



A
Savoy Valley
Novel

Magnetism

Aliyah Burke

McKenna Jeffries

Taige Crenshaw

Satin Notes

Magnetism

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A Satin Notes Free Novel

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Dedication

To our fans who have supported us. We give you this free read in appreciation for all your support.

Aliyah, McKenna and Taige

Prologue

Kira Winters didn't need the scent of blood to know she was dying. She was so numb and cold. She had no idea how long she had been laying on the ledge on the side of the cliff. Time had lost all meaning. All she knew was pain. The pain of stupidity. The agony of loss.

Challen, her newly-found twin brother, was dead. Dead because of her. The sight of him falling, then being swallowed up by the fog, was constantly replaying in her mind. The day had been bright and beautiful. They had decided to go for a hike along the Velen Cliffs, one of the highest points in Savoy Valley. The view from the cliffs was one of exquisite beauty. Challen had been teasing her. The memory of his laughing face made her eyes sting.

Oh God. I wasted so much time.

Regret filled her. When Challen had come to her, claiming to be a brother she had never known of, she had welcomed him. Yet she hadn't made time to spend with him. She had been busy working on the expansion of her business. Besides, she figured they had all the time in the world. She had been without family, at least family by blood, and figured they would find time eventually. Her friends, who she thought of as her true family, had accepted him also.

Challen had not given up on spending time with her. He had kept coming around for months and helping wherever he could. He gained her respect for his unwavering refusal to give up. Then she learned to accept him for his kindness and strength. Six months after she had met him, she'd finally let him talk her into a day together away from her restaurant. After that first time, she'd made more time to get to know her brother. They had started to explore more of Savoy Valley, places she loved and some she hadn't known.

Although Challen had recently moved to Savoy Valley, and she had lived there for almost three years, he knew more places than she did. The hike to Velen Cliffs—"a bonding expedition" as Challen called it--was their latest adventure. When they had reached the bluff, Challen had put his arm around her shoulders while she had looked out at the sheer beauty of the ocean and cliffs.

A sound was the only warning before all hell had come down upon them. Suddenly, Challen had spun to face the open area behind them. Kira didn't want to believe what she had seen. David, the man she had thought loved her, was leading a group of animals. Yes, they had to be animals. There was no such thing as shape-shifters. There couldn't be. But then, why had their attackers looked like they did? Some appeared to be half-man and part animal. Their top halves were those of human men, but the bottom parts looked like snakes, wolves, and tigers. Her mind could not believe it. Pacing beside them was actual snakes, wolves and tigers. All of them had hissed and growled, fangs dripping. They had rushed Kira and Challen, claws extended to rip out whatever they could reach.

David had flashed his killer grin at her as he picked up Challen, who had stepped in front of Kira to protect her. David tossed him away like he was a useless toy. Trying to help her brother, Kira had stumbled to the edge of the cliff to reach for him.

"Heller will p—" Challen screamed. Leaning over the edge, she had grabbed for him even though she knew it was too late. She had watched his pale grey eyes as he fell and was engulfed by the fog. She had no time to even process it as something dragged her from the edge. Turning, she had looked down to see one of the things holding her ankle. It fell on her, ripping her flesh. The agony of the first cut had made her mind block out the pain. David just stood there and watched as the other animals joined in, tearing at her piece by piece.

Blood had poured from everywhere. How could a human body lose so much and survive? The day passed into night as they tortured her in unimaginable ways. Each

time she thought she would die, they would back off, then come back to start all over again. The day that had started with such promise was now a living hell. Challen had screamed it as he fell, and she was living it, replaying each moment as they bled her of life. The sun went up, then down again as she lay there waiting for the end. She had heard their whispered plan to take her with them. The thought stalled the breath in her body. She couldn't take it. Determination filled her.

Using her last strength, she had gathered herself to wait. When they came to drag her away with them, Kira fought and ran, jumping off the cliff, knowing she would die.

But the death she had prayed for didn't come. She had landed on this ledge. As her thoughts returned to the present, Kira didn't know if she should be grateful to be alive or cursing that she wasn't dead. She knew they would find her; it was only a matter of time. Opening her eyes, Kira watched as the night faded and the sun lit the sky. Staring at the sun, she prayed again for death. Hoped it would find her before they did. Her breath started to hiccup and go shallow. A small smile curved her lips, making her face ache. She lay there, waiting for death to take her.

Then a sound came from above. Kira stilled, fearing she had imagined it. It came again. It was her name. Someone was calling her name. She was silent, in case it was them. Her name came again, and then a voice she knew as well as her own called.

"Ria!"

Tears burned her eyes, making her vision blur.

She didn't even think she could answer, but she tried. "Here."

It came out in barely a whisper. Frustration welled in her, and tears fell faster, stinging her cut face.

Taking a deep breath, she ignored the pain racing through her and tried again. "Here." Louder this time.

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Then again. "Here!" she yelled, with an effort that hurt her throat.

Weak, she lay there waiting. But she pushed away the need for death, hoping they had heard.

Suddenly, she felt gentle hands on her, but the pain still burned. Biting her lip to still the screams, she felt herself being lifted up and up. Hands grabbed her. A roar of agony ripped the air. Kira didn't realize it was coming from her. Blackness started to overtake her. The last thing she saw before she lost consciousness was the worried and anguished faces of her best friends, Mika Kendrick and Zanna Mattis.

As she slipped into oblivion, Kira's last thought was of survival, so she could take vengeance for the hell she had been forced to live, and for the death of the man she had finally accepted as her brother.

I will find them and make them pay

Chapter 1

Fire hot enough to peel your skin off licked up her spine. Kira Winters ignored it, just like she had every other torturous pain that had racked her body for the last year. She moved smoothly, biting down on her instinct to scream. Blocking everything else out, she focused on being like water--calm, smooth, and deadly. Delicate hands that were usually more adept at soothing moved with lethal precision, in a blur of motion from right to left. The slight twinge in her still-healing shoulder made her grin grimly.

Three months ago, she would never had been able to move this way. Nine months earlier, she should have been dead. Glancing up, she met the topaz gaze of her friend Mika Kendrick. Mika was standing in front of her. Looking to left, Kira saw her other friend, Zanna Mattis, watching her carefully. The expression on Zanna's sienna face was serene and unreadable. Returning her attention to Mika, Kira noted the light sheen of sweat on Mika's caramel face. Mika nodded, and the three of them continued to move as one.

Memories battered her as her hands flowed, moving in the intricate patterns Mika had taught her. Challen laughing and teasing her mercilessly. The two of them had been still tentative in their newly-discovered relationship. Regret filled her. The time she wasted trying to work on her expansion plan instead of spending time with him weighed heavily on her.

Initially, she had been in awe that he had found her. Challen had been also. Finally, she had a blood relative--a twin brother she never knew she had. She had wanted to hate him, but found that she couldn't. Her heart was too soft for that. "Big-hearted", Challen had called it.

But a fool is what she was. A fool that gotten Challen killed. She could still see him fall, trying to protect her. She could hear his last words to her as he went over the cliff.

"Heller will p-" The rest of the words were lost in the wind. The pain was still intense as she relived every millisecond of his fall until he disappeared into the fog, gone forever. The torture she had suffered was a like a dream. She remembered David and things that she could not explain. The rescue as Mika and Zanna came to save her.

From what they had told her, the entire staff of doctors at Savoy Valley General except for one had given up on her surviving. Kira remembered that, while unconscious, she had known she was in the hospital, fighting to live. The blackness tried to claim her, but she had fought as the doctors whispered over her she would die. Using the same will with which she had prayed to die, she prayed to live. She refused to give up, knowing she had much to do.

When she finally woke, all she knew was pain. Pain of loss. Pain of body. Pain of mind. Pain of soul. Pain of stupidity. Ruthlessly, she had pushed it all aside and focused on getting better, living for one goal--vengeance. By the time she had given the police David's name, he seemed to have disappeared, and with him, the answers she needed. She hadn't told the police the other things she had to have imagined. Not about those inhuman things. It was not important in finding out why. She didn't know why or by whom she and her brother were targeted, but as the doctors whispered outside her door that she would never regain mobility in her legs or body, she vowed to find out. Gritting her teeth in determination, she tried to move. Cursing as she was unable. Until the two voices she wanted--no, *needed*--to hear, besides her brother's, spoke.

"You will not be a vegetable, Ria." Zanna's usually soft voice was harsh.

Opening her eyes, Kira had seen Zanna's sienna skin was pale, and as usual, her hair was hanging in messy, curly disarray around head. In contrast, the look in Zanna's dark brown eyes snapped with fire, while her lanky body was braced as if waiting for a fight.

"No. She'll live, and then we *will* find justice." Mika's silky tone was menacing in its intensity.

Turning her attention to Mika, Kira's breath caught at the look of despair and pain in Mika's topaz eyes. In that instant, Kira knew Mika was regretting never admitting to

Challen, or anyone else, she loved him. She knew Mika would grieve as she would, but at the moment, the pain was too much for her to bear looking at. Dropping her gaze, she took in Mika's impeccably attired figure. Her stance was more relaxed, only the stubborn look on her honey-toned face looking as if she dared Kira to disagree.

If Kira hadn't thought she would pass out, she would have laughed. Once Mika used that tone of voice, nothing would get in her way. And Mika had used the incredible clout that her wealth bought, bypassing all the protests and red tape of the hospital officials. She had taken Kira out of hospital and into her home. It wasn't until then that they told her about the funeral. She hadn't even thought of it. Not being able to go to Challen's funeral, which Zanna insisted was only a formality since there was no body found, hit Kira hard. She had slipped into a depression.

Seeing this, Zanna, already living in the guesthouse on Mika's property, moved into the main house. Between Zanna's and Mika's refusal to let her wallow, she didn't stand a chance. Zanna began working on Kira's therapy using her knowledge as a surgeon to tell Kira in blunt terms what she was up against. The scars on her face and on her body would never be completely gone, but she would walk and move again as long as she was willing to take the pain.

Mika hired managers for Kira's business and leased out her house. Then she, along with Zanna, turned a deaf ear to everyone who said Kira would never move. The one doctor from Savoy Valley General who had believed she would survive had refused to be pushed aside and came by often to check on her. Grudgingly, Mika and Zanna had worked with the doctor and had been allowed to join in with her therapy to add more support. They had gained another friend and ally for Kira's recovery. They worked to make her whole, one painstaking step at a time. Using ruthless will, Mika, Zanna and the doctor helped Kira relearn to walk, move, and live.

Challen is still dead. The shaft of pain threatened to make her collapse. Returning her attention to Mika, she barely saw her hand flash in time to counter the move. Instinct alone made her dodge. With a smooth glide, Kira slid out of the way. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zanna coil, then spring into a roundhouse kick. Swearing under her

breath, Kira spun out of the way. Too late, she realized her error. Mika grabbed her arm, then flipped her over her shoulder. With a grunt, she hit the floor.

Out of breath, she lay there and closed her eyes. She heard them drop next to her.

"What you really need is a man," Zanna said in a conversational tone.

Kira's eyes popped open in shock at Zanna's outrageous suggestion. Mika burst out laughing. Shaking her head, Kira wondered how long Zanna had been thinking of this. Sitting up, she ignored her.

"You need a man, Ria. The tension you have been carrying since Ch-"

Kira cut her eyes to her.

Zanna winced, but continued doggedly. "I'm not saying you have to marry him. Hell, I'm not even saying you should fall in love. Just get the edge off. Let loose a little."

From her earnest expression, Kira could tell Zanna was serious. She was thankful it was only them today. A call from Savoy Valley General had taken their fourth therapy partner away. She could only imagine what they would have said if her surgeon were there. Although she knew Zanna wanted what was best for her, Kira couldn't get involved with anyone. Looking at Mika, she saw the look of understanding in her eyes.

Zanna, the doctor, and Mika may have helped her get better physically, but it was Mika who understood most her need to find her brother's killer. They had made sure not to talk around the doctor. Although they were all close friends, Kira had not admitted all she had seen to anyone but Zanna and Mika. She had been afraid they would say she was crazy, but they hadn't. Mika had just watched her with her intense eyes and asked if she was sure. When she had said yes, Mika and Zanna had looked at each other, then at her. Their look let her know they believed her, no matter how improbable her story sounded.

Zanna and Mika worked tirelessly, using their respective connections to get her some answers. The police wrote off her brother's death as a random attack, but Kira knew better. No random attacker would call you by name or talk in an indescribable foreign tongue. Zanna's help was due to her faith in Kira and respect of Challen. But

when Kira looked at Mika, it was the love for Challen she never admitted aloud and the same burning need to vengeance that she saw.

Slowly getting to her feet, Kira said, "I don't need or want a man, Zanna. He'd run anyway." She laughed bitterly.

Zanna popped to her feet and got into Kira's face. "Don't even start that mess. I've told you already I won't put-"

Cutting her off, Kira said, "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm beautiful. I can do anything. Yada, yada. "

Zanna grinned, then laughed. Joining them, Mika slung her hands over each of their shoulders as they started toward the door of the huge home gym that ran the length of the bottom of the house.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Mika asked softly.

Kira knew exactly what her friend was asking. She stepped into the elevator, and it closed before she answered. "Yes."

Mika squeezed her shoulder. Zanna reached over and gave her hand a pat. Glancing at the two of them she saw the anxiety in their gaze. There was nothing she could say that would alleviate it. The door opened on her floor and she stepped out. Turning back to them, she smiled grimly and watched as they nodded. Turning toward her rooms to prepare, Kira hoped she would make it through the day.

* * * * *

Glancing at the clock, Kira almost whimpered in relief when she saw that it was nearly time to leave. Three minutes until six, and then she could get away from the pitying looks, insensitive comments veiled as sympathy, and everyone who seemed to believe she needed to be coddled. Hell she would have cursed at them all if they weren't on her staff. She regretted now that she hadn't spoken to them before she came in for this first day back at Winters. Thankfully, she had already called a meeting for the following morning.

Looking around at her pride and joy, Winters, she took in the chatter, scrumptious smells of food, and friendly atmosphere. Even with her being away for over a year, it was still the best restaurant in Savoy Valley. Over four years earlier, when she bought the vacant lot on Panthera Street in the northern part of Savoy and built Winters, the area didn't have much. Now it was considered a prime location. She wasn't arrogant enough to think it was Winters alone that made the area so sought after. It was Mika. Kira smiled.

Mika had initially tried to talk her out of buying the lot to build Winters. When Mika had realized she was determined about the location, it wasn't until after she had already broken ground that Kira found out Mika had bought up almost all the land that now housed the different businesses in the area.

When she had asked Mika why, Mika had smiled that wolfish grin she got, then replied, "I know you. When you open Winters here, I give it a year, and then everyone will want a piece of this area." At the time, Kira had shook her head and laughed. On the one year anniversary of Winters opening, Mika had sent her a painting by Dakota Willis. Kira glanced back at the painting behind her. She looked up and up. The painting covered the entire wall behind the bar. She didn't know how Mika had convinced the artist, who was known as reclusive and ornery, to make a commissioned portrait of Winters. Mika owning various galleries around the world that carried some of Dakota's pieces would have had no relevance on getting Dakota to agree to do the painting. Mika was a well-known artist also although her favorite medium was sculpting. Mika had never revealed what she had done to get Dakota to do the painting. A Dakota Willis original was very expensive, and because of that--and the size--she knew Mika had paid an outrageous price for it. Of course, it was Mika's way of telling her she was right. In a year, Panthera Street had become a hub of businesses. With Mika owning most of the land the businesses in the area were on, she was able to make sure it kept the picturesque feeling.

The beauty of the Panthera Mountains was a backdrop to the region. Kira had chosen it for that very reason. She returned her attention to the massive room and

looked across it, through the window, at the Tigris. The sun shone across the Tigris, which was a lake that ran halfway along the base of the Panthera Mountains. At the other half, the base of mountains held various paths and lot of roads. Warnings were posted on many of the paths leading up the mountains. It was too wild or untamed for anyone to venture. Those paths were strictly guarded.

When people came to the Panthera Mountains, they could explore other paths. The residents who had homes up there had to get special permits to build. The natural beauty of the area had to be in your plan. The reason she knew what it entailed was because Mika's home was in the Panthera Mountains. A hidden glen made it difficult to find Mika's home if you didn't know what to look for. Kira could just imagine herself in the room Mika had given her. She wanted to go there and get away from everyone's well meaning attempts to help her. Sighing, she returned her attention to the dining area.

The managers and additional staff Mika had hired not only kept Winters running smoothly, they had made it even more of a success. She would have to decide if she wanted to keep them all. Kira glanced at the time again, then signaled to let the other bartender she had been working with know she was leaving. Turning to exit from behind the bar, she studied the changes that had been made. Leave it to Mika to finish the renovations she had finally gotten down to her specifications. Mika had never said a word. The shock of walking into the Winters she had always envisioned had barely worn off. The dining area and private room had been totally redone, all in earth tones ranging from burnt orange to gold. The kitchens had been expanded to accommodate her new venture, Pulse Beat, a supper club. Her executive chef and pastry chef were happy with having more space.

Walking rapidly down the hall that attached the space next door she had bought before everything went to hell, Kira remembered the brief glimpse she'd had before work. The empty space she had left was already converted and ready to open whenever she wanted. The wide space for Pulse Beat was done in rich reds and black. It had a massive stage, lots of dancing space, a bar covering one wall, and lots of tables to relax

and have a good time. Taking out the keys, she unlocked the door. Stepping through, she stopped suddenly as music she hadn't been able to hear from the other side of the door echoed in the room.

Cocking her head to the side, she listened as the beauty of a song she didn't recognize wept from a saxophone being expertly played. The tempo changed, deepening into a sultry tone. Walking forward, drawn to the music, Kira's breath stalled as she took in the sight before her.

Bathed in light from the stage, he sat on a stool, one foot on a rung while the other was firmly planted on the stage. She couldn't see his face; it was in the shadows. Suddenly, he stood then shifted from foot to foot, making the muscles in his thighs, hugged by black jeans, move with a sensual innate melody. Her mouth went dry as she looked up his long body, taking in the jeans cupping every delicious detail of his muscular thighs and, from the look of the bulge in his jeans, thick and full cock. He shifted again. Dragging her eyes upward, she watched as his stomach rippled beneath a snug red t- shirt. Distantly, she heard the sax continue to play as she continued to study him.

His light toffee-colored fingers were long and thick, caressing the notes out of the sax. They moved in a blur of motion. Finally, she looked at his full mouth wrapped around the mouthpiece, blowing out the lush music. Her body tightened as she wondered what else he knew how to do with his mouth.

Don't let him be handsome, Kira prayed.

He stepped forward into the light, and she gasped. He wasn't handsome at all. He was devastating. His face was drawn into lines of harsh ecstasy. His thick masculine brows were pulled down in deep concentration, and his eyes were shut tightly, dark curly lashes fanning out while cheeks that had been carved by a master sculptor were coated in a sweat. He curled deeper into the sax, and his long, dark brown hair fell forward, obstructing his face. Kira's hands clenched in defense against the need to go on stage and brush his hair back. The music slowed and, as the last notes played, he

opened his eyes and looked right at her. Impaled by his aqua gaze, her breath stalled in her lungs, as his eyes seemed to glow.

Lowering the sax from his lips, the man spoke. "I've been waiting for you, Kira."

How does he know my name? Kira wondered.

Before she could blink the man was in front of her. Kira's heart clenched. She hadn't seen him move. Fear filled her. The only thing she had ever seen move that fast had almost taken her life. Instinct took over, and she smiled at him. The man's eyes lit with hunger, and his head started to lower. In a quick movement, she lashed out at him with her hand. The man caught it. Kira felt the strength in his hand. She jerked her arm, and he let her go. She didn't take the time to wonder why. Kira shifted her body, then slid back away from him. The man followed her in a movement as graceful as her own.

Kira ran up the wall. Ignoring the ache in her leg, she flipped to the left. She turned to look for the man. A hand flashed out and surrounded her neck. Kira grabbed at it. Her body was pushed backward into a wall. A large body crowded her, resting against her. The heat from the body seeped into her clothing. A soft purr tickled her skin. The hand around her throat tightened, and a face pressed against the side of her face. A tangy, musky scent wafted around her. Kira pulled on his fingers. The man's hold did not break.

"Shh... Kira." His breath tickled along the side of her face.

Kira turned her head and met his aqua eyes. His breath stroked along her lips. She stilled a shudder. His eyes flashed with need, then went cold.

"Who are you?" Kira croaked, glaring at him.

"You've been poking into things you shouldn't, searching for answers about Challen." The man squeezed his hand around her neck. "You should have let it be, Kira."

Kira's heart raced at the sound of Challen's name. She stilled the pain and continued to look at the man.

"So you're here to kill me."

"I wish." A rueful smile curved the man's lips.

Kira narrowed her eyes. "Who are you?"

One second, the man was choking her, and the next he stood a few feet away from her. Once again, she hadn't seen him move. Slowly, Kira stepped away from the wall, bracing herself for an attack. The man flowed back to her, a sinuous ripple of muscle. A sudden feeling of being hunted overcame Kira, making her want to run. She squashed the feeling, keeping her face blank. The man came to her and stopped, a hairsbreadth between them. He leaned down till his lips were almost on hers. Kira stilled, refusing to flinch. Some internal instinct warned her not to show any fear. The same instinct that told her to not run. The man purred, a rumble in his chest. Her pussy flooded, then clenched. Kira locked her knees.

"You've been looking for me." The man growled softly, his breath tantalizing her lips.

Shock filled Kira as she watched his eyes. The man smiled, but it was more a baring of teeth. Anger overtook her, knocking out all rational thought. Kira's hand flashed out, hitting him in the chest. The man stumbled back. Kira didn't give him time to recover. She bent her legs, then sprang into a roundhouse kick to his chest. The man fell back again. Kira ran to him and jumped, straddling him. She heard him grunt as she settled over his rock-hard stomach. Quickly, she reached behind her back and unsheathed her knife from her back sheath, then pressed it against his throat. The man's eyes flashed and an arrogant smile curled his lips. She pressed harder, then leaned into him.

"You're a hard man to find, Heller Sidorov," Kira said coldly.

"Not when I want to be found," Heller Sidorov replied, his voice a soft purr.

Kira narrowed her eyes. Heller was too relaxed for someone being held by a knife. The thought had barely registered when Heller's hand flashed up and disarmed her. Then Kira was airborne.

Chapter 2

As she flew back, Kira cursed herself for being gullible. Before she could crash into the wall, hard arms stopped her, then crowded against her. Kira felt every inch of his long body against her. She looked up at him. The amused look in his eyes made her furious. She clenched her fist.

"Uh-uh," Heller cautioned.

Kira growled. Heller snarled back. Kira stilled as the eerie sound rose from him. Fear made her immobile. She had only heard that sound once before, and it had been quickly followed by pain. Eyes wide, Kira stared at him. His eyes dilated, then changed. Her heart pounded a rapid tattoo. Then, as quickly as it started, it stopped. His deep rumble ended and he watched her, that same slightly amused look on his face.

"Challen never mentioned you were such a spitfire," Heller said.

Kira stiffened and narrowed her eyes. He spoke of Challen with such familiarity. As if he had known him.

"Yes, I know Challen," Heller replied to her unspoken question.

"I've never heard of you," Kira replied harshly.

"I've heard of you." Heller shrugged, a negligible movement.

Kira studied him. While he was on the stage, she had seen he was a delicious looking man. Up close, his sensual magnetism was even more evident; yet something about him screamed "Danger!" Heller stood still for her perusal and studied her also. Except for his breathing, he didn't twitch or move at all. His stillness was unnerving. There was a sweet musky scent coming off his body that flooded her senses. She couldn't place it. It was heady and addictive. Kira inhaled deeply, taking it in even more. Heller's eyes darkened as he lowered his head. All her senses screamed for her to move away, but she couldn't. He made a soft sound as his lips came closer to hers.

"Kira, they said- " Mika's husky voice trailed off.

"Well, well," Zanna remarked, amusement lacing her tone.

Kira jerked back from Heller. He growled softly, his breath tantalizing her lips. His chest chaffed her nipples. Kira shuddered. He grinned, a sensual promise, then flowed away. Kira locked her knees and tried to think.

A sound made her look to her left. Mika's face was cold as she held her crossbow steady on Heller. Kira knew she had it set for the center of his forehead.

Zanna's expression was equally cold as she held her whip in one hand, moving it along the floor in a slow motion. In her other hand, she held a long knife. That had been the sound Kira heard. She walked over to join her friends, moving behind them. They parted, she stepped into the center, and together, as one, the trio faced Heller.

Kira's eyebrow went up. He was smiling and relaxed as he leaned against the wall. Nothing seemed to faze him. He glanced at Zanna, then Mika before looking at Kira. There was a pleased expression on his face.

"Challen's weapons. We couldn't find them when we cleaned out his things."

"You took his things? Why?" Mika asked in a deadly cold tone.

Heller glanced back at her. "Ah, you must be Mika Kendrick. Challen said much about you."

Mika stiffened. Kira could almost feel the pain her friend was hiding.

Heller continued and glanced to the right of her. "Zanna Mattis, are you the one who has been searching in places you should not for me?"

"I don't know who the hell you are, but you seem to be asking a lot of questions," Zanna replied softly.

Kira glanced at her, shocked. Zanna was the one of them who was usually most easygoing. Heller laughed, a sensual sound that made Kira shiver. She looked back at him, and they locked gazes. Heller's eyes darkened, and he licked his lips. Kira followed the motion. He chuckled again.

Kira stiffened and glared at him. "We'll be asking the questions."

"Who is he?" Mika asked.

"Heller Sidorov."

She knew Mika and Zanna would know what the name meant. After they had gotten her well enough to want to live, they had gone back to look at the information Mika had gotten when Challen had first arrived, claiming to be Kira's brother. The memories of that time rushed over Kira.

Mika didn't take anything at face value. She believed in having facts, so she had hired a private investigator to do a full report on Challen. After getting the report, Mika had given it to her. Kira had been furious at her for interfering. Mika didn't give a damn and proceeded to tell her all the investigator had found. Zanna had told her stop being stubborn and give Challen a chance.

Too bad you didn't listen to them when they did it. Kira's thoughts returned to the present. The information was gone now. It had disappeared from Mika's safe. Mika had been furious that someone had gotten into her house.

It was then that they told her about Challen's house, that everything was gone, like he hadn't been there. Grimly, they had realized there was much more going on than they had thought. Mika had shocked them when she admitted Challen had given her something to hold for him. She had led them to a room in her home and shown them the chest Challen had given her.

Kira had questioned Mika about it, but Mika hadn't known Challen's reasons. She had just done as he asked. Kira had known it wasn't as simple as that. Mika didn't do anything she didn't want to do. But she had let it go, and they had opened the chest. Inside were various small boxes. Kira had picked up one of the boxes and studied it, wondering why Challen hadn't wanted it to stay in his own house. Suddenly, that box had heated in her hand and shifted. She had almost dropped it. Shock barely described what she felt as she stared at the sword in her hand. When Mika and Zanna had each picked up one of the boxes, it had changed into a different weapon. They didn't know what was going on, but decided to keep the weapons secret, and on them, at all times. They didn't want the weapons disappearing like the file on Challen and the things in his house. Kira was wondering how the heck they could carry weapons without them being seen when the sword in her hand had morphed back into a small box. Mika's and

Zanna's had done the same. Not questioning it, they had divided the various boxes among themselves.

Since the file on Challen vanished, Mika had contacted the private investigator again to get another copy of it. The investigator claimed not to know what she was talking about. It was then they knew someone was trying to wipe all traces of Challen away. After that, they had resumed the search themselves. They had come up with very little information. Every source the private investigator had used was gone. They had pieced together the file with what they remembered. They hadn't given up and had continued to search. Zanna was the one who had finally uncovered a name a few weeks ago, and they had been searching for him ever since--a man who didn't seem to exist, except for his name. Heller Sidorov.

"Why is it you don't seem to exist, Heller?" Kira watched Heller closely.

"I must be real, since I'm here." Heller motioned up and down his body with one tanned hand.

Kira didn't let it distract her. "We want some answers. Who are you? Why was Challen killed? Why was everything in his house taken?"

"Did you take his file from my house?" Mika asked.

Mika's tone was cool, but Kira knew better. Mika was still furious someone had broken into her house. It was her sanctuary.

"No, I didn't take the file," Heller replied to Mika's question.

"Do you know who did?" Mika countered.

"Yes, I do." Heller watched Mika, waiting for her next question.

"Tell me who."

"No," Heller replied.

Mika nodded abruptly. Although he didn't reveal it, from his expression, Heller seemed surprised.

"What? You expected me to shoot you for it?" Mika asked baitingly.

Heller blinked, then laughed. "You are much too observant, Mika."

"Kira, what is Heller trying to decide? Zanna, where will he go?" Mika asked conversationally.

Kira waited until Heller's attention was on her, then spoke. "He's trying to decide on the best way to take us off guard and disarm us before we get the answers we want."

Heller's expression sobered.

"He'll go for Mika first then me, figuring I would be distracted trying to protect Kira. He will go for Kira last, thinking she would be easily taken. Of course, he's wrong," Zanna replied flippantly.

Heller's look was questioning.

"Why is he wrong, Kira?" Mika smiled, a cold baring of teeth.

"I'm the most dangerous, and he should come at me first," Kira replied, watching Heller.

"Guerrieri, I will not underestimate you." Heller bowed his head respectfully.

"You already are. Why call us warriors in Italian when we know you're Russian?"

The surprise on his face was telling. Heller laughed.

"Habit." Heller shrugged, then continued. "Now to your questions. We have no idea why Challen was h... killed. It was more prudent to take the things in his house. And apparently, we missed something, since you have his weapons."

We? Who is we? Who is he working with? "They weren't at his house," Kira replied, not letting her confusion about his wording show. It was something she would discuss with her friends later. But she was certain this was the second time, Heller had used the word "we" when talking about going through Challen's house.

Heller glanced at Mika. "Challen left them with you."

Mika nodded abruptly, her aim never wavering from where she had her crossbow pointed.

"We did underestimate your worth to him." Heller nodded to Mika, then looked at her and Zanna. "I need you all to come with me."

"We're not going anywhere with you," Zanna countered.

