted to make slick that spot between her legs where he knew he would find ultimate satisfaction. He wanted to torture her as she tortured him.

“How would I find you wanting me, Allantra? Would you like me to undress you, licking you as I bared your skin? I know you like to be bitten, sweet one, on your neck, shoulder, that fleshy part of your breast near your nipple. You’d like me to go lower wouldn’t you? My tongue is just firm and textured enough that I cause the friction that takes you higher in arousal.”

He could see her panting lightly now as his words worked their way through her mind and right to her sensual body. Her hands balled and flexed now at her sides as she fought for control ... he would have none of that, he stepped closer to her, so she could feel the heat of his body. He lightly ran his fingertips up and down her arm, barely touching, but he reacted to the touch as well, her skin was as hot as his own.

“I’m sure I would love the way you taste, precious one. Wild and sweet. I believe you would love my tongue circling your navel before it dipped lightly. I would bite you just under it.” Dharean watched as a shiver went through Allantra, his own cock was steel hard and he knew he should stop, this wasn’t just affecting her. It was making him lose control as well. But still he embedded the compulsion even deeper...

“You would let me taste you wouldn’t you? Let me spread you? Part those beautiful long brown legs for my viewing pleasure? Your thighs will beckon to me, Allantra, I know they will, and I will kiss the inside of them, leave love bites. I can smell your arousal for me. You want me and only me. You will squirm for me, yearn for me. You will offer yourself to me impatiently. For right now you want nothing more than to feel my tongue slide in your honey coated slits, very slowly. You know what, Allantra? I want it too. And so I do it, you taste wonderful, addicting me in the very first taste.”

They stood in the clearing outside of the Place of Honor. Not touching but both panting like they’d just gone out on a run. Occasionally, a passerby looked but no one dared interfere, it was the *Noir Brujo* and the *Scion*. No one but Za’rae would intervene, so curious eyes remained curious as they shuffled past, pretending not to notice.

“You are a wanton one aren’t you? Pulling my head closer, my tongue deeper, you grind your sweet chasm against my mouth seeking the satisfaction only I can give you, not once, but more times than you can probably handle. I like it, Allantra. I like your fingers in my hair pulling me closer and never getting close enough. But I won’t give you satisfaction this way. I pull my tongue out of you, satisfied that you are wet enough to hold me—all of me.”

At this point, Allantra, against her will and at the same time because she impulsively wanted to, looked down at his straining cock. The bulge underneath the small cloth covering him didn’t have a chance in hell of hiding that huge chunk of cock. She felt it against her pelvis up to her navel, they stood so near. He was huge, her mouth watered at the thought of it going inside of her.

“Slow at first, I would never hurt you. But by the gods you are so wet, so slick, so tight...” Dharean closed his eyes as his own words caused him to harden even more. “Just the tip at first, sweet one. You gasp because you love how I feel.” Out loud, Allantra softly moaned, it was as if it were really happening. Her moan caused the tip of his cock to leak a small amount of fluid. Allantra could see the dark cloth dampen slightly from the moisture. “I have the tip inside you and now you’re pushing against me,

I'm trying to hold back, keep control, but dammit you swallow me tightly and it's so hot and wet. You are a siren, little one, and I can't hold back, so plunge I inside of you." Dharean's voice was raspier now, his breathing quickened. Allantra grabbed each muscular arm tightly for balance and laid her head against his chest a small cry elicited from her throat.

"I can't help but pound into your sweetness." Sweat began to roll down his back, her touch, her skin next to him made his now very sensitive skin react wildly. He found himself grinding his cock against her; she rubbed herself against him in abandonment of all common sense and decency, right there in the clearing in view of anyone and everyone who cast an eye their way. "So hot, so tight..." he moaned into her hair as he held her against him tightly. "Come for me, Allantra, let me feel your come against my cock." This time he had not the foresight nor the control to embed his words, but it didn't matter, because seconds later he felt Allantra shudder against him, her legs began to buckle, and gods he wanted to help her stand but his knees gave out as his cock spurted forth a massive amount of hot semen in the name of Allantra. She-devil. They both went to the ground on their knees in unison still holding one another. Their breathing heavy, their worlds spinning.

It took minutes for them to gain equilibrium back. It took seconds for Allantra to realize exactly what she had just done: come for a man she barely knew, and couldn't stand, in the middle of a fucking clearing. She could feel the wetness between her legs, and keeping her eyes downcast, could see his semen on his cloth and on her as well, already cooling in the open air. What the fuck was wrong with her?

"What did you do to me?" she said gravely, dropping her arms and pulling her body away so that she sat away from him still on her knees.

How did he answer that? He knew compulsions could be powerful things, but the one he used was weak, very weak. The compulsion he used could barely get a child to obey and yet she had responded strongly. But that didn't make sense, because the compulsion wasn't suppose to work on him. It didn't work on him. The tattoos on his arm were wards against magic, compulsion was one of them. It didn't bear thinking about. Perhaps, he admitted to himself neither of them were under compulsion.

"Nothing" he responded getting up and reaching out a hand to help her up.

"I don't usually orgasm in public with a near stranger." She bit out, her voice rough because of her embarrassment. She accepted the hand but stepped away quickly.

"And you believe this is a hobby of mine?" He began to walk away. He needed air, and he couldn't get a decent lung full with her around.

"This all started with you telling me what a wonderful lover you are," she quipped as she followed him, keeping up this time only because he slowed to match his pace to hers.

"Well I didn't see you complaining a moment ago." He threw back at her, smiling as he realized this bit of realization. Allantra kept silent, she really didn't need to have this conversation. They walked in silence until they came upon a rather sturdy well-kept hut. It was then that Allantra realized how the argument began in the first place.

"Well would you look at that, home sweet home," Allantra murmured to herself.

Suddenly, Masque was with them expressionless as always. "You need to come with me, *Brujo*." He stated simply. "There are humans in the forest and they smell of black magic." Within seconds the two men were off running. Allantra turned to the door of the hut. "Guess I don't get carried over the threshold." She said to herself, she took a deep

breath then went inside.

* * * *

“How many are there?” Dharean asked as he crouched low to the ground, sheltered by the vegetation.

“First, I only saw one, then a few hours later at least ten more,” Masque replied matter of factly. “I smelled the scent of the first one around the village and traced it back to this place. He’s been here almost as long as the girl. He is the one that tried to capture her.”

Dharean didn’t need to know who ‘the girl’ was. She was still very fresh in his mind. He was grateful for the fast pace, it dried his clothing quickly. A flash of desire went through him as he thought about the effect Allantra had on him. “We’ll keep low for now.” Dharean closed his eyes and concentrated lightly on touching the mind of each tainted human. He grimaced. Indeed Allantra was a harbinger.

“Black arts—the vampyres sent them. Their minds are quite cleverly concealing their plan though it shouldn’t be hard to guess; they’re here to break out numbers. With time, yes, I am sure I could break the mind locks but it might alert the vampyre controlling them. We need to handle this carefully.”

“Why not just kill them and get it over with.” Ever the efficient killer, Masque wanted done with the whole business.

“Because we might be walking into an ambush; never underestimate the intentions of the vampyres. Their presence here could be bait to flush us out. Killing these humans could also make the vampyres attack with full force, we aren’t prepared.”

Masque thought of this for a moment then grunted in agreement. “Then we wait.”

* * * *

The small hut was lit comfortably, giving one a sense of peace, if it wasn’t for the jars of rather disgusting looking preservatives. Okay, so maybe body parts of various animals and weird looking plants would be a better description. She knew Dharean practiced the dark arts but up until now never gave it much thought. Tomes of books lined the walls, and surprisingly none were dusty as she thought they would be. He either took great care with his books or he used them that much. A very lush bed was pushed against the furthest wall. The sheets were tossed aside carelessly, the covers on the floor. *You want to know about all the beauties that seek my touch when the moon is high? You want to know how I make them scream my name repeatedly make their bodies burn for my touch and my touch alone?* His words echoed in her mind as she looked at the unkempt bed. Were the sheets tossed about in passion? Did he have a lover with him last night?

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. It wasn’t her business. So why did it bother her so much? Brusquely, she picked the covers off the floor and made the bed slowly and meticulously, dreading her stay here with Dharean. How long did he expect her to stay here? Was Khaelen still thinking of her? Her heart skipped a beat when she thought of Khaelen. She felt as if she betrayed him somehow and yet at the same time, the physical attraction she felt for Dharean felt right. Was she a slut? No, she couldn’t possibly feel anything for the Black Wizard.

Yes, she was drawn to him, and at the same time he irked her. She smoothed the sheets and sat down as she thought about him for a second. *You are a wanton one aren't you?* His question echoed in her mind. She'd never been wanton, never really lusted after a man. Yes, she had a lover or two but it was just to fill a need. It was nothing like what she felt for Khaelen, for Dharean. What was it about these two men? Would she have to choose? Common sense said no. When all this was over she would leave Dharean behind, they would go their separate ways and then there would just be her and the vampire. Of course all she had to do was stay out of Dharean's bed.

With that thought she jumped from the bed as if a fire had been lit under her. *Great start, Allantra!* she chided herself. Her eyes fell on the cluttered desk, sprinkled with parchment, feathered pens and ink. Very Old World she thought wryly, almost smiling thinking of how Dharean must look dipping the feather and writing some horrible spell. A large book was opened and beckoned her to it. Something told her if she went to that book, her world would change. Her heart pounded erratically as she got nearer. She stood looking at the book before she would allow herself to even read from the pages. But her eyes were betrayers and they riveted on the right page of the book, drinking in the text:

*Touched by evil that flows and ebbs
The Ancients cower from its web
The Scion comes from enemy land
A harbinger for change at hand
Mated first to an enemy that's not
Mated second to a wizards' lot
The three shall form the weapon to be
The catalyst of death to the enemy
If one should falter from the path
T'would bring down destiny's final wrath
The enemies' stronghold shall re-enforce
Survival of the Ancients, shall end its course*

Her mind refused to accept the words she was reading. Was this referring to her? Was that too arrogant? She reread the words and shock settled in. "No, it can't be." She said aloud to herself.

"Well, I see you made yourself at home..." Dharean's voice rang loudly in the small hut; it seemed to echo as he paused then added, "Scion."

Chapter Five

Allantra's voice caught in her throat, frantically her eyes darted from Dharean to the old tome in utter disbelief; disbelief that of course in no time turned into utter outrage.

"You knew this, and didn't tell me!" she screeched balling her fists in frustration.

Dharean looked at her as if they were having a perfectly normal conversation. Turning his back on her, he began idly grabbing ingredients off the shelves. "You were ... ah ... *are* on a need-to-know basis." He grabbed a small jar of whatever the hell it was and casually put it into a small leather satchel. "You forget, little one, you are a Civil Lander. Our trust is not given to those of your ilk so easily."

"My ilk?" Allantra's voice dropped to an almost deadly whisper. "You want to clarify that for me, asshole?" At that statement Dharean looked over his shoulder, his gray eyes turning a shade darker at her endearment. He paused in what he was doing and turned around to face her, now giving the irate Allantra his full attention.

"I will ignore you said that and not take it out on your hide."

"You have the nerve to be offended after you just virtually called me worthless and untrustworthy."

"You got two words out of the one?" he crossed his arms in front of his chest, appearing unaffected by her mood.

"It was not my choice to have my parents murdered and to be raised in a place where I was considered less than dirt just because of what I am. What you are. I fought tooth and nail for everything that I got. And no, no one asked me to come on this mission but I volunteered because I was tired of seeing my people, whether they are half-breeds or not, suffer. I don't need to take this shit from you. You don't know how many times I was almost killed trying to find your people. I left behind someone I lo..." she stopped when she realized just what it was she was about to say. Dharean, however, was no fool.

"Say it, go on, tell me about your vampyre lover." He challenged her and when he got no response but her silent anger, he let loose with his barbs. "I smelled him on you the moment I spotted you and yet you won't talk about him. Is he not good enough for you, either?" Dharean watched her closely. His anger began to fill the small room.

"Don't you dare speak to me about sacrifice. I have sacrificed much for my people and in return I get their fear. Some even their scorn as they stand behind me for my protection. No one asked me either to do the things I have done for my people, but they needed to be done. It was my father, the Shaman, who was killed by those blood drinkers. Do you think you are the only one who has suffered, princess? My trust does not come easily, as I suspect neither does yours."