"Yes, you will." Heller smiled.

Kira recognized it as the same smile he gave her before he threw her.

Kira whispered one word. "Dare."

The crack of the whip sounded, then Kira saw it flash out to Heller. He caught it in one hand, glanced at Zanna, who had wielded it, then back at Kira. Zanna hummed, then threw her knife. Heller shifted out of the way and jerked the whip, pulling Zanna to him.

He winced slightly, then shook his head as, reaching up, he pulled the arrow from between his eyes. He glanced at Mika. The look on his face was comical--a mixture of shock and exasperation.

"Hey, watch it!" he yelled. "Christ! You don't even know if I could heal an arrow to the forehead."

Zanna released the whip and stepped back to join them. They glanced at each other, then back at him.

"Well, at least we know he's not human," Zanna said.

"Whatever he is, the arrow should have knocked his ass out by now," Mika countered.

Heller's eyes crinkled, and then he laughed. "You drugged me."

They didn't even answer.

Heller put up his hands. "Hey, before you try any more moves on me, let me explain."

They waited for him to speak. Heller glanced at the tip of whip in his hand and flicked his wrist. The whip rotated around and wrapped across his shoulder, then around his chest. He glanced at the arrow and tucked it his belt. Heller ran his hand along his neck, under his hair. Kira stiffened, readying for an attack. He pulled out a chain she hadn't seen before from around his neck. Kira gasped and took a step toward him.

She stopped, reached under her shirt, and pulled out her pendant. Kira looked at the intricate hieroglyphics design that encased the sardonyx cabochons. The smooth

polished stone was in red, orange, and gold, while the design enclosing it was done in white gold and yellow gold.

She looked at Mika in time to see her lower the bow and glance at the ring on the third finger of her right hand. The intricate hieroglyphics design was slightly different than Kira's, and the stone it enclosed was a star ruby.

Kira looked at Zanna, who was touching her earrings. The moonstone was surrounded by another design. They were all gifts from Challen. He had worn a similar pendent. When he had given each of them these gifts, he had said they were for those he saw as his family.

Returning her attention to Heller, Kira moved closer. The disk he had looked almost identical to Challen's. She was sure the disk was the same black onyx with white bands that Challen had worn. She studied it and realized the design was slightly different. Nothing he could have said would have convinced them he wasn't there to harm them. But the pendent was proof that he was considered family by Challen. Kira decided she would be cautious, but give him the benefit of the doubt. She looked up and meet Heller's gaze.

"Where are we going?" Kira asked.

Mika and Zanna came over to join her. Heller didn't say a word, just turned and touched the wall behind him. The wall opened, and the parking area behind Winters came into view.

"Damn, Mika. Why didn't you tell me there was a door here?" Kira asked as she stepped outside.

"There wasn't." Mika's tone was grim.

Kira glanced at her, then at Zanna. Zanna shook her head. She looked for Heller and saw him standing next to a dark orange SUV.

"What the hell is going on?" Zanna whispered.

"I don't know, but we're going to find out. Do you believe me now about what I saw?" Kira asked.

Mika gave her a narrow-eyed look. Zanna looked sheepish. Kira chuckled, then sobered.

"Uh-huh. I know you didn't believe all I said, but I'm glad you trusted me enough to help me."

Mika and Zanna exchanged a look, then looked back at Kira.

"Let's go see what is going on," Mika agreed.

"Challen only gave this jewelry to family. And if he's not who the pendant says he is, then we contain him to get answers," Zanna added.

I'm not sure we could contain him, should he not wish it. Kira was watching Heller and saw him grin and shake his head.

"He can hear what we're saying," Kira answered.

"I know," Mika replied without hesitation.

"We want him to know," Zanna countered.

"Yes. And if we don't like his answers, then he has to deal with me." Kira's voice was soft.

Heller glanced at her. Kira returned his perusal steadily. She walked over to him. Heller opened the door for her. She stepped to the door. He shifted, crowding her. Kira refused to move away.

He leaned close to her ear and whispered, "No matter what happens, we'll be dealing with many things, Kira."

Kira stilled, then shuddered as she felt the promise he made come through in his voice.

She turned to him and looked up at his heated aqua gaze. "We'll be dealing, but only on my terms."

"We shall see." Heller's eyes went hooded.

Kira brushed against his body as she got into the SUV. Heller watched her legs as she slid in. She felt as if they were bare and he was touching them. Kira smoothed her hands over her pants, shifting the material over her ankles. Heller chuckled, then closed the door and went around the hood to the driver's side. He opened the door.

"Uh-uh. Nobody drives my car but me," Mika growled.

Heller winked at Kira, then held open the door for Mika.

"I was just getting the door for you, Mika." His grin was irreverent.

Kira rolled her eyes, knowing he had planned on driving. Zanna was laughing. Kira glanced out her window at Zanna, who was shaking her head. Zanna went to the back door. Mika got in and he closed the driver's door. Zanna gasped. Kira looked back and saw Heller holding the open door for Zanna. Zanna looked at him up and down.

"Fast thing, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," Heller's amused voice answered.

Zanna chuckled and got in. He closed the door. In moments, he was sitting in the back beside Zanna. Zanna didn't gasp this time, just glared at him.

"See, now you're bugging me. Stop doing that. Move like normal folks," Zanna griped.

"Who says how you move is normal?" Heller countered.

Zanna opened, then closed, her mouth. She sighed. "You're a pain in the butt, aren't you?"

"So I've been told," Heller replied.

Zanna chuckled.

"This is all very fascinating, but are you going to tell us where we're going?" Mika cut in.

"It would be easier if I drove." Heller glanced at Kira and winked again.

"Just give me directions," Mika countered.

"16 Panthera Mountains," Heller replied.

They looked at him, shock on their faces.

"The path to that is closed." Kira frowned.

He glanced at her and had to control the growl that bubbled in his throat. She was beautiful. Silky, touchable caramel skin covered a broad forehead, high sculptured cheeks, and a nicely rounded chin. All that paled in comparison to her eyes. Her golden eyes were so much like Challen's. But, where he felt only camaraderie and friendship

when he looked into Challen's gaze, when he looked at hers, he wanted to see passion and need. Kira smirked at him. He wanted to nibble on her lush, cupid's bow lips.

To calm himself, Heller took a breath. Too late, he realized his mistake. Despite the luscious scents of the other two women in the car, her scent reached him. It was a tantalizing mix of tangerine, vanilla, and woman. The combination was eroding his control. Kira lifted a deceptively delicate looking hand and pushed back her braid over her shoulder. He clenched his fist, wanting to loosen her auburn hair and see its golden highlights shimmer while he took her. Fighting for control, Heller answered their question.

"To you, it usually is, but not today."

They exchanged a look, and then Mika started the car and pulled out of the space. Kira turned and looked ahead. Zanna settled into her seat. Heller was glad for the silence. He tried to understand his intensity and lack of control. If his brother could see him, he would be teased mercilessly. In his family, he was usually known for his control and for being affable. People usually mistook it as not caring. Those who knew him knew better. Kira had made the same mistake as others when she took him down.

You let her take you down so you could touch her. He ignored his inner voice and stifled a chuckle as he remembered Kira's look when he threw her. The shock on her face was priceless. He had bucked, flipped to his feet, and streaked after her, catching her before she hit the wall. Even though he knew he was baiting her, he couldn't help himself. From the first time she stepped into the room, he felt her along his skin like a velvet touch. It was disconcerting. He had kept to the plan and waited for her to get close enough before looking at her. That first look had almost brought him to his knees. He had been out of town when Challen had gone to meet her. Challen had talked about her, but never mentioned how lovely she was. He glanced at Zanna, then met Mika's eyes in the rearview mirror. Challen had talked about all of them.

Heller saw what Challen had meant when he said, "They will stand for each other to the death."

When they had seen him with Kira, Mika and Zanna hadn't hesitated to come and protect her. They had faced him fearlessly. He respected them for that. Heller ran his hand over where Mika had shot him with the bow. He met Mika's gaze again in the mirror. She smiled, a cold grin. He returned it with one of his own. Mika nodded, then looked away. He slouched back into the seat and glanced up. He stilled. Kira stared at him. The pulse in her throat fluttered, yet he would never have known from the steady way she studied him. Challen had wanted him to meet Kira, but circumstances made that impossible. An image of a laughing Challen flashed in his mind. He blocked out the pain.

"The path is blocked." Mika's voice drew his attention.

Startled, he realized they had driven up the mountain and were sitting in front of 16 Panthera Mountains. Silently, he cursed himself for his inattention. It was not only foolish, but dangerous. He glanced out the window and saw a flash of teeth before it faded.

Thanks, brother. Heller sent his thoughts to his older brother.

Get your head out of your ass and pay attention.

He winced at the amused, yet chastising tone. He knew his brother was right, but it still grated. A chuckle sounded in his head.

Oh, I am so going to enjoy teasing you about this. Wait until I tell Killian.

Christ! Just shoot me now and put me out of my misery. Heller stifled a groan.

Nah. This will be much more fun. Now get back to your guests, his brother replied and cut off.

Heller looked at them and realized they were watching him. He stifled a sigh and glared at Kira. She was the reason he was so scattered. Kira's eyebrow arched, and she returned his look. Heller bit his lips so he wouldn't laugh. She was a spitfire. He liked that.

"Continue driving," Heller said.

Mika glanced at the path. A rock foundation covered with vines stood in the path. She looked back at him.

"If Alfred gets scratched, I will hurt you."

"Alfred?" Heller asked.

"Her car." Zanna laughed.

Heller looked at Mika, then started to laugh. "You named your SUV Alfred?"

Mika gave him a look. "Yes, *Heller*, my car is called Alfred."

She said his name with a sneer. Heller chuckled and motioned for her to continue on. Mika turned and drove forward slowly.

"She could have said she would kill you. Maybe she likes you," Zanna teased.

Heller glanced at her and noted the wicked look on Zanna's face.

"Shut up, Zanna," Mika growled.

Zanna blew her a kiss and settled back in her seat. Heller looked at Kira. She had a slight smile on her face. When she realized he was looking, she glared at him.

Yeah, she's a spitfire, Heller thought.

They reached the foundation and Mika slowed even more.

"Just drive through, Mika."

"There's nowhere to go!" Mika countered.

Heller sighed, loud and long. Mika muttered. Zanna laughed, and Kira watched Heller silently.

"Just press the gas."

Mika growled, and then the car shot forward.

"Mika!" Zanna screamed.

Kira continued to watch him. They reached the rock formation and went through. Mika stopped the car, breathing fast. She looked behind him. Heller followed where she was looking and saw the other side of the rock formation. The gates stretched for miles. The main gates had ancient emblems and writing. A whack on his arm made him turn. Zanna hit him again.

"Why didn't you just tell us it would open?" she grouched.

"It would have been too easy," Mika replied drily.

Heller said nothing, watching Kira. Kira turned away from him to face forward.

“Oh my!” Kira’s soft exclamation drew the other women’s attention.

Mika started to drive again, passing the manicured lawns with flowers. Paths snaked through the various gardens, then gave way gave way to wild forest farther than the eye could see. He cocked his head and heard the waterfall some distance away. A calmness overcame him. They drove for twenty more minutes, then turned another corner. The women gasped as they saw the house. It looked like a medieval castle, complete with turrets on either side, lots of windows, huge balconies, and flags flying on the top. Mika pulled in front and shut off the car. Heller got out and opened each of their doors. When the women stood next to him, he gestured to the house.

“Welcome to Kindred Manor. Follow me.” Heller strode up the stairs and opened the door.

He waited for the women to come up the stairs and step inside. Kira was last, and he crowded behind her, inhaling her scent. She stiffened and glared at him, then punched him the stomach. Heller lowered his lids and watched her. Her pulse increased. Shaking his head, he walked around her and continued to his right, around the corner, then down the hall. He didn’t turn to see if they followed, for he could hear them behind him. Reaching a door, he opened it and held it for them. They walked through, and he went in behind them, closing it. He glanced around the sitting room and was thankful to see it was empty, as he had requested.

“Wait here.” He gestured for Zanna and Mika to take a seat.

Mika opened her mouth to speak. Kira looked at her, shaking her head. Mika nodded, then walked over and sat in a chair. Zanna’s look clearly said he better not try anything, and then she went to join Mika.

Kira watched Heller. He motioned for her to follow him. She walked with him silently across the room and to the door. Heller opened it and led her into a darkened bedroom. He stopped next to the bed and watched Kira. She looked at the bed, then back at him, confusion on her face. Heller frowned, then glanced at the bed. The man looked frail. His white hair spread out below him. Heller glanced to his left and saw the

stones were still there. He reached for the night stand and shifted the stone away. Standing, he watched Kira.

Kira stared at Heller, wondering what he wanted from her. She had been aware of his every move in the car. Something about him drew her. Kira knew it was stupid to be drawn to him. She wasn't sure what he was and what he had to do with Challen. The way he moved should have warned her off. Only one man she knew had moved that way, and it had almost led to her death and had caused her to lose her brother. Pain blossomed in her. Why had Heller brought her here, to this house? To look at some strange man who looked like he was dying? She had been there, and knew what it was like to be stuck in between death and awareness.

Then a shaft of agony made her knees buckle as she caught something familiar out of the corner of her eye. Heller reached out to touch her, and she jerked back.

Turning to face the bed, her hands flew to her mouth and she gasped. Shakily, she stumbled forward and dropped onto the bed. With a hand that shook, she reached out and touched the man's hair. A raw voice she didn't even recognize as her own gasped.

"Challen."

Chapter 3

Kira gripped a part of his hair and lifted it off the bed. There was no mistaking the hair. It was golden blond. She had teased Challen about having such pretty hair. He had grabbed her and given her a noogie for it.

Dropping the hair, she touched his hand. The strong fingers were the same. Raising his hand to her cheek, she closed her eyes at the warm feel of his palm against her face. Cautiously, she raised her eyes, afraid that what she had seen was false. Kira gasped as she watched his face. Reaching up, she traced the familiar lines, so much like her own-- broad forehead, firm masculine cheeks, aquiline nose, lips that usually laughed, and a rounded chin. Tears burned her eyes as she looked at him. She could remember his eyes that were as golden as his hair, so striking against his caramel skin. She had told him he had stolen all the gold from her hair, leaving her only the highlights. Challen had laughed, a rich sound, and said he would share it with her. Then he had given her another noogie.

A movement made her glance back. Heller stood behind her. Kira lowered Challen's hand to her lap.

"Why didn't you te-" she began.

"Kira, we're through-" Mika's voice trailed off as she stepped in view of the bed. Disbelieving, she walked over and looked down. "*Challen.*"

Mika's knees buckled, and Kira caught her before she fell. A sound of agony came from Mika. Kira rocked her as she wailed. Feeling a hand on her shoulder, Kira looked up at Zanna, who had tears in her eyes. Kira glanced past Zanna at Heller. There was pain on his face. When he realized she was watching him, he stiffened, turned, and left.

Zanna came to the other side of Mika. Kira linked fingers with Zanna, and they hugged Mika between them. Mika continued to cry, a harsh, broken sound. Kira held on, letting her mourn. Mika was the only one of them who hadn't cried at all when Challen died. Instead, Mika had thrown herself into finding who had killed him. Mika had understood Kira's pain, but refused to face her own. Now, knowing Challen wasn't dead, Mika was falling apart. Eventually, her shudders stopped and her crying ceased.

"I'm okay." Mika's voice was hoarse.

They slowly released her. Mika got off the floor and tugged on her jacket. Not looking at the bed again, Mika went to the window across the room and stared out. Kira looked at Zanna. Zanna touched her hand, then went to Challen.

"You gave us over a year of mourning, Goldilocks," Zanna said, then leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Zanna looked at Kira, then nodded at Mika. Kira nodded. Zanna touched her shoulder and left. Kira glanced at the bed, then back at Mika. Crossing the room to stand next to her, she waited for Mika to speak. Mika remained silent. Kira glanced at her and saw the contained look on her face.

"He's alive, Mika. Challen is alive," Kira said.

Mika was silent so long Kira didn't think she would say anything.

"It doesn't matter." Mika's tone was despondent.

It was a tone Kira hadn't heard from Mika before. Kira glanced at her again, then decided to just ask what had been bugging her ever since Challen had come to town.

"Have you and Challen... um..."

Kira bit her lip, unable to voice the question. Mika looked at her.

"Are you afraid to ask if I had sex with you brother?"

"God, Mika. Okay, yes. Did you sleep with Challen? Damn it. Only you would make me have to say it," Kira groaned.

Mika laughed, a harsh sound. "Yes, you have to spell it out. And no, I never slept with him. Christ. He barely even touched me." Mika smiled bitterly.

"I thought you lo-" Kira stopped herself before she said it.

"Loved him." Mika finished for her.

Kira nodded.

Mika laughed again, that same harsh sound. "How can you love a man who you never touched, except as a friend? How do you love a man who, after time, wouldn't even touch you at all? Who treated you as if your very presence was painful? Who seemed to do everything to stay away from you? Who ma -" Mika cut off, staring out the window.

Kira looked at her and reached to touch her. Mika gripped her arm, then let go, still looking out the window.

"It doesn't matter, Kira. I'm happy for you that Challen is alive," Mika said woodenly.

Kira glanced back at her brother, then at her friend. Mika didn't look at her. Kira turned and went back to the bed. She touched Challen's hand softly.

"I love you, brother, and I will get some answers. And I know just who to ask." Kira turned and went to the door.

She stopped a moment in front of it and took a breath. She glanced back. Mika stood next to the bed, her hand hovering just over Challen's face. Kira bit off a gasp as she watched the pain and longing on Mika's face.

“How do you love a man you don’t even know?” Mika’s anguished voice echoed in the room. She lowered her hand until it was almost touching Challen’s lips. “Oh God, I don’t know how, but I fucking love you, Challen. But God, I hate you for not letting me love you. I hate you for leaving me, although you were never mine.” Mika drew her hand back without touching him and knelt next to the bed, putting her head on her folded hands.

Silently, Kira watched her, then turned to the door.

Walking away swiftly, Heller left them with Challen. Guilt choked him. He had wanted to go and tell Kira her brother was sort of alive. But they all had decided it was best she not know. Let her heal and move on with her life. If Challen survived, he could decide to go see her or not. They had known eventually Kira and her friends would start to search for answers to what happened, but they never expected them to actually get anything. When the flag had gone up that they had Heller’s name, to say they were shocked was putting it mildly. After discussing it with the others, Heller had been sent to see how much they knew. They left it to his discretion if he told them that Challen was alive. The pain and anger on Kira’s face when she’d looked at him ripped hurt.

When Mika had fallen apart, he had almost lost it himself. He knew she had feelings for Challen, but hadn’t known how deep they were. Challen hadn’t let on, and he had to have known. Heller swore viciously. He understood why Challen hadn’t made Mika his, and he disagreed with Challen about it. Heller hoped Challen would wake so he could knock some sense into him.

The door opened behind him. Heller braced to face her. He turned and was disappointed and somewhat relieved that it wasn’t her. Zanna came to him, a determined look on her face. She vibrated with fury. Heller stood his ground and waited for her to reach him.

Zanna stopped a few steps away from him. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't kill you."

Heller was shocked. From all he knew of them, he had expected that reaction from Kira or Mika, but never Zanna. He looked at her, realizing he had made an assumption based on the files he'd read on each of them. It wasn't something he usually did. He was off kilter and didn't know why.

"Answer me when I am fucking talking to you!" Zanna stepped closer to him.

"I've got this, Zanna," a soft, deadly voice cut in.

His attention shifted to Kira. She walked over to him, a sway in her hips. She stood in front of him and crossed her arms under her breasts. Heller didn't look at all the luscious cleavage she showed. There was aggression in her stance. He glanced to her side and realized Zanna had left. He hadn't even heard her go. His focus was way off. Kira shifted, he realized when he heard a brush of cloth, and he glanced at her. Her scent came to him, coating his senses. She was the reason he couldn't think clearly.

"Explain," Kira said softly.

Heller heard the demand in her tone. He took a breath to steady himself.

"On that day, I was on my way to meet you."

"You were?" Kira was surprised.

"Challen had wanted us all to meet, but we were ... out of town for a while--me, my brother, and our cousin. We had just gotten back, and Challen called. He let us know where you were headed, and we agreed to meet you there." He stopped, remembering Challen's happiness that day. "We were waiting on the bluffs above the cliffs, giving you and Challen some time alone, when we saw the attack." The fear and rage he had felt that day came back to him. "We ran as fast as we could to get to you and Challen." He looked at Kira. "Do you remember much about that day?"

"Some." Kira's reply was clipped.

Her response didn't surprise him. At first, they had only assumed she remembered, but when they started poking around, they knew she had. The expression on her face stopped him from asking what she remembered. He could still hear her screams, then nothing. Heller clenched his fist, then continued.

"When we got there, we started fighting to get to you and Challen. They had already thrown him over the cliff, but we knew he would be fine. They were good, but we were better. We took a lot of them out, yet somehow they took you away somewhere. We figured it was on the cliffs, but couldn't find you. My brother and cousin went to track them, while I went for Challen." His mind flashed to Challen, lying so still, half in and half out of the ocean. "Challen had dragged himself out of the sea, but he was so still, just lying there. There was so much blood. So much blood." He closed his eyes against the memory, then opened them again. Heller could see the pain in Kira's eyes and knew it mirrored his own. "I pulled him to shore and called for help. I was afraid to move him, afraid because he was absolutely motionless." He went silent for a moment, then spoke again. "We got him out and brought him here. It was too dangerous to take him anywhere else. We didn't have any idea who had tried to kill him. And we had no idea who had taken you, or where."

Kira watched him silently.

"I left Challen here with the healers and went to help find you. It took us days, days it shouldn't have. Something wasn't right. Your friends were also searching for you. To keep an eye on them and protect them, we joined with them to help find you. Challen had told me of your close bond with Mika and Zanna, but seeing it was... They were impressive. Mika was an organization general, and Zanna was filled with such purpose. Put the two of them together, and, well, let's just say even my cousin was impressed. When we finally did find them, we realized they had shielded themselves from all of us. It shouldn't have been possible. You got away from them. We don't know how, but you

did." He shuddered, remembering. "The first sight of you, on the side of the cliff-" He stopped.

"Finish it," Kira said, a closed look on her face.

Heller tried to keep his tone expressionless. "You were lying there, as still as Challen, and covered with blood. I wasn't even sure if you were alive. When I touched you, you grabbed my hand and looked at me. Then, although you were weak, you fought me. It wasn't until I showed you my pendant that you calmed and passed out. I took you to the top of the cliff and gave you to my brother, and then we let you go with your friends to Savoy Valley General. You're human, and they didn't think you would survive. I came back here and waited to see what would happen with you and Challen. They had gotten him stable, and he slowly got better, but no one could wake him."

He stopped and smiled. "You got better too, and woke. Mika and Zanna took you out of the hospital and let no one stop them from getting you better."

"Why isn't Challen awake?"

He shook his head. "We don't know why. He's in some sort of coma, alive but not awake. We've tried to get into his mind, but we're shut out."

He watched Kira carefully to see her reaction. Her expression hadn't changed.

"Why don't Mika and Zanna remember you?"

"Savoy Valley doesn't let those who shouldn't know about what the town is," Heller replied. He waited to see what she would ask next.

Kira's next question didn't disappoint him.

"What is it about Savoy Valley we're not supposed to know? What makes Savoy Valley what it is?"

Heller stifled a grin at how carefully she worded her questions. "It's a place where both humans and what you would call supernatural beings can exist together, where we can be ourselves and not hide it. Well, we don't hide from everyone, just the TR--temporary residents--who didn't know about Savoy Valley. They're blocked until they undergo a test of sorts."

Kira's eyebrow rose. "A test?"

"Yes, a test. When a person has been here for a year or more, they are put to a test to see how they will react to a demonstration of someone not quite like them. The time and the way they're tested varies according to each case. Sometimes it's someone close to the person, and sometimes it's just random."

Kira frowned. "What happens after this test?"

"If they do badly, they're removed from Savoy Valley and their memory wiped of all knowledge of its existence. They will never be allowed to return. Those who accept stay and go on about their daily lives, except they have knowledge of what makes Savoy Valley what it is."

"Is Savoy being this 'super town' the reason there are two mayors, police chiefs, and most other town officials?" Kira's question was more curious.

"*Super town?*"

"What do you call yourself?"

"Heller," he answered, deadpan.

Kira arched an eyebrow, and her lips twitched.

He answered her. "Other beings. And to answer your other question, yes, there is a human and other in most of our higher offices in the town. Things that can't be handled by the human officials are handled by the other and vice versa."

"So to sum this up: Savoy Valley is a safe haven of some sort, and when the 'humans' "--she made the quote sign with her hands--" are tested, those who pass the test and are accepted stay, but those who don't are uprooted from their lives and moved God knows where."

"Sort of. We set these people up with the same things as they had here. It's for everyone's safety that we move them," Heller replied.

"Okay. You've told me about Savoy and Challen, but not what I need to know." Kira's tone went soft and intense. "What does Challen being attacked have to do with Savoy Valley, and what do you want from me?"

Heller contained his surprise. He hadn't expected her to make the connection. A small, smug grin was on Kira's face, and the look in her eyes made him know she figured he hadn't expected her question. He kept underestimating her.

"Challen is important to Savoy Valley. We need your help in flushing out who tried to kill him. Your investigation had come to our attention, and that means whoever tried to kill Challen is probably also aware of it." Heller paused and studied her. "Will you help us?"

Kira answered without hesitation. "Yes. What will I have to do?"

"What will we have to do?" Mika's tone was soft but packed with determination.

"All of us," Zanna added.

Heller had heard them come to stand in the doorways when he started to explain about Challen and Savoy, Mika from the bedroom and Zanna from the hallway outside. They had counted on all of the women wanting to help.

"All of you," Heller agreed. "We'll meet at Winters tomorrow at 10 a.m. to talk about the details. Until then, make yourselves at home. My home is yours. Visit with Challen as long as you like."

"Challen will be moved to my house." Mika's tone brooked no argument.

Heller took in the closed look on her face. Kira and Mika exchanged a look, and then Kira looked back at him.

"Yes. We want him moved."

Heller thought of arguing about his safety, but the looks on their faces made him change his mind.

"We'll make arrangements to move him. Someone will have to put stronger wards on your house, Mika."

"What the hell does that mean?" Mika demanded.

"Challen put shields on your house to protect you all. All of your houses were protected, at least until Zanna sold hers and moved into your guesthouse. When he was hurt, we reinforced those at your house, Mika. You sold Kira's, so it wasn't necessary to do anything to those. The wards aren't strong as the ones here. We need to keep it quiet that he's alive."

Mika nodded abruptly. He nodded to them, then went to the door. Zanna stepped out of his way, going past him to join the other women. He heard Mika and Zanna go back into the bedroom. Heller paused in front of the door.

"I knew you would not die, Kira Winters," Heller said softly.

"Why?" Kira asked, just as softly.

"Despite all your injuries, you fought me when you thought I was the enemy."

He glanced back at Kira, standing in the center of the room with the sunset washing her in colors of red, orange, and yellow. She was a beautiful warrior. Her stance was proud, and the determination in her eyes unmistakable.

"Death couldn't claim you, since you had already been claimed." Heller turned and left.

Striding down the hall, he stopped a bit away from the room. He put his hand on the wall and took a breath. The scent of blood filled him as the memories battered him. The thought of Challen and Kira, both so bloody, still haunted him. Raising his head, he shook it off, walking down the hall and through the open doors to one of the balconies. Standing at the rail, he looked out at the oasis he had created for himself. He sucked in a breath of the sweet air and gripped the rail.

I won't let anything happen to Kira, Challen. I will protect her with the last breath in my body.

Kira watched Heller leave. She thought of all he had said, and things he hadn't. There was more to what was going on than he said.

"He didn't tell us everything," Mika said behind her. As usual with Mika, it was a statement.

"Yes." Kira glanced at her as she came next to her.

"You're attracted to him," Mika said matter-of-factly.

Kira didn't try to deny it. "It doesn't matter. I can't afford to be distracted."

"That's a lie. That's not the only reason you want to keep your distance," Mika countered.

"No, it's not."

"Kira," Mika said softly.

Kira looked at her. Mika's look of sympathy made her breath shudder.

"What is he Kira?"

Kira shook her head. "I don't know, but his movement reminds me of D-" She couldn't say his name.

Mika gripped her hand, squeezing it. Kira returned the gentle pressure, pushing away the memories. They stood silently for a few moments.

"Heller doesn't seem anything like him. Don't let what he did stand in your way." Mika's voice went soft. "Don't let anything stand in your way."

Kira looked at her and saw regret on her face. The look of longing on Mika's face as she stood over Challen was fresh in her mind.

"Mika, it's not too late," Kira said.

"Yes it is. When this is all done, it will be over. I can-" Mika stopped, shook her head, and then continued bitterly. "Do you know I dream about him every night? *Every night*. We walk, talk, and laugh, yet even in my dreams, we don't touch. Even in my dreams, he doesn't touch me. "

Mika took a shuddering breath. Kira didn't know what to say. She squeezed Mika's hand.

"We'll get this done, and everything will be fine." Mika sighed.

"Kira, you've got to see this," Zanna said.

Kira turned to look at her as she came toward them, holding a sheaf of paper. Zanna showed her what she was looking at. Kira looked at the name on the papers, then back up at Zanna, then over at Mika. She looked at the name again, unable to believe.

"She couldn't have known," Zanna said.

Kira looked up at Zanna. "We'll ask her before we assume."

Zanna nodded, then went to sit down to continue reading.

Mika's question caught Kira's attention. "What are you going to do about Heller?"

Kira said nothing, having no answer. Mika squeezed her hand and went to join Zanna on the couch. Kira turned, went to the window, and looked outside.

* * * * *

What are you going to do about Heller? The question still echoed in Kira's head as she stood behind the hostess desk at Winters the next morning. The other hostess had gone to the back to get some more menus. Since there was a lull of people coming in, Kira turned and straightened the menus they had. Kira rolled her neck, tiredness weighing on her. She had spent most of the night with Challen, then gone to Mika's house to get some rest. She had hated leaving Challen.

"Well, well, look who's here," a voice said.

Kira winced, recognizing the voice. Turning, she locked eyes with dark brown.

"Hey, Cami," Kira said as she walked over to stand in front of her, the hostess desk between them.

Camilla Maxwell didn't respond, just looked her over from head to foot. Absently, Kira noted the man with his hand around Cami's waist. Kira waited for what she would say. Cami was usually blunt. But instead of speaking, Cami pushed open the waist-high door and stepped behind the counter, pulling Kira into a big hug. Shocked, Kira stiffened, then relaxed. Cami was shaking. Kira patted her back, then looked at the

silent man who was standing with an amused look on his face. She wondered who he was. Cami released her and looked her over again.

"It's so good to see you, Kira." Cami narrowed her eyes. "I would have come yesterday, but Mika decreed that we shouldn't overwhelm you."

Kira bit her lip, trying not to laugh. She could imagine the conversation. Cami and Mika had a love-hate relationship. Specifically, Cami hated to be told what to do, and Mika loved to tell her. They bickered whenever they got together. Kira waited for Cami to say something else. Cami hugged her again, then went back out to stand by the man. The man put his hand on her waist again, and Cami glanced at him with an arched eyebrow. The man chuckled and bumped hips with her. Cami growled softly, then looked back at Kira.

"It's really good to see you, Kira."

"What have you done with Camilla Maxwell?" Kira demanded.

"What? I can't be happy to see you?" Cami glared.

Kira snorted. "Yeah, but where are the questions and snide comments?"

"Hey, a girl can change," Cami defended.

Kira looked at Cami in disbelief, then at the man. "Are you responsible for this change?"

The man said nothing, just grinned. Cami hit him in the stomach, then glared at Kira.

"You act like I don't care, Kira. Jem and I asked about you and came to see you in the hospital. We even tried to come by Mika's house, but she wouldn't let us see you."

Kira knew Mika had kept everyone away at her request. She hadn't wanted anyone to see her. Kira ran her hand under her hair and touched the scar below her ear, under her hairline. It was the only one visible, though there were more on her body.

"I know you did, Cami, but I didn't want to see anyone," Kira said softly.

Cami nodded, understanding in her eyes. Kira shifted and reached out with her hand. Cami gripped her fingers and squeezed.

"Thanks for coming, Cami. Let me get you a table, and I'll come by later," Kira said.

Cami looked around the filled dining area. "Wow. The renovations look good."

"Thanks. Mika made sure everything was done. I heard congrats are in order to you and Zora. You opened a catering business. Delicious Surrenders, right?" Kira said.

A huge smile came over Cami's face. "Yes. It's doing wonderfully. I wanted to wait until you got back before I made arrangements to use some of your private rooms for my clients."

"You didn't need to wait for me. Mika could have helped you with that," Kira replied.

Cami gave her a look. "I waited for you. I'll call you later this week to set up an appointment."

Kira understood the look. Mika and Cami together were like oil and water. She looked at the man again.

"You're being rude, Cami." Kira gestured to the man.

Cami glanced at him, a wicked grin on her face. "Oh, this is Bobby."

"Camilla," the man rumbled.

Cami laughed. She glanced around again. "No reason to seat us. I see Jem and Chad. We'll go on over."

Cami walked away before she could reply, pulling the man behind her. He pulled her to a stop, then leaned in and kissed Cami's neck. Cami laughed and swatted him, and then they continued on to Jem and the man she assumed was Chad. She hadn't seen Jem come in. Jem saw her and waved. Kira waved in return.

"Kira!" a sultry alto called.

Kira turned her attention to the door. Dr. Aurora Garrwick-Ha'gan rushed to the desk, a huge smile on her face. Aurora came through the door and hugged her. Kira laughed. Aurora wasn't just her doctor when she was in the hospital. Aurora and Dionne Lukas, her friend and fellow surgeon, were the only ones who believed Kira would survive. When she had left the hospital, Aurora and Dionne had bullied their way into Mika's house to help take care of her. They had impressed her with their tenacity and refusal to leave. They had become friends because of it.

"I saw Nigel come in earlier and figured you would be in," Kira said.

Aurora let her go, and a naughty smile beamed on her face. Kira guided her outside the door, and they stood in front of the desk. Aurora looked around for her new husband, then blew him a kiss across the room. Kira followed her gaze. Nigel Ha'gan's long dreadlocks were pulled back in a ponytail, leaving his beautiful sun-kissed skin, a clue to his Native American descent, bare. Although he was too far away, Kira remembered the raw, chiseled masculine perfection of his features when she had gone to their wedding. It was the only time she had ventured out before she healed. Only because of her close friendship with Aurora did she go.

Kira looked around the dining area and saw the table with the mayors and police chiefs. She wondered which was human and which was other. They looked at her and nodded their heads. She returned their greeting and continued her perusal. As she looked around the dining area, Kira tried to figure out who was human and who

wasn't. She couldn't tell. She looked back at Aurora and saw the love on her face.

Aurora glanced back at her, and then her eyes narrowed.

"You know," Aurora said.

Kira was unsure what she meant. Aurora came closer and studied her.

"You know about Savoy Valley."

Kira's eyes widened as she realized Aurora knew about the town, that Aurora might be one of them.

"That there are different beings here than us," Aurora said.

Her statement confirmed that Aurora knew, and that she was actually human.

"Yes, I know," Kira whispered.

Aurora came closer to her. "Why are you whispering?"

Kira glanced around. "So no one can hear."

Aurora looked startled, then laughed. "You could shout it, and no one who isn't supposed to know will hear it."

"Really?" Kira asked.

Aurora nodded. "Yes. Nigel explained it to me. Unless you know, things magical or strange can happen around you without you ever realizing it. It's muffled and kept from your sight."

Kira processed what Aurora had said. She glanced at Nigel again, and saw him looking at them. Aurora followed where she looked and smiled. She turned back to Kira and came closer.

"Nigel is a god," Aurora said.

Kira's mind flashed to his face and she replied. "Uh-huh. I'll say he is. Oh yeah."

Aurora looked at her and laughed again. "See, now I should be pissed at you for ogling my hubby, but he is yummy, after all. But seriously, he is a god. Well, a retired god, actually."

"A god, as in Zeus and Olympus and all that? And he retired? They can do that?" Kira was stunned.

She studied him with new eyes. Nigel smiled at her.

"Yeah, a god. And they all retired, leaving the kids in charge."

"Even Zeus?"

Aurora gave her a funny look. "Yeah, Zeus too. Zeus makes the most fabulous crab cakes, and Aphrodite's caramel cheesecake is to die for." Aurora's eyes were twinkling.

Kira's eye narrowed, then widened. "Zeus and Aphrodite are cooking in my kitchen!" She tried to exclaim quietly as she waved toward the kitchen.

Aurora laughed and nodded. "Yeah, from what Nigel tells me, Zeus always loved to cook, and when he retired...well, he needed something to do. Aphrodite needed something to keep her out of trouble, or at least try." Aurora's look was exasperated.

It piqued Kira's curiosity. "Trouble?"

Aurora shook her head. "Not now, but remind me to tell you how I met Aphrodite."

Kira nodded, then started to think. She glanced back to where the mayors and police chiefs sat, then back at Aurora.

"Christ! That makes one of our chiefs of police Ares. As in the god of war."

Aurora nodded.

"I know he's Zeus's son and all, but is that smart? Putting someone who likes anarchy in charge of law?"

Who better than the lawless to know how to contain the law. A sensual voice filled her mind.

Kira jumped and looked over at the table again. Ares had a smile on his face. She narrowed her eyes. Ares could project thoughts into her mind? Aurora distracted her.

"Hey, have you thought of dating yet?"

She looked at Aurora and groaned. "Not you, too."

Aurora looked confused. "I don't know what you mean, but my stepson--you remember him from the wedding?"

Kira remembered the man, who looked a lot like his dad.

She asked, "You mean the one who looked like he wanted to cry when you were getting married, and then, when they asked if anyone objected, his father gave him a look?"

Aurora laughed. "You noticed, huh? Yep, that's him. Nathan wants to get married, and you would be perfect."

Kira looked at the devilment in Aurora's eyes. "Well, before you marry us off, what god is he?"

"The god of nurture."

Kira knew she hadn't heard right. "Did you say nature?"

"Nope. Nurture."

Kira didn't even know what to say.

"I had the same reaction. " Aurora laughed, then asked, "So how about me setting you up?"

"She doesn't need a set up, Aurora," a delicious voice said behind her.

Kira stiffened, then turned to meet Heller's fierce aqua gaze.

Chapter 4

Kira couldn't tear her eyes away from him. She hadn't thought it was possible, but Heller looked even more decadent today than he did yesterday. His loose black shirt tantalized her with a view of his magnificent chest, while his slacks hugged his thighs. The boots he wore came up to his knees. He was a wicked piece of male flesh. Kira licked her lips. Heller watched the movement.

"Heller." Aurora's voice snapped Kira out of her daze.

Aurora reached out for Heller. Heller looked away and took Aurora's hands, kissing them.

"Aurora, it's nice to see you again." Heller glanced at Kira, his eyes burning with heat.

Kira took a breath. Heller smiled, a small grin, then looked back at Aurora.

"When are you leaving that old man and running away with me?" Heller asked.

Aurora rolled her eyes and chuckled. As Heller stood there, a wreath of flowers appeared on his head. Kira blinked. They hadn't been there before. Aurora touched Heller's cheek.

"You look good in daisies." Aurora stifled another laugh.

Heller looked confused, then touched his head. He took down the wreath, looked at it, then glared across the room.

"*Nigel.*"

Kira glanced at Nigel and saw him finger wave at Heller. Heller growled. Aurora laughed. Heller turned back to Aurora and kissed her cheek. Aurora swatted him. Kira watched the easy camaraderie between them.

"Aurora, do you know anything about the patient at Heller's?" Kira asked.

Aurora looked startled by her question, then glanced at Heller. Heller watched Kira, but nodded.

Aurora looked at her. "Yes. I've been treating him. I can't te-"

Kira cut her off. "He's my brother."

Aurora frowned and shook her head. "Are you feeling okay? He doesn't look like the pictures I've seen of Challen."

"He's my brother," Kira repeated.

Aurora glanced between her and Heller, realization dawning.

"Oh, Ria, I didn't know. I would have told you." Aurora reached for her.

Kira took her hand and held it. "I know, Aurora, I know. It's okay."

Aurora frowned. "No, it's not." She turned to Heller. "Does Nigel know who it is?"

Heller nodded. Aurora's eyes narrowed, and then she looked at Nigel. He was standing.

Aurora squeezed Kira's hand, then said. "Me and the god need to have a little conversation about secrets."

Aurora stomped off toward Nigel. Nigel winced. Kira watched the diners around the room and saw some of them looked amused. She knew they were the ones who knew about the town.

"How did you know she didn't know?" Heller asked quietly.

"She wouldn't have let me mourn for him and not told me," Kira replied as she turned to him.

Heller nodded. "I better go help Nigel out."

Heller sauntered off. Kira checked her watch and saw it was only 9:30 a.m., and not time for them to meet. Zanna and Mika hadn't arrived yet, but they had time. Kira went back behind the hostess desk. She nodded to Syesha Johnson, one of the front desk hostesses.

"We have lots of reservations all day," Kira said.

"Yeah, it's going to be a busy day." Syesha studied her.

"You have something on your mind?"

"You know about Savoy Valley." Syesha grinned at her.

Kira frowned. She studied Syesha and wondered how she knew.

"I'm a Season Warden," Syesha said matter-of-factly.

Kira was shocked. She would never have guessed Syesha wasn't human. Kira studied the stunning caramel-skinned woman. Syesha's pale grey eyes had an exotic slant; they were offset by high cheekbones, full lips, and a slightly rounded chin. Her light auburn hair was in a braid, and pinned in an intricate design at the back of her head.

"What's a Season Warden?"

"Watch." Syesha came closer to her, then glanced out the door.

Kira looked out at the bright and sunny day. Suddenly, a loud crackle came, and rain poured down. Kira's mouth dropped open, and she blinked. She looked to both sides of the man standing outside. The rain was only falling on him. The man looked up, then back, then forward. With purpose, he started toward the door to Winters. The rain followed him.

Kira looked at Syesha and saw the fierce smile on her face.

"Are you doing that?" Kira asked.

"Hmmm? Yes." Syesha glanced at her. "I help protect the seasons, make sure things stay the way they should. Change of seasons and all that. I report to the Weather Maven in charge of this area. Oh crap. I've got to go before he comes inside." Syesha looked at her pleadingly.

Kira looked at the man striding toward the door, then back at Syesha, who had that puppy dog look on her face.

"Come back in ten minutes." Kira jerked her thumb in a scam movement.

"Thanks, boss." Syesha chuckled.

She faded, her laughter trailing after her. Kira tried to not be freaked out that she had just disappeared.

"Where is she?" a cold male voice asked.

Kira looked at the irate man and bit her lip to keep from laughing. He was soaked. His t-shirt was clinging to his muscular frame, and his usually neatly braided hair was starting to curl. He looked cute.

"Who, Vami?" Kira put on a confused look.

Vami Ballou gave her a look. "Don't act like you don't know who I'm talking about, Kira."

He raised his hands and ran them over his hair. As he touched it, it smoothed out and was dry. Kira stifled a gasp.

"Where is she?" Vami asked again.

"I don't know where she went," Kira responded absently, wondering what he was.

"Since this is your place, I'll let it be for now," Vami said, then looked at her. "I'm a Zerican Sentinel from the Seviza sector within the Karvic Kingdom--although I'm retired."

"The who? What?" Kira squeaked.

The usually somber Vami looked at her and laughed. Kira narrowed her eyes, not appreciating it. He calmed down, continuing to meet her gaze. Kira tried not to gasp. His eyes were usually a deep brown. Now, the brown was ringed with pale green, hazel, and grey.

"Wh..at.. happ...ened to yo...ur...eyes?" Kira cursed herself for stuttering.

Vami looked amused. "You know about Savoy Valley."

"Christ! Was it in a newsletter or something? Does everyone know?" Kira demanded.

"Yes, it was, and only those who already know about Savoy Valley know," Vami said somberly.

"There's a newsletter?" Kira was surprised.

He laughed again, eyes twinkling. "No. We just know when someone finds out."

Kira glared at him. "That's not funny at all. And why are you so smiley today? In all the time you've been coming in here, I haven't seen you smile, much less laugh. The only joy you seem to get is matching wits with Syesha."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Is my usual table available?" His face darkened.

"Yes." Kira didn't know what to think of his abrupt change of mood.

Vami nodded and turned to leave.

"Vami, will every... um... other being tell me what they are?" Kira called after him.

He turned to look at her, a wicked grin on his face. Kira stifled another gasp. The look changed his face from handsome to sexy as all hell.

"No, not all of them. Some will because they like you, or just want you to know, and others just to see your reaction," Vami answered.

His answer cleared her head of how he looked.

"Why did you tell me?" Kira frowned.

"Guess." He winked.

Kira laughed, shaking her head.

"You're lucky I like you, or I'd be pissed you let Syesha use me for her little demonstration," Vami said, and walked away.

"But I didn't," Kira defended.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. I believe that," he said, and kept walking.

Kira shook her head, turned, and picked up the papers on the desk, studying the reservations for later.

"Kira." The soft voice reminded her of dark bedrooms and carnal touches.

Kira's hands shook as she looked up into William Chadwick's face. William's pale grey eyes studied her carefully.

"William," Kira said happily.

William chuckled and leaned over to kiss her cheek. He took her hands in his own and pulled her gently from behind the counter. He studied her. Kira stifled a shiver. It was an instinctive reaction to William. There was just something about him. The very contained surface he had made her curious to find out more, yet she wasn't sure if she really wanted to know. It was a baffling reaction.

"You look good." A pleased smile was on the reserved man's lips.

"I'm doing well. I-"

"William." Heller's voice interrupted her.

William's eyes shifted to behind her shoulder. Kira stiffened.

"Heller." William looked back at her. "I'm here to meet my brothers and their ladies. You've never met Robert or Chad, have you?"

"No. What name is the reservation under?" Kira asked.

William glanced around and gestured. "Don't worry. I see them over there."

Kira followed to where he gestured and was surprised to see the men who were with Cami and Jem beckoning him to join them. She glanced at William.

"The men with Cami and Jem are you brothers?"

William nodded. "You know Jem and Cami? What a small world."

"Yes, it is," Kira agreed.

William laughed, a husky sound that made her shiver. Heller growled. Kira ignored him.

"I'll see myself over." William threw an amused glance over her shoulder. "As always, it was pleasure to see you, Heller."

William turned and walked away. Kira watched him. The women in the room followed him with their eyes. His innate grace and the way he moved tickled her memory. She narrowed her eyes.

"How do you know William Chadwick?" Heller demanded behind her.

Kira didn't like his tone. She turned to face him.

"Why do you want to know?"

Heller studied her a moment, then opened his mouth to speak.

"Just in time. Is Zanna here yet?" Mika's voice interrupted.

Kira looked away from Heller. Mika looked impeccable, as usual, but Kira could see she was tired. They had stayed up late talking and planning.

"No, she's not here yet. She has ten minutes." Kira looked at her watch.

Mika nodded, then glanced between Kira and Heller. Mika looked back at Kira, a completive expression on her face.

"William's here," Kira said to distract her.

"*William's* here? Where is he?" Mika asked.

"He's over there with his brothers and their girlfriends." She gave Mika a look, then continued. "One of which is Cami. Why didn't you tell me Cami and Jem are dating Chadwick's?"

"I did tell you. Actually, Jem is engaged to Chad, not dating him. And Lord help Robert, who's dating Cami and trying to convince her to marry him." Mika shuddered.

Kira laughed. "Cami seems to have mellowed."

"*Cami?*" Mika looked at Kira as if she was crazy.

"You're bad." Kira shook her head. "And you only told me they were involved, but not with whom. I would have remembered if you had mentioned they were with William's brothers."

"Shoot. I probably tried to block out the thought of Cami dating a Chadwick. Or just Cami all together." Mika got a wicked grin on her face. "I'd best go say hi to William." Mika rubbed her hands together. "And bug Cami. Meet you at the table."

Before Kira could say anything else, Mika strode off toward William and Cami. When she reached their table, William stood and captured her hands. He kissed her cheek, and Mika laughed. She kissed him on the mouth, then drew back. William chuckled and put his hand around her waist. Mika leaned over and said something to Cami. Kira was too far away to hear what was said. Cami flew up from the table and got in Mika's face. Mika threw her head back and laughed. Kira shook her head and looked at Heller. He was studying her.

"Let's go to the table. Mika will meet us there, and Zanna will be along." Kira turned and walked away.

She greeted various patrons as she passed them, making sure they had what they needed. Reaching the back, where she always kept a table empty for her family and friends, Kira went to pull out her chair. A strong male hand was there before hers. Kira glanced at Heller. He had a small smile on his lips. Kira sat, and he pushed the chair under her. Heller leaned over and took a breath. He purred. Kira shuddered and cursed herself for it. He chuckled. Kira turned her head and met his eyes. Heller was almost close enough to kiss. She waited to see what he would do. Heller made a soft humming

noise, then stood straighter and went to take a seat across from her. Kira stifled the disappointment she felt.

She glanced at William, then back at Heller. "Is William like you all?"

"Like who?" Heller asked.

"Another race, or other being. Whatever the heck you call it," Kira said.

Heller looked at William, then back at her, and started to laugh.

"William's not one of us." Heller sobered and demanded, "What is it about him that makes women act weird?"

Kira looked at William again, then smiled before looking back at Heller.

"It's a female thing, and you wouldn't understand," Kira replied.

"Every woman I ask tells me the same thing. I wish one of you would explain it to me." Heller rolled his eyes.

Kira shook her head. She couldn't even put it into words. She glanced at Heller, and her breath caught. He had that look on his face--the look that made her ache.

"Who's Cami? Why did Mika get that look on her face?" Heller's question surprised her.

"Camilla Maxwell. She's sort of related to Mika," Kira answered.

"How can you be 'sort of' related?" Heller frowned, a contemplative look on his face.

The look confirmed what she and the others had suspected. Heller had checked out their backgrounds. She would not have expected less. They had done the same, although there wasn't much to be found on him.

"In their case, they are." Kira shrugged.

"So she's like her sister or --"

"Oh, God no. Cami isn't my sister. Thank God. We would kill each other." Mika interrupted Heller and reached for her chair.

Heller was around the table, pulling Mika's chair out for her. Kira got goose bumps on her arms. She hadn't even seen him move. Mika looked at Heller, then took a seat. Heller strolled back to his chair and sat down.

"So, if this Camilla isn't your sister, who is she?" Heller asked.

"Don't ever let her hear you call her Camilla. She hates it. Call her Cami. Only I get to call her Camilla." Mika grinned. "Well, Robert does too, but he does it because he likes her. Go figure. I s-

"*Will C.!*" a voice squealed, cutting Mika off.

Kira turned and looked at the table a little away from them. William laughed as he lifted Zanna off the ground and swung her around. Zanna peppered kisses on his cheek. William chuckled and set her on her feet. Zanna waved at Cami and Jem. Jem and Cami said something, and Zanna nodded. She turned back to William and started talking animatedly. William chuckled, then kissed her on the lips. Zanna patted him on the cheek, then turned and spotted them. She rushed to their table.

"Sorry. Oh! You've got to stop doing that, or at least warn a sister," Zanna said as Heller pulled out her chair and waited for her to sit.

Heller laughed and went back to his seat.

"Sorry I'm late. The hospital was busy. What'd I miss?" Zanna asked.

"You're just in time, Zanna. We just sat," Kira replied.

"I was just explaining to Heller that Cami isn't my sister." Mika looked at Heller. "We're related through a brother and sister. Different dads, but same mom. Let's just say Cami and Jem's dad was a rolling stone."

Heller looked confused.

Mika laughed. "That wasn't in your file on me, huh?" Mika waved her hand. "I know you're not here to hear about my colorful family history. So, why are you stalling?"

"He's waiting for me," a deep voice practically purred.

Kira glanced up behind Heller and almost forgot how to breathe. The man stood with a quiet sensual awareness--the same one that Heller had. But where Heller hid his intensity behind an amicable façade, this man did not.

Intensely intelligent eyes, a perfect blend of tawny and green-gold, studied her. He stood tall and proud, his body powerfully muscular, and yet there was a look of fluidity

around him that told her despite the muscles, he would not be slow. He had thick coal black hair, and long lashes that highlighted his amazing eyes. His features were sharp, and he was covered by beautiful golden tan skin.

The man took a seat casually next to Heller, his movements deceptive, she knew. Something about him was familiar. A flash of memory filled her, and Kira remembered his tawny-green-gold eyes when she was lifted up the cliff. Another memory came of Heller's grim face and worried aqua gaze. With the memory came a wave of pain.

Not now, Kira. You can't remember this now. Kira shut away the memories. She focused back on the man. He had one black eyebrow raised. Kira gave him a bland look. A small smile curved the man's lips.

"My brother, Dane Sidorov." Heller made the introductions.

Kira had already figured they were related. They shared similar features and mannerisms.

"Kira, Mika, and Zanna." He nodded at each of them as he said their name. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you all." Dane glanced at Heller. "Killian can't join us. He'll go by and meet the ladies later."

Dane relaxed against the chair, watching them. Kira glanced at Mika and Zanna. They had the same stunned expression she knew was on her face. Heller by himself was a sensual charge, but together with his brother, it was sensory overload.

How does their cousin look? Kira thought.

"My God. What does your cousin look like?" Zanna said out loud what Kira was thinking.

"Like us." Dane's smile went arrogant, and then he shrugged, a lazy ripple of his shoulders.

Zanna sighed, and Mika chuckled. Kira glanced at Heller. He was watching her. She licked her lips. Heller's eyes followed the movement.

"What can I get you, boss?" a voice asked.

Kira jumped, then looked at Nylan Alient, one of the servers. She looked at the others around the table.

"Do you all want to look at the menu, or order now?" Kira asked.

They all decided to order. Nylan took their orders and left. Kira took the opportunity get their discussion started. She wanted to get this over with and away from Heller. He unsettled her, and she needed to think.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked.

"Just do as you have been," Heller replied.

She looked at him, confused.

"We want them to come to you," Heller clarified.

"You know who did this to Challen?" Kira sat forward.

"No," Dane answered. There was a sliver of menace in that single word.

She glanced at him, eyes narrowed. "Then how do you know they'll come after me?"

Heller and Dane exchanged a glance, then focused back on her. "We knew you were searching for answers about what happened. If we do, so do they. It's only a matter of time before they come after you. All of you."

"Let them come." Kira smiled fiercely.

"Let them," Mika agreed.

"Bring it," Zanna echoed.

The men looked at them. Another look passed between them.

"Guerrieri," Dane purred.

"Yes, we already know you think we're warriors, but we're just women. Women who will make sure whoever they are regret what they did to Challen," Kira said fiercely.

"What they did to Challen and to Kira," Zanna and Mika said together.

Kira glanced at them. They nodded. She returned it, then looked at the men. Heller's look was warm. Kira cleared her throat.

"We'll put someone we trust with all of you," Dane said. "Mika, our cousin will be filling your open position in your gallery so she can be close. Zanna, another of our cousins works at the hospital and will be there to watch over you."

Kira watched Heller. A sensual grin curved his lips. Her heart raced, waiting to hear who would be with her.

"We don't need protection. We can take care of ourselves," Mika interjected.

"You'll have help, or we'll remove you from harm's way." Dane's tone brooked no argument.

"I'd like to see you try." Mika's voice was cold.

"Don't push me, Mika," Dane countered. His tone never modulated, but Kira could feel the difference in it.

"Don't set yourself up to get hurt," Zanna said softly. Kira noticed Dane's eyes sweep over Zanna. Then he held her gaze until she dropped it.

Kira continued to study Heller, while he watched her, an amused look on his face.

Dane laughed, a rich sound. "You ladies are brave. Not smart, but brave. What's the number one rule in any fight?"

"Use any resource you have," Mika said grudgingly.

"We have things you don't, so use what we give you. Heller, Killian, and I are known to the other beings here, but we're rarely seen in Savoy Valley. They know we are other, but not exactly who we are," Dane replied.

"You've said a lot of things, except the one thing we all want to know. What is Challen, and why is he so important to Savoy Valley?" Kira questioned.

"We can't tell you, Kira," Heller replied, his look steady.

She opened her mouth to speak.

"It's Challen's place to tell you, Kira. We can't." Heller interrupted what she would have said.

"If Challen dies, I'll tell you," Dane added.

"*He won't die.*" Mika's voice went deadly.

Heller raised an eyebrow, but didn't look away from Kira. The thought of Challen dying gave her a pain in her chest.

"He won't die," Kira echoed fiercely. "We want him moved to Mika's house today."

Heller and Dane didn't say anything for a little while. Mika and Zanna were also silent.

Dane broke the silence. "Challen will be moved today. Kira, Heller will be your new bartender. As things come up, we'll share information. Basically, you ladies are bait."

Kira held back any reaction. Heller didn't look away.

"Here you go," Nylan said.

She and another server put their food on the table. Kira could hear the others start to eat. Finally, she looked away from Heller and picked up her fork. She took a few bites, then realized she couldn't eat. She put down her fork and pushed back her chair.

"Mika and Zanna, I'll speak with you later. Heller, I'm usually here at 6 a.m. to brief the staff, then work rotating shifts. I'll make sure you get my schedule." Kira nodded at them without looking at Heller.

She strode away, absently greeting people as she went, but not stopping. Kira went past the double doors leading to the kitchen. She looked up and saw Zeus, with his back to her, mixing something in a bowl. Aphrodite was icing a cake and laughing with Illiam, one of the pastry chefs that worked under her. Kira continued around the corner, then down the hall. She paused in front of her office and opened the door. Closing it behind her, Kira leaned back against it, taking deep breaths and trying to still her heart.

Why didn't you ask what Heller is? her inner voice asked.

I'm afraid to know, Kira thought. *God, I'm afraid to know.*

"Kira." His voice purred from across the room.

Stiffening, she straightened as he came toward her. Kira walked over to meet him.

"How the hell did you get here before me?" Kira asked, her pulse pounding.

Heller didn't answer, just came up to her until he was barely a hairbreadth from her. He cocked his head to the side.

"It doesn't matter. What are we going to do about this?" Heller asked.

Kira knew what he was talking about. The magnetism between them was intense. She could be coy and act like she didn't understand, but that's not what she wanted to do. Kira studied him. Instead of answering him, she closed the distance between them and kissed him.

Just one taste, Kira thought.

His taste rolled over her tongue, an addictive mix of man and heat. Kira murmured and stroked her tongue deeper. Heller stood still, letting her control the kiss. Kira raised her hand to his hair and put her fingers through it. She clenched his head, holding him for her kiss. With hard strokes, she plunged her tongue into his mouth. Heller shuddered and groaned. Sucking down the sound, Kira pressed closer to his hard, hot body. Her pussy dampened, and her heart raced. She was drowning in the sensual taste of Heller.

Have mercy. He's sex incarnate, Kira thought.

Fisting her hand tighter in his hair, Kira ate at his mouth with wanton hunger. Heller's arms clenched around her, and he took over the kiss. His tongue sank into her mouth with firm strokes. He licked along her tongue and the roof of her mouth, then nibbled on her lips. Kira shuddered. Heller chuckled, a darkly sensual sound. He dipped his tongue back inside her mouth and licked the roof again, then pulled out. Kira followed him, closing the distance between them. Heller sealed his lips to hers, then murmured. Kira whimpered. Heller bit her tongue, then let out a rolling purr. Kira gasped as sensation broke out all over her skin. A shock went down her back, across her ass, and between her legs, straight to her clit. Shocked, Kira jerked away from him, stumbling back. Heller took a step toward her.

Kira shook her head and held up a shaking hand. "No. We can't do this."

Heller looked at her silently, his eyes heated. With long, slim fingers, he took her hand. Raising it to his lips, Heller kissed the back of her hand. He rolled his eyes to meet hers. Kira shivered. Heller licked along the back of her hand, then let it go. Kira locked her knees so she wouldn't fall.

"Soon, you won't tell me no, Kira. I can smell your need. Eventually, it 'll become so unbearable, you'll come to me, and then you'd better be prepared. I won't let you go," Heller promised.