The air reeked of tension as a loud silence rang between them. Allantra tried to breathe easily as she got a grip on her anger, and let it slide from her body. Dharean began to throw a few more bottles into the satchel. "I didn't know the Shaman was your father." She said quietly. Dharean stopped and looked at her. She averted her eyes choosing to look instead at the books that she never actually saw. His shoulders sagged as he gave up his anger quickly.

"Most don't know, my father never married, he had many ... lovers to put it mildly. I was one of many. I am, however, the only one who inherited his gift for the magical arts.

Ergo, the people by default are my responsibility.”

“But they don’t know your heritage. Perhaps if you told them...”

“I will not barter for respect. They either accept me for who I am as I stand alone or not at all.” Dharean slung the satchel across his shoulder.

“Where are you going? Am I to stay here alone, with all these creepy things?”

Allantra crossed her arms and rubbed them.

“I am going to put a protection barrier around the village. There are vampyre servants about. I needed a few things. I left Masque to keep an eye on things until I am finished. And, no, I fully intend to share these quarters with you, Scion.” Allantra breathed a sigh of relief. He came to her, lifted her chin and placed the smallest of kisses on her lips. “I am sorry for the loss of your parents.” Then he left, leaving Allantra wanting a much deeper kiss.

* * * *

“Did he say how close to the village they were?” Minn asked as she threw more vegetables into the pot. It had been hours since Dharean left and Allantra had no choice but to seek out company. No one actually talked to her. She asked where Minn’s hut was and they just pointed vaguely and kept going. She knew she instilled mistrust and fear. After all she was the *‘Harbinger of change’* and it wasn’t exactly for the better, at least not immediately. Minn had welcomed her in as she set about making dinner for her twin boys.

“No, just said he was putting a protection barrier around the village.” Allantra murmured as she looked around the hut. A very cluttered hut. Minn seemed not to notice the chaos in her own home, yet she kept Za’rae’s immaculate.

“He works so very hard. It’s a shame the people don’t treat him better. But I guess the women who slip into his bed at night make it all worth while. Well at least some of it.” Minn laughed to herself as she checked the small fire pit she was cooking over. “But since you’re there I suppose that business is going to have to stop.”

Allantra could feel her cheeks blush as she ignored the jealous feelings that rose up when she pictured all the women that surely must come to him at night. Did he not mention that himself? Who could blame them? He was gorgeous and dangerous as hell. Was there a better combination of man? “There is nothing going on between Dharean and me.” Allantra shifted her position on the floor mat trying to get the small scrap of material she wore to fully cover her bottom, or at least to cover some of it. Minn had given her the two-piece short sarong-like skirt and bikini-like top to wear instead of the scratchy sack. She didn’t know which one was the lesser of two evils.

“I know. And no one saw what happened between the two of you in the clearing.” Minn came back full force smiling and laughing at her at the same time.

“He put me under some kind of spell, I know he did. I don’t do things like that.”

“Highly possible, but not likely because that wouldn’t explain why he was just as affected by you. Magic does can’t fall under their own spells.”

For this Allantra had no answer so she chose to change the conversation, put Minn under the microscope a little. “If you don’t mind me asking, where is the boys’ father?” The smile dropped just a little from Minn as she answered, Allantra felt like a heel for asking.

“He died two years back. Some humans were out here hunting trying to prove their

worth to one another. They shot him with a poisoned bullet while he was in hawk form. It was his totem animal. Dharean did everything he could to save him, but the poison worked fast. Masque, of course hunted them down and killed them before they made it out of the Savage Outlands. It didn't bring him back, but I rest easier knowing his murderers are just as dead."

"I'm so sorry, Minn."

"Wasn't your fault. Anyway Masque feels responsible for us now. I have urged him to seek his own happiness and find a mate, but he won't. Before the Mass Execution I knew he was in love with someone. He wouldn't tell me who, only would say he was sure she was his destined mate. Our mother and father demanded to meet her. I don't know what happened after that, only that he lost all ability to enjoy life, and he refused to do any magic."

"Refused to do magic?"

"Yes, he was well on his way to being quite a sorcerer, probably could have even rivaled Dharean. He never told anyone why, not even Dharean."

"How very strange, and he never talks about it?"

"At least not to me. Sometime after that my parents died in the Mass Execution. They weren't with the representatives of our people that day. They came a day later, not knowing what had happened. They just wanted to spend a day in town. Mother wanted some exotic spices that she insisted could only be found in the Civil Lands. The vampires slaughtered every shifter they saw. We lost a lot of our royal line from different clans. What's left of all the clans are here in this village."

"I don't remember it exactly. Just being alone and crying. I remember a nice lady taking my hand and telling me to shush. After that she was all I ever remember. She loved me."

"You were lucky that night." Minn said solemnly.

"I was lucky that night." Allantra repeated as she thought about the prophecy. Was she lucky that night? Or was it all destined to happen?

* * * *

Sometime between late night and early morning Dharean finally found his way into his hut. Despite his fatigue he couldn't help the way his heart quickened at the thought that Allantra was there, inside. Not necessarily waiting for him, but there nonetheless. He closed the door quietly, careful not to wake her. He treaded lightly to the big bed, his eyes feasting on the sleeping woman as he came closer. The cloth she wore about her hips rose high, revealing creamy brown thighs. Her small waist showed a marked dip as his eyes rose higher until they rested on her chest. An equally small scrap of material pushed them together showing her small but shapely breasts. He watched fascinated as she breathed the pattern of the deeply resting.

What was it about her that captured his attention so? She had a smart mouth, and no respect for his authority. She was strong willed and independent and most of all she wasn't afraid of him. Not like the others were. Her fear of him was simply because she couldn't control him, and he suspected that he caused her just as much angst as she caused him. No she wasn't afraid of his power or his dark side, she was afraid of the affect he had on her. His sharp ears picked up the familiar sound of his door being quietly opened. He had neglected to lock it. He had never locked his door. Tonight for the first

time he would regret this arrogant act.

A slim hand rounded the door and caught the knob on the other side, soon followed the lush body of one of the female villagers. Nani, recently mated for prestige, not love. It was the reason she was in his bed several nights a week. At first these antics did not bother him, but now... Shifters are supposed to mate for life, they are supposed to wait for the other that completes them. Over the years (his father a prime example) they had taken on human habits of marrying for other than companionship and love. He suspected that was also the reason for the low breeding, making it difficult to propagate their numbers. Was Allantra the same? Was her vampyre lover merely for convenience or did she really feel for him as she almost proclaimed?

"Dharean?" came Nani's whispered query as she saw him standing beside the bed, still oblivious to Allantra's sleeping form. Using wizard speed Dharean was beside Nani in a mere blink of an eye, wanting to quiet her before she awoke Allantra.

You must leave Nani. He said into her mind.

"Have you replaced me already?" she cooed softly wrapping her arms around his neck. Dharean swiftly removed them. *Go home to your husband.*

"He doesn't satisfy me. What is this? You are refusing me?" she practically snarled the soft seductive voice all but a memory.

Do not test me woman. Know your place. I am in no mood for you. Dharean looked behind him, afraid her rising voice would wake the woman, but that proved to be another careless error on his part. For Nani followed his line of vision.

"You take that Civil Lander to your bed in my stead? You know what is said about her. They whisper she is the Harbinger of Change. She will bring nothing but strife to our people and you choose to bed her?" Nani's voice began to rise as her outrage grew. Dharean had sworn to himself to never use magic on his own people unless it was absolutely necessary, he was torn between what was necessary for him and what was necessary for the situation.

You forget you are mated to a prominent trader who has given you much, Nani. Should you make a scene here in my hut he will know your whereabouts, and the deeds you no doubt have been up to!

Dharean could see the fight die in her but the maliciousness stayed. "You two deserve each other, foul creatures such as yourselves should not taint the beds of decent folk." With that the bold adulteress left the hut in a hurry. Despite her scathing words, she appeared to be afraid she might have pushed him to his limit of control. With a thought, Dharean locked the door behind her, taking the lesson to heart.

"Perhaps my being here is not such a good idea." Allantra's sleepy voice reached his ears. Dharean turned to see Allantra sitting half way up and staring at him with her lovely feline shaped eyes.

"It was not a good idea for Nani to be here." Dharean corrected approaching the bed.

"But you have slept with her before." Allantra stated, with just a trace of hardness to her voice. If Dharean didn't know any better he would say that she was jealous.

"I have done many things before that I choose not to do again, when I give myself wise counsel," he countered sitting on the bed and laying a large warm hand on her exposed thigh. He waited for protest but got none, so he sat contented for the moment being able to just touch her.

"It's late. You are tired. We can share the bed so long as you keep your hands to

yourself.” Allantra smiled as soon as she said the words. She looked down at his hand but said nothing.

“As tempting as you are, young one, I have not the strength to devour you. It has been a very long day.”

“What happened today?”

Dharean was a little startled at the question. No one had ever asked him about his day. No one had ever cared to hear the things he’d done. They only wanted to know if they were safe, and then they would continue to give him a wide berth.

“Many vampyre servants are about, including the one who tried to capture you. I am afraid my people can no longer reside here. I must move them. I put a protection barrier around the encampment, so they cannot get in should they get a mind to before we can evacuate. We have a few days, and a hidden access to the river. Tomorrow I shall make the announcement and give them time to take only what is needed.”

“What about me? I did not come here to stay, Dharean, I must get back and soon.”

“I have thought of that as well. When my people are safely relocated Masque and I will return with you to handle this delicate negotiation. After all, the outcome of this will affect my people as well. It could quite possibly give them the freedom to live their lives without fear.”

“Thank you,” she said softly, reaching out to him with her small hand and brushing a stray strand of his hair away from his face.

“You are most welcome, little brave one. But I feel you will not feel so kindly towards me on the morrow”

“Why is that?” she wrinkled that space between her brows in confusion. Dharean was fascinated by every facial expression of hers, even the angry ones.

“I have asked Za’rae to examine you, find the reason why you are the crucial point to the triad.”

“I don’t think I follow you.”

“Vampyres are powerful creatures, from what you have told us, the one you are—attached to is powerful. I am powerful within my own right as well. You play a crucial role, but you have no magic. There is something about you that we are missing.”

“You’re saying I am a weak link?” a wry smile crossed Allantra’s face. “I am not offended. I have wondered this myself. I have wondered ‘why me?’ ever since my arrest began in the Civil Lands.” She paused as she considered her next statement. “Will it hurt, the examination?”

“No, it is more a ceremony of sorts, but my part comes in when I must test you, find out what it is you can and cannot do. I cannot go into battle without knowing what my soldiers are capable of. We need a strategy if things don’t go as planned. If I know vampyres, they can’t be trusted.”

“Not all vampires are the same.” Allantra said defensively.

“I will reserve my opinion of your lover until it is proven to me. Meanwhile get some sleep, the next few days will prove to be quite taxing for the both of us.”

For reasons he did not know, and reasons Allantra did not question, he pulled her into his arms. She not only allowed it, she snuggled into him. Her back to his front and he felt just as satisfied as he would have if he’d just made love. Okay, maybe not as satisfied but close enough. He was content with her just being there. With no time to waste, they both fell asleep with a smile on their faces.

Chapter Six

“You must relax; all this nervous energy will interfere.” Za’rae clucked at her in a disapproving tone. Allantra tried to relax, but the hut was too warm because of the fire Za’rae constantly kept going. Not to mention it was just plain unsettling to glance up and see her reflection in the old woman’s coal black eyes, without one eyelash to cover them. How old did one have to get to lose not only all the hair on their head, but lose the eyelashes too? It was like looking at a voodoo doll come to life.

“I am trying to relax.” Allantra whined lightly.

“I don’t want to give you anything to help you relax, it might interfere with the results. You’re going to have to get a hold of your emotions!” Za’rae snapped, while placing the last heated stone in the middle of Allantra’s forehead.

Allantra lay flat on the mat. Different colored stones were placed strategically over various parts of her body. Yellow cool stones were placed in the crevice of each arm above the elbow, green ones at room temperature on each thigh, a slightly larger heated blood red one on her stomach, and the final blue heated one on her forehead. Za’rae was warning her not to move, and Allantra heeded the advice because she just wanted this over with.

Za’rae began to mumble softly to herself and thankfully closed those creepy eyes of hers. Allantra closed her own and felt herself get markedly drowsy, fighting to retain consciousness. “Must you fight everything?” came Za’rae’s soft reprimand and smoothly she continued her chants. Allantra took a deep breath and gave herself up to the ceremony.