His hand flashed out, and he took her fingers, bringing them to his lips again. He sucked the pad of each finger. Kira's pussy clenched with each suck. Heller released her, then walked to the door. Kira turned to watch him go. Heller opened the door, then looked back, flashing her a sexy grin.

"Be very sure when you come to me, Kira," Heller said, stepping out the door and closing it behind him.

Kira blew out a breath and staggered across the room. She dropped down onto the couch and rested her head against the back. She could taste him and smell his heady masculine scent on her skin.

"You're a fool, Kira," she said. "One taste won't be enough."

Heller strode down the hall with Kira's taste on his lips. That sweet mouth was more delicious than he could have ever imagined. Her scent filled his senses. He ached to have her. Heller stopped, putting his hand on the wall. He needed control, or he would turn around, go back down the hall, and take her.

"I can smell your need, Heller. Control yourself," Dane said sharply.

"Fuck you, Dane." Heller pushed past his brother, streaked across the room, and went out the door.

He zipped down Panthera Street, past Nirvana Avenue--which was more fondly known as Shopper's Strip--and then around the corner of Silven Place.

"Taking the long way home?" Dane asked idly.

Heller glanced at his brother, who was meeting him step for step as they ran. He didn't reply, just kept running. In a few moments, they were up the mountain and standing at his door. Heller didn't slow, just opened the door and kept running until he

was in his family room. He flopped down onto his couch, ignoring Dane as he sat next to him.

"Your wanting Kira complicates things, Heller," Dane said in that same idle tone.

Heller didn't reply.

"Complicates things, but it doesn't matter. She's already yours," Dane said.

Heller looked at his brother. "I know. I already know that."

He sighed and leaned back further into the couch, looking out the window moodily.

"So, are you going to make her yours?" Dane asked.

Heller looked at Dane, refusing to answer. Dane laughed and watched him.

"She'll lead you on an interesting hunt."

"Shut up, Dane," Heller griped.

"I'm just saying." Dane continued laughing.

"I can't wait for you to meet a woman who'll knock you on your ass," Heller growled.

Dane shook his head. "Never going to happen again." His face was somber, as if he had already accepted his fate to be alone.

Heller looked at him and reached out his hand. Dane clasped hands with him briefly, then leaned next to him.

"So, how do you plan to convince her to give you a shot?"

"Like you have to ask." Heller glanced at Dane, an arrogant look on his face.

Dane met his eyes and laughed.

Magnetism

"The Sidorov Seduction." Dane chuckled. "I almost feel sorry for Kira. Almost."

"She won't know what hit her. Kira Winters will be mine," Heller vowed.

He leaned deeper into the couch, planning his seduction.

Chapter 5

Kira sat beside Challen, holding his hand and watching him for any signs of life. His chest moved so shallowly it was hard to detect. His hair, which used to be so beautiful and shiny with health, lay beside him, limp and dull. Even the golden tint to his usually rich caramel skin had paled visibly.

Her thumb travelled in small circles on the back of his hand. "Come on, Challen. Fight this. I know you can hear me. Come back to us."

Nothing. He didn't move. Kira stared at his face. This very long day had dragged on endlessly and seemed like weeks. Since last night, when Kira found out he was alive, she had sat here every chance she could. She'd relearned his face, each line, each angle. Everything. Although it was similar, it just wasn't the same. Instinctively, she just knew something had changed, but she couldn't put her finger on what. She didn't want to remember him like this.

"Something's bothering you," Heller commented from the doorway.

She glanced over her shoulder, watching as he closed the door behind him and moved toward her. A fluid motion tinged with a predatory one.

Her skin tingled as she stared at him. Her eyes fell to his lips, and her body grew flushed as her mind recreated the explosive kiss they had shared.

Wrenching her gaze from his deceptively casual dress, Kira stared at her brother's hand in hers. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Heller's muscular thigh as he stopped beside her. The dark blue slacks hugged lovingly to that one thigh and his buttocks.

She swallowed hard. Her belly a quivering mass of emotion, she tried to stanch the flow of moisture between her thighs.

Squeezing her eyes shut tight, Kira prayed for control, the strength to resist him, or to pursue what had been started the moment their eyes met in Pulse Beat.

"What's bothering you?" he asked, crouching beside her.

His nearness was unnerving, and it made her mind muddled. She was having a hard time concentrating on anything except the potent, musky scent that seemed to seep directly from his pores into hers.

She wanted to lie and say nothing, but something compelled her to answer him. "He's just lying there. It's like he's given up. Why isn't he fighting?"

Heller's sigh reverberated through her, and she realized that he was just as frustrated as she was about that. "I don't know," he said finally. "I wish I knew."

"Can't one of you just...I don't know, appear in his head and snap him out of this?"

"No one can get in. Believe me, we've tried." Again, that frustrated tone came across.

She knew that. Heller had said the very same thing before. Kira put her brother's hand back on the bed and stood up, needing to distance herself from both Heller and Challen for a few moments. Pacing the room, she mulled over her thoughts. Casting a quick glance at her brother, Kira left the room and headed out onto the balcony.

"Just ask me," Heller ordered.

"Ask you what?" she snapped, not liking the idea of him reading her so well. And the fact he had followed her sent shivers skating down her spine.

"Whatever it is that put that look on your face."

"Well, I've been thinking that if he's not letting anyone in, then he must still be a lot stronger than we've assumed. Maybe it's just he can't do both at the same time. So whatever he's protecting must be very important."

"Or whoever he's protecting," Heller said in a low tone, almost too quiet for her to hear.

"You think he's protecting someone?" Kira moved to Heller's side and placed a hand on his muscled forearm. "Tell me who," she demanded.

An indescribable emotion crossed his face, and his eyes changed color from aqua to a bit darker, before he replied. "I don't know."

She didn't believe him, but she would cross that bridge later. "This 'we' you talked about having searched Challen's house--does that include Dane and your cousin?"

He glanced at her hand where it still sat on his arm and smiled at her. "You picked up on that, did you?"

"Yes, and you're avoiding my question." She withdrew her hand and rubbed it on her hip, trying to alleviate the lingering sensation his body gave her.

His eyes were an iridescent shade of peacock blue. They struck her hard as the colors shifted and changed. A feral grin crossed his attractive mouth. "Are you ready for me yet, Kira?"

The question threw her. She had been all intent on finding out the answers to her questions. Hearing him ask that threw her for a loop. She shuddered and barely bit back a moan in time to keep it from escaping.

"Look at you," he purred. "Your eyes are dilated. Your breathing is rapid and shallow. You look so fucking hot, Kira. My skin is burning for your touch. So, I'll ask again. Are you ready for me?"

She had to lock her knees to keep from collapsing. Flames licked up and down her skin, and sweat pooled between her breasts. Her lungs felt empty, and no matter how she tried to fill them, it wasn't enough.

Despite the sun going down, the heat from his gaze kept her all hot and bothered. Suddenly, a breeze moved across her, bringing her a brief respite from the warmth surrounding her.

Heller stiffened. In a flash, his mood had gone from flirtatious to dangerous. Without saying a word, he ushered her back inside the room and closed the balcony doors.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'll be back. There's something I have to take care of."

He was gone before she could formulate a sentence. Then it was just her and Challen in the room with those stones that were around him. Wards, they'd been called. Kira hugged herself, wondering if there was a ward to protect her from Heller.

Do you really want one, or do you want to just give into those urges to take him? Kira didn't have an answer for her inner voice. She put it out of her mind for now, then sat next to Challen and took his hand.

Heller slipped into his bedroom and shut the door behind him. A deep roar began to build in the back of his throat. He longed to release it and get it out of his system.

"Do you really want to explain that noise to the women here?" A low voice reached him.

Relaxing his fists, Heller turned to see his brother leaning up against the far wall. "What do you want, Dane?" Heller realized he hadn't really paid enough attention, since he hadn't realized he wasn't alone, even in his own room.

His brother's black brow rose. Heller knew he could hold his own against his brother, but damn...there was something about that look that would make him freeze and do a double take.

"Just making sure you're doing okay."

"They're out there. I can smell them--that rotting fucking stench that they can't conceal totally, no matter how hard they try."

Dane nodded. "Me too. But we can't get a bead on them."

The brothers stared at each other, and when Dane's phone rang, Heller sat down on a chair. He kept his eyes on his eldest sibling as his mind drifted to another part of the building, where Kira was. He knew she was still with her brother.

If it were another time and another place, he would have already marked her as his own. But he had to go slowly. She was combative, confused, hurt, and hiding something, and it seemed she didn't even know what it was.

Dane snapped his phone shut. "I have to go. I'll be out of touch for a while by ordinary means. Let me know if you need me."

The seriousness on his face told Heller all he needed to know. He stood. "Stay safe, brother. *Uspekhev!*"

"Always." Dane hugged his brother and then left the room. Within seconds, he was out of the house. Heller knew it.

He smoothed his hands down his pant legs. With a deep breath he opened his door and walked back down to rejoin the trio of friends, in which there was one woman who had the ability to make him lose all control.

All three women were around the bed when he entered the room. Each woman stared in his direction--Mika's with her topaz eyes, Zanna's with her dark brown gaze, and his Kira with her deep pools of haunting gold. Yes, *his* Kira.

He met each of their gazes, but held Kira's the longest and the last. "We're moving him tonight. Mika, I need you to go ahead with Killian and ready the room he's going to be in. We'll follow shortly."

Mika frowned at him. "Where's Killian?"

"At your service, my dear." A new voice broke in.

"About time you got here, Killian," Heller grumbled good-naturedly.

He steeled himself for the looks the women were going to get upon seeing Killian. It was mostly Kira who he was worried about.

That look of awe and lust swept all three of their faces. Heller scoffed as he glanced at his cousin. Killian wore khakis and a white shirt. His blond hair, not nearly as long as Heller's but longer than Dane's, hung unruly. Tanned skin, bleached white teeth, and vivid blue eyes surrounded by thick golden blond lashes completed the picture.

His cousin looked like a surfer. Granted, a dangerous one, but still...

Killian grinned at him. *I like surfers, thank you very much.*

You would, pussy.

Meow. Killian walked over to him and nudged him. "Introduce me, Heller."

Heller noticed that Kira kept staring between the two of them. Biting back a groan, he made the introductions. "Ladies, this is my cousin, Killian. Killian, meet Mika, Zanna, and Kira."

He sucked his teeth when Killian took each hand, bowed over it, and pressed a kiss to the back. A low growl formed in his throat as Killian lingered over Kira's hand. Laughter in his head told him that Killian had heard him.

Heller released his breath when his cousin stood upright again and put his attention on Mika.

"Are you ready to go, Mika?" Killian asked in his deep voice.

"No. I remembered something you said, and I want answers now," Mika stated.

The women exchanged a glance, and then Mika looked between Killian and Heller.

"Emotions were high when Kira was missing. There were a lot of people working on the rescue to help Kira, and we don't remember them all, but there is no way we could not remember you, your cousin, or your brother." She made a movement of her hand. "You mentioned you pulled Kira out, all of you, and that you were with our search team." Her voice went intense. "Yet neither Zanna nor I remember any of you. How is that possible? How is it you were the one to rescue Kira, and we don't remember you? Any of you?"

Heller knew the question would come up sooner or later. He had hoped it would be later. Watching Mika, Zanna, and Kira's expressionless faces, he figured they had talked about it. That they had waited this long to ask impressed him. He glanced at Killian and saw the same look in his eye. The women knew the best times to catch their opponents unaware. They still saw him, Dane, and Killian as adversaries, but would have to learn they were in this together. Whatever happened, they were all in this together.

"You weren't supposed to remember us," Heller replied.

None of their expressions changed.

You can do better than that, Killian mocked.

Shut the hell up, or you explain, Heller responded.

We need them to trust us, Heller, for all of our sakes. We can't afford any mistrust. Explain it. Killian's tone was still the same affable one he usually used, but Heller watched him carefully, hearing the tension in his words.

What's wrong with you?

Her desire for you scents the air. Killian flashed him a look. His eyes slightly dilated and changed.

Stop smelling her. Heller's eyes narrowed.

Killian scoffed in his thoughts. Heller cursed silently, knowing how silly that sounded. It was as if he'd asked Killian to cut off his arm. Although they could usually shut off scents at will, Heller knew the power of Kira's need made it impossible for Killian to do so now. If Heller had already marked her as his, it wouldn't have been a problem, to Killian or anyone else. Heller looked at Kira, eyes tracing where he would mark her to make all know she was his. Kira's eyes narrowed, and her chin went up.

Feisty. Killian said what Heller was thinking.

Heller glared at him. Killian shrugged, a smile on his face. Heller tried to think past his own need to finish answering the question Mika had asked. He looked back at Mika and Zanna. The women had moved closer to Kira, surrounding her as if to protect her.

"It was for your own protection that we made sure you wouldn't remember us. Since we didn't have any idea who had taken Kira or tried to kill Challen, we needed to make sure nothing would give away the fact he was still alive."

"But why would it matter if we knew you as the rescuers of Kira?" Zanna asked.

"Although we aren't home much, people in the town know Dane is part of the military." Heller exchanged a look with Killian, then returned his attention to the women. "They know we're all good friends with Challen, Dane included. It would have seemed strange that he was able to be there with us to help in the search. We shielded that we were there from everyone but you three."

Their eyes widened, and they exchanged glances.

"Yes, we can do that. So if you had decided to mention any of us to the other rescue teams, there would have been questions--questions best left unanswered. We felt as if we already knew all of you. Challen talked about all of you often. We were looking forward to finally meeting you that day."

"Challen never mentioned your names. He talked of 'his buddies' fondly, yet never mentioned your names. I didn't notice it at the time," Kira interjected.

She glanced at the other women, and they nodded. Kira looked back at Heller, then Killian. Heller stifled a growl that wanted to escape. Kira returned her attention to him, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

"Challen is Challen. No one can guess why he does certain things he does." Heller shrugged.

He glanced at Mika and wondered why Challen hadn't mentioned she was much more to him than a friend. Mika's eyes narrowed warily, and she kept glancing between Killian and Heller.

Heller sighed. She was going to be a problem.

"Mika, we wouldn't put Killian with you if we didn't trust him implicitly," he said.

"I don't know him enough to trust him," she snapped.

"Killian, stay here with Zanna and Kira. I need a private word with Mika," Heller ordered. "You, Mika, come with me."

"You don't give me orders, Heller Sidorov," she bit off.

"Now," he growled low in his throat. "Move your ass out the door." This time, he allowed his eyes to change, and she moved. She did it resentfully, but she did at least move out the door, and neither Zanna nor Kira said a word. He knew they wanted to.

"What the hell is your problem?" Mika demanded, bristling before him.

"You are."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't get me wrong. I admire your protective nature over Kira and Zanna. But do *not* make the foolish assumption that means I'll continue to put up with you second-guessing everything we do. All your obstinacy does is make our job twice as difficult."

Mika opened her mouth, but he shushed her with an impatient hand gesture.

"No, you listen. I don't give a damn if you like me or not, but if we're going to work together, you have to trust us. Protecting you, Zanna, Challen, and Kira is our priority, as well as finding those responsible." He leveled a glare at her. "I'm normally the calm one of the group, so don't get my temper riled."

Mika held his gaze briefly before she looked to the side.

Heller sighed lightly. "Look at me," he ordered.

She did, and Heller saw the war she was waging in her own soul. It wasn't a simple conflict; this was life or death. He understood what she was going through.

"Mika, let's just call a truce. When it's over, you can go back to hating me, if you so choose. But trust that we can protect you best. It's going to take a joint effort on both sides to keep everyone safe."

Mika nodded and began to spin the ring on her right hand's third finger. Heller could tell it brought her relief immediately. When she caught his gaze, she stopped and raised a brow defiantly. Heller ran his fingers along his chain and blinked once in comprehension. She may not fully remember their past together, but she did trust Kira and her brother, and so she would trust Heller out of respect for Challen.

"Okay," she said, in a voice much quieter than she normally used. "A truce...for now."

"I grow on people." He winked at her. "Shall we?" Heller waved her back toward the room and fell in step with her. He deferred to her to enter the room first. The others fell silent as they made their entrance.

Kira and Zanna both did a visual check on their friend before glaring at Heller. He ignored it. "Ready?" he asked Killian.

"Yes. Ms. Mika, shall we?"

"Zanna should come with us as well," Mika announced.

Heller was surprised, but watched Kira's face for her reaction. Her golden eyes grew wide before they narrowed slightly as she looked at her friends. To Heller's amusement, Kira schooled her face into an unreadable mask. He hadn't expected them to leave her with him. Mika gave him a look of warning. She continued to surprise him.

"Sounds like we're ready then," Kira said, standing and doing a damn good job of looking everywhere but at him.

The three women shared a glance before Mika placed her topaz eyes on Killian. "Let's get this going."

Killian bowed. "Ever your servant, milady."

Mika snorted in disbelief and left the room, Zanna on her heels, leaving Killian to bring up the rear.

Kira was nervous. Her brother was vulnerable and fragile. Suddenly, moving him didn't sound like a good idea. He'd been safe here--damn safe, considering those who'd attacked him apparently hadn't been able to find him. Heller had done a wonderful job of keeping her brother's survival a secret.

But now, if they were moving him, would it be discovered that Challen still lived? Would David come back and try again? Would it put Mika and Zanna in more danger than they were already in just by being her friend?

Her heart was heavy. Still, she shivered as Heller's warmth wrapped around her. He hadn't even touched her, but she could feel his presence.

"You're worrying." His words were delivered on a velvet blanket.

Kira looked sideways at him. "Do you ever ask, or do you just get off on issuing statements?"

A flash of teeth showed as he smiled, and a predatory look filled his eyes for mere seconds, but she felt its heat. "Do you really want me to tell you what I get off on?"

Her pussy throbbed. "No."

He leaned in and whispered in a tone she had to strain to hear, "Liar."

She shivered with longing. He was right. She was lying.

Kira didn't understand why he had spoken so quietly until the door opened, admitting four people. At least, she thought they were people.

There were two men and two women. One wore white, one brown, one red, and one blue. They all looked ethereal as their robes flowed around them, their faces solemn masks of concentration.

Heller dipped his head silently in their direction and placed a hand on her back. She immediately felt better.

"Kira, these four will be moving your brother just as soon as Killian lets us know the house and room have been warded again and are secure."

"Who are you?" she asked the robed figures.

The man wearing white captured her gaze. His skin was dark pigmented--not jet black, but very dark. His black hair reached long past his shoulders. Black eyes stared at her. "My name is Olorun," he said.

Olorun nodded with his head toward the other man. He looked older and distinguished. Tall and Caucasian, his hair was long as well, but brown in color. It was a lighter shade of brown than his robes. "That is Haurun," Olorun said. The brown head nodded silently in her direction.

The woman dressed in red looked Filipino to Kira, but she wasn't positive. The woman had long straight black hair. "The one in red is Darago," Olorun continued.

Kira looked at the woman in blue and noticed that both she and Darago wore tight dresses. Their robes helped to conceal the tightness of their dresses. The woman in blue had paler skin and blue eyes. Her hair was ash blonde and was flowing free past her shoulders.

"Juras-mate is in blue," Olorun told Kira.

Her overwhelming desire to protect Challen caused her to step forward. As one, all four looked at her, and she stopped. They meant him no harm. She could feel it flowing off their bodies.

"What are you?" she asked.

We are Elementals, child. We mean neither you nor your brother any harm.

Kira had no idea who spoke in her mind. All of them continued to stare at her as if waiting for her reaction. "Okay." She drew out a long breath. "Elementals. Of course." She shrugged and closed her eyes.

Is this what a nervous breakdown feels like? she wondered.

You need to trust in the man beside you. He would die before he ever let anything hurt you again.

Oh my God. You can read my mind. Kira felt weird knowing that.

No, we can't. Your brother made it so we can't, the same voice replied.

Kira stared at them in disbelief. If they couldn't read her thoughts, then how did they know what she was thinking?

Your expression is very telling. The voice came again.

Startled, Kira schooled her features. She usually was more careful than that.

You may not be sure of giving your trust to the man beside you but you are comfortable in his presence and home. The amusement in the voice was clear.

Kira couldn't help it. Her gaze slashed over to land on Heller. He stood there beside her, silent, and watching her unerringly. Until the Elementals pointed it out, she hadn't realized that, although Heller made her ache with need, she still took comfort from being with him. She didn't want to think too much on what that meant. She looked back to the four *Elementals* and found they, too, still watched her without fail.

Heller spoke. "All is ready for Challen at Mika's house."

The four moved around Challen, one on each side, pairing off with a man and a woman facing each other. The stones that had been surrounding Challen were also within the group.

Kira felt the hair on her skin begin to rise as the four reached out to their sides and began chanting in a language she couldn't even begin to identify. Heller remained mute beside her, his hand still resting on the small of her back.

The clothing and hair of the Elementals began to move as if a breeze flowed over them. Nothing else in the room moved. A feeling of static flowed over Kira as she

watched them work. The stones, along with her brother, floated off the bed and hovered in midair.

The woman who wore red looked at her. Kira's breath caught in her throat. Streaks of red were moving from her scalp throughout her ink black hair, turning it into the same vibrant shade of red as her clothes. *We will protect your brother. Fear not.*

"Thank you," Kira whispered. Her eyes moved to the others, and she noticed their hair was doing the same thing. The streaks in each one's hair matched his or her robes. The group of five began to shimmer as they started to fade. Kira stepped forward, only to be halted by Heller. She shot him a glare, but he just shook his head and curled his hand about her waist.

Before her very eyes, Challen disappeared. "Challen," she gasped.

"He'll be fine," Heller assured her.

"They vanished with him. What the hell was that?" she demanded, smacking his hand away from her and stepping back. A feeling of helplessness washed through her, and she hated it.

"This is the safest way to move him."

Kira narrowed her gaze as anger filled her. For some reason, his explanation rubbed her the wrong way. A feral smile crossed her face as she felt her sword appear in her hand.

Flames rose behind his amazing aqua eyes. "Don't ever draw a blade if you aren't planning on using it."

"Maybe I am."

He cocked his head to the side. "Anytime you wish to workout with me, Kira, all you have to do is ask. Don't play with weapons, though." A smile snaked across his lips. "I'd love to roll around with you again."

Her sword retreated, and she hissed at him.

Heller blew her a kiss in return. "Let's go get you situated back at Mika's." One brow arched. "Unless you want to stay here with me."

Oh, do I ever, she thought. Aloud, she snipped, "Keep dreaming."

"Dreams can be very telling. Want to share?"

She couldn't stop the grin. Heller Sidorov had a knack for slipping past her guard and making her smile. "I don't think so."

His nonchalant shrug didn't set her at ease; in fact, it made her more suspicious. *You're up to something, Heller.* She wasn't scared. She felt extremely safe with him. It was how he *made* her feel, like he'd stripped away the hardened warrior she'd become to reveal the woman beneath. She wasn't always sure that woman existed anymore.

Kira wished she could get over her physical reaction to Heller. He was so disruptive to the shield she'd erected around herself. Each second she spent in his presence seemed to erode the wall. He was getting to her, and he knew it.

There was this insanely sexy look that would fill his gaze as he watched her. His eyes seemed to smolder and burn away her clothes, letting him glimpse her bared flesh. It was that look he gave which made her long to do what Zanna and Mika had said she needed.

Just sex. Nothing more. Just experience the touch of a man.

Heller Sidorov was a man. He was one hell of a male specimen. What an experience that would be.

"Kira." Her name was spoken in a deep, silvery timbre that placed her body on high alert.

She glanced over to where he stood. His face was a tight mask of determination. There was a lone bead of sweat that she watched roll down the side of his face.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," he bit off. His nostrils flared, and he ran one hand through his hair. He muttered something in a language she didn't understand, and when she blinked, he had moved to stand right in front of her.

Damn, he moves fast.

His mouth lowered over hers, branding her, engulfing her.

Kira melted against him. Her synapses exploded with the heady sensation of his touch.

She whimpered as his tongue slid past her lips and dipped into her mouth. Her senses filled with the taste she couldn't forget from the last kiss--powerful, sensual, and unique. As before, her body reacted immediately.

He pulled her flush against the hard ridges of his body. Not a spare ounce of flesh existed upon his frame.

Without a thought, her arms moved up around his neck. Her pussy demanded attention, and her nipples tightened even more as his chest rubbed against them. Her fingers sank into his hair. It felt like silk being pulled over her skin.

A low rumble rose from the back of his throat as his mouth plundered hers. Kira wanted him deep within her, filling her. From the depths of her soul, she longed to be joined as one with this man.

His hands gravitated toward her ass, and he began kneading her flesh. She purred. He rumbled again. The sound he made reverberated through her. She used one hand and moved it down his side.

Kira groaned in frustration as his mouth ripped away from hers. His chest heaved as he fought for breath. Her eyes narrowed.

His hands released her. "If you aren't ready for this, Kira, walk away now." His voice was low and graveled with strain.

Kira stared at him. He looked tense. Clenched jaw, flared nose, and unquenchable passion made his aqua eyes darker.

Indulge herself with the man before her, or shove back her own desires and need to be a woman?

He'd handed her the power.

The decision was hers.

Heller watched her eyes. Kira had no idea how lovely she truly was. Her golden skin and matching eyes called to him in ways he'd never imagined. She was his mate. The problem was getting her to believe it, and then to accept it.

Her eyes were darkened with need and passion. The spicy scent of her arousal was pungent and seemed to infuse his taste buds. He fought not to lick his lips. She had to decide to come to him. He could help, encourage, but ultimately the choice had to be given to her.

In the dark recesses of his mind, he heard the roar of frustration from an alpha being who resented not taking what was his. He struggled to retain control.

"Kira," he forced out. "Your decision."

If it was no, then he had to get them out of his home and to where there were others around.

He saw her acceptance before she even spoke. Her eyes shifted to a darker gold, and he knew it was passion that had caused it.

"I don't want to stop," she stated, stepping in close and reuniting their bodies.

A low growl erupted from him as his mouth reclaimed hers with a ferocity he'd barely been keeping in check. Thrusting his tongue deep into her warm mouth, he swept through it, touching everywhere before dueling with her own tongue.

She tasted amazing, a combination of flavors that brought to mind softness, sultry and mind-blowing. Grabbing her ass, he lifted her off the ground and headed for his bedroom. When her legs tightened around his waist, he almost lost it.

He couldn't afford to, or he'd mark her as his, and he knew she wasn't ready. Heller clamped down on his instincts to do what his alpha being wanted, and focused on the more carnal needs so they could get to where he needed her--laid across his bed, waiting for him.

His hands shook with the need to strip her where she stood and take her right there on the floor, to have her on her hands and knees as he drove into her from behind. Instead, he continued to his room.

Kicking open his bedroom door, he strode to the bed and laid her upon it. Staring down at her, he knelt by the oversized bed and began unlacing her boots.

Removing footwear and socks, he moved over her and undid the button on her jeans. A groan slipped from him as her toned, golden brown legs were exposed.

"Beautiful," he gasped. There were scars on the insides of her thighs, and he stopped her from closing her legs in an attempt to keep them hidden. "Don't hide yourself from me."

Her soft skin trembled beneath his lips as he kissed the scars. She whimpered. He longed to wrap his hands around the ones who had marred her stunning skin and rip them apart. That desire soon faded as she whimpered and pushed up against his mouth.

"Kira," he whispered against the fabric of her panties. His tongue snuck out and tasted her through the material. His cock throbbed. He tried to go slow and make sure her pleasure came first.

Moving up her body, he removed her shirt and bra. Fine scars were all along her skin where they had hurt her. Heller bit the inside of his mouth to still the cry of rage that wanted to erupt from him. Kira took a breath, making those mouthwatering breasts move. They were the perfect size, firm, and topped with nipples that reminded him of dark butterscotch. His tongue swept over them to see if they tasted as good as they appeared. They did. He kissed each fine mark on her skin, laving it with his tongue.

Kira gasped and arched toward his touch.

Then he turned his attention back to the only article of clothing she had left-- black satin panties.

Control, Heller. Stay in control. It was very difficult. He wanted to plow into her and make her scream his name to the heavens. His body was so close to exploding.

Control rapidly slipping, Heller yanked off her panties and stood by her feet, staring at her body. He took in the marks of valor from her fight to survive. Feminine. Muscled. Beautiful. Naked. And his.

With a yank of his shirt and slacks, he ripped them off his heated body. Kira's eyes widened, and then her lashes lowered to half mast. The hunger in her gaze made his heart still a moment, then race with harsh need. Her hot gaze took all of him in. Heller shivered, feeling as if she touched him. Kira licked her lips and stretched out on the bed, arching her back. His control shattered.

"Mine," he growled as he lowered himself onto her.

Kira lay there watching him. In an impatient movement, Heller ripped off his shirt and slacks. In seconds, Heller stood naked before her. *Jesus!* Her eyes widened, and then she lowered her lids as her pussy pulsed. He was lip smacking gorgeous. There was a medium dusting of hair across the powerfully cut chest. Her breath hitched as she scanned him from head to toe. Not a single line blemished his tanned body. He was the same tan color all over. *All over.* And the ridge she had seen in his pants was not false advertising.

His cock jutted out from a nest of dark hair. Her fingers itched to touch it. Long and thick, it tempted her. He shivered. Licking her lips, she arched her back, rolling her hips as a flash of heat scorched through her, right to her clit.

He closed the distance, and the possessive way he rumbled "mine" at her made her feel invincible. A woman's power over a man was a heady experience.

Her insides flipped as his warm skin touched hers. The hairs on his chest abraded her overly sensitive nipples. Moisture leaked down the inside of her thigh.

"I've waited years for this," Heller whispered as he slid two fingers between her legs and into her wet, bald pussy.

"Ahh!" she gasped as her body stretched to accommodate him. It felt so wonderful.

"So tight."

Back and forth he moved his hand. Her skin was on fire. He licked the edge of her ear before he nipped it, and drove his fingers back deep inside her.

Kira came unglued. Hips arched, legs tightened, and stars appeared before her eyes as an intense orgasm washed over her. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she rode out the wave of pleasure.

He kissed her and withdrew his fingers. She held his gaze as his tongue lapped her juices from his fingers. His eyes were so dark with passion, it warmed her.

"Are you ready for me now, Kira?"

"Yes," she said on a sigh, her body still singing from the orgasm.

"Good."

She watched him as the head of his impressive erection entered her. He slid slowly into her, filling her more than anyone ever had before. He touched parts she didn't know she had.

Heller held still once he was fully encased by her wet heat. Kira whimpered and tried to move against him, craving more of him.

He looked down at her, his eyes dark with a wildness she'd sensed about him, but hadn't seen before. Such power, such feral power, stared back at her. She felt her heart triple in speed.

Heller moved within her. The small hesitation she'd had was washed away by the amount of pleasure coursing through her. Kira closed her eyes and let it flow over her.

"No, Kira. Look at me," Heller commanded, his breath fanning her face.

She did. His long hair hung around them, creating an even more intimate feel. Her eyes locked onto his as his sensuous strokes continued.

The burning started deep within her belly, drifting out and reaching everywhere in her body. He lowered his forehead to touch hers. She could smell hunger on his breath.

In. Out. In. Out.

Her skin tightened and her toes began to curl. She lifted her legs higher up on his back, and moaned when he slipped in deeper.

"Perfect fit," he muttered as his hips picked up speed.

Deeper. Faster. Harder.

Her fingers dug into his flesh, and it seemed to spur him on more. His grunts grew louder, and his thrusts became faster.

This time, she couldn't stop the groan. His mouth covered hers, and his tongue mimicked the action of his hips. She drew hard on his tongue, craving all she could get from him.

Heller moved his lips along her jaw and down across the skin of her neck. She shuddered when he bit her behind her ear, and then purred when his tongue laved the spot.

She could feel it deep within her, building, needing release. Her panting grew shallower as she moved closer to the edge. The stubbled skin on his face chafed her as he nuzzled into her neck.

He took her hands, placed them above her head, and laced their fingers together. She felt exposed, not in control, and yet, she wanted nothing more than what she was receiving--Heller Sidorov.

His sweat rubbed off on her skin, and she loved it. Every bit of it.

"Come for me, Kira," he ordered.

She did. She crested the mountain, falling amidst all the stars and bright colors her intense orgasm brought her.

"Ahhhh!" Her scream echoed in the room.

Kira's scream made his alpha being roar inside. Her pussy clenched around him in a sexual vice he never wanted to leave. Stroking into her harder, Heller growled as her nails raked his back. The scent of blood wafted to him as she broke skin. The alpha in him approved and tried to come to the surface to claim its mate. Heller shuddered and bit the inside of his cheek, tasting his blood, to control it.

It was a brief internal struggle to see who would win. Kira rolled her hips and moaned. The sweet clench of her cunt around his hardness made him quiver, and distracted him from the need to mark her. Her lips brushed against his, and she speared her tongue into his mouth. Unerringly, she found the cut inside and licked it soothingly. She might not be fully his yet, but Kira instinctively knew what to do as his mate. The being subsided, wallowing in the stroke of Kira's tongue and the heated clutch of her desire.

Heller groaned and laid deeper into the crease of her thigh. Kira clamped her legs around his back. Her hands raced along his spine, stroking him. She undulated her

hips. His sacs tightened, and his shaft hardened even more. Kira gasped into his mouth. Heller took it in and moved even faster. She matched him thrust for thrust. Her harsh words of need filled his mouth. Heller grunted in response. Kira laughed, a wicked, carnal sound that made him crazy with lust. He tightened the hold he had on her fingers. Kira bucked against him, hips rolling and pussy clenching. She weakened him and made him feel strong all at once. Kira purred. The sound vibrated against his tongue, sending him over the edge. His sacs pulled tight, and his cock pulsed. Stroking harder, he heard her gasp, and her wetness drenched him as she went over again. They came together in a firestorm. He stroked. Once. Twice. A third time. Heller opened his mouth and roared.

Kira's body was on fire. Heller was stripping everything she had bare. The heat from his body scorched her. The fierceness of his thrust made her pussy vibrate with need. His tenderness as he held her hands above her head overwhelmed her. His fingers tightened on hers, and she knew he was close. Rolling her hips and clenching her pussy, she purred against his tongue. Heller stiffened and stroked harder. His release triggered her own, shocking her. A harsh groan ripped from her. Three more thrusts, and a low roar erupted from Heller as he continued to spill his seed deep within her womb. He was careful not to crush her as he collapsed against her. Their hearts began to slow down. Absently, she noticed his heartbeat matched her own. His breaths came at the same time as hers.

Before she could think on it, Heller gathered her close, kissing her forehead. "Rest a while, and then we'll go see your brother."

She stiffened, guilt swamping her, shoving the euphoria aside. She'd not given anyone else a single thought while being with Heller.

He tightened his hold around her. "Stop feeling guilty. You're allowed to live."

* * * * *

"He's making that outfit look mighty tasty."

Kira jumped in surprise and embarrassment. "Wh...wh...what are you talking about?"

Her eyes landed on Syesha Johnson, one of her hostesses. Syesha's pale gray eyes sparkled with more than a healthy dash of humor as they glanced between Kira and Heller, who stood behind the bar, serving drinks.

"Like you don't know. Please. You've been staring at him for, like, five minutes. I'm sure that one spot you've cleaned has never been so shiny."

Kira blushed. Heller was wearing all black. She hadn't expected him to make bartending in her establishment a sexual occupation, but damn it all, he did. He wore black leather pants. Tight, black leather. A form fitting black shirt hugged his torso, and she swore she could count the abs through the material.

Not surprisingly, business had increased. Well, business around the bar area. Lots of single women, wearing skimpy and slutty outfits. Kira's feelings about the increase in revenue was on the fence.

"I'm not staring at him," she snapped, her lip curling as a leggy redhead leaned against the bar and flashed a grin at Heller.

"Right," Syesha said, doubt ringing in her tone.

Kira snorted. "Think what you like. I know."

"You know you've been staring," Syesha interrupted. "Why fight it? I've been staring too."

Kira arched a brow. "And what would Vami think of that, if he were to find out?"

A blush crept across Syesha's caramel skin, and then she huffed. "He has no say." She paused then said, almost too softly for Kira to hear, "Nothing. He wouldn't say a word anyway."

Kira wasn't too sure about that, but she held her tongue. And glared across the room.

"Just like I'm sure you aren't glaring at him." Syesha raised a brow at her.

Well, when she puts it like that. Kira sniffed indignantly and shared an understanding look with her friend and employee.

Her gaze drifted back to the man working behind the bar. He was staring in her direction. When their gazes met, he winked. She groaned. It was like he had heard their entire conversation.

One side of his mouth lifted in a grin. "Insufferable wretch," she muttered. This time, he flashed her a full smile, teeth and all, before he slid the redhead her drink.

Kira frowned. Could he really hear her? "Can you hear me?" she asked in that same low whisper.

Heller nodded.

She flushed. All those times when she talked about how he looked standing behind the bar, in his tight clothing, he'd heard her. *He heard her.*

Kira saw him nod again.

"Can you read my mind?" Kira demanded softly.

The Elementals had said they couldn't, but she wasn't sure if he could. Heller didn't make any movement saying yes or no. Kira walked over to the counter and slipped behind it. Heller turned his eyes onto her, tossed the towel over his shoulder, and walked toward her.

Walked. Strode. Prowled. Flowed.

She shoved down her reaction. It seemed like her skin came alive whenever he was near. The way it prickled always told her who it was. A sensation like danger, but not, skated over her when he approached.

His eyes darkened as he neared her. He'd been watching her with an increased intensity ever since she'd given in and allowed herself the pleasure of experiencing his body. She wanted to do it again, but did her best to keep that feeling at bay.

"Afternoon, love," he purred, stopping a hairsbreadth away from her.

Love. Another thing he'd begun since their roll in his bed. She liked how hearing it made her feel. Heller Sidorov made being bait a relatively pleasant experience.

"Can you read my mind?" Kira hissed softly.

"I haven't tried. Do you want me too?" Heller smiled down at her.

The smile did things to her that should be considered illegal. Kira didn't bother to reply. They had been together for weeks already. With all the time they had spent together, she knew Heller did what he wanted. And when it suited him.

It had taken her a while, along with Zanna and Mika, to accept and trust that Heller and his group were damn good at what they did, and that they would protect them to the very end.

Still, she couldn't have him calling her that. "Don't call me that," she ordered, her eyes running up the hard planes of his chest to meet his gaze.

Speaking low so they couldn't be overheard, Heller said, "You still feel it there between us. Don't you? You still crave my touch."

Her pussy throbbed. Damn him for being right. She wanted more. Much more.

"Doesn't matter."

A rumbling chuckle escaped him. "Yes it does. It matters."

"Why are you pushing this?"

"Because it isn't something we should be ignoring. It's something we should be exploring."

Tossing her head so her hair moved away from her eyes, she held his gaze. "No strings? Just..." she trailed off. *What the hell am I doing? Talking about this in the restaurant during a busy time is just crazy. Someone is bound to hear us.*

Kira's eyes widened. If Heller could hear what she had said, that meant any of the beings who worked for her could. Then another thought occurred to her. Hell, that meant any being who was dining at Winters heard. She stifled a groan.

"They can all hear us," Kira hissed softly.

She didn't even know why she bothered to say it softly, if they could all hear anyway. She glanced around the room. No one was watching them or anything. She looked back at Heller.

Heller didn't seem at all concerned about being overheard. He stepped closer. "They can't hear the private things between us. I made sure of it. This is between me and you, Kira." Heller studied her, his eyes hungry. "Sex?" The word rolled off his tongue like an invitation to a night of seduction.

She blushed. "Yes."

"You think you'll be okay with that?"

"Will you?" Kira tossed back at him. When heads turned, all she saw was baffled curiosity. She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing Heller had been speaking truth. No one knew what they were discussing.

At least the private things, Kira amended.

She lowered her voice again. "Do you think you'll be okay with that?"

"No. But I know we belong together."

We belong together. She swallowed heavily as those words sank in. He spoke them with such assuredness, it shocked her. Was that honestly how he felt?

"Don't go setting up the white picket fence just yet, Heller Sidorov. I'll agree to this so we can stop wasting energy fighting it. But there's nothing else attached."

The grin that crossed his face should have warned her. "We'll see," he promised. "You come home with me tonight, then."

"After I check on my brother," she insisted.

"Of course." Heller winked. "Now, please excuse me. I have customers waiting for drinks." He walked away, and her eyes found their way to his firm ass and stayed there until he spun around and caught her staring. He laughed out loud as she fumed silently.

Kira headed back to the front desk and scowled at the smirk on Syesha's face. "Did you hear what we were saying?"

She knew what Heller said, and no one seemed aware of what they said, but she wanted to make sure. Kira stifled her blush. She had propositioned Heller in front of everyone at Winters. She glared over at him. Heller threw her a kiss and went back to making drink. Making a huffing sound, Kira looked back at Syesha, waiting for a reply.

Sysha looked confused. "No. Usually you can make it so those with ... um... *acute* hearing can't hear you." Then her look changed to devilment. "Was it something good?"

Kira ignored her question and grumbled. "I don't want to hear it."

"What?" Sysha batted her eyes.

Lifting her lip in a snarl, Kira glared at her. "Hush."

Sysha just laughed harder. She stifled her joy and smiled as the door opened and in walked another couple.

Kira faced them as well, and sent the pair of women a welcoming grin.

"Welcome to Winters."

One was blonde, and one was a brunette. Both had blue eyes, and Kira repressed a shiver as they held her gaze. "Thank you," the blonde said.

The urge to draw her weapon hit Kira full force, but she nodded and backed off a bit, allowing Sysha to look for their reservation.

The woman said, "Hollingsworth."

Bile rushed to Kira's throat. Her heart began to pound erratically. Instinctively, her body readied itself for whatever battle she might be facing.

As if he sensed her distress, Heller looked over at her. In a second, he was moving fluidly toward her. "A word, Kira," he said as he approached.

Sysha took two menus and led the women off toward a table. The brunette glanced back at her, and again, Kira fought down a shudder. But she refused to back down.

"Kira?" Heller's question was low and growled. "What's going on?"

She could feel power and danger rolling off him. Heller kept his eyes on the women at the table, but Kira knew his attention wasn't far from her.

"I don't know," she admitted, not arguing when he ushered her toward her office.

"What did you feel?" He shut the door behind them, closing them in the room.

Feel? "It was just the mention of their name." *Was it?* "And when they looked at me, I felt exposed, naked. Scrutinized. And not in a pleasant way."

"What was the name?"

Kira was lost back in time, as the sadistically pleased face of David Hollingsworth filled her line of sight. She vividly remembered the pleasure he got when he tossed her brother out of his way, like he was nothing.

"Kira!" Heller intruded, jarring her back to the here and now. "What was their name?"

"Hollingsworth," she said. "It was Hollingsworth. That was David's last name."

Kira wasn't sure she really heard the low growl until she looked at Heller. His eyes were hard as ice, and his entire body was tense. Not a trace of the flirtatious man she'd seen moments earlier remained.

"Let's go," he said, opening the door and stepping out of the room.

She followed him immediately. She wasn't even sure if those two women were related to David. Perhaps they were a lure to get her to do something foolish, like take them on alone. She just wasn't sure.

The one thing she was certain of was that she was glad Heller Sidorov was at her side. His aqua eyes softened as they looked at her once again before hardening as he looked away.

Chapter 6

Heller was pissed. The desire to maim flowed through him. His heart had dropped to the floor when he'd glanced back over to where Kira stood talking with Syesha. Her expression was unfailingly polite, but the fear her body emanated resonated through him.

She was scared witless. The fear rolled off her in waves, the sour scent embedding itself deep in his nose. A roar of anger welled up inside him. Never before had his control been so close to snapping.

He barely stopped himself from vaulting over the counter and running to her side. He had calmed a bit by the time he got to her and took her back to the room. She had been shaking, but she'd not wavered for a second.

Heller was so proud of her, for not giving in to the fear and running, and for not doing something that could potentially be dangerous. He had told Syesha that he and Kira were taking lunch and would be back in a bit.

The women were different; that much he knew. But what exactly they were, he couldn't tell. They were masking their true identities. The second Kira had mentioned David's last name, Heller had wanted blood.

They moved through the restaurant and headed for the door. While those eating there who didn't know all of the secrets of Savoy Valley could be shielded from some things, Heller didn't want to risk them getting injured. So if those two women were after Kira, he wanted them to follow them outside.

"Where are we going?"

"We're seeing if they're after you," Heller told her, making sure they didn't rush, just walked like they hadn't a care in the world.

"And if they are?" she asked with a low growl.

"Then we capture them and find out what they know."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

She placed a hand on his arm. Heller stopped and looked down at her. He could read the question in her eyes. But he wanted her to ask.

"What if they don't come quietly?"

"Then their carcasses become fodder for worms."

She nodded and continued walking. "Good."

Heller smiled despite the seriousness of the situation. Such a warrior, his Kira was.

"So where are you taking me?"

"To lunch." He placed his hand on the small of her back and led her toward his vehicle. Once she was buckled in, he drove them to the outskirts of town and stopped at a beautiful clearing surrounded by large trees.

"This is gorgeous," she said.

Looking down at her, he agreed. "Yes, it is."

She wore a loose-fitting pants suit today. It was a pale, margarita green and had accent threads running through it the same golden color as her skin. "Delectable" was the word that came to his mind.

He led her to the place where a nice large blanket was spread out on the ground. A basket containing their lunch sat in the middle.

"You were serious," she said.

"Of course. I don't joke about food. I thought we could use the time."

She shoved him with her shoulder. "Use it for what?"

He chuckled. It was amazing to see the strain fade away from her body. He wanted to keep her like this for all time. Happy, smiling, relaxed. "Whatever you like," he teased.

"Well, you brought me here for food, so feed me."

Heller watched her sit down across from him on the blanket. He dished her up some food and handed her the plate.

"Looks great. Where'd you get it?"

"Don't recognize your own food?" Heller asked.

Kira took a bite of the pasta salad on her plate and grinned in ecstasy. "I don't normally serve it out of a wicker basket at Winters."

He enjoyed a taste of the fluffy roll on his plate. For a few moments they ate in silence, the sounds of nature flowing around them on the air. Heller was content, although he never let his guard down.

Once she finished the food on her plate, he asked, "Was it just the name you heard that freaked you out, Kira, or was there something more?"

She rolled her head on her neck. "Something more," she admitted.

"Tell me," he commanded, moving the basket out of the middle so there was nothing between them.

"It was like they were trying to get in my head. They couldn't, but it was...was as if...kind of like there were feather light touches, trying to get in." Her face scrunched up as she moved one hand, trying to describe it.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"I want to try something."

"What's that?"

Heller didn't respond, just sent out a mental touch to her. It was blocked; he couldn't get in. Moving slowly, he tried prodding in different spots. No use. Her mind was sealed off.

"Yes, it was like that," she said, then stiffened as realization dawned. "What the hell are you doing?" she demanded, moving back from him.

His eyes met hers. "I tried to get into your mind." Heller frowned. It was almost unheard of for a human to be able to block out his attempts to access their thoughts. There were some humans who had a natural block and could keep most people out. But none had ever kept him out. The only way that could be was if someone who had that sort of power had created the block.

See if you can read Mika and Zanna's thoughts. Heller sent the messages to his cousins who were protecting each of the ladies.

I can't read Zanna's thoughts. Bryndis Sidorov, his cousin's voice, came into his mind. Heller could hear the curiosity in her tone.

Mika's either. And she felt it, and boy, is she pissed, Killian added, amusement plain in his voice.

She felt it. So did Kira. Why didn't Zanna? Heller wondered.

Bryndis laughed. *She didn't say anything, but she gave me a look and said out loud to stop fucking with her head..*

The only way they could have that sort of block is Challen, Killian stated.

Yes, Challen was protecting them from someone, Heller agreed.

Yeah. Bryndis and Killian concurred.

They withdrew from his thoughts. Heller couldn't figure out from whom Challen was protecting the ladies.

Challen, you smug bastard, only you could create a block so dense, yet sensitive enough the women would know if anyone tried to read their thoughts. Unconsciously, he sent his thoughts, as he usually would, to Challen.

There was no response, and there hadn't been for over a year. Only a black abyss with no sound. Pain filled him. Before all that had happened, he and Challen had spoken constantly to each other through their thoughts. All of them did. Dane, Killian, Challen and Heller had teased each other mercilessly, and just talked.

The only time they were ever out of touch was when any of them was working, and even then, they checked in every few days, just to make sure they were okay. They had a pact that, if they didn't hear from each other within seven days, they were in trouble and needed help. Only once had they ever needed to go help one of them who was in trouble. Heller shut off the thoughts of that time before they could form.

They couldn't talk with Challen, but they could see him. He was in some trouble they couldn't see. It was frustrating that they could seem to do nothing to help him. Suddenly, warm feeling flooded Heller.

I'm okay, guys. Heller sent his thought to all his family.

Warmth continued to fill him, and he felt the love and support of all his family surrounding him. An image flashed in his mind. Heller felt the touch of Rhiannon, one of his cousins, in his mind. He saw Challen in his bed at Mika's. A golden light surrounded him, seeping into his skin. Heller knew it was love from all of them surrounding Challen, soaking into him. They all loved Challen as much as he did. Challen was their brother, cousin, and son too. The image and feeling slowly faded, but he knew they were all there if he needed them. If Challen needed them. Kira spoke, drawing his attention.

"So, that's what they were doing?" Kira shifted on the blanket, and Heller noticed a short sword appear in her left hand.

"Most likely. They were attempting to see if they could get any information about..." He trailed off. The wind brought the scent of trouble to him.

"Challen," she whispered.

The smell faded. "Yes, exactly." Heller used his senses to see if he could pick up on the putrid scent again. It wasn't there anymore.

"Everything okay, Heller?"

The air smelled safe again, and he nodded. "Yes." Looking at her, his gaze dipped beneath her shirt and lingered over her breasts, covered by a pale pink bra.

"My eyes are up here, Heller Sidorov," she said saucily.

Without moving his gaze, he responded, "I know exactly where your eyes are. They are a beautiful shade of gold."

"You're not looking at them."

He smiled. "No, I'm not."

Her hand clapped down on her shirt. "Think you could look me in the eye?"

Heller did. "Of course." He moved toward her on his hands and knees, slowly. Her eyes widened before they grew smoky with desire.

"We can't do this." Her breathy voice was hesitant.

"Oh, but we can."

"Heller," she sighed.

"Don't fight it, Kira. We're made for each other."

She couldn't fight it, even if she wanted to. Heller Sidorov had that effect on her. Reaching up, she threaded her fingers through his hair. The action allowed her to see more of his face. He stared at her with hunger in his gaze.

"We should be getting back to work." She spoke as her hands trailed over the muscled expanse of his back.

"This is much more fun than work." His tongue swept out and traced the outline of her ear.

Shifting on the blanket, Kira tried to stop the flow of moisture the man over her created. It was no use. Her pussy was wet and demanding relief.

Closing her eyes in surrender, Kira moaned. "Please, Heller. Stop teasing me." She arched up against his hard body.

One of his hands made its way up under her shirt. She groaned to the air as his fingers curled around her breast. Another flood of moisture soaked her panties.

"I can smell you, Kira. Your scent is like the sweetest nectar," he mumbled against her jugular before he nipped it.

Undulating her hips, she tried to get closer. But he held her still and moved down her body. At the waist of her pants, she felt his fingers delve beneath the band and begin to pull them down, along with her panties.

He freed one of her legs from the confines of her pants and underwear, then settled himself back between them. His mouth was warm over the juncture of her thighs. She whimpered and struggled.

His arm held her in place as one hand traced the lips of her pussy. She bit the inside of her lip as two fingers slipped inside her. "Oh, shit!" she moaned.

Heller readjusted himself so her legs were over his shoulders. She mewled as his tongue snuck out and flicked across her swollen clit. Kira almost lost it as he drew the sensitive nub into his mouth and rolled it around, grazing it with his teeth.

His fingers pumped in and out of her relentlessly. Kira reached down and wrapped her hands in his hair, holding him closer and grinding down on his face. She hissed as he let go of her clit and removed his fingers. Her hiss of displeasure turned into a grateful purr as his tongue stabbed deep within her core.

His mouth ate at her without stopping, his tongue stabbing deep and swirling around in her. He began massaging her clit as well, and Kira knew it wasn't going to be long before she came apart.

Tightening her hold on his hair, she panted as her hips tried to bring her closer to his magical tongue and touch. "Heller!" she yelled to the air. "Heller!"

"Hmmm?" His vibrating question rocketed through her already tight nerves and pushed her over the edge.

She locked her legs around his neck, her thighs tight around his ears, and lifted her hips as the orgasm washed over her. "Shit!" she hollered to the afternoon.

Heller never pulled away. He stayed right there and lapped up all the juices her body gave him.

Heller licked hungrily. The taste of Kira's come on his tongue filled him, making the alpha in him want to mark her as his. It was spicy and addictive. He purred, continuing to lick at her and keep her pleasure at a heightened peak. Heller suckled her clit. The hardened bud was hot against the side of his tongue. Gently he scrapped his teeth against it. Kira bucked, another scream coming from her. More of her addictive taste flooded his mouth. Her scent filled his nose and seeped into his pores. The alpha in him rolled around, basking in all that was its mate.

Kira's harsh breath echoed in his ears. She shuddered, and her legs tightened around his head. There was a sweet pause of breath that he already knew so well as her getting ready to come, and then a sensual growl that came from deep within her belly rent the air. He put his hand on the bottom part of her stomach. The muscles in her stomach clenched, then undulated. Kira's wetness drenched his tongue again. Heller

purred, stroking his tongue deeply in between her pulsing flesh. Kira growled, a husky sound that made his cock tighten more painfully. Heller rolled his eyes up. The sexy lines of her release were etched on Kira's face. It was beautiful and decadent.

Kira's eyes were opaque, her full luscious lips parted in a growl, and her sensual scream of fulfillment rang in his ears. Kira collapsed back against the blanket, shivering. Heller didn't want to stop tasting her. Slowly, he pulled his tongue from her sweet cunt. Kira moaned, a soft sound. Heller purred and nuzzled the side of her thigh still wrapped around his neck. Kira's fingers tightened in his hair, and then her fingers stroked his scalp. Heller moved his head deeper into her hand.

Mine. He stroked her stomach, feeling the vibrations of her mini orgasms.

Her limbs were shaking as Kira slowly lowered them back to the blanket. She released the death grip she'd had on his hair. Then, and only then, did Heller raise his head from between her legs.

A content look on his face, Heller licked his lips like a cat who'd just devoured a bowl of cream. Then he prowled up her body and took her mouth in a dominating kiss. She could taste herself on him, intermixed with his own unique and heady flavor. She loved it and sucked hard on his tongue as it invaded her mouth.

"You taste even better than you smell," he whispered as he placed small kisses around her mouth.

She could feel the ridge in his pants. Kira wanted him buried deep inside her.
"What about you?"

"What about me?" he asked, still peppering her face with tiny kisses.

"Don't you want...?"

"Always, but this was for you. You yourself said you wanted to get back to work."

Kira hated the wave of disappointment that flowed through her. He was right; she had said that. Rolling away from his touch, she dressed quickly and got to her feet to readjust everything.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. Heller still lay there on the blanket, the erection obvious in his pants, but his eyes were watching her. They burned, and she smiled at the knowledge that, although he was being thoughtful, he still wanted her.

The smile faded from her face as an image shimmered into view a little ways off from the blanket. It was one of the women from the restaurant. Immediately, her body prepared for battle.

As the weapon was forming in her hand, she heard a low growl and saw that Heller was staring behind her. She knew there were more, and her instinct was pickly proven correct as a few more people emerged from the surrounding forest and headed toward them.

A momentary wave of panic swamped her. It was just like the day she lost Challen.

No! Not just like that day. Today, they aren't catching me unaware.

She blinked, and Heller had gone from lying down to standing beside her. They were shoulder to shoulder, just facing opposite directions. She could feel the energy pouring off the man beside her. The growl that emanated from his throat was an unending warning to those approaching.

Heller was furious. He'd almost been caught unaware. He shouldn't have assumed it was all safe once the smell faded from the air.

The materializing of the brunette behind Kira had brought him to his feet in an effortless flow of motion. He could smell others and knew there were more than just the two women from Winters.

Killian. Bryndis. Stay alert. They're attacking us now. Keep her friends safe.

Do you need assistance? Bryndis's normally gentle voice was lined with steel as she asked.

I've sent word to Dane. He got back last night. Keep them safe.

A rumble of warning grew from the depths of his throat. Suddenly, the idea of capturing one didn't seem good. He wanted their blood. He wanted it soaking the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Kira had armed herself. Her body was deceptively relaxed, but there was a thin rod in one hand. It was near unbreakable, and similar to an ASP Tactical Baton F31 used by cops. But hers was magically enhanced.

They'd been working on her speed in calling a weapon from the boxes she had on her. And while her left hand was empty, for the moment, he knew all it would take would be half a thought, and it would have a deadly weapon in it, most likely her sword.

"Kira," the brunette said, her voice skating across the air to settle around them. "Don't fight us. We don't want to kill you."

"I can't promise not killing you," Kira hissed without taking her attention away from the ones before her.

Heller stepped so that their backs were against one another, and then he nudged her so they turned a full circle, allowing him to see what they were up against. Seven against two.

He held the gaze of the blonde woman and waited to see what was next. His body was ready for anything. He would die to protect the woman with him.

I don't think it will come to that, brother. But there are more than seven. Watch yourself.

The blonde woman's eyes narrowed as she spat, "Heller Sidorov. I've heard about you."

He remained silent as she stepped toward him. Danger rode the current ahead of her. His body tensed in preparation. He knew how fast these things could attack.

"Kira, what are you doing with a shifter?" the blonde asked, never slowing in her approach. "He's just like those that killed your brother and tried to kill you."

Heller felt Kira stiffen behind him, but she didn't move from her position.

"How was it having him between your legs? Don't you care that he's no different than David?" She stopped just barely out of the range of Heller's leap. As if she knew.

Heller heard her gasp. His eyes held the blonde's as he asked, "If we're pretending to do pleasantries, who are you?"

Her arm dropped down, and as he watched, her hand turned into a paw with razor sharp claws. Her eyes shifted to yellow, and her incisors lengthened. She rumbled a low challenge.

Heller knew in that second. Jessie Conrad, David's right hand woman. Which meant the brunette was David's sister, Sherona Hollingsworth.

He longed to roar back his answering challenge, but he kept it clamped inside. When he opened his mouth, all he said was, "David's pussy."

"Among others," she said, without missing a beat. "Jealous?" Her arm went back to being a human one.

"Nope. I don't do rancid meat."

Anger flashed in her eyes, and she hissed at him. He sent her a malicious grin in return.

"Kill him," she ordered. "She is to be taken alive. Alive!" she shouted as her body lunged toward Heller. "I can't wait to eat your flesh."

Heller jumped simultaneously and met her in the air, crashing toward earth with her on the bottom. He didn't linger over the fact he knocked her unconscious as they fell, just rolled to his feet and grabbed his next opponent. A quick glance told him that Kira was holding her own as she fought the brunette.

It had taken all her control to ignore the announcement that Heller was a shifter, that he was like David. A voice in her head told her it was a lure to get her off guard. They were trying to distract her, and she wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. There would be time later to deal with that information. She focused on the approaching threat.

Kira was ready for the attack. The moment the brunette jumped toward her, Kira sidestepped and attacked in return. She swung her thin, hard baton, hitting her opponent in the back of the leg. The woman hissed in pain and almost dropped to one knee.

Kira lunged sideways as the woman swung at her, biting back her alarm as long, deadly claws reached for her. Dropping low, she avoided the rapier-like claws. Spinning around, Kira used her momentum to sweep the legs out from under the woman.

"Bitch," she yowled as she had to flip to avoid landing on her back.

Kira regained her feet and stared at the woman, who tore up the ground with her claws. A sound behind her caused her to spin around and engage the next person.

Half-man, half-snake. His eyes were like that of a viper, and as she waited for him to make his move, she watched the clear lid sweep over them.

Freaky.

He came at her, and she nimbly avoided his first strike, but underestimated his tail. The tail wrapped around her waist and lifted her off the ground, bringing her toward his face.