She felt as if she were floating on a warm thermal cloud. The cool stones began to warm gradually and Allantra felt all the stones heating up. Panic began to set in as she quickly envisioned herself being burned. Za’rae immediately cooled her by placing more stones on her body and the tempo of her chants seemed to change, to get oddly excited. Allantra hoped she wasn’t about to be sacrificed. Allantra felt the stones begin to heat up again. She felt the weight of the stones as Za’rae added more, the chants sounding more questioning in nature.

Allantra opened her eyes and full-fledged panic set in; she could only see blinding light so intense. “Shut your eyes you little fool!” Za’rae hissed at her. Allantra shut her eyes immediately to close out the piercing light. In a much nicer tone Za’rae urged her to focus on the rock in the middle of her forehead. “You can use that to see what is going on around you.” Za’rae whispered in a hypnotic voice. Allantra concentrated hard, trying to get her mind off the notion that she was going blind. Fuzzy at first, an image appeared, she concentrated harder and then she saw Za’rae looking down at her with a smile on her face. Well Allantra assumed it was a smile it was so slight. How can she see with her eyes closed, through the stone? It was like having a third eye.

“It is a third eye of sorts,” Za’rae acknowledged, Allantra couldn’t believe she’d forgotten this particular skill of Za’rae’s. “It’s almost over.” She seemed to laugh delightedly to herself.

Allantra could have sworn she heard an audible click in her brain, almost a popping sound. Was she having an aneurysm? Soon the stones cooled and she could feel them

lifting off her body simultaneously. "Open your eyes now, it is all right." Za'rae said. Allantra opened her eyes and saw the stones floating directly above her. Keeping her eyes trained on the stones, Za'rae streamlined them into the basket sitting at her side. Allantra sat up, feeling different somehow but she couldn't put a finger on why.

"How do you feel?" Za'rae asked anxiously watching her closely.

"Strange, but fine."

"Yes, yes." Za'rae said still looking at Allantra like she was some sort of anomaly.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that? What did you find?" Allantra rubbed her forehead and felt like something was missing.

"Oh I didn't live this long giving away secrets, child. You'll find out soon enough. Let an old woman have some fun."

"Is your fun going to cause me pain?" Allantra asked dryly. The woman was too weird for words. Za'rae ignored the comment, obviously too wrapped up in her little secret to pay her too much mind. She beaded a small blue stone onto a black cord with amazing dexterity.

"Go to Dharean now, he should be finished apprising the people of the situation."

"What should I tell him? Since you're keeping whatever you found a secret."

Allantra stood stretching her limbs, oddly instead of feeling tired after laying there so long she felt energized like she could run for miles.

"And you probably could..." Za'rae commented on her thought, while tying the ends of the cord tightly into a knot.

"Don't do that. I don't like my thoughts invaded like that."

"Then block intruders," Za'rae replied eyeing the creation as the stone hung from the cord and swayed slightly.

"I don't know how," Allantra bit back, irritated at the woman yet liking her all the same for her straightforward no nonsense manner. Her mind strayed to how she had blocked Khaelen when he tried to read her thoughts. "What I mean is I'm new at it. I don't know how to keep up blocks continually."

"Then it would seem Dharean has much to teach you today." She held the corded stone out to Allantra. "I strongly suggest you wear this from now on and do not lose it. It is much too important."

Allantra took the gift from the woman's gnarled cool hands. She tried to slip it over her head to sit around her neck. Too small, it stopped, encircling her head with the blue stone resting between her eyebrows. Suddenly things felt right ... balanced. The fit was perfect. "Here." Za'rae suddenly had a rather crude mirror in her hand, sensing that Allantra wanted to see it. Allantra took the mirror and marveled at the stone's beauty against her brown skin. Her normal brown eyes looked lighter; something about her was definitely different. Even her long hair though braided seemed to have an added luster to it.

"What did you do to me?" Allantra asked softly, knowing there were no real physical changes, yet seeing a change all the same.

"You could say I unlocked something." Za'rae almost fell over laughing at her own comment. Allantra set the mirror down and made her way to the door. She tried to thank Za'rae for the gift but didn't think she was heard over the woman's loud cackling.

Allantra made a rather hasty exit. She would ask about the stone another time.

As she made her way to the clearing where Dharean had instructed her to meet him,

her mind was in utter chaos. What did Za'rae find out about her and why was she acting stranger than usual? Allantra looked around to see people eyeing her with open disdain as they passed her. Oh boy, of course Dharean had told them about the human servants in the forest and they no doubt blamed her.

Of course technically she was responsible since they probably would not be about if not for her. But then who's to say they wouldn't have made their way to their encampment eventually anyway? As she came upon the clearing, she saw Dharean pushing a pole into the ground with a wooden target somehow attached at the top.

As she looked around Allantra saw four other poles already in place. Two of them held another sort of target at the top. He turned to her, just as she quietly approached him from behind. It was like trying to sneak up on an agitated rattlesnake.

"Are you ready?" he asked, then frowned when he saw the stone on her forehead. "What is that for?" he demanded casually brushing his hands together as if to shake off loose dirt.

"I don't know. I was too unnerved to ask her at the time. You can ask Za'rae about it later, she gave it to me after the ceremony and won't tell me anything. She just cackled something about secrets and she looked mighty smug, so that can't be good."

"You haven't known Za'rae long, but I would say you definitely know her well enough." He chuckled softly "I'll keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Are you ready?"

"I don't know. What am I doing?" Allantra asked eyeing him suspiciously, then the target poles.

"I thought to start you off with something small, something we teach the children when trying to control and direct their magic." He lightly took Allantra by the elbow and led her away from the targets. When they were at least fifty feet from the target he stopped and turned her around. "One target is made of wood, cloth, and metal. The remaining two targets aren't targets at all, but talismans to keep any stray magic from going outside the training area." Allantra squinted slightly and could just make out the strange symbols that were painted onto the trunk of the poles.

"What am I supposed to do with said targets?" she inquired with some unease. She hadn't done a lick of magic in her life. Hell she doubted she had any magic in her. This was a complete and utter waste of time.

"Focus," Dharean said simply. "Change your attitude; I can sense your negativity. You have to believe in magic in order for it to work."

"Fine, whatever, instruct me."

Dharean grunted to himself then stood behind Allantra. "Something is very different about you. I can't figure it out." The wizard whispered softly in her ear. He leaned into her from behind, careful not to touch and said quietly "Concentrate. Close your eyes and try to move the target from the pole with your mind. Envision it."

Allantra closed her eyes, trying like hell to ignore the heat from his body and the way his whispered words sent goose bumps down her spine. Eventually, she got to the place of concentration ... sort of, but it was a hard won battle. She envisioned the magic in her, tried to will it toward the targets. Nothing.

An hour and a half later, exasperated and tense Dharean called it a day. "I believe we have solved the question of whether you have any magic in you," he quipped rudely, and began to stride towards the targets to remove them. "Of course it would have helped if

you could have concentrated.”

“Excuse me?” A huge dose of Allantra attitude surfaced on a whim.

“I could tell you weren’t concentrating. A child could do this.” He stopped and turned, his gray eyes blazing in challenge. Allantra began to hear a buzzing sound as her anger rose, but she ignored it as she focused her anger at Dharean.

“I was trying. If you weren’t behind me constantly *telling* me to concentrate, it would have been a whole lot easier. When was the last time you concentrated on demand?” The buzzing picked up tempo.

“Every time the situation calls for it!” he snapped finally letting his anger loose.

“Well everyone isn’t you, Mr. Perfect. Screw you, I was trying!”

“Screw me?” he asked incredulously. “I’m not the one who can’t float a feather, let alone help save our people.” He shot back.

“If you are so good at everything you do, then how come you can’t teach lil’ ole me?” Allantra chided him. “Maybe you’re the problem, maybe you couldn’t teach your way out of a paper bag with holes!”

Now Dharean was really pissed. “How dare you? I am the one taking time out of my duties away from my people to help you! More than likely I will be the one taking on the brunt of whatever is coming this way from the vampyres. Because I am the one who sacrificed *my* soul to the dark arts, and you have the nerve to question me?” Allantra could only stare at him. As if she hadn’t sacrificed as well. The buzzing grew louder and Allantra wasn’t prepared for what happened next.

* * * *

Dharean should have controlled his anger. He should have heeded the buzzing feeling in the back of his head, for it often warned him something unusual was about to happen. Most of all, Dharean should have taken control of the situation, but when it came to Allantra control was not an option. It seemed impossible to maintain. Dharean, in his anger, aimed a bolt of fire at the wooden target. He only wanted to frighten her. It was meant to be a small quick fire. He was not prepared for the explosion. Not only did the target explode, but the other two exploded as well. The metal blasted off the top of the pole slamming into the talisman and dripped metal liquid down its side. Allantra cried out. Dharean turned, his heart jumping into his throat to see her, eyes closed, as she fell to the ground on her knees. Her arms, crooked almost in a pleading gesture, held out in front of her. A blinding light radiated from her body and then, just as quickly, it was gone.

Dharean now knew what Za’rae had not told them, knew why she had taken great pleasure in keeping this a secret. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn’t have believed it. He rushed to Allantra, kneeling as he pulled her into his arms, telling her repeatedly that he was sorry. Cursing himself for his foolishness, he looked up to see Za’rae projecting overhead, legs crossed in their usual stance. Her face was slightly amused and concerned at the same time. “Now you know,” she said softly then disappeared. *Yes, now I know*, he said to himself.

He knew why she couldn’t call her own magic. Knew why she was a centerpiece in the prophecy. He now knew why she wore the stone. She was one of the rarest of shape shifters. Allantra was a synergist.

Chapter Seven

By fastest possible means, Dharean took her to his hut; the hut they shared. She clung to him, as if she were a child. She was frightened and, he was quite sure, still feeling the residual tremors of energy that had been brutally snatched from her, by him. He had not hurt her fatally, this he knew, and he did not want to cause her physical pain. He didn't ever want to cause her physical pain. He set her carefully onto the big bed. Still she had not opened her eyes; a worried frown creased his brow.

"She is more in shock than pain." Za'raes voice came to him. He whipped around to find the old woman hovering over his desk. Anger streaked through him, and for the moment he forgot her wisdom, her importance. In his eyes, she had gone too far.

"Why did you keep this from me?" he bit between his teeth as quietly as possible, he didn't want to frighten Allantra any more than she already was.

"Now that you have the information, Black Wizard, what will you do?" she queried easily ignoring his question. "Will you still deny she is your mate?"

"She is mated to a vampyre," he stated needlessly knowing the prophecy by heart, knowing the foolishness of his words.

"You must swallow your pride, for you *will* share her. Take this time now and bond with her. The prophecy is unraveling before us, and we haven't a lot of time to prepare."

"Why did you not tell me? Tell her for that matter?" Dharean persisted again, his hands balling in confusion and anger as he approached the wise one.

"I knew she would not be hurt badly. Like I said, it is the shock of what happened. The energy you pulled from her caused no more pain than a quick swat to the bottom."

"But *why*?" he insisted still not seeing what reason Za'rae could possibly have. He looked back at Allantra who was now stirring restlessly. When he turned again Za'rae was gone without answering his question. No doubt the old woman expected him to come up with the answer on his own. He had no time for such games. But one thing she said was correct, the time draws near and there was much to prepare for. With great trepidation he approached the bed, fearing her fear of him. It was the one thing he cherished about her, her fearlessness. It allowed him to be himself, even if the real him was a bit surly.

She finally opened those gorgeous cat shaped eyes of her and immediately focused them on him. She squinted and then questioned, "What the hell did you do to me?" Dharean didn't know his heart could feel so elated. She still had no fear of him. She was pissed at him; by the Gods that made him happy!

"How are you feeling, little one?" he sat next to her on the bed, picking up the long braid that had fallen across her chest and began to unbraid it.

"A little buzzed for want of a better word." She smiled slowly. "Kind of like I felt after Za'rae performed the ceremony ... different without knowing why."

"Would you like to know why, little one?" he murmured as he watched her glossy brown hair filter between his fingers as he unbraided it. She made no motion to stop him. When she silently nodded her head, he continued. "You are a rare shifter. So rare it was rumored that your type did not even exist. In fact you are highly prized among our people. That is, you will be when they find out."

“What am I?” she said breathlessly feeling like a three-headed monster or that he would tell her she was some sort of demon.

“You are a synergist. You’re a conduit of power. You can channel power through your body and transfer it to whatever or whomever you choose. At least you will be able to do that once you are trained.” Her hair, loose now, was beautiful and he fanned it about her shoulders. She looked like a goddess in his bed.

“But how? I’ve never been able to do anything.”

“I believe it was a way to protect you. You are a child of the prophecy, your power had to be released, by one wise enough and with enough power to do it.”

“Za’rae.”

“Yes, so you see, ultimately you had to come back to us. It was destiny,” a short pause “as we are destined.” He waited for her reaction, which was slow in coming.

“You’re saying according to the prophecy I must bond with you.”

“Yes, to put it simply,” he replied. Two seconds later Allantra jerked up, her eyes flashing in anger.

“Of all the low-down things ... do you take me for a fool? How dare you use the prophecy to get me in your bed?” Dharean was shocked, but then he laughed heartily.

“Believe me little one, this is not my first choice. Do you really think I want to share my destined mated one with another, let alone a vampyre? I understand mates are more trouble than they’re worth. I have seen my share of bonded pairs and do not wish this upon myself.” His words sobered her anger, only to cause another bout.

“Are you saying something is wrong with me? Are you trying to say I’m a pain in the ass?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” he retorted, holding her stare. They stared at one another for what seemed like an entire minute. Their breathing quickened. Neither one would ever be able to recall who moved first, but they found themselves locked in each others arms, kissing passionately.

Dharean explored her mouth thoroughly, making Allantra moan. She clung to him tightly and rather smoothly he pushed her all the way down onto the bed, so that his body now covered hers. Allantra immediately seized the opportunity to explore him, raking her nails lightly from his back, across his chiseled ass and down to his muscular thighs. She tore at the loincloth as it hindered her touch to his hot smooth skin. He broke the kiss long enough to whisper a few words and then the sparse clothing they both had on was gone. “You must teach me that,” she murmured with a smile then immediately took hold of his lips again. Dharean rested his weight on one arm while he finally explored the wonderment of her body. The brown toned soft skin seemed to burn under his touch. He caressed her neck, her shoulders, her long slender arms as he kissed her, then followed his touch with his lips, thinking in awe that she tasted as good as she smelled.

As soon as his tongue curled around her right nipple, Allantra’s back arched and her breath caught in her throat. He took the small berry-like nipple into his mouth, sucking on it and lightly nibbling it. Allantra began to grind her hips into him, her nails dug into his thighs as she pressed herself tighter against him. Loving the way she reacted for him Dharean turned his attention to her other nipple and soon following she arched her back again. This time she cried out “God, that feels good!” Dharean chuckled to himself, he could get used to the way she expressed herself. His hand traveled lower until it reached the junction of her thighs, there he paused. This would be a point of no return. There was

no way he could touch her here and not want his cock to follow soon after.

"Is this what you want, *flammulae*?" he whispered into her ear before he licked it, his hand still hovering over her core.

"Yes!" she replied impatiently.

"Heed this, little one, this is not some coupling to soothe an urge. Between us it is sacred, it is destined. With this act we become two thirds of the triad, for we will be bonded together." It was with these words he felt her still beneath him. Was he foolish to tell her? Should he have just taken her and let whatever happened happen? When she spoke it was small, and breathy.

"I too have read the prophecy, I know that this is bigger than just you and me and Khaelen." She felt a slight flinch at the mention of the vampire but she rushed on. "I accepted this responsibility when I started on this journey. I want you, Dharean, prophecy, destiny or no, I want you." Briefly she wondered why she did not feel guilty at the thought of being with Dharean. It did not mean she loved Khaelen any less. It just meant that this was meant to happen.

Dharean was just as much hers as Khaelen and she knew the time would come when the three of them would have to work something out. The prophecy of course wouldn't be so kind as to tell them how to do it. No they would have to work it out for the sake of all those this upcoming war affected.

Dharean needed no more encouragement. His tongue plunged into her mouth the same time his hand found its way between her thighs. She was wet for him and him alone. One strong finger tenderly explored her folds while he kissed her deeply. She would play with fire, and learn what it is to be loved by a wizard.

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Dharean removed his hand and broke the kiss. He licked his fingers, swearing to himself he had never tasted anything so sweet before. He wanted to drink straight from the fountain. Gliding his large frame down her smaller one, Dharean stopped when he was eye level to her soft junction of folds. Cupping her firm bottom with his big hands, he held her as if he were about to devour a succulent fruit. Without so much as a warning he brought her to his mouth, sinking his tongue inside her and curling it so that he got a rather ample serving of her cream. He licked at her greedily, paying no heed to the way she squirmed in pleasure; her taste was driving him wild.

Dharean knew she was close to orgasm and was trying to fight it. He directed two, phantom tongues at her nipples, mimicking exactly the way his mouth was loving her core. Her back arched immediately. Allantra's hands, now partially formed claws, dug into the bed, ripping the fabric mercilessly. Then he removed his hands from under her bottom and spread her thighs even wider apart, the phantom tongues still wreaking havoc on her nipples. He stared at her, admiring her female beauty. It was then he realized he couldn't possibly wait any longer. She was streaming for him, and he no longer wanted to imagine what it would be like to fuck her, she was right there waiting to be fucked.

He made his way up her body, watching her writhe in pleasurable agony; his thigh parted hers further. The phantom tongues started licking her everywhere. Dharean could feel himself become more engorged as he stared down at her.

He knew he was teasing her with the phantom tongues, driving her to the brink. Her sloe-eyes opened wider as his cock expanded while looking down at her. His eyes hooded

and heavy, watched every stuttered breath she took, reveling at the sight of her nipples, hard as they peaked, responding to his magical ministrations.

“Are you going to stare at me or fuck me?” she asked throatily.

“Both,” he responded. Her eyes followed as he grasped the base of his cock in his hand, and lightly stroked it up and down. “We’re bonding now, little one,” he said, fisting the thick root from base to tip and looking down at her. He knew his cock was impressive, he could feel her desire without entering her mind. No, he wouldn’t go into her mind ... yet. “You must be connected to me in all ways, mind, body and spirit.”

“But how—” she began only to be cut off by his soft shushing.

“Keep eye contact with me, don’t look away, ever,” he whispered just loud enough for her to hear. Never taking her eyes off the drop of fluid tipping his cock, Allantra nodded. He had to have her now.

He held his breath as he positioned his cock at her entrance, looking into her eyes. He winced as the velvet head came in contact with her hot creamy fluid. He bathed the head of his cock in it and groaned from the sheer eroticism of the act. Then he impaled her. No warning, no preamble, he surged into her and practically roared like his totem beast. He was not prepared for her scorching heat, the tight sheath that sucked him in and made him realize this was what he had been missing. This chasm was his, the feeling she gave him was one no other female could possibly hope to achieve. She gasped at the invasion but seemed to purr in her throat with pleasure. The sounds she made alone could make him burst.

Slowly he rocked in and out of her, relishing in the muscles and heat that surrounded his cock. Soon that wasn’t enough and he picked up the tempo, all the while staring deep into her eyes. True to her word she kept eye contact. He entered her mind softly so as not to alert her to his presence, he wanted raw honesty on how she was feeling. She squirmed under his blazing stare but kept her eyes trained on him. She was a little afraid because she wanted him so much. She was thoroughly enjoying herself, and she was afraid she was falling in love with him. He grunted in male satisfaction, not once had she thought of the vampire.

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Allantra could feel her very legs quaking as he pumped into her. Her whole body seemed wired and on fire. She felt a loosening in her mind and realized she was pouring out energy, infusing their bonding with an unnatural amount of it. Dharean’s eyes began to practically glow as he increased his strokes inside her. His right hand bit into her hip as he pulled her, as close as possible. She felt the connection growing as she stared into his gray eyes. They were both sweating as she surged her hips upward for his thrusts. She felt the bedding being ripped and wasn’t sure who was doing it, and most certainly didn’t care. He pressed himself closer against her, his eyes boring into hers and that’s when she saw it. His totem creature seemed to phase in and out softly like a ghost. She stared into his eyes and knew his beast for what it was. A black leopard. Beautiful. Sexy. Deadly. A black leopard for the *Noir Brujo*.

She felt his excitement as she dug her fingers into his left flank. He pumped into her faster and she felt his need to come, for it rivaled her own. His thrusts so strong the bed rocked and moaned under the onslaught. With a snap the connection slid in place as she was catapulted into his mind. There she found uncontrolled lust. Allantra cried out as her

juices began to flow faster, making it easier for him to fuck her. Beads of sweat poured off their bodies, and finally Allontra had to shut her eyes, for she couldn't stand the light of the energy pouring from her. Their bodies were illuminated, and she knew instinctively she couldn't control it, not when she was making love. She didn't have the experience needed.

She read his frantic thoughts; the tsunami of power that she was pouring into him had to stop. It was heady, addictive and could, if left unchecked, cause them to fuck until they died of fatigue.

Look into my eyes, little one, he begged as his cock continuously pummeled her.

It hurts too much, she answered, feeling the fatigue setting in but unable to stop the furious rhythm of their joining.

Please trust me, he coaxed her. It took great effort to stay focused as he fucked her, she felt so very good. But there was no way to stop the bonding without causing damage to one or both of them. Slowly, she opened her eyes, and immediately he caught her gaze with his own, blocking out everything but him.

Focus on how my cock feels inside you, he told her seductively. *I feel myself getting ready to burst inside of you, so much seed for you.* He looked straight into her eyes. *I want you to come on my cock. Let me feel what I do to you. I want to feel you squeeze me dry as I come.* His words sent them both over the edge. Dharean roared loudly, an inhuman roar, but perfectly common for a wild beast. Her walls, slick and hot, held him tighter than a fist. She felt his joy as his seed gushed forward and flowed into her, coating her walls, claiming her. He shuddered against her as the last of his seed erupted, but still he stroked in and out of her. The blinding light dissipated as Allontra got her emotions under control. She too was possessed by aftershocks of her powerful orgasm. They lay there quietly, knowing that what they had done sealed their future together. They were bound, mind, body and spirit.

"So it is done," he said softly, shifting his weight to one side and idly tracing a pattern around her navel.

"So it seems," she answered, accepting the weight of the decision she'd made.

"There is but one more thing to be done, to complete the triad," he said heavily. Now the answer surfaced as to why Za'rae did not tell either one of them of Allontra's gift. The sharing of the knowledge brought them the closeness they needed to take that final step.

"What...?" Before she could finish there was a loud banging on the door.

Dharean cursed loudly and willed a rich brown robe around his body before he went to answer the summons. He swung the door open quickly and stepped forward, clearly irritated at the intrusion. Masque stood there expressionless but with an air of urgency, anger and malicious intent.

"What is it?" Dharean asked immediately contrite. Masque was not one for idle meddling.

Minn and the pups have been taken.

Taken?

She sent out a mental call to me for help, but it was cut off.

I set parameters...

She was at the river.

Allontra watched knowing they communicated silently. "What happened?" she asked

Dharean.

He turned slightly and explained what had happened. "I set parameters to keep the people safe. Because water is a fluid changing source it couldn't be included in the parameters." Allantra now knew what they both were thinking. His people had a hidden route to the river. None knew of it but them. Someone in his tribe had helped the vampyre servants. Obviously Minn had been betrayed and ambushed. He gave a nod to Masque then went into the hut. "I have to go, Minn has been taken. After we find her we have an execution to perform."

"I don't understand."

"Someone betrayed us. Stay in the hut, my people will probably look at you with suspicious eyes. No one will dare enter my hut." Fully clothed now, he kissed her surprisingly soft. She kept the sheet clutched to her chest as she watched him leave. He looked back at her one last time. The reflective eyes of a panther looked back at her, and she knew with great accuracy what she was witnessing: a dangerous predator out to hunt and kill.

Chapter Eight

Swiftly they moved, the hawk in the air, the panther through the foliage. The panther sniffed the air frequently in frustration. He could not catch a scent of Minn or her sons nor the vampyre servants; it was as if they disappeared into thin air.

I can see where they have traveled, but I do not see them. Somehow they are being shielded. Masque communicated from the air.

They are being guarded with skillful black magic. It is not merely black magic; I sense the black magic has its own entity of evil woven into it. The frustration and wonderment could not be mistaken in Dharean's words.

It is a very powerful vampyre indeed that we are up against, Masque commented as he dove toward the waiting panther.

Powerful and very evil, Dharean agreed as he shifted into human form. Masque landed on a heavy branch softly and immediately shifted, then jumped down the few feet to the ground where Dharean knelt with eyes closed, reading the life cycle of the forest.

"What now, *Brujo*?" Masque asked when Dharean stood and they fell in stride together.

"No matter how powerful this vampyre is, they cannot taint nature itself. No unnatural deaths have occurred, for Kynn would tell me. I believe it is safe to say they have been taken alive, which means they *need* to be alive for whatever purpose the vampyre has."