"Not so tough, are you?" he mocked.

Calling the sword, she stabbed him in the chest. A feral smile crossed her face as she was released, the man dying before her. "Apparently, you aren't either," she said. But there was no time to linger over the victory of a kill, for more men, women, and creatures were coming toward them.

It was like they were coming out of the woodwork. Kira had no intention of going down without a fight. A roar broke through the air, sending chills up her spine.

Spinning to avoid another attack, Kira gulped in surprise as she saw a white tiger rip out the throat of another assailant. Past that, she saw Dane fighting off two others.

Where's Heller?

A lioness went after the tiger, and it was all claws and teeth in seconds. Kira almost missed the brunette's next attack.

Time lost all meaning for Kira as she fought. The brunette left her, shifted, and went after the tiger as well. Kira's aim was true, and her strikes always found their mark.

"Enough!" A loud voice rang through the clearing.

That voice sent tremors of fear and hate through her. David Hollingsworth. Kira dispatched the enemy before her, and her eyes scanned the area. Her heart beat slower as her gaze landed on Dane. He was close, and his eyes were hard as ice when they met hers. She was glad they were on the same side.

She saw a few others that she didn't know as well, but it wasn't the time for introductions. And she still didn't know where Heller had gone.

David strode forward, his gait arrogant and sure. Dane and the others formed a line between him and Kira. She glanced back to her right and saw the white tiger, standing over a wounded lioness, and another one nearby that appeared dead. There were cuts all over him, and blood streamed from them.

"Hello, Kira." David looked at her, and she tried not to be repulsed by what she saw--a man who had tried to kill her brother.

A low growl filled the air. The line of defenders parted, and David's eyes fell to the tiger and the two at his feet. Rage filled the eyes that used to look upon her with love.

"What the hell have you done?" he demanded.

The tiger snarled at him before shifting. Right in front of her, the tiger became Heller Sidorov.

Bile rose in her throat. *It was true! Heller was like those monsters.* Unconsciously, she took a step back from him.

"I've protected what's mine," Heller spoke in a raspy tone, unmindful of the blood that ran down his arms.

"Sherona," David gasped. "And Jessie."

Kira watched in amazement as Heller reached down and lifted the still unconscious lioness into the air with one arm. The dangling cat changed into the blonde from before. The other lioness just stayed on the ground.

"You will die for this, Heller Sidorov!" David spat. He looked over to Kira. "You and I aren't finished," he said. Then he vanished.

So did his remaining people. All except the blonde, who Heller had by the neck.

"You're going to die, Heller," she cackled.

"How's it feel to know he just left you?" Heller taunted. "You know he has his next pussy lined up."

She spat at him.

"Now, now, Jessie," Heller said. "Don't tell me you don't want to be our guest." He handed her off to two men who showed up. "Get her out of here."

Then he looked at Kira, who still wasn't sure what to think or feel. She looked away from him. Suddenly, a cold feeling filled her. Kira looked at where the blonde woman had first appeared. An image seemed to waver in the air. She tried to make it out, but it never became clearer. It seemed to fade, but the strange feeling she had remained. Kira glanced around the clearing, and the feeling got stronger as she glimpsed where David had disappeared. Her gaze landed back on Heller.

"Kira?" he asked, reaching for her.

She shook her head and stepped back. "I want to see Mika and Zanna. Make sure they're okay."

She could read the hurt in his eyes, but he just nodded. "Of course."

The ride back was tense. He didn't say anything, and her eyes kept drifting to the bleeding wounds he seemed oblivious to.

Part of her wanted to reach out to him, nurse his wounds, and hold him. But she couldn't get the image of his changing from animal to human out of her mind. And so she remained silent, keeping her face turned toward the window.

The second he pulled up in front of Mika's gallery, she was out of the vehicle and running up to the door.

Mika and Zanna were inside the galley when she arrived. A huge sigh of relief escaped her as she saw them unharmed. Their faces were full of concern, and immediately they ran to her and pulled her into their embrace.

"Are you okay?" Zanna questioned.

"What the hell happened?" Mika demanded.

"I'm fine, I'm fine." Kira drew back and smiled at them both, positive, however, that they knew it was a strained one.

Kira felt Heller's presence, but refused to turn around and look at him. She just wasn't ready.

"Come on, Kira. Come sit down and fill us in." Zanna guided her to a couch and sat down beside her.

Kira released a shuddering breath and looked across the room. The gallery was empty except for Mika, Zanna, Kira, and their respective bodyguards. The tall, statuesque blonde named Bryndis worked tenderly on cleaning Heller's wounds.

"What's with the snarl, Kira?" Mika asked.

Kira smoothed out her expression. "I'm not snarling," she snapped.

Mika looked at her with a brow raised, then glanced over at Heller. "Right," she scoffed.

Kira felt Heller's eyes on her, and she met his gaze. He seemed unaware of the blood running out of his body, and of Bryndis working steadily on sewing him up. Instead, he was focused solely on her.

His eyes seemed to beg for understanding and a chance to explain. Kira tore her gaze from his and put it back on Zanna, who watched her with more comprehension than she wanted to acknowledge.

"What happened between you two?" Zanna queried.

"Nothing. We went out for lunch and got jumped." She blushed. "I mean ambushed."

Mika glanced between her and Heller. It was no secret to Kira's friends that she and Heller had slept together. They'd razed her about it the first day it'd happened. In fact, both of them had told her how much more relaxed she appeared.

Mika's expression turned serious. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. It's a lot different when you're ready to fight. Plus, Dane and some others I don't know showed up to help."

Zanna tucked a strand of Kira's hair behind her ear, staring into her eyes. "So, what's with the chill between you and lover boy?"

"He's one of them," she expelled on a harsh whisper.

Her friends furrowed their brows in confusion. "One of what?" Mika asked.

"Half man, half beast. He's a tiger." *A white tiger. Who beat back many to protect me.*

"Kira," Zanna questioned softly. "Are you sure?"

Holding her friend's gaze, she nodded. "He changed right in front of me, from tiger to man."

Mika glanced over her shoulder, looked at Heller, and then back at Kira. "You knew he was different, Kira. Don't shut out something good because he reminds you of someone else."

Heller's heart sank at Mika's words. *Did he really remind Kira of David?* He'd wanted to crumble at the revulsion he'd seen in her eyes when he faced her right after changing from his animal form to human.

He hadn't planned on shifting. But when Jessie and Sherona had come at him in animal form, he'd changed immediately, determined to defend himself and Kira the best he could.

And while he was dangerous in human form, as a tiger, he was extremely lethal. Razor-sharp claws, crushing jaws, all backed by well over eight hundred pounds of powerful muscles.

"Relax, Heller," Bryndis said in a soothing tone. "It's just the shock of it. It'll wear off."

Looking down at his cousin, he gave her a small smile. Bryndis was a warrior, and a powerful one. Standing six feet tall, she was well muscled and walked with a grace that drew many stares. Long blonde hair and brilliant blue-green eyes tended to give her an advantage over her opponents, who would mistake her for an easy mark.

"You didn't see the revulsion in her eyes, Bryndis. " His cousin stabbed him with the needle. "Ouch! What are you doing, trying to kill me?"

"Stop talking, stupid. You two are meant to be. If you're so ready to give up, then you deserve to have this pain inflicted upon you." Bryndis tied off the thread and cut it. Then she wrapped a bandage around it and tied that as well.

"I'm scared, Bryndis," he admitted, not caring that Killian could hear it as well. "I'm scared I'll lose her."

"Well, standing here talking to us ain't gonna make it any easier. Go talk to her. Zanna and I have to get back to the hospital anyway." Bryndis kissed his cheek and sent him an encouraging nod. "Zanna"--she spoke to the trio of women--"we should get back."

Zanna stood after kissing Kira on her cheek. "We'll finish this discussion tonight." Then she walked off, striding beside the tall blonde and heading out the door of the gallery.

"Kira," Heller said. "We should get you back to work."

His gut clenched as he saw the tightening of her muscles before she stood. She shared a silent message with Mika before walking toward him, her face a stoic mask.

She is your destiny, Heller. Never lose faith. Dane's voice filled his head.

I'm scared, brother. I haven't marked her. She doesn't want to admit she's mine. What if she chooses to leave me? I can't live without her.

Listen to yourself, brat. Are you giving up? No Sidorov has ever given up in the quest for their one true mate. Yours is Kira.

I never said I was giving up!

His brother's chuckle bounced around in his head. Heller knew he'd been egged on deliberately.

At least now we know why we couldn't find David and the others, Heller said.

Trying to change the subject, Dane teased.

Focus, Dane.

Okay. I'll let you get away with it for now, Dane countered.

Whatever.

They're using the gateways. Dane's tone was grim.

Yes, and that's why we couldn't find them.

They shouldn't be able to use them so easily. Unless...

I know, Heller answered.

The only one we can ask is Challen.

And he can't even answer. I don't want to bring in the others. We don't know if we can trust them. Heller bit back a curse.

We'll discuss it later. Do svidaniya, brat.

Goodbye, brother.

Heller focused back on the woman waiting before him. He could see the fear behind her golden eyes, but he admired how she kept it restrained. He knew it was fear because he could smell it on her, mingled in with the desire she still had for him, tainting the enticing aroma.

"We have to talk, Kira."

She shook her head and moved to the door. "No. We just have to work together until this thing is over. From the looks of things today, they'll be back soon. Especially if you killed his sister and captured that other one."

"We *need* to talk." He touched her arm. "About what you saw today."

"I don't think I want to talk about that."

"Look at me," he ordered.

Her eyes snapped with fire. "I have a business to run." She jerked out of his hold and went to the car to wait for him.

His eyes burned with determination as he strode after her. They *would* talk this through by the end of this night, or he was not worthy of carrying the Sidorov name.

Kira managed to avoid Heller for the rest of the day at work, without overtly appearing to do so. Every time she closed her eyes, all she got were images of fur-

covered flesh changing into tanned, naked skin. Angry tiger to human male. Animal to Heller Sidorov.

She was unsure--of everything. The words the Elemental had given her rang loudly in her ears. And on the other hand, her revulsion at the memory of the creatures who had attacked her seemed to lump Heller in with them.

She was silent over dinner, only half listening to the conversations that floated around the table. Only after they had cleaned up from dinner, and she was with Mika and Zanna in the sitting room, did they start asking her questions.

"What's going on?" Zanna demanded. "There's enough tension between you and Heller to cut with a spoon. And not the same kind as before."

Kira shook her head. Her hand rubbed the necklace that Challen had given her, searching for the comfort it used to bring. She still felt empty inside.

"Kira? Are you going to tell us?" Mika questioned, her tone unusually soft.

"There's nothing to tell." She didn't want to share it with them. For the first time, this was something she wanted to keep to herself.

Mika shuffled her feet before she finally said, "Fine. You know where we are if you want to talk to us. Zanna, let's go."

Kira was shocked that they left her alone. Alone. She didn't need to be alone. What she needed was...

"Are you ready to talk now, Kira?" Heller's deep voice covered her like crushed velvet.

Spinning on the couch, she gasped as his large form materialized from the corner. Her mouth grew dry as she looked upon him, clothed in black leather pants and a tight, hunter green tee shirt. His hair was loose and framed his face with amazing perfection.

She could see the white cotton of the gauze around his wounds starkly against his skin. His gait was the same, eerily smooth. His aqua eyes held hers and refused to relinquish them as he moved closer.

Kira rose from the couch and watched him approach. Unending. Effortless. Predatory. And yet, behind all of that, also a bit of uncertainty.

Heller stopped before her, one hand cupping her face without actually touching her. His head cocked to the side, he stared deeply into her eyes.

“I never wanted you to be scared of me.”

Then he kissed her, pouring everything he didn't say verbally into his kiss.

Chapter 7

Heller could feel her body go from tense to relaxed under his gentle, yet persuading, lips. He groaned deep in his throat as she pressed against him, her fingers gripping his arms as if to say she never wanted to let go.

When he knew he was the only reason she was still on her feet, he drew back slightly and stared down at her. Her lips were swollen from the pressure of his kiss, and a few bruises were on her face from the altercation in the afternoon. Her eyes still held uncertainty when she looked at him, but she didn't move from his embrace. That alone made him have hope.

"We have to talk, Kira. I'm not leaving until we talk about this."

He watched the pulse in her throat speed up, and she swallowed rapidly a few times.

"What are you?" she asked, finally moving away from him.

"I'm what you see before you, Kira. Flesh and blood."

"I've seen both animal and human flesh. Don't fuck with me. What are you?"

"I'm a shifter. I have the ability to wear this shape, or be a tiger."

Her jaw clenched as her eyes raked up and over his entire frame. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"What purpose would that have served? You had to trust us so we could protect you. If it meant keeping back part of who I am to accomplish that, then of course I would do it."

"So you set out to lie to me from the beginning?"

He sighed. Walking away from her, he moved to a stool along the wall, sat on it, and picked up his saxophone. Placing the instrument to his lips, he began to play a haunting melody. For a while, the evocative strands were the only sound in the room.

Heller watched her as the last notes faded from the air. Caressing the instrument, he sought her gaze and held it. "Do you really think lying to you was my goal? As opposed to protecting you?" He put the mouthpiece back in his mouth and began to play again.

He closed his eyes and played from his heart. It was the only way he knew not to toss his control out the window and mark her as his for all time.

"I don't know what to think," she said. Her voice was closer.

Cracking open his eyes, Heller saw she had diminished the distance between them. Still, her lithe body was not totally relaxed. He held her gaze as his fingers danced across the mother of pearl key touches.

Kira stared at the man before her. Man? Beast? Did it really matter?

He had protected her, as promised. She didn't want to be locked away, considered "breakable," and so he had done as she wished. He'd worked beside her for weeks, loving her at night, and understanding she would fight instead of being taken away by someone out of harm's way. Heller had come to know her so well in the brief time they had been together.

The music he played flowed over her, taking her back to the first night they'd met. Well, the first time after the rescue. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as the poignant notes seemed to dance across her skin.

Each of his fingers moved over the instrument as if he were making love to it. His eyes, however, made love to her. She swallowed and sat down on a stool beside him. He spun so he could keep his eyes on her.

Sitting there, Kira just enjoyed the moment. Just being in his presence made her realize what she had been missing earlier. It was this man who completed her.

"What you are scares me," she admitted softly.

Heller stopped playing, placed the saxophone on the marbled countertop, and, picking up her hands, and kissed the back of each one. "Haven't you realized by now that I'd sooner kill myself than hurt you?" he asked, stroking the side of her face.

Her heart ached at his words. Kira studied his face and wanted to make him understand the depths of her fear. She could only think of one way. She looked deep into his eyes.

"I want you to understand what I went through. Is there a way I can show you all that happened to me, and after?" Kira swallowed the sickly fear that filled her.

The thought of reliving everything made it hard to breathe, yet she knew she had to face it. She hadn't thought of it in a long time. The nightmares still plagued her, but not as often as they used to.

Heller returned her perusal, his look tender.

"Yes there is, but...ah... Kira, you don't have to do that. I-"

She cut him off. "I want you to see. I need you to see." She gripped his hand and cupped his cheek. "Let me share this with you."

Heller was silent for a bit, just staring at her. He moved until her knees were between his legs, then leaned his head against her forehead. His eyes locked with hers, he slowly raised their joined hands to his lips. Kira jumped as she felt a touch inside her mind. Instinctively, she tried to push it out. He said nothing, just waited. She knew he couldn't get in unless she let him.

Heller had explained to her, Mika, and Zanna that Challen had put a block on their minds, protecting them from anyone else. They could receive thoughts from others, but no one could read their own. If they didn't want to receive thoughts from someone, they had the ability to block it. Since none of them knew anything about how to do all that, Bryndis--Heller's cousin, who was guarding Zanna--had shown them how it was done. Now they knew how to let in only those they wanted to, and how to throw thoughts of their own. They had insisted that Bryndis show them all they needed to know immediately. Bryndis was a hard taskmaster, and she had shown them in hours what it should have taken months to learn. The process was hard, painful, and they'd had monstrous headaches, but they had all learned. After they were done, Bryndis had touched each of their temples and taken the pain away, then left to go back to work.

Taking a shaky breath, Kira relaxed and did as she had learned. She focused on Heller and the path he used to communicate with her. Slowly, she found her way to his

path, and then she felt the flutter of his mind. The warmth and care there was amazing, making tears burn her eyes.

I'm here, Kira. His tone was pure Heller--take charge, caring, and sexy.

He made her want so many things, yet fear to ask for them. Heller smiled tenderly. Kira slowly made an opening for him to get in while she built a protection against anyone else.

Bryndis had explained that everyone had a preference regarding what they used to build their blocks or protection. She and the others had each picked something. When they had told Bryndis each of their choices, she had laughed and commented that they were "unique." Mika's was water. They had thought it strange, but it worked for Mika. Zanna's was feathers, which was also weird, but worked. Kira preferred wind. She personally thought hers wasn't so strange.

She felt Heller slipping into her mind. Kira's instinct was to shut him out. She was afraid when he saw it all, he would change toward her. Heller's gaze never wavered. Slowly, she relaxed and let the box she had pushed into the corner of her mind open. The memories of what happened flooded her. The joy of that day, and the pain and fear that choked her. Her body tensed with each blow, cut, and word. David's face filled with hate made her try to pull her hand back. Heller held it against his lips, kissing her knuckles, soothing her. She relaxed again and let it come. Something she hadn't remembered came to her. The long days of going from place to place. The final decision to die instead of letting them do anymore. Heller stiffened and made a low growl. Kira looked into his eyes. They were dilated and had changed to tiger. She waited for a shiver of fear, but it didn't come. This was Heller, and he would never hurt her. Kira leaned forward and kissed along his knuckles. She licked them gently.

Heller purred, and his tension eased. She continued to share it all with him. The memories of the fall over the cliff to death, the pain when she hit the ledge, the melding of days when she didn't know if they would find her or she would live, and finally, the voices of Mika and Zanna. Kira gasped when she remembered locking eyes with the aqua gaze of the man who saved her. She had fought him, and he had shown her his

pendent, calming her. She gently ran her finger over Heller's face as the memory of his words echoed in their minds.

You will live, Kira. For Challen, you will live.

He had taken her to the top, and she had seen two other men. She now knew they were Dane and Killian. Mika and Zanna had seen her, and then everything went black. Memories of pain, in and out, the whispers of the doctor's that she would not survive, all of it melded together in a fog. The words of Mika and Zanna that she would survive and not give up. They had taken her home, then set out to rebuild her, inside and out. Each pain, step, triumph and success she shared with him. The doctor's—Aurora, Garrwick, and Dionne Lukas--refusing to be shut out from helping her. Training with them, they had provided their medical knowledge. Over a year of recovery and training. Heller stiffened and growled when he saw William Chadwick in her mind.

William's chest was bare and his body built. His voice was cool and unbending as he pushed Kira to work harder. Another memory came of William moving with deadly precision, his hand so fast she couldn't see them, but had moved out of the way. William hugging her and telling her she would be fine. The last time, William came and kissed her on the lips, then gave her a look that made her knees get weak. It was the look of a man who had knowledge of the effect he had on women. William's smiled, and commented that, in another time, they might have been lovers. William stroked her cheek, then was gone. Kira remembered collapsing on the chair and trying to remember how to breathe. Mika and Zanna had come in and teased her mercilessly when she admitted what had happened. Mika had looked speculative, then grinned, commenting that Kira was lucky William had valued her more as a friend than potential lover, or he would have had her, no matter the consequences. Mika had refused to explain what she meant, and only said the woman William decided he wanted better be prepared, since he was relentless and never took no for an answer.

Heller's growls increased in volume. Kira licked the back of his hand and bit it gently. He looked at her, and whatever he saw made him calm. Kira stifled a smile at his jealousy. It was cute.

I'm not cute. Sexy. I like sexy better. Heller was arrogant.

Kira's eyes widened, and then she remembered that he was in her mind and could read her every thought. She stifled a laugh.

Yeah, you're cute, but also sexy.

Heller wiggled his eyebrows and leered at her. He sobered as another memory filled them. Kira gasped as it unfolded. She didn't consciously remember it. The same day William left, she had left the house without telling anyone. She had made the trek to the cliffs. A sick feeling in her stomach with each step she took hadn't dissuaded her. When she'd finally arrived at the place where they had thrown Challen over the cliffs, she had stood there a long time, just staring out at the edge.

Suddenly, she had dropped to the ground and started to scream, pounding the hard earth with her fists. Her hands had bled on the earth, and she hadn't felt it as she continued to rage. It had been hours before she stopped. Her voice was gone, and her hands were throbbing. The sun had sunk low in the sky. Kira had hugged and rocked herself. Soft hands had slid along her shoulders. She had known it was Zanna and Mika. Kira had felt them come hours earlier, but they had let her scream and rage. Now they were there to comfort. She had looked at Zanna, whose eyes were as red as she was sure hers were, and then at Mika, whose eyes were clear. Mika hadn't cried since that first day. Mika and Zanna had helped her up when she was ready to go. They had stood at the cliffs and reaffirmed their vow to find whoever had killed Challen and tried to hurt her. They had gone home and cleaned her hands, then went back to training.

As the memory faded, Kira swallowed hard. Heller's finger stroked her cheek.

My Kira. You've been through so much. But you survived. Lived. Thank you for letting me see everything.

Heller's voice in her mind was like a caress. It wrapped around her, silky and sensuous, and yet she heard the understanding behind it, the care and respect he felt for

her ordeal. It humbled her. She couldn't speak, so she turned her face and pressed her lips to his callused palm. Then she moved away from his touch, climbing off the stool. "I have to talk to Zanna and Mika."

She needed some space to deal with the things she hadn't remembered herself, and to thank them for being there. Although, knowing Mika and Zanna, they would tell her to shut the hell up.

He picked up his saxophone and nodded. "Of course." Powerful strides took him to the door and, before he left, he stared at her and said, "I'll be back for you in an hour, Kira."

"What for?" she asked. "Is there something else left to be done tonight?"

"Yes. I want you in my bed. I'll be back in an hour." Heller slipped away without another sound.

Her pulse escalated, and her pussy convulsed at his words. Before she had time to think long on what he'd said, Mika and Zanna walked into the room.

"So, I assume he'll be back in a bit," Mika announced.

"What are you talking about?" Kira asked, playing dumb.

"Heller doesn't seem the kind of man to give up on what he wants. And he wants you, Kira. All of us can see that," Zanna told her in a calm voice.

"And you two think there's nothing wrong with it?"

"Wrong with what?" Mika questioned. "You needed to find some relief that neither Zanna nor I were able to provide for you, so what could be wrong?"

Zanna sat down in a Chippendale chair. "I think our Kira may be developing feelings--real feelings--for this man. Which would put a crimp in her plan to be alone."

Kira sank down hard on the couch. She forgot all about thanking them. Zanna had hit the nail on the head about that. She'd been so sure it would work this way, merely sleeping with Heller to ease the ache he created between her legs, without strings attached. But now, she wasn't so positive.

You shared the most intimate thing with him--your thoughts of that day. You've never discussed it with anyone. Hell, even Mika and Zanna only know parts. When will you face what is going on? Her inner voice mocked her.

These intense feelings kept interfering with her ability to simply receive amazing sex from Heller Sidorov. And then there was the way he kept stating how he *knew* they belonged together. It was all very disconcerting on so many levels.

"You know, it's not a sign of weakness to admit you have feelings for him," Zanna told her.

"Zanna's right, Kira. You'll still be just as strong of a woman," Mika added.

Suddenly, Kira just wanted to get out of there. Bolting up from her seat, she glared down at Mika and demanded, "And I suppose you would have done the same thing with Challen?"

Mika seemed to pale before her. Sorrow washed over her, but instead of apologizing, she stalked out of the room. *Heller, I'm ready to go now.* Her rapid steps took her down to the front door and, when she yanked it open, her breath caught in her throat.

Heller stood there.

She swallowed the gasp and frowned. "What're you doing here?"

"You told me you were ready to go."

"What the...how did...I didn't..."

"Kira, anytime you send me a thought, I get it. Even before you let me in your mind, I had opened my mind to you so that if you ever need me, you can call me. You called, and I came." He took her arm. "Let's go."

Walking beside him, she hesitated. "What about Mika?"

"She's watching you from the window. Now come on." He led her to his vehicle.

Kira gasped as Heller opened the door to his bedroom. There were flowers everywhere. She couldn't see the floor, for the number of them that were there. Literally, she would be walking on a carpet of flowers. Her eyes looked into the open

bathroom door, and she saw that the steamy room held more flowers. In fact, there were multi-colored blankets of them hanging from the ceiling, and they were drawn back to expose the sunken tub.

"Heller," she gasped. "How did you...?"

"I asked Nigel to help out. And, after he teased me a bit, he agreed."

"For me? You did this for me?"

"You deserve it."

Kira felt the tears swarming in. She jumped into his embrace and wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you."

His arms caught her easily, and he kissed her before setting her down. "Let's get you in your bath."

Kira stood still as Heller undressed her, placing tender kisses all over her skin as it became exposed.

"I've never seen anyone so beautiful in my life," he murmured as he brushed a kiss over the inside of her ankle.

She trembled. He looked up at her from his position on his knees before her, and her insides flipped. There truly was such magnetism between them, it blew her mind. But aside from that, there was this sensitive and kind side of him that made her want to be beside him always. Kira waited for the panic and denial to come. It didn't happen, and instead a sense of contentment filled her.

With a smooth motion, he rose to his feet and took her hand. "Come with me."

Kira let him pull her along toward the bathroom that was still full of steam. He pushed open the door, and she gasped at the sight before her.

There were even flowers floating in the full sunken tub he led her to. A heady aroma rose and reached her nose, making her skin tingle. "What is that scent? It's divine."

"Qilulla."

"What?" she asked as she dipped one foot into the water. Perfect temperature. Kira slowly lowered herself into the tub, groaning with ecstasy as the heated water immediately went to work on her sore muscles.

Heller settled down beside her. "It's called Qilulla. I asked Nigel to give me some. It has soothing and healing properties, as well as smelling as wonderful as it does."

"Qilulla." She rested her head against the thick folded towel that Heller had put there for her to use. She closed her eyes. "I feel better already."

"Perfect," he purred by her ear. "You rest, and I'll be back when you're ready to get out."

"You're leaving me?" she asked, opening her eyes.

"I'll be in the other room." His hand stroked down the side of her face. "Relax. I'm not going far."

Kira blushed, realizing how that sounded. "I'll be fine."

"Yes. Yes, you most certainly are."

She blushed again. He brushed his lips over hers.

"Call me if you need anything," he whispered. Then he left.

Kira shut her eyes again and allowed the thick aroma fill her pores. Her skin tingled, and her nipples tightened. Unconsciously, her hands moved up and began tugging on her nipples. A low groan slipped from her mouth as spikes of pleasure shot through her system.

As she continued to pull on one nipple, her other hand slipped over her flat belly and dipped between her thighs to circle her clit. Kira bit her lower lip as her fingers continued to stimulate her.

Eyes squeezed tight, she focused on a mental image of the man whose tub she sat in. His massive chest tapering down into lean hips. An erection that never ceased to bring her endless pleasure. Heller Sidorov was a man unlike any other.

"Heller," she said on a moan.

Her body convulsed as two fingers slipped inside her pussy. Eyes flew open to see Heller in the tub with her, his face close to hers, those intense aqua eyes of his darkened with lust. Kira stopped moving her hand.

"No, Kira. Don't stop." His deep, syrupy voice poured over her.

She parted her lips as her fingers began moving on her clit again. Impulses raced through her, and she whimpered, moving her hips, riding his fingers. Kira let go of her nipple and reached for his cock.

His eyes smoldered as her fingers closed around it. Her wrist moved her hand along him at the same speed he moved within her. A low hiss emerged from Heller, and he pushed another finger into her.

"Oh, oh, oh," she panted. His motion was unrelenting. Kira lifted one leg, giving Heller better penetration, shifting her hips a bit so she could still easily stroke his erection.

"Faster," Heller muttered, pushing his pelvis forward.

Tightening her grip, Kira did as he asked and moaned in pleasure as he, too, picked up speed. All her synapses were firing, and she knew it wouldn't take long before she crested. She tightened her internal muscles around his fingers.

Heller pulled his fingers out of her and sheathed himself deep inside her in one stroke. He came in an intense rush. Kira screamed as he filled her with his come.

"Heller!!"

She dug her nails into his chest as her body shuddered with ecstasy. His response was a loud roar, a sound that filled her with chills and more gratification than she would have believed.

He stood, holding her around his waist, his cock still impaled deep within her. Powerful strides took them out of the tub, dripping water on the flowers as he carried her into the bedroom and laid her down upon his bed. The smell of flowers was still strong as her body was engulfed by a thick towel.

Heller began moving inside her again, and everything else faded away. Kira gave herself over to the sensations of being in his arms.

* * * * *

Heller woke from the most fulfilling sleep of his life. Wrapped in his arms was the best thing he had--Kira Winters.

She lay sprawled half on him, half off, her naked body pressed tightly against his. Her hand rested just on the inside of his thigh. Her slight snores filled him with such contentment, he grinned arrogantly.

His cock stirred to life as her fingers moved against his skin. Heller knew he should let her sleep. Today was going to be a busy one at Winters; they were hosting a wedding rehearsal dinner. And they had made love until the first rays of morning crept across the sky.

Yet, he only grew harder. It was no use. He rolled Kira over onto her back, rose over her, and slid inside her with one stroke.

A groan escaped him as her heat encased him. Her golden eyes opened, and a siren's smile crossed her face as she used the strength in her legs to put him on his back.

He shuddered with anticipation. For a brief moment, she held still, her sultry gaze on his, her long hair cascading around her face.

He moaned as she began to move. Up and down, she rode his shaft. Heller reached up to touch her when a growl exploded from her chest. She slammed his hands back to the bed, which was still covered with flowers.

The tiger in him roared his response, a mix of approval and challenge. Heller kept it in check, wanting Kira to set the pace.

It was a decision that was tested mightily. Her hands moved slowly up her nude body, stopping to linger over her breasts and then moving on. She ran her fingers through her hair, closed her eyes, and emitted teasing little mewls from the back of her throat. All the while, she rode his cock in a slow, toe curling, fire building way.