"It is the curse. They seek to end it, and forfeit the bargain struck. A vampyre has gone rogue, perhaps the banished one Allantra spoke of."

"That would be a good guess. But right now as far as I am concerned all the vampyres are rogues and suspect. It would seem our journey will take place sooner than expected. We will retrieve Allantra and go to the Civil Lands in search of Minn and the pups. Kynn willing we will get there before any real harm befalls them."

* * * *

It was the same woman from before. Still she was chained to the wall, though she seemed to have a slightly brighter life force. The face was an almost duplicate of hers. The woman looked at her with love; even bloody and apparently starved she looked at her with such love. The look was familiar. She mouthed words at her. Hurry. Careful. Then the woman turned her head to the side, something had come into the room with her, and terror permeated throughout her body. She looked back at her it seemed and mouthed one more word. Daughter.

Allantra woke with a start, her heart pounding. Or was it the door, more than likely both. Someone pounded on the door. Groggy from sleep, Allantra wrapped the sheet around her. *Stay in the hut.* Dharean's directive softly reverberated in her sleepy head. She wouldn't leave the hut, she just wanted to answer the door and make whomever it was go away. She leaned her hot forehead against the crack in the door.

"Who is it?" she croaked out of her dry throat.

"Thank Kynn you're in there, hurry we must flee!" came an urgent female voice.

“Flee?” Allantra repeated confused.

“It’s the vampyre servants; I think they waited until Masque and Dharean left they are marching upon the village now. Please hurry, almost everyone is gone!”

Allantra’s heart pounded. The village was under attack? She yanked the door open, and there standing on the threshold stood Nani, obviously flustered and clutching her breast. “We’ve no time, the sentinel who spotted them said they will be upon us any moment, will you please help me round up the children?” She turned and looked behind her frantically seeming to expect the vampyre servants to overrun the small village at any moment. Clutching the sheet tightly around her, Allantra took a step forward out of the hut and laid her hand on the woman’s shoulder.

“Just give me a moment to dress, and I’ll help you.”

Nani turned around swiftly, the worried expression gone, only to be replaced by a dark repulsive scowl. “You will remove your filthy hands from my person, Harbinger!” she sneered. “Grab her!”

Before the words and the meaning sank in, strong hands clasped about her arms, letting the sheet fall roughly to the ground. Allantra looked to her left and saw a tall True Blood looking down at her with utter hatred and to her right, stood Dysil, who was openly admiring her naked form with a fanatical look in his eyes.

“It’s too bad I don’t have time to sample this whore’s charms.”

“What are you doing, asshole? I came here to help. Listen to me-” Before she could finish, Dysil hit her, hard enough to make her black out. Allantra slumped in their grasp.

“Take the bitch and make ready the fire. This whore has mesmerized our leader. He will see the spell she cast when she is dead and her power over him is broken. She is in league with the vampyres, it was her who gave Minn and the pups to the servants.” They dragged Allantra’s unconscious body away from the hut.

* * * *

“What is it, *Brujo*?” Masque inquired sensing the unease in his friend.

“I felt fear in Allantra, then nothing,” he answered thoughtfully, his heart beating painfully against his chest. He knew she was willful, but hoped she had stayed in the hut as he directed. “I will go to her.” Using his wizard speed, he made for the village. Masque dutifully shifted into raptor and took to the skies. He couldn’t possibly match the speed of the wizard, but he would get there soon enough.

When Dharean entered the village, it seemed to resonate with violent intent. He felt something he wasn’t used to feeling: cold hard fear. Every hut seemed abandoned, but he knew the people were here, he could feel all of them, but Allantra. Trying to remain calm, he concentrated on the feelings of violence, misgivings and guilt. It led him to the clearing in the back of the Place of Honor, where a fire licked closely at Allantra’s ankles. She was tied naked to a stake, her hands bound behind her back. Her head tilted forward, she was unconscious. Her long beautiful braid had a small fire creeping up the length, burning the beautiful strands. The scene enraged Dharean. A roar so loud that it caused birds to flutter from their nests, ripped from his throat. The people turned and cowered, immediately prostrating on the ground, all but a few.

With a thought the fire immediately snuffed out, swirls of smoke curled around Allantra’s body, and now he saw the thin trickle of blood that poured from her nose. Her beautiful hair had been badly singed. He strode up to the pit and approached her from

behind, mentally untying the knots that bound her hands. He rushed forward before the last tie loosened to catch her before she fell into the smoldering woodpile. Carefully he laid her on the ground. Thank the Gods she was still breathing! People around him began to mutter and cry their apologies. Some tried to scramble away. "Don't move. I will kill anyone who does." He laced his voice with magic so that it boomed across the clearing, every note declared violence on anyone who disobeyed.

Carefully he examined her, noting the burns around her foot and ankle. There were nasty burns on her back where her hair had hung against her skin. Rage, more powerful than he'd ever known, churned in him, but for now he kept it at bay. His first priority was his mate, his second priority to kill all those involved even if it meant the whole village. Za'rae suddenly appeared, her wrinkled body immediately moved to Allontra's other side. She laid cool hands on the woman and muttered something low.

"She is comfortable now, she feels no pain."

"Why did you let this happen?" he spat at her.

"Mind yourself, boy," the old woman snapped. "Take care of this situation and then you may ask me questions." With her hand still laying upon Allontra's belly they both disappeared. Now Dharean had full rein to unleash his anger and revenge.

"Where is the quisling?" he asked the crowd. His eyes settled on the still standing figures of Nani and her husband. "Where is the quisling?" he pointedly asked her, "and do not lie, I am in no mood for your games."

Perhaps she was drunk on the power of the moment. Perhaps Nani even thought that she had the support of many villagers, but whatever her foolish reason, Nani decided to throw caution to the wind.

"You dare hurt your own people, for that whore? What of the vow you took, not to use magic against your own people?" Her jealousy was palpable. "She has done nothing but bring us evil. Minn was nice enough to befriend her and look what happened. It could have been any of us, more even, if we had shown her such foolish kindness."

"Whore?" It was hard to tell if Dharean called Nani a whore or if he was merely picking up the word from her statement. It was at this moment he opened his mind to Masque so that he could witness the events "You call her the whore, yet it was I who you have been bedding since you have married this fool." He jerked his head toward the tall True-blood who now looked at Nani with glittering eyes. "You have had your part in this because of your jealousy, you will be punished forthright. My vow is still in effect, for those who have not crossed me."

"You would kill me?" Nani said incredulously.

"No, venom-tongued bitch, there are things worse than death. Your beauty hides your true nature;, perhaps that needs to be changed." With a smattering of words said low Dharean looked directly at her. But Nani felt nothing. She laughed at him instead.

"Perhaps you are not as good a wizard as we thought." She began until she heard the murmurings from the people. A woman screamed as she looked upon Nani's face. Then her husband looked at her as if he were ready to vomit. Nani then felt the tightness under her skin, and the feeling of movement under it, the sensation was quite painful.

What looked to be small snakes seemed to slither under the skin in her face and neck. Occasionally a forked tongue would flicker out of her nostril. Nani reached for her face and felt the slithering serpents. Sheer horror filled her eyes. "And you have helped her harm my mate, you shall remain with her for all your days." He decreed to the tall True-

blood. The man found himself being pulled like a magnet towards his wife. When his left arm connected to her right, it melded together to form one arm. Some of the snakes began to make their way to his body. He looked upon the visage of his once beautiful wife and saw the serpents crawling, sometimes seeming to bulge out of her neck. His repulsion led him to turn and retch, only to realize there was no escaping his wife, no escaping the serpents that now dwelled in his body as well. The people cried their apologies and begged for forgiveness. Dharean sensed that these people had been misled because of their own fear, he would punish them but not as severely—later, but it was one person in particular he needed to kill.

He knew it was Dysil, he smelled the scent on Allantra. He heard the name whispered in the minds of the people.

I have him in my sight. Masque told him, giving him the location where Dysil was cowering. Dharean transformed into the panther as he was running, the animal in him demanded to take the life.

The panther followed instructions from Masque until his feline nose picked up the scent. He ran as fast as his powerful legs would carry him. He slowed as he came upon Dysil's hiding place. Dysil was no more than a large chameleon-like shifter. He could change to blend in with his surroundings. But Masque, with his raptor eyes, could see right through the blending. The panther circled the tree trying to appear as if it were confused. He could hear the heavy breathing that Dysil tried hard to slow. He smelled the blood as it pumped furiously throughout his body, the fear giving it a pungent odor. Then without warning the panther took a bite out of the trunk of the tree. Dysil cried out as his intestines were ripped from his gut; he fell forward, the ability to blend with the tree lost to the intense pain and the wound. The panther spit out the entrails, and then shimmered as the form of Dharean towered over the fatally wounded shifter.

"Why?" was all Dharean asked, yes he could have just plucked it from Dysil's mind, but the nature of the panther made him want to play and torture his prey before he killed it.

"She is the harbinger, the end to us all." Dysil rasped out, blood spattered about his lips as he coughed.

"She has caused no one here harm."

"It was only a matter of time." He retorted weakly. Now the blood flowed freely from his mouth, his hand tried to futilely cover the wound. "The servants never found us until she came."

"You gave them Minn and the pups."

"It is best to sacrifice three than the whole village. You get a chance to romp around with fresh pussy and you lose all wisdom, can you not see what she is?" Dysil beseeched him.

"She is a key to our existence you fool. She is a synergist." Dharean let the words soak into his pain addled brain. "That's right, you tried to kill the one thing that could save us all, without her gift, the vampyre and I couldn't possibly take on all the vampyres."

"You lie." Dysil insisted. "I did what needed to be done. I have saved the people. I gave them what they wanted so they would leave us alone. You should have let me burn her, she is impure." His fear and hatred poured from him. Dharean realized he was just bad seed.

“Yes, you gave them Minn and the pups, and the servants will go back and tell the vampyres there is an entire village of us. They will come back to kill us all.”

“No, they promised. They only needed three.” He rasped choking on his own blood. Dharean sat on his haunches in front of the slowly dying man. He guessed, with the wound, the man could live a few more hours if he didn’t bleed out.

“You hurt my mate, tried to kill her. You betrayed our people. You went against my orders. You are a traitor and have been sentenced.”

“You are a fool, *Noir Brujo*.” He laughed spitting blood. “I am already dying; there is nothing more that you could do.” His entrails quivered as he tried to laugh. “I have saved our people and if I could have another chance, I would burn that bitch of yours quicker.”

Dharean’s eyes took on the black funnels that showed his anger was almost beyond control. Dharean lifted his face to the sky and dark clouds began to rumble overhead. The tattoos on his arm became glossy as they protected Dharean when using such magic. The three shadow demons rose around Dysil, their insidious whispers echoed in his ears. One came close to Dharean but stayed a respectable distance back; the tattoos forbade it to come any closer.

“You give him to usss?” It whispered, the dark form hovering over the ground, its yellow eyes looking hopeful.

“I do.” Dharean answered. “I understand it is feeding season.”

“It issss” the thing answered.

“I give him to you under the condition that you grant me a favor.”

“Hmmm,” The thing pondered for a moment looking from Dysil to Dharean. His hunger evident, it wanted nothing more than to bite into the dying shifter and suck the very marrow from his bone while he was still alive, it was so much sweeter when they were alive. “You must let me hear the favor first.” The demon wisely bartered.

Chapter Nine

Dharean strode into Za'rae's hut without preamble. Though punishing the main participants in the event that hurt Allantra took off some of the anger, there was one last persistent part. He was angry with Za'rae. She could have prevented all of this from happening. She had just as much power as he, more in fact. Why she would go through the trouble of protecting Allantra from him in the beginning then letting the people hurt her? He didn't understand, but he was determined to find out.

The fire, as usual, was going at a moderate intensity. Allantra was laid out on a mat with a thin cloth covering her with special markings. It was the healing cloth. A cloth that only Za'rae possessed and only used sparingly, he wondered how bad Allantra's injuries were. Za'rae, as usual, sat by the fire hunched over. Her coal-black, glossy eyes never wavered from the fire as she spoke.

"I will forgive you for the trespass this once because of circumstances, but I warn you yet again do not push me." She hid the smile behind her annoyance at his obvious insistence to see his mate.

"Why did you not stop this from happening? Why did you let her get hurt?" he demanded speaking harshly but low, afraid to wake her.

"Because I needed to know where your heart lies," she answered simply, her gaze still intent on the fire. "I had to let things unfold as they did because they needed to. I cannot interfere. If you did not come to her rescue all could have been lost."

"You have the power. You could have stopped Dysil and the others before they hurt her." To his horror his voice broke. The idea of what happened to Allantra rooted in his soul, and made him want to cry in anger, in frustration. He wished he could take away what happened. Hadn't she been through enough?

"Yes, I have much power, Dharean, and for that reason must be very careful how I use it. The prophecy is to be taken seriously. If you were not sufficiently bonded to her, I could not let you go on the journey. You would have revealed us with no hopes of winning. But you came for her." She turned her coal-black lashless eyes to Dharean, a smile on her wrinkled face. "You came for her when you felt her fear. You are bonded as you need be and all events fell into place."

"Of course I came for her," he bit out, still angry with her.

"You say that now, but do you not remember how you fought the very idea of being her mate in the beginning? And now you love her." Za'rae said simply.

"I don't know that I love her." He said finally sitting in between Allantra's sleeping form and the old woman.

"Look at you, even now you put yourself between her and any possible danger. I, dear boy, am not a danger to her." She chuckled. "She is healed and no scars shall remain, though she will remember everything. If it eases your mind, I would not have let her die had you not come for her. She would not die for your foolishness." She turned back to the fire. "By the way, you must deal with your feelings of the Triad. The vampyre is just as much her mate as you, and she will need to fully bond with him as well upon her return." She paused before starting another thread of conversation. "You will need to set out first thing when the sun sets this evening."

“But she is freshly injured, will she be able to travel?” Dharean looked down at her singed hair and lightly stroked the braid, trying to ignore Za’rae’s wise but unwanted look at the future.

“That is why I used the healing blanket. When you are ready to set out, she will be more than ready, trust me on this. Go now, get your supplies ready and come back when the sun sets.” With these words she effectively dismissed him. Dharean leaned over and kissed Allantra above the stone on her forehead, then he rose and quickly left. Za’rae let out a breath of relief. Perhaps her time to finally rest was near; very soon there would be nothing she could do to help her people. It would lie in the hands of the vampyre, the wizard, and the synergist.

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Allantra felt the end of her hair and winced. Dammit, now it needed cutting. She hadn’t cut her hair in a very long time. She was grateful for the traveling clothes Za’rae provided for her. Black leather like pants clung to her body. A matching cropped top with ragged edges hugged her breasts. The material was light, comfortable, and excellent protection against thorny plants. Za’rae had explained the events and why she had let them happen. Of course Allantra was pissed, as the memory of waking up and being cooked would not go away. Eventually the smoke inhalation knocked her right back out. She picked up the shiny sharp knife she had asked Za’rae for and began to chop at her hair, until it fell just below her shoulders. She braided the very front of her hair on both sides and tied the ends with pieces of the leather like material she tore from the shirt; it wasn’t like anyone could tell she ripped it. She then took the stone and put it back making sure the string was hidden in her hair. The soft padded boots allowed her to walk quietly, undetected. She felt damn sexy!

A knock at the door tore her from her self-appraisal and she bade the knocker to come in. After all, no harm could come to her inside Za’rae’s hut. Dharean walked in, with the same leather like material encasing his powerful legs, he didn’t wear a shirt though, choosing instead to go topless ... fine with her. He carried his herb satchel with him. Another satchel was slung across his chest and looked heavy. He paused as he took in her new appearance.

“Had to cut it,” she said softly, suddenly unsure of the appearance that she felt was totally awesome moments ago. He came quietly to her, his gray eyes riveted on her face and hair.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered to her, bending down to finger the fresh braids.

“Well, thanks,” she said, suddenly shy.

“I’m sorry for what my people did.” His eyes became dark. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Za’rae told me what you did to Nani and her husband, but she said it was best I didn’t know what you did to Dysil.” She looked him in the eye. “I don’t think differently of you, Dharean. You did what you felt was right. I just wish I could have added my own justice.” She grinned at him and his heart lifted. He didn’t know he had been holding that burden. But yes, now that he was willing to admit it, he had been afraid that once she heard what he was capable of she would fear him. “I don’t fear you.” She added.

He looked startled as she read his thoughts. “I guess it was the bonding. Your thoughts come easily to me. At least I’m making some progress as a shifter.” She joked.

He pulled her into his arms and sighed. “Yes you are, but there is still much for you

to learn in such a short time. I will try to be more patient with you. I have not been a very good teacher, have I?"

"No, you suck actually. But maybe I can teach you while you teach me." She pulled back long enough to kiss him lightly on the lips, but he was having none of that. He immediately escalated it into a full-blown mind blowing kiss. Pouring all his fear of losing her into the first kiss he could give her since it happened. Za'rae's scratchy voice was the only thing that broke them apart.

"Hopefully there will be plenty of time for that later," she said gruffly, suddenly appearing before the fire. "The people will evacuate soon and find a new place to hide until the outcome. Masque is waiting outside, and though you could never tell from his expression he is most impatient to go save his family." Guilt registered on both of their faces as they thought about it from Masque's point of view. Dharean pulled Allantra up.

"Remember, do no falter," Za'rae said to them.

"Good bye, wise one," Dharean said.

"Thank you for everything," Allantra added not sure if she'd ever see this freaky looking but wise character again. At the same time Dharean and Allantra both bowed before her, letting one knee touch the ground with bowed heads. They paid homage to their one living ancient. When they rose Za'rae was gone.

"She's not used to affection. She's kind of a curmudgeon in her old age." Dharean joked and led her out of the hut to a waiting Masque.

As they walked in silence, each one was entertaining their fears of the journey. When they reached the outskirts of the village, Masque turned to Dharean.

"So how do you propose we go about finding their trail? We had no luck earlier."

Dharean reached into his satchel and pulled out a bottle of ink. He bade the other two to sit down. On the right arm of both he drew symbols with the ink. "These are symbols that will protect you." He said as he drew the last part of a symbol on Allantra's arm and before either of them could ask the burning question: 'Protection from what?' Dharean's eyes funneled and a low rumbling quickly ensued. Sinister whispers seem to surround them. The shadow demons appeared ... sort of. Allantra even with her shifter vision could barely make out the demons if it weren't for the yellow eyes.

"As you agreed, shadow demon," Dharean said, his voice full of authority.

"Assss wasss agreed." The demon answered. "Thissss way," it beckoned them to follow.

"What's going on?" Allantra demanded, though she knew Dharean would never put her in harm's way the demons scared the hell out of her.

"Masque and I couldn't find Minn's trail or the servants, because it was too cleverly shielded. But evil can find evil. In return for food provided they agreed to show us the trail the servants took. We must shift forms to move quickly, they have agreed to only this one night."

Allantra removed her clothes, as did Masque and Dharean. She could feel the eyes of both men on her and she reveled in the attention. After packing the clothes in the satchel provided, Masque grabbed Dharean's herb bag and Dharean slung the satchel across his shoulders. Masque shifted so quickly she barely saw the change from man to raptor. The raptor held the bag firmly in its claws. Allantra changed to her wolf form, as Dharean changed to his panther, the bag slung across its body so as not to fall off. In moments the two of them were running full blast behind the demons and the raptor with his sharp

vision followed in the air.

When dawn threatened to break the dark sky into pieces, the demons immediately stopped their tracking and turned to the animals as they approached. The raptor began to dive from the sky, the panther and wolf transformed quickly.

"We have fulfilled our bargain." The demon hissed. "We cannot go any further, unlesssss of coursse you have another offering for ussss." They eyed Allontra then Masque as he touched ground and shifted,, his naked form sweaty from the exertion of flying all night.

"No, our deal is done, shadow demon." With that the demons just simply faded away. Dharean turned to the other two. "We will eat and rest."

"I can track them now; it seems the vampyre stopped shielding them some miles back." Masque informed them, "While flying I spotted a pond not too far from here. We can bathe there. I will lead the way."

Allontra couldn't help but giggle, when Masque took point, his finely chiseled ass was something to behold. Dharean took one look at her looking at Masque's ass and immediately swept her up in his arms; she laid her head on his chest and put her arms around his neck.

"So all I have to do to get carried is look at another man's ass?" she joked, feeling his cock come alive and bounce under her butt as he walked.

"You will get another man killed that way." He growled. But he couldn't stop that niggling thought that he would have to deal with Allontra looking at another man with lust. A vampyre. For now he tossed that aside; right now it was just the two of them, and he would not taint it with thoughts of her other lover.

At the sound of a splash, they knew the pond was near and he finally let her down, since obviously Masque was already in the water. "Last one there is slave to the other one." Allontra called out already running before Dharean even realized what she said. Immediately he dropped the satchel and took off after her. Her naked body hit the water a second before he caught her. She giggled as he grabbed her around the waist.

"I won," she said triumphantly.

"You cheated," he responded nibbling on her ear.

"Are you going to be a sore loser?" she asked turning in his arms.

"How can I lose, if I'm you're slave?" He grinned devilishly, taking her mouth in a deep kiss. Allontra felt his hard erection against her belly as he held her tight.

What about Masque?

Is it okay if he watches? Allontra got wetter between her legs just thinking about it.

Fine with me, she responded.

You are a dream come true. Dharean grinned into the kiss.

Over her shoulder she could see Masque come up on the bank and sit with his back against a tree trunk. His butter-yellow hair was slicked back from the water. He parted his legs slightly as he looked at them in the water, his cock in his hand stroking it slowly. Allontra's heart began to pound in anticipation.

Chapter Ten

With little effort, Dharean lifted Allantra out of the water without breaking the kiss. Immediately she wrapped her strong brown legs around his waist, and felt his cock bobbing against the crevice of her ass. If possible, she pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, loving the taste that was Dharean. He growled a sound half man half beast, as his tongue sought out her own unique sweet taste. She felt his hands at her tiny waist again and she was lifted up just high enough for him to position her on his cock. Gently at first, he worked the almost steel like head into her folds, and when her body naturally adjusted for him, he pushed her all the way down. This time the sound that vibrated from his throat was all animal. Allantra felt as well as heard the intake of breath when she fully sheathed him, for a moment she was lost in the sensation as well.

Then Dharean began to take long strides toward the bank of the pond. Each powerful step made his cock go deeper, pull out a little only to be rammed in again. Allantra broke the kiss and mewled softly, throwing her head back and just living in the sensation of being fucked as he walked. He stopped no more than ten feet from where Masque sat stroking himself a little faster, his eyes never once leaving the amorous couple. Just knowing he was watching them, sent the most erotic chills down her naked spine.

Dharean lowered her to the soft grass, still managing to keep his cock firmly embedded in her. Allantra was on her back and within moments, the sound of their wet bodies coming together began to crack the air. Allantra could hear Masque's breathing becoming more and more shallow as he watched them. She dug her nails in Dharean's back, dragging them across, leaving deep welts in their wake. It only succeeded in making him pump into her faster. The thought of his mate marking him, claiming him, seemed to engorge his cock even more. The slickness of her, the tightness was driving him to levels of pleasure he had no idea even existed. She cried his name over and over, her legs trembling from the onslaught of the sensation. She felt the energy trying to pour forth, and she denied it, knowing the last time could have been disastrous. She felt a sense of triumph as she held it at bay.

Dharean was there in her mind, knowing the small battle she fought, and her accomplishment. She was strong and a fast learner, and by the gods she felt good on his cock. He felt himself ready to spew in her, but he himself held back, the strangled moans from Masque caught his hearing. He pulled out of Allantra, and immediately she protested. "Trust me, *flammulae*, you will like this." He said softly. She brought herself up on her elbows. "Come here." He commanded to Masque. Ever expressionless, Masque obeyed his command. His cock, florid and thick, bounced as he walked the short distance to them. Dharean indicated that he kneel on one side of Allantra, Dharean then disengaged himself from between her sweet, smooth thighs and took post at the other side. "Lie back," he said seductively. When she complied he smiled indulgently. "Pleasure yourself as we pleasure ourselves, watch us as we coat your lovely breasts with our hot seed, as we watch you bring yourself to peak."

No hotter command had been given, Allantra was sure of that. Each man took his swollen dick in hand; Dharean was glossy and slick from being inside of her. "May I?" Masque asked Dharean, who with the slightest hesitation nodded. *He only wants to coat*

himself with your juices, will you allow this? Dharean asked her. “Yes” Allontra answered in an airy voice. Though the idea appealed to her, she was half afraid Masque’s unnaturally clawed hands would scrape her. But Masque, with the gentlest of touches, leaned over to his side slightly, three fingers—with contracted claws—swirled around her pussy, collecting the cream gathered there. Allontra nearly came off the ground from the touch. She was so sensitive and ready to come.