His fingers crushed the velvet petals as he restrained himself from taking over. He swallowed as her hands began the torturous journey back down her warrior's body.

It was like he could feel what she felt. The softness of her skin, the leanness of her muscles, the rapid heartbeat, the light sheen of sweat. It was almost good enough. Almost. He longed to run his hands over her skin, taste the sweat on her body, and feel her pulse pounding under his tongue.

Kira's eyes opened. She captured her bottom lip in her teeth, and when she picked up her speed, a deep moan slipped past her mouth.

Never had anyone looked so good. Flushed skin, firm breasts with nipples that were hard and pebbled.

"Kira," he rumbled, "I can't take much more of this."

Long lashes closed once before she looked at him. "Want me to stop?"

His beast roared loudly in protest. "No," he bit off.

She leaned forward, her hair hanging to one side, and her small yet strong hands rested on his chest as she touched their noses together. "Good. I hadn't planned on it anyway." Kira rolled her hips and released a purr of gratification.

His control snapped. He placed his hands on her hips, ignored her snarl, and began pounding up into her, lifting her and bringing her down hard upon his shaft.

The harder she dug her nails into his skin, the harder he thrust. He watched her from lowered lids. Her eyes had closed, and her moans were coming sharper and louder. His own grunts echoed hers as her body tightened around him.

His balls began to tighten, and he knew he was almost there. Heller felt his skin burning as a roar rose up from the depths of his chest.

Faster and faster, he pounded into Kira. She rode him with ease, taking everything he gave and asking for more. Her moans were music to his ears, and the nails in his chest only added to his satisfaction.

"Kira," he said on a growl.

"Now, Heller, now!" she demanded.

The roar escaped as he thrust twice more before erupting inside her. Her scream sounded more like a roar of her own, as her pussy convulsed around him, milking him for everything he had to give.

Kira collapsed on him. He couldn't move; his body was completely drained. He could feel the shudders coursing along her slender body. Turning his head slightly, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

Neither said a word, just waited until their heartbeats had returned to normal.

Heller kept his dissatisfaction at her climbing off him quiet. He knew they had to get ready to leave. Her big eyes looked at him and he said, "Why don't you use the shower in there. I'll grab one in another room."

She wasn't schooled enough to stop the flash of uncertainty from crossing her face.

Heller rose from the bed, loving how her eyes heated as they looked upon his naked physique. "I'm only saying this because we have to get to Winters, and if I get in the shower with you, we can forget ever getting there today."

He kissed her and walked out of the room, before he did just that.

"Ready?" Kira asked him. She was waiting downstairs by the door, holding a cup of coffee.

"Almost," he said. When her brow arched, Heller moved closer and handed her a box. It was dark blue with no markings on it.

"What's this?" she questioned, setting down her coffee and taking it.

"A gift." He worried the inside of his cheek, unsure of how she would react.

She glanced between him and the box. "What is it?"

A wry chuckle escaped him. "Just open it and find out."

His eyes never left her face as she removed the top of the box. Her head cocked to the side as she lifted the padding and uncovered his gift.

"Oh, Heller," she breathed. "This is beautiful."

She pulled out the necklace. A silver curb chain with a silver heart pendant, draped over her golden skin of her hand. When her gaze met his, he would have sworn on his soul there were tears in her eyes.

"Thank you, Heller." Kira handed the necklace to him and gathered her hair up off her neck. "Can you put it on me?"

He did so reverently and kissed the side of her face. "Thank you for wearing my necklace." To him, it meant she was finally acknowledging this thing between them was more than just a fling.

She glanced at him and touched his cheek. "Let's get to work."

Kira snuck a peek over to where Heller stood behind the bar, serving drinks to the members of the rehearsal party. She didn't know the bride or the groom to be; they had just moved to Savoy Valley. His name was Matxin Freeman and her name was Estrella Hernandez.

She liked them immediately. And both of their respective families also seemed very nice to her. There were no bad vibes or anything that set her nerves on edge. So for the moment, it was only Heller Sidorov who had the ability to affect her.

It seemed like each time she thought about the tall handsome man, the necklace she wore grew warmer. And her mind drifted to Heller quite often.

"Thank you for allowing our party to be here," a soft voice said.

Kira tore her gaze away from Heller and looked at the woman beside her. She was tall, a bit on the thin side, and had bushy black hair. It floated about her face like a cloud.

"You are most welcome. Are you on the bride's side?"

A soft chuckle escaped. "No, Matxin is my brother."

Kira skimmed her gaze over the groom and smiled as she took in the way his dark eyes shone, and how his smile stood out against his dark skin when he looked at his bride-to-be. "He looks very happy."

"He is. He loves Estrella so much. I'm Nahia."

"Nice to meet you," Kira said. She shook her hand and smiled again. "I hope everything is to your liking."

“Oh, please. This is more than we could have hoped for. I know you’re busy. I just wanted to stop by and thank you personally.” With a gentle smile, she nodded her head regally and moved off, looking as if she were floating instead of walking.

Kira stared after her for a few moments until she heard one of her hostesses behind her. That grabbed her attention enough to allow her to focus back on her job. With a smile, she smoothed out her coral business suit.

She made the rounds, making sure everyone had all they needed. Even as she wove among the patrons, her eyes continued to find their way back to Heller. He looked delicious in his black leather pants and tight white tee shirt.

Their eyes met, and he sent her a quick wink. She shook her head and focused back on her job.

Kira stood behind the counter and watched her staff make short work of cleaning up. The party was over, and she was tired. Her feet hurt from wearing uncomfortable heels, and she really just wanted to sit down and eat something herself.

Mika and Zanna were doing just that as the place was cleaned around them.

“Get over here, Kira, and eat something,” Mika ordered.

A tired grin crossed her face as she did as commanded. With a groan, she sank down in comfortable chair. Zanna slid a plate piled high with salad and lasagna toward her. Kira picked up her fork and began to eat.

Her eyes closed in ecstasy as the rich cheeses and flavorful meat of the lasagna showered her tongue. *Damn, I have some good cooks. Who would believe they used to live on Olympus?* Opening her eyes, she noticed that Heller, Killian, and Bryndis had joined them and were beginning to eat as well.

Kira ate quietly and watched as Killian and Mika teased each other constantly. It was almost like watching her with William; she was that relaxed in his presence. Every now and then, he included Zanna in his jokes.

It made her feel wonderful to know that her friends were in such good, capable hands. Bryndis told some embarrassing stories of growing up with both the men at the

table. A smile attached to Kira's face permanently as she heard about the antics Heller had pulled as a child.

The men took it good naturedly, only after promising mild retribution to Bryndis. Heller's lips were curled up in a sexy smile that seemed to find its way back to Kira more often than not.

Kira absently held onto the pendant that Heller had given her, sliding it back and forth along the chain. She was content. She was happy. Silently, Kira headed toward the front counter, wanting to look at tomorrow's schedule.

"How you holding up?" Zanna asked quietly, materializing beside her.

"I'm okay. How about you? Seems like you and Bryndis are getting along well."

"You and Mika only spent time with her when she showed us how to use our mind blocks, but she's good people. I actually like her. She's a jokester. But she can also kick some ass. I did some sparring with her, and it was unmerciful. I swear, my body ached for, like, two days."

Kira grinned. She knew it must be bad if Zanna complained about aching. She was one who never seemed to tire or get sore.

Zanna smiled for a second, and then her face got serious. She put a hand on Kira's after setting their drinks down. "We never got to talk about what happened to you in the field. You positive you're okay?"

"Yes. I am. Heller took real good care of me."

One eyebrow rose as Zanna took a drink of her wine. "I bet he did."

Kira blushed. "Not what I meant. Well...it was, but...no, no it wasn't." She reached for her own drink and took a sip. "He drew me a bath, put this flower in it that soothed all of my aches." Kira leaned close. "It was absolutely amazing."

"He drew you a bath? Girl, that man is all out seducing you."

Kira fought down a giggle. It had been a long time since she'd wanted to giggle like a school girl. "I like it," she admitted.

"Really?" Zanna's voice smacked of sarcasm. "I hadn't noticed. All your smiling and such made me think you weren't enjoying anything he had to offer."

"Shut up," Kira groused, smacking her friend on the shoulder.

"I like the necklace. Gift from the oversized tabby?"

Kira almost snorted wine out through her nose. Heller? An oversized tabby?

"Don't let him hear you call him that," she said, trying not to burst out laughing.

"Although, he probably did."

Both women turned their heads toward the table. Heller was waiting for them. He smiled and winked at them. Kira groaned. *He heard.*

Killian got up, and soon Winters was full of dancing music. Zanna looked at Kira, and they shared smiles.

"Doesn't look like we'll be leaving anytime soon."

Zanna laughed out loud. "Look, I know we aren't Heller, but damn, can't you spend some time with your girls?"

Kira jerked her head and looked at Zanna, whose dark eyes shone with humor. Sticking her tongue out at her, Kira grabbed Zanna's hand, dragging her over to where Bryndis danced with Killian.

Heller watched as Kira danced with her friends and his family. She'd traded her stilettos for fur lined slippers, and she moved with the grace he'd come to love. He leaned against the bar and watched Killian spin her around.

I like this woman of yours, cousin.

Exactly, Killian. Mine. I don't like you touching her.

We're just dancing. You could always come dance with her.

Pushing away from the bar, Heller did just that, breaking in between Kira and Killian.

Bastard, Killian teased.

Sorry, cousin. My parents were married.

Killian sent a snarl to his mind, and Heller just laughed it off.

"What's so funny?" Kira asked.

"Just something Killian said," Heller responded, spinning her out and back into his arms.

She smiled, and he promptly forgot about Killian and focused totally on the woman he danced with.

Heller Sidorov! You must return immediately to Mika's house! A voice shattered through his skull, making him stagger to a stop.

Who are you?

I am Juras-mate. The wards on her house are failing. We can only keep them out for so long. You must hurry.

We're on our way.

Stopping, Heller pinned Killian with a stare. "Get them back to Mika's, fast. Bryndis, you're with me."

"What's going on, Heller?" Kira asked.

"The wards are being bypassed."

"Oh my God. Challen," Kira gasped.

"Bryndis, let's move." He headed for the door, already feeling the tiger in him roaring to the surface.

His cousin matched him stride for stride as they slipped away into the night, heading for Mika's sanctuary. *Keep them safe, Killian.*

We're right behind you.

As he cleared a fallen log, he swore again. *How the hell could the wards be failing?*

Dane, what's going on?

Just get your ass here, Heller. He heard the coldness in Dane's tone and knew he was in battle.

A sound behind him made him turn. With his keen eyesight, he saw Kira was running a good distance behind them. She wasn't as fast as them, but she was making good time. Heller swore softly.

Killian, Kira is behind us. You were to keep her safe.

Try keeping three determined women from going where they want. Killian's voice was deceptively calm.

Heller had a flash of a dashboard.

Where the hell are you?

On the way to your house.

He didn't have to ask for an explanation. Killian shared the brief conversation between him, Mika, and Zanna before they had distracted him so Kira could run off behind Heller and Bryndis. Killian had been shocked, but Zanna and Mika had walked away to the car. Killian hadn't believed they would actually be crazy enough to leave him. They were driving fast from Winters. Killian had run after them and wrenched open the car door. Pushing Mika over into the middle, he'd taken over driving. Since then, the women had been smart enough to say nothing. They sensed how furious Killian was. Heller was grateful they kept silent. Killian in a temper was not something he liked to see. Killian was the more affable of them, but when he got angry, he was the most dangerous.

Just get here as soon as you can, Heller said.

Fuck you, Hell, Killian replied.

Bryndis, go ahead. I'll go get Kira. Heller turned around and raced back to Kira. As he reached Kira, he saw her eyes widen. He was impressed that she didn't even seem out of breath. Without a word, he scooped her up in his arms and turned back to go toward Mika's house.

Heller, I ca –

Not one word, Kira, Heller warned.

Her eyes narrowed, and she stiffened in his arms.

I'm not going to be left behind like some little women waiting for my man to protect me, Kira said.

That's not what I was doing. I wanted you out of harm's way.

It's the same thing. If this is going to work, Heller, I'm your equal, or nothing.

His tiger roared inside in anger and fear. It swiped out at him from inside. Heller took the blow, knowing the tiger was right to chastise him for not trusting his mate as his equal.

She is our equal, but it's in our nature to protect her. The tiger purred in response and rolled around. Heller could almost hear it say, *Yes, but we pick our battles, and it's her right to protect her brother.*

Heller conceded to the alpha being.

What was that? Kira's voice shook.

Startled, Heller realized she had felt it. If she had, it could only mean one thing. He stifled a smile. His tiger had already started the process of making her theirs. The tiger roared, then trailed off into a rolling purr.

It was the bossy side of me--my tiger, Heller replied.

The tiger swiped at him playfully.

At least he knows you need to behave. Kira laughed and purred back.

The tiger stilled and flowed to the surface of his skin. Kira gasped as she felt it. The tiger sniffed at her, taking in her scent. Heller shuddered and dodged another log as he ran. Kira quivered.

Oh my. You're an overwhelming being.

The tiger grinned arrogantly and bowed its head. Suddenly, it looked up and roared. Kira stiffened, and Heller saw her look around. They burst through the trees surrounding Mika's drive. Heller took in the battle before him. Dane was in the middle, still in human form. He dispatched an enemy who was in human form, and various beings in a variety of other forms. Dane's face was cold as he made short work of adding bodies to those already littering the ground. A roar rumbled loudly, drawing his attention. Bryndis, also in human form, spun into the air and slashed down with her sword, hacking a wolf shifter in half. She threw her head back again and roared, her beast screaming in rage as another attacked her. Dropping to the ground, Bryndis lowered her head and put down her sword. With her other hand, she beckoned the

enemy to her. They rushed her at once. Bodies covered Bryndis, and she disappeared below them.

"Help her!" Kira screamed.

Heller lowered Kira to the ground and held her so she wouldn't run into the fight. Kira pounded at him. Suddenly, a loud roar filled the area again, and bodies went flying. Bryndis rose from among them, flying into the sky and flipping in the air. She landed on her feet a little bit away from the pile that had covered her. Heller didn't need to check to know they were all dead. Bryndis didn't look back, but jumped into the middle of another set of enemies and slashed with her sword.

Are you going to just stand there and gawk or help, Heller? You too, Kira! Bryndis seemed disgruntled.

Heller looked at Kira. There was a look of awe and respect on her face. It slid into a fierce grin, and she raised her hands. He saw the two swords she held in them. A roar rattled the area. Heller looked back and saw Mika's car, the roof flying off and Killian swooping into the middle of the fight.

Show off, Heller teased.

Not my fault you're slow, Killian returned.

A wave of beings rushed the car. Heller took a step toward them. Zanna flipped out through the roof, and the air quivered with the sound of her whip cracked. It lit with fire. Zanna's face went full of shock, and then she grinned.

"That's what I'm talking about. Come on, you slimy bastards," Zanna taunted.

She flicked her wrist and brought up another whip lit with fire. With deadly accuracy, she wielded the weapons, picking off the beings rushing the cars. Arrows took out those who Zanna didn't. Although he didn't see her, Heller knew Mika was in the car, taking them out one by one. Mika and Zanna worked in tandem, cutting a swath through the enemy.

"Come and get it, you fucker!" Zanna called as she continued to battle. Heller moved to help her, taking on the beings coming at them. He heard the slice of Kira's swords. Standing at the back of the car, he fought. Something made him turn. The back

glass of the SUV gave, and an arrow knocked the being sneaking up behind him off his feet. He looked at Mika and nodded his thanks. She returned it and turned quickly, dispatching arrows with deadly accuracy.

Heller turned, punched his hand through the chest of an enemy, and flung him away. He glanced at Kira and saw her cut a snake being in half.

"Zanna, you got this?" Mika's question drew his attention.

Heller spun, taking the man he'd grabbed with him.

"Go, Mika!" Zanna screamed.

Mika slid out the back window onto the ground, running around the car and for the house. Never slowing, she used her crossbow to kill any of the enemy in her way. She turned in a graceful move and took out those coming behind her, then looked front and kept clearing a path. In moments, she ran up the stairs, still firing, and went through the front door.

Who's inside, Dane? Heller flung one combatant away and turned to face another.

The Elementals, and Zarin, Spike and Tovah, Dane answered.

Heller grunted as his fist connected with another face. If it wasn't Killian, Challen, or Dane at his back, then it had always been Zarin, Spike and Tovah. He knew they would let nothing happen to Mika. As for the Elementals, he didn't know why they were helping, but he was grateful. A loud boom rocked the ground. Heller scrambled to keep his feet. He looked back at the door of Mika's home. One of Elementals floated outside. The beings from inside slipped out into the yard.

"UrrreelIII LIIIIII!" Spike's battle cry filled the air. She flew over the heads of the beings and slashed down with her claws. The beings tumbled off the stairs.

The inky black hair of the Elemental streaked red, and then she raised her hands, fire flying out of her finger tips. They incinerated all the enemies around them. Heller looked back toward the car and saw the bodies littering the area, and those who were able running back into the trees. He turned and ran toward the fight in the middle of the yard. He heard Zanna's whips as she joined the fight. Kira's sword made a hissing sound as it cut down. Suddenly, the remaining enemy beings turned as one and ran

back into the trees. In seconds, the area was clear. Heller looked at Dane, Bryndis, Spike, and Killian. They shrugged, the same confusion on their faces that he was sure was on his.

"Why did they all retreat like that?" Zanna voiced the question they all were thinking.

"They realized whatever they were after was unattainable," a soft voice replied.

Heller glanced at the Elemental called Darago, who was floating a little off the ground. Darago stared at him. The other Elementals joined her, each floating next to her.

"Thanks for your help," Heller said.

"We hear the 'what the hell are you helping us for' in your tone, Heller Sidorov."
"Darago laughed, a rich sound.

Heller didn't deny it.

Darago glanced at the other Elementals, then back at Heller. "It is not for your knowledge yet, Heller."

The Elementals floated down the stairs and to Kira. Heller tensed as they paused in a circle around her.

"Kira Winters, if you ever have need of us, just call." Darago looked at Zanna also. "Any of you."

Heller knew they weren't talking to him or the others. Their invitation was for Zanna, Mika, and Kira. His curiosity increased. He watched to see what Kira's reaction would be.

Kira watched as the beings she had only seen once, when they moved her brother, waited for her to say something. It confused her why they would help them. Heller had mentioned they usually were neutral. Yet they had come to help.

"Thank you. We will call if we need help," Kira replied.

The Elementals all nodded, looking pleased, then started past her.

"And if you ever have need, call us," Kira added, before she could think about it.

She winced as they stopped and looked at her, shock on their faces.

Real smart, Kira. Why would these powerful beings ever need your help?

Kira hoped her embarrassment didn't show. The Elementals looked at each other again, and then at her. They bowed to her as one, and then the one she knew as Darago spoke again.

"Kira Winters, we certainly will." It sounded like a promise.

They all smiled gently, then turned. A murmur rose from them, and Kira felt the air change. If she'd blinked, she would have missed it. The bodies disappeared, Mika's car was back to normal, and when she looked back, the hole around the front door was gone. Everything looked normal again. When she looked for the Elementals again, they were gone.

"Did we just give alliance to a powerful set of beings? And them to us?" Zanna asked, coming closer to her.

"I think we did," Kira replied, looking at her.

"At least we're on their good side. After seeing what they can do, I'm glad for that." Zanna's eyes twinkled.

Kira chuckled, then looked at Heller. He was watching her, pride and need on his face. He murmured a few words to Killain, Dane, Bryndis, and three other people she didn't know, then came to her. She met him halfway, running her hand over him to make sure he was unhurt. Heller stood still for it, then took her hand and led her to the house. Without a word being spoken, she knew where they were going. Heller would know she would need to see for herself that Challen was okay. Even though Mika was with him, she needed to see him herself. Silently, they climbed the stairs and went down the hall to Challen's room. Heller stopped her before Challen's door. She looked at him.

Gently he kissed her. Her heart started to race, and she cupped his cheek. He released her slowly and opened the door. Kira stepped inside, took a few steps and looked up.

"Mik-"

She stopped speaking and stood rigid. Mika was lifeless on the bed, lying next to Challen's still form. Kira's blood went cold as the man with a knife in his hand looked at her. Blood blossomed on his shoulder, and she saw the arrow there. A fierce thrill hit her, knowing Mika had gotten off a shot and injured him.

"I've been waiting for you, Kira," David Hollingsworth purred threateningly.

Chapter 8

Kira didn't say a word, just watched him for a chance to take him out. David's smile widened. He looked to her side, and his lips rose into a snarl.

"You should keep better company." David raised his head and sniffed, then he hissed. "His stench is all over you." He cocked his head to the side. "Yet, you aren't fully his. Tsk, tsk. You should have done it while you had the chance, Heller."

Kira didn't know what David was talking about, yet the tension she felt in Heller made her want to reach out and touch him. As soon as she thought it, she felt the brush of Heller in her mind.

It will be okay, Kira. Dane and the others are on their way.

It wasn't what he said that calmed her, but the utter faith in his tone. Slowly, she felt the tension ease from her. Kira smiled. David blinked and looked around the room, then turned his attention back to them.

"Your body language has changed, Kira. Where's the fear that I usually taste from you?" David taunted.

Kira kept her face blank of her shock. She hadn't even known she had been frightened of him. She thought about it and realized whenever she thought of David, she did feel afraid. What she had seen him do made her afraid. His lack of soul made her afraid. Heller flooded her mind with warmth and comfort. It was if the sun had pulled her close and filled her soul.

David looked from her to Heller and snarled. "She's mine, and you had no right to touch her."

"I was never yours, David. You used me and tried to kill me and my brother." Kira let all the loathing she felt fill her tone.

David looked at her, surprise on his face. Then he snickered. "Got a little backbone." He licked his lips. "It will be my pleasure to beat it out of you." He purred, a nasty sound in the back of his throat, then continued. "If I wanted to kill you, Kira, you would have been dead from the time we captured you that day. I wanted you

weak, so I could control you. I never expected you to escape. Who knew you had that sort of strength in you?"

His voice sounded impressed, and his look was hungry. His eyes raked down her body like a physical touch. Kira felt naked. She waited until he returned his attention to her face, then threw her head back and laughed tauntingly.

"That was the first of many mistakes. Hell, you couldn't even kill Challen as you planned. You're an incompetent asshole. A fuck up. Why don't you come over here and let me put you out of your misery?"

David's face went furious, and he took a step toward her. Kira braced herself, ready for his attack. She felt Heller shift also. But David stilled, shuddering with rage.

"Uh-uh, Kira. It won't be so easy. You'll know pain, mourn their deaths. Let me rectify my incompetence." He looked away from her to the bed.

He dropped the knife on the table, and his hand changed to razor sharp claws.

"Who shall it be?" David asked in a singsong voice. "Challen?" He lowered his claws almost to touch Challen's cheek. "Or Mika?" He shifted his hand, and his claws extended to Mika.

Kira saw a movement from behind him. She glanced at the window he was standing in front of. Her eyes widened. Dane was in front of the glass, all his attention on David, his hand in a claw. The smile on his face was deadly. He glanced at her, and she swallowed hard. His eyes had changed, and the look in them was of death.

A hissing sound captured her attention. She looked back at David. A funnel rose from the bed. Kira realized it came from Challen. David stumbled back from the bed, and the black mass followed him. It surrounded him and swept over his body.

"No!" David screamed.

The cloud streaked up into his mouth, nose, and eyes, and disappeared. David glanced at her and roared. The window behind him shattered. He turned. Dane flew into the room. All the other windows shattered. Kira glanced around and saw Killian with Zanna on his back, Bryndis, and the three others from outside. They closed in on David, who looked at all of them and laughed.

"Fools." His hand flashed up, and the light from the windows bounced off the golden disk he held.

The disk started flashing, and David glanced at her. "You're mine, Kira, and I'll come back and claim you."

Dane reached David as he was fading and grabbed for him, but it was too late. A sizzle sounded, and he was gone. Dane roared. Kira ran forward to the bed where Mika and Challen were. She glanced at Challen, then Mika, and saw they were okay. A hand slipped over her shoulder. She looked at Zanna, then at the windows.

"How did you all get down the side of the house?"

"Down? We came up. Before I knew what was happening, Killian had me on his back and was climbing up the side of the house. They didn't even use any ropes. Those claws sure come in handy." Zanna raised an eyebrow.

Kira nodded and looked back at the people on the bed. She heard the others talking behind her.

"Now we know how he's disappearing," Bryndis said.

"The Silenus," Dane growled. "How the hell did he get his hands on it?"

"The better question is, how did he infect Challen with a Vilaiz Symbiant?" Killian added.

"What the hell is a Vilaiz Symbiant, and what is the Silenus?" Kira asked, staring at them.

Heller looked at her and came over. Zanna moved to let him stand beside Kira. The others moved to stand around the bed.

"The black blob that went into David is a Vilaiz Symbiant. It's not from this dimension. David doesn't have the kind of power needed to go where it is and get it. And even if he did, he shouldn't have been able to infect Challen with it. Challen's immune--at least he should be. The Silenus—that gold, flashing disk he had--is a displacer. It bends time and creates pockets for people to walk through to other places. Again, not of this world, and something David shouldn't have been able to acquire. Only--" Heller cut himself off and looked at Challen.

Challen and a few others can wield them.

Kira picked up the stray thought from Heller's mind.

Kira looked at Challen, then back at Heller and the others around the bed. Zanna had the same look Kira was sure was on her own face. Kira asked the question for both of them.

"What is Challen? And why is David after me?"

Heller looked at Kira, then at the others. He returned his attention to her and took her hands.

"We don't know why David is after you. Only Challen might know. As for what Challen is--well, we hoped he would be able to tell you himself, but now you need to know. Challen is a T--"

A gurgling sound cut Heller off. Kira looked back at the bed. She gasped as she saw Challen's face go gray and his breathing shallow. He made the sound again, and it was echoed. She turned her attention to Mika, and her breathing as shallow as Challen's.

"What's going on?" Zanna demanded.

Kira looked up at her across the bed. The same fear she was feeling was reflected on Zanna's face. Kira glanced at the others around the bed. The grim looks on their faces made her heart race. Finally, she met Heller's gaze. The pain and sorrow in his aqua eyes made her knees buckle. He caught her and held her close.

"No!" Kira screamed.

"I'm sorry, Kira." Heller's voice was thick.

"What's going on?" Zanna demanded again.

"They're dying," Heller replied softly.

Kira jerked away from him as he said the actual words. She pounded him on the chest.

"No! You have to do something!" Kira cried.

Zanna's soft sobs came from across the bed. The regret in Heller's eyes let Kira know what he would say.

"There's nothing we can do."

Heller tried to pull Kira into his arms again, but she pushed him away, not wanting his comfort. He resisted her and pulled her in. Kira shuddered and glanced at Zanna. Killian held Zanna close, tenderly stroking her hair. He looked at Kira, pain and anguish in his gaze. He turned his attention back to Zanna, who had silent tears rolling down her cheeks as she stroked Mika's hair. Killian made soft, comforting sounds against Zanna's hair. Bryndis, Dane, and the others had the same look in their eyes as Killian. Kira tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. She looked at Challen and Mika, her brother and best friend, and prayed they would live. They all stood there silently, watching Mika and Challen for a long while. The room started to go dark as the sun set. Someone turned on the lights.

"Kira," Heller said softly, breaking the silence.

She was pulled out of her reprieve. She looked around. Killian was in the chair with Zanna asleep on his lap. The others were gone. Kira glanced at Heller. His look was tender. Tears burned her eyes.

"How can I say goodbye to two people who mean the world to me? Oh, God, I can't do this." Her voice was raw.

Heller tightened his arms around her. He rested his cheek against hers. Kira looked back at Challen and Mika.

"Do you know that Mika *decided* I would be her friend?" she said to him. "God, she was so arrogant. We passed each other in the hall, but never spoke. She just watched me, and I thought she was strange. The first time we actually spoke to each other, she walked... no, *swaggered*... right up to me and said we were going to be best friends for life. Of course, I looked at her like she was crazy and, hell, even asked her if she was. Mika just gave me this devilish grin and said, 'Sometimes'. All I could do was laugh, and we've been friends ever since." Kira thought of all the years they had been friends.

"When did you all meet Zanna?" Heller asked quietly.

Kira laughed softly. "Two years later. Mika and I were on the way to dinner, and she hit Mika's car, and Mika was pitching a fit. Imagine, Mika in a rage, and all Zanna did to diffuse her was say, 'Oh, I like you. Teach me how to curse like that.' Then Zanna laughed. Mika sputtered, then started to laugh. I thought they were both nuts, the two of them laughing like lunatics on the side of the road. Then Zanna looked at me with that look of mischief and said, in her Caribbean accent, 'So, what interesting adventures are we going to get into?' And that was that. We've all been friends since. Together, we've gotten into lots of mischief, and been there for each other. Oh, we've had some dozzies of fights. Zanna has a nastier temper than Mika."

"Zanna." Heller sounded disbelieving.

Kira glanced at him. "Yes, Zanna, if she ever gets really angry--not a little, but a lot--and goes into a rage." She shuddered. "It's not pretty, and I've only seen it a few times. The last time, she and Mika went into a rage together. God, it was a sight. It was when I--"

"When you what?" Heller prompted.

She took a breath. "When I was willing myself to die." She looked into his eyes for his repulsion. He continued to look at her with the same tenderness, and he stroked her cheek with his finger.

"Mika was cursing me out and trying to control herself, but then Zanna--well, she lost it. She was not only cursing, but throwing things around the room. Zanna gets strong when she's angry. She pitched a desk in the room against the wall, then grabbed me out of the bed. Mika tried to stop her, and she decked Mika, knocking her to the floor. Zanna dragged me to the window, opened it, and said, 'If you want to die so bad, then just jump instead of wallowing.' She stepped back and left me there. I hadn't been out of bed for months. God, I was so weak and shaking. I stood there, looking out at the lawn, and had visions of me dead there. I thought of it, and was furious at Zanna for doing this to me. See, Zanna knew I didn't want to die. I glared at her and snarled, 'Take me the fuck back to bed.' Zanna gave me a nasty look, then hauled me back to bed. She and Mika crawled into bed with me, one on either side, and then we cried. It

was at that moment I knew I wanted to live. After a few tears, Mika looked across at Zanna and said, 'If you ever hit me again, I will beat your ass into the ground.' We looked at each other and started laughing." Kira glanced at Zanna, then at Mika in the bed. "How will Zanna and I survive this? Mika is our third. Our sister." She looked at Challen. "Challen is our brother. We can't lose them."