She watched Masque as he rubbed *her* slippery fluid on his cock, and her clit, if possible, got even harder. They both began to masturbate over her breasts; Allontra reached down and in small impatient circular motions began to seek the road that would bring her over the edge. The breathing of the two men became ragged and shallow. She could hear that they would be coming soon. She brought her hips off the ground as her orgasm threatened to overpower her and make her mindless, and she didn’t care one bit. It seized her, rendered her immobile and unable to scream. Her mouth opened but nothing came out. Large tidal waves of pleasure undulated in and around her mons. And if that wasn’t enough, both men growled loudly and she felt large streams of their seed plop on her breasts. She couldn’t help herself; she looked at both cocks as they spurted all over her. Masque had thrown his head back giving his howl up to the early morning sun, but Dharean’s eyes had stayed trained on her the whole time.

She smiled at him and the tenderness on his face, she was quite sure, had never been seen by anyone else. “Thank you.” Masque said quietly getting to his feet; his manhood, now going back to its natural state, was still impressive. He turned and left heading for the pond, a few seconds later a very clean splash sounded in the pond.

“That was very generous of you.” Dharean said, sitting back on his haunches as Allontra sat up looking at the semen that was drying fast on her breasts.

“You as well. I know you have a problem sharing.” She gave him a slanted look, gauging his reaction; he knew she was referring to Khaelen. But he did not tense as she expected him to. Instead he ignored the reference.

“In the past Masque and I have shared many women.”

“Somehow I do not doubt that.” She laughed. “Besides it was a new experience for me, and he was most respectful. I didn’t mind at all.” Dharean stood and held out his hand to her, which she took, he pulled her up with little effort.

“Do not get used to it.” He mumbled leading her to the water. Allontra let the remark pass. He was trying to share, even though it was easier to share with his best friend, Khaelen, however, was a different matter for him altogether.

“I will take first watch.” Masque stated. After the bath they had all eaten a light meal consisting of the fruits from nearby trees.

“No we can’t waste time taking shifts. We will all sleep for a couple of hours and no more. I will put up protection barriers so that we all may rest together.” The other two nodded. Allontra settled in Dharean’s arms, Masque slept on the other side of her. It wasn’t sexual, it was for protection. In no time they were all sleeping.

* * * *

Finally they are coming! Dominica would have clapped if she had that kind of joy in her; instead she chose to visit her favorite pet in the secret room. She glided fast. They had three; she could see them through the eyes of the servants; a rather plump woman and two boys, twins. They were young but she really didn’t think it mattered. Blood was

blood and she most certainly planned to shed theirs. Everything was in place; all she needed was the blood. Did she dare dream of the day when she would again be corporeal and cause chaos and death among the traitorous Council Members? They dare try to banish her and keep her in this form while they enjoyed the favors of being flesh and blood again! No, she would show them, all of them.

For over a hundred years since she had been cursed, she had studied the Black Arts diligently. She was a master at it. There was much to be answered for. She would bring the justice that she had been denied. She practically sneered at the thought that a traitorous shape-shifter had done this to her. They couldn't be trusted. They could never be trusted, *should* have never been trusted. She glided into the secret dungeon and was pleased to see her pet was alive and awake. No, she wouldn't chance hurting her now, she was too close. But what could she do? So much excitement, surely she could cause some pain and not endanger the life of this dirty animal. Just a little bit, yes, she could make her relive the death of her mate; she made such delicious screams last time. Not too much, just enough to make her plead for mercy, make her call his name futilely as if her pleading could save him. She lowered herself until she was at face level with the shifter. *They will be here very soon. We're going to have just a little fun. Not too much, for I will need you alive and well, so that I may kill you later.* Dominica with dramatic flair pushed her wraith like hands into the mind of Taraema, feeding her the ghastly images. At her first scream a bolt of pleasure went through Dominica.

* * * *

Allantra bolted upright with a scream caught in her throat. Only it wasn't her pain, it was someone else's. The woman in her dream had been in intense pain. She couldn't see what the woman was so frightened of; there were only shadows in the room. It looked to be a dungeon of some sort.

"What is wrong?" Dharean asked sitting up next to her. He wrapped his strong arms around her. Masque too was up, his expressionless face seeming to search for an answer in hers.

"I dreamed of her again," she whispered more to herself than Dharean.

"Dreamed of who?" he rubbed her arms absently, as small goose bumps covered them from her fear.

"I don't know her, but she looks like me." Allantra answered, leaning back in the cocoon of Dharean's arms.

"Perhaps you were seeing something from the future?" Masque suggested.

"I don't think so, it felt real, like," she searched for words, "like it was happening somewhere right at that moment."

"Hmm," Dharean began, "could it be you are linked with the vampyre and he is..."

"What are you suggesting?" Allantra immediately defensive, disengaged herself from the warm embrace and turned to face him. "Are you trying to suggest he is hurting some poor woman and that's what I'm witnessing?"

"He is vampyre, you know. How well do you really know him, Allantra? Couldn't he very well be the one behind taking Minn and the pups?"

"Oh I can't believe this!" Allantra got up and began to stomp around erratically while she vented her anger. "Look, I know this whole triad thing is hard to deal with. I got that. It's hard for me too!" Allantra ran roughshod over her own lie. Truly she was

not disappointed that she had been fated to two skillful and gorgeous lovers but right now she wasn't about to discuss that. "We have to stick together, that's what the prophecy says '*If one should falter,*' Dharean, this whole thing will be for nothing. Please, I know it's not Khaelen."

Dharean took a deep breath; Masque looked on without saying a word. Dharean had the distinct impression from his emotionless friend that he was enjoying Dharean squirm.

"All right then, it was just a theory. Obviously you are linked to someone."

"There is no one else." Allantra whined. "I am not close to anyone else, and why now? Why am I having this connection now?"

"This world is full of mystery, little one. There are different ways to connect. There has to be some sort of blood or spirit connection to this woman."

"The dream plane," Masque said solemnly.

"What?" Allantra looked to Masque for the first time since she woke up.

"The dream plane; often you can connect through dreams, especially if it's a spirit."

"But she didn't look like a spirit. She looked to be flesh and blood."

"Then perhaps she is dying."

The words hung in the air like a thick fog. Allantra mulled the words and the possibility over. She was *chained* to a wall, and she did look as if she had been tortured. If the woman were dying it would stand to reason she could reach her on the dream plane. But why her? Allantra shook her head in an effort to clear the matter from her mind. She could deal with this later; right now Minn and the boys needed to be rescued.

"We should go," Allantra declared, looking at the two men as if they were slackers.

Silently the men rose, Dharean grabbed the herb bag and left the larger bag behind. "We don't need it." He threw it high into a tree where it caught on a branch and stayed out of sight. "We also don't need any of the vampyre servants coming upon this and getting suspicious." Masque had already begun to pace around the perimeter looking to see where he could pick up the trail. He gestured for them to follow. From now on they traveled in silence, running on silent booted feet.

Chapter Eleven

Khaelen sat at his desk, looking at the setting sun, through his special made windows. He'd taken to sleeping in his office since Allantra had left. He'd also begun to rise early, waking before the sun had fully set. She was in his system, and he missed her.

It seemed that the residents in the Civil Lands could sense impending chaos in the air. More and more arrests were being made—and unfortunately most of the charges were legitimate. There was a distinct smell of change in the air. Change; there had been lots of it these past couple of weeks. He painfully remembered waking up and finding that Allantra had gone. He knew that she had to leave, but he thought she at least would have waited until he had risen.

Even through her journey he had tried to contact her and she had stubbornly refused to communicate with him. He knew why, he could feel her hurt just as he hurt at the separation. Still it was killing him not knowing where she was, if she was even all right. Sometimes if he didn't monitor his thoughts carefully he let his fears take over that maybe she had died. But he would know it. They weren't completely bonded yet but he planned on taking care of that as soon as she returned. She belonged to him and to him alone. Perhaps he should have told her that he had fallen in love with her, but the feelings had been much too new and raw for him to share, but surely she knew.

Too much time had passed since he had last taken her blood. He couldn't connect to her mentally anymore, but as soon as she returned... What he needed to do was redirect his thoughts. He had been drawing up a new government structure that would reflect the changes that would be made. So many laws to be added and revised it practically made him dizzy just thinking about it. But right now he was burned out and he needed a small break. He pushed back the chair, the legs scraping against the floor like they had done thousands of times before. He felt antsy. He felt like the residents, something was about to happen, and it was bad.

Moments later he found himself strolling through the halls of the Quarter. He watched as Quarter Guards took suspected criminals through the process. As much as he'd wanted to stop the process of taking blood, doing so would have caused questions. The mood in the Civil Lands was much too wild as it stood. He quirked his eyebrow up as he watched three dirty and disheveled Quarter Guards practically drag a woman and a set of twin boys no older than six or seven out of the blood sampling room. Now that was odd. Automatically he reached into the Guard's minds to find they were blocked. Very strong mental blocks stood in his way, immediately he became irritated. This did not bode well. Only a vampyre of substantial power could create mind blocks such as these. He had a feeling the small truce they set with the Council was breached or was about to be.

He then touched upon the mind of the woman, and found her angry and aware of his intrusion. She cast angry brown eyes at him and immediately threw him from her mind. "You're all alike." She spat at him. "Don't worry my brother and the *Noir Brujo* will come for you, and there will be no rock you can hide under to escape their wrath!" She sent a healthy dollop of spittle his way, but he merely stepped back out of its path. The Quarter Guard holding her simply jerked her hard in the direction of the doors; the exit

doors to be exact. Khaelen now was truly perplexed. They sampled their blood just to let them go? Not only that, it was as if the Quarter Guard didn't see him... *Him*, The Executioner. It was then that it occurred to Khaelen that these were not only Quarter Guards; they were mindless vampyre servants as well. Influenced and controlled by a vampyre to do their bidding. But whose bidding were they doing?

These servants obviously had a very strong compulsion to carry out their orders, to the point that everything else was of no consequence. Khaelen was many things; 'of no consequence' wasn't one of them. He hung back and watched as the woman, struggling every step of the way, and the terrified boys were practically dragged out the door, then silently he followed at a safe distance behind.

* * * *

As soon as they were in familiar territory Allantra had taken the lead. She didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know where Minn and the boys were being taken, The Elder Council Chambers. Still she couldn't swallow the bitter pill that they had been betrayed. But her gut instinct told her all of the council members hadn't betrayed them. If she had to put money on it, she would bet it was that vampyre bitch Dominica behind the kidnapping. Hell, she would even venture as far as to say, Dominica was probably behind her own attempted kidnapping when she was in the Savage Outlands. Unease slipped into her as she remembered the words of the ancient council member: *'She will prove to be a problem. If she ever retains her true form she will be a force to reckon with. We will have to see that does not happen.'*

"Fuck!" Allantra said out loud in frustration.

"What is it?" Dharean asked. Masque gave her a look that suggested she should try to be a little quieter.

"I know who took Minn and the boys, it wasn't Khaelen, believe me, Dharean. Look, the vampire that's doing this is one sick asshole. She'll stop at nothing to see the shifters wiped out."

"Is it the rogue vampyre you spoke of?" Masque asked gravely.

"Yes, she hates everything and everyone except her own kind, at least that's the impression I got when I met her. We didn't get along." Allantra grunted as she looked out the window of the old deserted museum across the street from the Elders Council Chambers. "Wait." Allantra whispered as she saw dark figures moving toward the Chambers. "I see them, they're still alive!" she said excitedly. Dharean and Masque both rushed to the window to see Minn and the boys being brought rather unceremoniously down the street. The doors to the building opened on their own accord; obviously they were expected. The three turned from the window and faced each other.

"I don't know the layout of the chambers. Masque, it would be best if you tracked them; my nose obviously isn't as trained as yours."

"Perhaps you should stay here until we return." Dharean suggested smoothly, though his tense demeanor suggested anything but calm. He didn't want Allantra going into the fray of things so soon. She didn't have control over her new power and if he were honest with himself he didn't want the possibility of her getting hurt.

"Don't start that macho man shit with me!" Allantra hurled at him, undaunted by his rather curious look at the term 'macho man.' "I've faced these bloodsuckers before and lived to tell about it. I'll be fine. I've been taking care of myself a lot longer than I've

known you.” She pointed an annoyed finger his way. “Masque, lead the way, and be careful; their weapons here are nothing to play with, be ready for anything.”

Masque nodded and exited from where they had entered the museum, Allantra followed. Dharean however turned to look out the window one last time when he saw a tall, dark figure approach the doors to the building. Even from this distance he could practically feel the power of the man. His instinct told him the man was vampyre, old and very powerful. Perhaps Allantra was wrong and it wasn’t the rogue female vampyre behind this, but this obviously powerful vampyre. Maybe this vampyre and the rogue were in league together. Dharean snorted as he began to follow his small party. It didn’t matter, Dharean was in for a little bloodshed, and he knew for sure it wouldn’t be his own.

* * * *

Minn was afraid as they led her into the dank musty dungeon. Not for her own life, but that of her boys. They were the only thing she had left between her and her mate. They were the only thing of value she had in her life period. And now she stood helpless to protect her pups. She tried to soothe them, but they knew, even in their young years, that things were even beyond her control.

Please don’t cry, pups. Your uncle and the Noir Brujo will help us. You have to believe that.

I’m scared, mama.

I’m scared too, but not as scared as Landin.

You are too!

Am not!

Boys! Minn had to shout above the telepathic arguing. Please you’re giving your mother a headache.

Why can’t we shift mama? This question came from Kurahn.

I believe it has something to do with these rings around our wrists.

They burn. The boys said in unison.

I know. But just calm yourselves. Give me time to think. Give your uncle time to get here. It will be all right.

“I don’t think so,” came an almost whispery voice interrupting their private conversation. Minn watched in horror as a shade-like creature wafted into the room. Minn couldn’t make out a definite shape, but she certainly felt the hostility permeating from it. “Only I will be all right. I will be restored as I once was. Give me the blood collected from them; I will add it to the fresh blood taken from our resident prisoner here. Chain them to the wall, next to the fallen princess. Bleed them dry,” the voice sneered.

It was at that time that Minn noticed the crumpled body chained to the far wall. It couldn’t be! Yes, her hair was dirty and longer than she remembered, but even above the acrid smell of bodily waste she smelled the familiar scent. Slowly the figure lifted her head, and she met the eyes of Taraema, one of the missing royalty who had come here to the Civil Lands so long ago, seeking equality. She had been rotting in this Kynn forsaken place for a very long time. Minn wanted to cry when a second realization hit her. She now knew who the Harbinger really was. For Allantra was indeed a scion, a scion of the beautiful fallen princess...

* * * *

Every step Khaelen took brought him closer to unmitigated anger. A secret dungeon? How long had this been here? He watched from a distance so as not to be discovered, as they led the prisoners into the room the door clicking ominously behind them. He smelled their fear and would do anything to save them. Four guards adorned each side of the cell door. Piece of cake; Khaelen in a flurry of movement broke each of their necks before they even had time to wrench a cry from their throats. The bodies began to slump to the floor. Khaelen directed the bodies, which were now inanimate objects to remain standing, and so they did. He didn't need a surprise coming from behind, it was best that things look normal at least until he took care of the situation behind the cell door. With one more look behind him, Khaelen, not wanting to risk teleporting himself into an unknown environment, took great caution as he entered the cell.

Khaelen's eyes immediately adjusted to the poor lighting in the room. He saw two of the guards shackling the hands of the two boys to the wall, a wicked blood trail wound from a clean cut on their necks. They were still alive but unconscious. In a rather efficient manner they took Minn from the third guard who then seemed to be checking the life signs of a figure hanging by her wrists. Khaelen had no idea who this woman was, but knew she wouldn't last long. Out of the corner of his eye he caught swift movement, and knew one of the Elders was behind this monstrous deed.

"Stop," he directed to the two guards as they overpowered the rather plump woman and managed to get one of her wrists shackled. Blood dripped from her wrists. They continued, undaunted by his order, their minds truly belonging to the vampyre.

"You have no power here," came a very familiar voice. "You're too late." A very unwelcome voice.

"Dominica, I shouldn't be surprised that you are behind this." Khaelen said coolly.

"You are truly a waste of vampyre blood. For all your power, you sympathize with the mongrels. Still fucking that bitch of yours?" she chided him, slipping in and out of his line of vision. Though she physically proved no threat, she proved quite a threat to the woman and the boys for she controlled the guards.

"By the sound of your voice you sound envious, Dominica. How long has it been since a man found his way in between your non-existent thighs?"

Dominica screeched in outrage, a sound very reminiscent of the legendary banshee. "We will see how long your humor lasts." She promised. Two of the guards rushed him; one tossed a ring at him. He remembered them too well. Bullets whizzed by his head and he knew without having to take one into his body, they were the blessed bullets. He moved fast as the guard continued to shoot at him, the third guard calmly picked up an athamae blade first and aimed it at the woman chained to the wall by one arm. They were trying to distract him. The door to the dungeon burst open but he didn't have time to see who else was coming to the party. With an impressive display of telekinetic power, he violently tossed the woman across the room. The force was so great the chain broke in half freeing her; she hit the wall and slid to the floor. The athamae landed with a 'thwack' sound, embedding itself where the shifter would have been chained. Then a fine mist began to filter into the room.

* * * *

Masque led them deep into the bowels of the Chambers. Allontra was quite sure this where all the shady business took place. She was curious as to how many council members knew about this place, what's more how many of them used it. The place was empty of guards probably because simply no one knew it was even here. Eventually, they came to a turn that led them into a long corridor. At the end, four guards, almost unnaturally straight, stood guarding the door. Their eyes, even more lifeless than usual for vampire servants, made the hackles on Allontra's neck rise. Masque and Dharean, in a display of practiced and understood communication, nodded to each other. Allontra rolled her eyes. Masque and Dharean took off at the same time each taking two guards apiece. To their dismay their necks were already broken. The heads merely lolled to the side in a grotesque angle and finally mercifully the guards slumped to the floor.

Allontra approached the men, a finger to her lips for silence. If they could do the signals, so could she.

What is going on here? Allontra asked as she looked at the rag doll men with disgust.

It would appear they were already dead, Masque answered

Dharean had a pretty good idea who killed them. The vampyre he saw may have betrayed his partner. *Seems we have a killer among killers.*

I will go in first, Masque announced, ready to take one for the team.

I will go. There is much black magic here. Even now as I send out sensors, these doors made of metal, block my magic. Dharean argued. *There could be much danger behind those doors.*

Allontra had all she could take with the macho man bit. She concentrated as she had taught herself to do. She found the center of calm she needed quickly and began to feel her body go light as it dissolved into a fine mist. *I will tell you what I see,* she declared to the two men as they watched open mouthed at her unknown ability. She filtered into the cell through a large crack. Dharean connected with Allontra and it was then she knew fear held his heart and breathing prisoner momentarily. Quickly, he chanted the appropriate spell, channeling the power through his hands. The door burst in, Dharean rushed in followed by Masque. Then all hell broke loose.

Allontra came back to her true form to see Khaelen standing over Minn's unconscious body, blood trailing down her arm onto the floor. Each of the boys had blood on their chests that obviously originated from their necks. Rage poured off Masque. Dharean roared. More guards began to pour into the room at Dominica's bidding. Masque had to defend himself as they attacked. Dharean turned to the vampyre, and shot bolts of flame at him. Swiftly Khaelen moved almost faster than the shifter could see ... almost. He shot another burst of flame, this time singeing the shoulder of the vampyre. Dharean tried to track him but he moved too fast. Where was he? Belatedly he realized where the vampyre went, as talon claws raked across his back. Dharean dropped and rolled ignoring the painful sensation. He looked for Allontra trying to make sure she was not in danger but she seemed transfixed to the spot as she looked at the figure that was chained to the wall.

* * * *

Allontra's breath hitched. This was the woman from her dream. She couldn't help but stare. The woman was barely breathing. Slowly she approached her, why was she so afraid of her? Maybe afraid was too strong a word. There was excitement, yes, something

about this woman made her giddy with excitement. She knelt down, pushing the long dirty hair away from the woman's face, to reveal a visage so very much like her own. The woman raised her eyes slowly, pain evident in every movement. She looked to Allantra and smiled, the woman was very beautiful. She said one word to Allantra that put her in a state of shock before the woman let unconsciousness claim her. "Daughter." Then a blinding light encompassed the room.

* * * *

With a warrior's precision, Masque cut through the servants with his dangerously clawed hands. Deftly avoiding the rings tossed at him. He remembered them from when Allantra had been caught in one by the water. As the last one fell before him, a blinding light lit up the dark cell. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, then he saw the female vampire standing near the blown out door. Her eyes caught his and surprise registered.

"You," she said scathingly. "You're still alive?"

"Yes, Dominica," Masque answered shaking his head in wonderment. This is what happened to his mate?

"I thought you were dead. I prayed to every known god that you were dead. I hoped you met your justice during the Mass Execution." She laughed, a shrill ugly sound, derived from hatred.

"You were behind that?" Masque said incredulously as anger welled up. He had lost many friends and family. "You killed because..."

"Because shifters are lower forms of life; they lie, they deceive!" Her voice began to rise as memories she thought long buried surfaced. "You took me for a mate and then you left me because *I* wasn't good enough? Very clever, Masque, not using magic all these years, making me believe you were dead."

"I did it for many reasons, do not flatter yourself."

"No, do not flatter yourself, *mate*," she said polluting the word, making it seem an abomination. "You are only still standing because the transformation momentarily weakens me. But now that I know you are alive, you are my main target. Appreciate how lucky these filthy shifters were I didn't have time to bleed them dry as I intended. No matter, I have only begun my wrath!" With that Dominica used her last energy to teleport out of the room, fully corporeal.

* * * *

Allantra watched in pure astonishment at the exchange between Masque and Dominica. That bitch was the love of his life? She was the reason he stopped doing magic? It all made sense. Perhaps he didn't use magic so he could ease her hurt, make her think he was dead so she could go on with her life. If she could have located Masque when he used magic, she could have located his whole tribe and wiped them out. The enormity of what was avoided was staggering. Unbelievable as it was, Dominica had influenced the Mass Execution to take place because she was a jilted lover ... of a shifter.

Then the scent caught her, before the feeling of being watched. He was here! She looked around the cell to see Khaelen staring at her with a goofy smile on his face. Dharean was looking from Khaelen to her as understanding dawned on his features. Khaelen in his joy to see Allantra simply ignored the foe he had been sparring with but

moments before. He was at her side before she could blink and caught her in a tight embrace then pulled back to get a really good look at her. "You look different, but still beautiful," he said, a smile in his voice as he ran his fingers through her shortened hair and looked at the stone on her forehead. "I'll tell you about that later," she grinned. She too was happy to see him and returned the embrace. His lips sought hers and willingly she opened her mouth to him.

She forgot everyone and everything in that moment. She had missed him terribly. She felt awful leaving like she did. She felt guilty for ... she blocked that thought for now and kissed him back just as eagerly. Then abruptly he broke the kiss. "What?" she stammered, her senses reeling from his kiss.

"You smell like him, all over you. Why do you smell like him?" He jerked his head in the direction on Dharean, who now had the pleasure of smiling rather smugly.

"There's a lot to be explained..." Allantra hiccupped over her words but Dharean cut her off as he sauntered over.

"Not really, she's mated to me, vampyre, *fully* mated." Dharean smiled at the vampyre as he pulled Allantra roughly to him, Letting the vampyre deal with every connotation 'fully mated' meant.

"She's mine, we are not fully bonded but I will remedy that." The shifters words sent Khaelen into a silent rage of jealousy and hurt. Khaelen yanked Allantra back over to him as the two alpha males stared each other down. Allantra stepped back out of the reach of both them, fully pissed at being tossed around like a child's toy.

"First of all I don't belong to you," she pointed to Dharean narrowing her eyes, "or you." She swiveled her accusing finger at Khaelen. "Truth is, *both* of you belong to *me*. So deal with it."

Then Allantra approached Masque. "Will you please help me get everyone out, while those two go at it?" For the first time, an expression, tiny though it was, almost found its way to Masque's face. He almost smiled. He nodded instead, going to Minn first. Feeling a bit ashamed, the two males backed off each other with an unspoken understanding that they would continue this later. Then each unchained a frightened boy. Allantra knelt again by the unconscious woman and felt a pulse, though very weak. A large lump embedded itself in her throat. She knew this woman. It had been so very long, but memories so deep, began to wake up. She leaned over and whispered softly into the woman's ear. "Hello Mother."

The End

About the Author:

I live in Michigan. Don't let my last name intimidate your tongue it's simply pronounced-Mell Yer. Well that's it phonetically anyway. I am a Personal Trainer and also work in Theatre. I love writing and am a mother of two. So I stay pretty busy with life.

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