Heller said nothing, just held her close. Kira sighed and relaxed into his embrace. She watched Mika and Challen, sorrow eating at her. Kira studied the distance between their bodies and laughed bitterly.

"Even now, she can't touch him. I'm going to move her so they can touch. She wasn't able to touch him in her dreams over the last year, but by God, she will now." Kira took a step away from Heller.

He grabbed her and turned her around to face him. She opened her mouth, but her words stilled at the intensity of his gaze.

"Dreams? Mika dreamed of Challen in this last year?" Heller demanded.

Kira didn't know why it mattered, but answered. "Yes."

"How often?" Heller asked.

Before she could answer, a voice interrupted.

"Every night," Zanna replied.

Kira glanced at Zanna and Killian. They were standing on the other side of the bed.

"Of course." Killian's look was speculative as he watched Challen and Mika.

"She was keeping him alive," Heller said.

"What?" Kira looked between them, confused.

"Dreams are powerful and have hidden meaning. None of us could get to Challen," Heller said. He studied the couple on the bed. "With the Vilaiz Symbiant in Challen, he should have died not long after we found him."

"He shouldn't have been able to sustain himself," Killian interjected. "Except he had Mika."

"What do you mean, he had Mika?" Zanna demanded, pounding her fist on his chest.

Killian held her fist and looked at her. Zanna swore at him and jerked her hand away. She stepped back from him. Killian smiled, a predatory grin. Heller spoke, drawing their attention.

"None of us could get inside Challen's thoughts or dreams to help him. He kept us out to protect us from the Vilaiz Symbiant." Heller gave Challen a look. "He was being protective when it wasn't needed. We could've handled it." He looked back at Kira. "Somehow, he and Mika are connected, and he shared a joint dream with her to sustain himself. Of course, she had to have let him in for it to work."

"If that's the case, why are they dying?" Kira demanded.

"Challen used the last of his strength to save Mika when David was about to kill her. He expelled the Vilaiz Symbiant from himself, back into the person who infected him--David." Heller studied Challen and Mika again. "He didn't realize they're connected, so if one dies, the other will too."

Kira tried to make sense of everything Heller was saying. He spoke again.

"Unless-" He stopped.

"*Unless what?*" Zanna screamed.

Heller and Killian looked at each and said, simultaneously, "Chardon."

Kira was tired of not getting a straight answer. She planted herself in front of Heller. "Explain."

"Chardon is a sand goddess--a walker of dreams. If anyone could get into Challen's dreams, she could."

Kira narrowed her eyes. "Why couldn't she before?"

Heller exchanged a look with Killian, then looked at Kira. "We didn't call her before."

"Why?" Kira couldn't believe it. They'd had a way to help Challen and hadn't done it?

"It's complicated," Heller replied.

"Wh-" Kira began.

A sensuous chuckle cut her off.

"Well, well. Heller Sidorov. I never thought I'd hear you call my name again. "

Kira turned at the sound of the husky voice. She took in the woman who leaned against the open door that led into the sitting room. The woman's onyx skin stood out against her silver hair. She was devastatingly beautiful, with high cheeks, a sloping forehead, an aristocratic nose, full lips, and a rounded chin. Her clothing was gold. A bar studded with jewels covered her full breasts. A skirt started below her navel, leaving her midriff bare. The skirt fell to the floor in a soft rain of fabric that was the same color as her bra. An intricate tattoo surrounded her navel and flowed around her waist, disappearing behind her back. The woman glanced at her briefly, and Kira gasped. The woman's eyes were a translucent gray, almost the same shade as her hair, while her pupils were hazel. Kira couldn't understand why she was able to see all of that so clearly. The woman laughed again, and Kira felt something stroke her skin. She shuddered as realization hit her. The woman was using her power, making Kira see it all. She nodded, as if answering a question Kira never asked.

The woman looked over at Killian and licked her lips. "Now you, Killian, I've been waiting to hear from for a long time." Her voice dropped to a sensual purr.

Zanna moved closer to Killian, the look on her face violent. The woman waved a careless hand at Zanna.

"Who's your pussy?" she mocked.

"Who's your bitch?" Zanna returned in the same tone.

The woman was startled, then threw her head back and laughed. The sound seemed more genuine than the other.

The woman looked at Zanna, eyes twinkling. "Oh, I like you. You have fire. I'm Chardon Viles Durnios, the sand goddess, all powerful and yada yada." Chardon smiled, a self deprecating grin. "Don't believe the hype. It's all a load of bull. I'm just Char to my friends." The woman waved a delicate looking hand again.

"We're not friends." Zanna's voice was flat.

Char studied Zanna and replied, " Ah, Zanna, we will be."

How does she know Zanna's name? Kira wondered.

Char looked at Kira. " We will be also."

Char stepped away from the door and flowed into the room. " Kira Winters. I've been meaning to come pay my respects about Challen. I m-"

Char's face went blank as she came into view of the bed. Then she whispered, "*Challen.*"

The anguish in that one word made Kira's breath stall. The pain in the room overwhelmed her, and she had problems breathing. Heller touched her, pulling her back, and she could think again. They were standing at the foot of the bed. She glanced at Zanna, who was now beside her, and saw the tension on her face. Killian was touching her. She looked back at Char, who was standing by the bed. Char ran her hand over Challen's hair, and her hand was shaking.

" I thought you were dead." The agony rode on the air.

Char looked up. Fury made her eyes swirl.

Char said in a soft tone, " I should kill you where you stand, Heller."

Kira reacted to the danger she felt, putting herself before Heller. Char turned her gaze on Kira, the fury scorching her.

" For you, I will not kill him as I should, Kira Winters." She looked at Killian. " Or you. Why did you let me think he was dead?" Char turned her attention back to Challen. She touched his cheek. " I mourned for you, although I know you were no longer mine." She glanced at Mika, and pain flashed on her face. Then she returned her attention to Challen. " Ah, my noble knight. You didn't do as you should have."

Char fell silent, continuing to stroke Challen. Kira glanced at Heller. He was watching Char, and there was regret in his gaze. Char's voice drew Kira's attention.

" Do not pity me, Heller. Save it for those who need it. Fate made him no longer mine, but neither is he fully hers. I'll do what I can to save him." Char shrugged.

The air in the room seemed to get heavy. Kira felt the hairs on her arms stand up. She felt the same press she had before, and she knew it was power. Char reached over

Challen, her hand extended to touch Mika. Instinct flowed through Kira. She raised her hand and flicked her whip at Char, capturing her hand. Kira saw hers wasn't the only whip holding Char's hand. She and Zanna exchanged glances, then looked back at Char. They each held their whips steady. Out of the corner of her eye, Kira saw Heller and Killian step back behind them. Char glanced at the whips around her wrists, at Zanna, and then at Kira. Char raised an eyebrow.

"Do you not want me to save him?" Char asked.

"We don't trust you to not kill Mika and save only Challen. You save them. Save *them*. Not just him," Kira answered.

Char's face went cold. "I cannot kill her. If I do, Challen will die. I know that, but I am doing this for him and not her. So I will save him if I can."

Their whips unraveled rapidly from Char's wrists and flashed back at them. Kira braced herself for the bite of the whip. Char watched them as she controlled the whips. The bite never came. The whips flowed diagonally across her body and over her shoulder.

"Your loyalty to Mika is admirable, but attacking me is foolish. I'll do what I can for them." Char turned away and back to Mika.

Heller came back to Kira's side and held her against his chest. Kira leaned into him and looked at Zanna, trepidation filling her. Zanna was leaning against Killian and was staring at Kira. They both looked back at the bed. Char raised her hand over Mika, then lowered it. She stopped before touching her.

"If it wasn't for Challen, I might have liked you." Char touched Mika's cheek.

A bluish light flowed from her fingertips and spread over Mika. Char hummed softly and swayed. The light intensified and bounced from Mika to Challen, then back again in a continuous flow. It changed to red, then orange, and then black. The black swirled up and encircled Char. She moaned and shuddered. Heller released Kira and took a step toward the bed. A hazel wall flew over the bed, forming into a bubble and blocking his way.

"*Char!*" Heller screamed.

"You should have mentioned the Vilaiz Symbiant, Heller. Now leave me be." She looked at him, her eyes totally black.

Kira gasped.

Char looked at her and laughed bitterly. "Death can come calling at any time. You know a lot about death, Kira."

Char returned her attention to the couple on the bed. The blackness swirled, filling the hazel bubble until they could see nothing.

"Heller!" Kira called.

He looked at her and shook his head. "We'll have to wait and see."

They waited for what seemed like an eternity, yet was only minutes. There was a flash, and the bubble and blackness was gone. Kira ran to the bed on Mika's side. Challen and Mika's breathing wasn't so labored, and they weren't as gray. Char was gone. Kira looked at Heller, wondering if Char was dead.

"No, Kira, I am very much alive," Char's voice said weakly.

Kira looked back at the door and was relieved to see Char leaning heavily against it. Heller and Killian moved toward Char. She put up a hand, stopping them. Char glanced up at them, and her eyes were still black.

"No. I still have the taint Vilaiz Symbiant left behind in me. Don't come any closer," Char said.

Heller and Killian ignored her. Char swore and stepped back. She gasped and shuddered. Dane stepped into view and swept her up in his arms.

"Dane, put me down. I don't want to infect you," Char growled.

"Shut up, Char. I've got you, and you can't hurt me, even if you wanted to." Dane held her tenderly, a smile on his face. "Stop acting so all powerful. It's all hype anyway."

"You charmer, you." Char chuckled weakly.

Dane glanced at Heller and Killian, who had gone back to the bed. "I'll take care of her."

Heller and Killian nodded.

"I did all I could. Now you have to wait and see if they will wake or not." Char looked at them. She leaned her head against Dane's chest. "Take me somewhere I can rest."

Dane glanced down at her, his look soft. "We need to talk about –"

Char stiffened. "I won't discuss it with you. Put me down."

"No, and we will talk about you not seeing what is right under your nose, Ms. All Powerful," Dane insisted.

Char's look was mulish. "I don't deserve anything."

"Everyone deserves someone. If you would only open your eyes, you would see he is right there in front of you," Dane countered.

"I refuse to discuss it. Take me to rest, or put me the fuck down," Char growled.

"You're a stubborn woman, Chardon Viles Durnios," Dane said.

Char laughed. "And you're a man who will give some woman some major aggravation."

Dane's face shuttered. "Let's get you someplace to rest."

Char chuckled harshly. "So we can talk about me, but not about you? Does pot, kettle, black mean anything to you?"

Dane sighed. "God, you're a pain in the ass."

"I know," Char answered promptly.

"At least you know." Dane chuckled and walked out.

"Yeah, we all know our strengths."

"Strengths? That's what you call it?" Dane hooted.

Their voices faded. Kira watched them go, then looked at Heller.

"Dane wants Char?"

Heller shook his head and laughed. "Oh, God, no. They would kill each other. It's someone else, but she's too blind to see it. Challen knew they weren't meant to be, but, well, Char is stubborn and afraid, although she refuses to admit it."

Kira was curious who could make the powerful woman afraid. She didn't ask, but turned to the bed. Heller pulled her into his arms and led her to a chair not far

from it. He sat, pulling her into his lap. Kira curled up and watched the couple in the bed. Absently, she noted Zanna was sitting in the same position in Killian's lap. Zanna looked rigid. Kira made a note to ask Zanna what was up with her and Killian. Then Heller's breathing lulled her to sleep.

Something pulled Kira from her dreams. She opened her eyes and stifled a gasp. Challen was awake and leaning over Mika. His hand was almost touching Mika's face. The look on his face was tenderness mixed with anguish.

His deep voice broke the silence, filled with regret. "How can you let yourself care for a woman who has come to mean the world to you? How can you let yourself love a woman when you know it may mean her death?" It's better you hate me, Mika, for loving me is more dangerous to your life, and I cannot live without you."

Mika groaned and opened her eyes. "Challen."

All the longing she felt came through in that one word. Mika stiffened as she realized Challen was laying over her.

"Touch me or let me go, Challen. Choose," Mika said, pain in her voice.

Challen look was loving, yet remorseful. "Ah, quieridra, I can do neither."

"What do you want from me?" Mika demanded.

"Nothing and everything," Challen whispered.

Mika shuddered. "Damn you for making me feel this way."

"We're both past that, Mika. Now we'll have to decide what to do," Challen murmured.

Mika licked her lips, and Challen watched her hungrily. Kira watched them, feeling as if she was intruding. Suddenly, she felt a sense of displacement and gasped. She floated across the room to Challen. He looked at her, his golden eyes so much like her own bright and playful.

"Kira, have you no greeting for your brother?" Challen laughed.

She floated into his arms and squealed, "Challen!"

Kira held him and kissed him all over the face. Challen chuckled and kissed her in return.

"Goldilocks!" Zanna cried.

Kira looked up in time to see Zanna float onto the bed and on the other side of Challen. Challen grabbed her and kissed her cheek. Mika shifted to move away.

Challen looked past Kira. "Stay here, Mika."

"Don't tell me what to do, Challen." Mika's eyes narrowed.

Kira reached out and touched Mika. "Please, Mika."

Mika's arm was stiff. She looked at Kira and nodded abruptly. Mika shifted making space between Challen and herself. Kira saw the look of pride and need in Challen's eyes. Challen saw her watching him and smiled. He looked over at Heller.

"Now, now, Heller. Why were you all cuddled up to my sister, hmm?" Challen studied Heller, then laughed. "So, that's the way it is." He looked back at Kira. "I hope you know what you're getting." Challen winked.

Kira ignored what he said. "Challen, I'm so glad you're okay."

Challen sobered and cupped her face. "No, I'm glad *you* survived. I'm sorry I wasn't able to protect you."

Kira shook her head. "Challen, if it wasn't for you, I would probably have been married to that ass David Hollingsworth. I thought I loved him."

Heller growled. Kira glared at him. Heller winked. Kira looked back at Challen.

"David wouldn't have married you. He would have gotten what he wanted and killed you," Challen said.

"What does he want? What do I have to do with it?" Kira was confused. "What are you? Am I the same? Do I have powers?"

"He wants you to find him the doorways between worlds," Challen answered.

Heller growled. "She's the Ulmin?"

"The key," Killian said.

Kira looked between Heller, Challen, and Killian.

"Yes," Challen responded.

Kira studied him. Challen smiled gently.

"Have you ever had any strange feelings, or seen something out of the ordinary, like a door or something?"

Kira started to shake her head, then thought of the feeling she'd had in the clearing--the almost image.

"Yes," Kira replied.

"When?" Heller demanded.

She gave him a look, not appreciating his tone. "When we were in the clearing after fighting David."

"It's as I expected," Challen said.

"What's as you expected?" Kira still didn't understand.

From the expression on Mika and Zanna's faces, neither did they.

Challen's voice took on a hypnotic tone. "Each millennium on earth realm four, human women--one for each part of the axis: north, east, west and south--are born with the ability to find doorways between dimensions. Those designated by fate protect these women from beings who would use them to locate the doorways to dimensions that are best not ever opened in this world."

Challen's voice went back to normal. "Kira, you are one of those women. I found out by chance in my travels between planes that I not only had a sister, but that she was one of the keys. David must have somehow found out. Our parents--"

He paused. Kira's breath caught. She had never asked about their parents and how he had found her. Challen cleared his throat and continued.

"Our parents loved each other very much. Dad was human, but Mom wasn't. After they conceived us, they lived for a time in the human world. When we were born, Mom must have realized what you were and decided to hide you with a human family to keep you safe. After she explained it to Dad, he agreed, although reluctantly. When Mom tried to leave with me to protect him from what he knew was to come, he refused. He was determined to protect his family. Mom underestimated his determination. She left, but he followed her, and by then it was too late for him to go back. They stayed together for many years." Challen stopped.

"So they didn't leave me because they didn't want me."

"Oh, no. They wanted you so much, but they had to keep you safe," Challen replied,

Joy filled Kira. "Where are they? When can I see them?"

"They were killed 15 years ago," Challen said softly.

Kira gasped, and tears pricked her eyes for the parents she would never know. Challen's finger soothed her cheek.

"They were ambushed and died trying to save me. And, I didn't know it at the time, but they were also protecting the knowledge about you. If it wasn't for them, I would not be what I was meant to be."

"They were our parents, and that's what parents do--protect their children. And I'm sure they're proud of us both, wherever they are." Kira kissed Challen's cheek, tasting his tears.

They held each other and mourned for their loss. After a few moments, Kira felt Zanna and Mika's hands on each of hers. Heller's hand was on her back. Challen looked around at everyone.

"We have a good family."

Kira nodded and looked at Mika, Zanna, Killian, and finally, at Heller. The warmth in Heller's gaze warmed her. Challen chuckled, and his eyes were twinkling.

"Do you all need a moment alone?"

Kira refused to blush. Heller chuckled. Kira thought of the questions Challen hadn't answered yet.

"You explained why David wants me, but what are you? Do I have any powers?"

Challen shook his head. "You don't have any powers besides finding the doorways. That alone makes you powerful." Challen gave Heller a look.

She saw Heller nod.

I will protect her with my life, Heller said to Challen in his mind.

I can take of myself, Kira added to their conversation.

Challen's look was surprised, and then he laughed. "You let her hear your thoughts?"

"I can't seem to control it. I'll learn." Heller sounded wry.

Kira glared at Heller, then looked back at Challen.

"Don't give me that look. I want to make sure you're protected," Challen said. "Zanna and Mika too."

"I can look after myself," Zanna and Mika said simultaneously.

Challen laughed. Heller and Killian joined them. The women glared at them. Challen shifted them off his lap and stood next to the bed. He reached out and touched the stone there. It glowed white for an instant, then stopped. Kira felt the slight buzz she hadn't realized she felt each time she stepped inside the stones' fade. As soon as it did, the wind whipped around the room, lifting all the furniture, including the bed they were on. She, Mika, and Zanna gasped and held onto each other. Kira looked around, trying to figure out where the wind was coming from. A press of power stronger than what she'd felt from Char flowed up her skin. At the touch of it, Kira realized she had felt it before. She glanced at Challen. His hair flew around him with the wind. Kira heard a roar, and then the air heated. Wisps of golden light flowed through the windows and into the room, all heading for Challen. Challen raised his hands, and the lights circled his wrists.

Slowly, he rose off the ground into the air. Kira glanced at Heller. His calm look stilled her fear before it could form. A sizzling sound made her look back at Challen. The golden wisps covered Challen from the tips of his gold hair to his bare feet. A sucking sound came, and then the gold wisps seemed to absorb into Challen's body. He turned to face the bed. His eyes were glowing gold, and he smiled.

"I am Traveler Oracle Challen Valen Kirlus. The gateways are mine to protect. The judgment of those who do not heed the law of dimensions is mine to make. David Hollingsworth, you have betrayed the law, and judgment has decreed you will die."

Another roar rent the air, then all was silent. Challen slowly lowered himself to the floor. His clothing flowed into a dark brown leather vest, slacks, and boots covered

up to his knees with symbols that were carved from top to bottom. One of his hands moved flowingly, and a staff appeared in it carved with the same symbols as his boots. Challen raised the staff, then hit the ground. A golden film filled the floor and flowed out the window. A sound of agony filled the air. Challen looked out the window and smiled, a fierce grin.

"The hunter becomes the prey."

Challen looked back at them and lowered his hand. The furniture and everything in the room righted. Kira shifted as the bed touched the ground. Zanna and Mika gasped. Challen looked at them, his eyes still glowing.

"Come, my sister and friends. You have nothing to fear."

Kira stood and went to her brother. He took her hand and looked at her.

"What are you?" Kira whispered.

"I am Traveler Oracle Challen Valen Kirlus, protector of the gateways of Savoy Valley and the Northern Hemisphere. I pass through the dimensions and keep the peace when needed. I pass judgment when necessary. No one has access to certain dimensions but me, or others like me. Protection of the earth realm is our duty."

"So how do I fit into this?"

"Ah, Kira. You can open any of the gateways. That's why you're so valuable to beings who want power." Challen looked over her shoulder. "But you'll be protected."

She didn't even need to look over her shoulder to know Heller stood behind her. Challen glanced at Mika and Zanna. "You all will be. So mote it be."

"Tsk, tsk. Challen, we thought you were dead," a deep baritone said behind them.

Challen glanced back, and Kira looked also. A man seemed to detach from the wall. He flowed across the room. Kira forgot how to breathe. His presence was overwhelming to all her senses. His sienna face was masculine perfection--all ridges and angles coming together to form a face that you would never forget. Even if you could forget his face, his hair would always be remembered. It was a rich red in a high ponytail that trailed behind him, almost touching the ground.

"God, do they grow them gorgeous," Zanna whispered.

"Yum," Mika said.

"Uh-huh," Kira agreed.

Challen glared at Mika. She bared her teeth at him. Heller growled at Kira. Kira glared right back. Killian stepped in front of Zanna. Zanna pushed him. Killian didn't move, but grabbed her and pulled her against his side. Zanna hit him. Killian looked at her. Kira couldn't see his expression, but Zanna made snorted and turned her head. The man looked at Kira and winked. Kira blinked because she'd just realized she could see through him.

Challen sighed. "Zamiuls, I'm sure you missed me."

The man made a tsking sound again. "Of course I missed you, you old reprobate."

Challen laughed. "If you missed me so much, why didn't one of you take over the protection of Savoy? You all let David Hollingsworth roam free."

"What makes you think we didn't? I took over, but no one knew. We wanted to find out who had killed you, and what did your sister have to do with it. We knew something was wrong, but not what." Zamiuls sobered.

Zamiuls glanced at Kira. "Now we know why. You've been hiding things, Challen, and will have to answer to the Council for it." He looked at Heller. "And you too, Heller." He glanced at Killian. "Killian and Dane also. We should have been told." Kira felt the lash of his power. She moved closer to Heller.

"Stop your posturing, Zamiuls. We know what we have to do. Is there anything else?" Challen waved his hand.

"You're a rude bastard."

"Takes one to know one," Challen fired back.

Zamiuls threw his head back and laughed. "I've missed you, Challen."

Challen rolled his eyes. "Missed being a pain in my butt."

"Yeah, that too." Zamiuls shrugged.

Challen laughed. "We'll be talking soon. You better hope no one does anything to your body."

"Ah, hell. She's still pissed at me. I've got to go. Later, Challen." Zamiuls faded.

Kira looked at where he had been, stunned. "What was that?"

"A pain in the ass," Heller growled.

"A know it all," Killian added.

"A friend." Challen glared at Heller and Killian.

They nodded, grudgingly, and repeated together, "A friend."

"He's still a pain in the ass, though," Heller added.

"And know it all," Killian said.

"Yes, he is. But he's still a friend." Challen sighed.

"Don't remind me." Heller grunted.

Kira looked between them.

"If he's a friend, why do you all act this way about him?" Zanna voiced the question all the women had been thinking.

Killian shrugged. Heller chuckled. Challen laughed.

"It's our way," Challen said.

"Men." Kira looked at Mika and Zanna and rolled her eyes.

The women stifled a chuckle. The men laughed. Challen looked at Kira and held out his hand.

"Are you ready for us to finish this?"

Kira instinctively knew what he was asking. It was time to end this. She stepped away from Heller and took his hand. Challen gripped hers. Kira felt the air charge, then a sense of displacement. When her head cleared, she took in the view of Velen Cliffs. She glanced at Challen, then saw that the others were also there with them. Challen nodded at her, and suddenly the air wavered and beings flooded the area.

Before any of them could move, Challen flowed into the middle of the beings, and, with an intricate movements of his hands, he froze them where they stood. He flipped in the air and, using his staff, knocked them down. They shattered in a million

pieces. More being flooded the area. Heller and Killian flew in to fight. Kira pulled her swords and waded in. The crack of Zanna's whip rent the air. The plunk of Mika's bow went off repeatedly.

Adrenaline filled Kira as she fought the being that rushed her. She turned, slicing down with her arm, severing a limb. She turned and cut down another being. Some instinct made her shift, and she drove her sword into the belly of the man behind her. She pulled it out and spun again. Kira gasped as she realized she was at the edge of the cliffs. She stumbled back and hit a solid chest that steadied her. Heller's scent filled her senses, and she relaxed against him.

"Thanks," Kira said.

Seconds after she said it, Kira tensed. Suddenly the wind shifted, and she scented him. Turning quickly, she swung. He caught it and the other sword she swung. David Hollingsworth tightened his grip on her wrists. He smiled and jerked her into his body.

"You're mine, Kira."

Kira's heart raced as she saw death in his eyes.

Chapter 9

Looking at the man who had caused her so much pain, Kira waited for the fear to overwhelm her. It didn't. All she felt was calmness as she gazed at him. She studied David and wondered what she had ever seen in him. The handsome, debonair man she knew was gone. All she saw was a monster who wanted power, a man who had ripped apart her life, and others, to get it. A steely resolve filled her.

"David, I'm going to kick your ass," Kira said softly.

"You can't kill me, Kira." David chuckled.

"I know." Kira nodded.

Swiftly, she broke his loose hold and moved back from him. The shocked look on David's face warmed her. He had underestimated her, thinking she would be ruled by fear. But she wasn't the same Kira she once was. He'd made sure of that when he had betrayed her. In a quick motion, she raised her foot and swiped across his chest. David hissed and fell back, looking down at the blood on his chest. Kira smiled fiercely and cut him again with the blade in her shoe. David roared.

"I don't want to kill you, David--just bloody you a little, for every second of pain and suffering you caused. The times I couldn't think. When I thought Challen was dead. All of it." With each word, she cut him somewhere else.

David tried to block her, but she was relentless, cutting him over and over again. He looked stupefied at all the blood gushing from various places on his body. Kira stifled a laugh at the look. David's arrogance would be his downfall.

"For deceiving me." Kira sprang up and turned, swiping across his face.

David roared and grabbed the cheek she had cut open. Kira raised her swords and charged him. David met her, blocking the blows. He hissed as she got one through. Kira ducked out of the way as he swiped for her. She laughed at him. David was enraged, and it left him sloppy. She cut him again, then again and again, over and over. Each cut gave her a sense of peace. David reached out to grab her. Kira slid back away from him. She teetered on the edge of the cliff and righted herself. David grinned evilly and charged her. Kira could see his plan clearly on his face. She waited until he reached

her, then twisted out of his way and back kicked him between the shoulders. David's arms pin-wheeled as he tried to not fall. It was useless. He went over the edge of the cliff as Kira watched him.

"You can't kill me, Kira!" David bellowed.

The hate in his voice was palpable. The rage on his face made it an ugly mask. Even after all this, David was too stupid to realize she had no intention of delivering the death blow.

"I know!" she called in return.

Kira turned swiftly and saw the ground littered with bodies and the others watching her. She glanced at the one man who had as much right to kill David as she did.

"Challen," Kira said.

Challen nodded and smiled fiercely. He raised his hands in the air, and light flew from his fingers. With a howl, a tremendous wind flew around them. Kira glanced back at the cliffs, and David floated up in front of her. He struggled against something that held him.

Challen joined Kira at the edge of the cliff. David looked at him, and fear blossomed on his face. David glanced back at Kira.

"I should have killed you," he hissed.

"You didn't, and now, you will die." Kira shrugged.

"Do you want to bloody him some more, Kira?" She heard the amusement in Killian's voice.

She glanced at him, then looked back at David. The blood flowing from the various cuts she'd given him made her smile.

"Nah, I'm good."

The others behind her laughed.

Challen spoke in a musical voice. "I am Traveler Oracle Challen Valen Kirlus. The gateways are mine to protect. The judgment of those who do not heed the law of

dimensions is mine to make. David Hollingsworth, you have betrayed the law, and judgment has decreed you will die."

As Challen finished speaking, a golden film covered David. It started from his feet and continued up his body. As it reached his face, David screamed loudly as he disintegrated. In seconds, he was gone. Kira looked at Challen.

"You're one badass dude. Remind me never to get on your wrong side." Kira chuckled.

"Me? You're the one who wanted to bloody him. Felt good, didn't it?" Challen bumped shoulders with her.

"Yeah, it did." Kira curved her hand around his waist.

They stood there for some time, looking out on the cliffs. Challen kissed her forehead.

"I have something I need to do," he said.

Kira looked at him. "You're leaving?"

Challen nodded. "But I'll return." He looked over her head.

She followed his gaze. Mika looked at Challen, then turned her back. Challen sighed and kissed Kira once again. He started to fade.

"I love you, my sister."

"I love you, brother," Kira replied.

Challen disappeared. Mika and Zanna came over to join her, one on each side. They each put an arm around her waist and a hand on her shoulder. Kira put a hand on each of theirs.

"It's over," Zanna said.

"Finally," Mika added.

"Yes. It's done," Kira replied.

In silence, they watched the fierce waters beyond the cliffs. After some time, the sun started to go down, and the air got cool.

"Let's go back to the house," Mika said, breaking the silence.

Kira shook her head. "I need a little more time."

Mika and Zanna nodded and turned to go. As she watched them walk to Mika's SUV, Kira realized everyone else had already left. Mika honked her horn, and Zanna waved. Kira returned it and went back to looking out at the cliffs.

Her thoughts turned to that day, and to all the emotions she had felt-- happiness, fear, pain, and loss. She thought of the months after, of rebuilding herself, striving to survive and live. Each second flashed through her mind in Technicolor. It all lead back to this place where her whole world had changed. Now, today, she had closure. David was dead, and her brother was alive.

Heller's scent filled her, and then she felt his arms curl around her waist. Kira leaned back into his strong arms. He was silent as he held her. Turning her head, she nuzzled his neck and bit him softly. Heller's arms tightened, and he purred. The rumble from his chest went down her back and up again. Kira shivered.

She turned to face him. Heller's arms circled her waist loosely. His gaze was steady and hungry. Kira cupped his cheeks and held his face. She looked deeply into his eyes.

"I love you, Heller," Kira said.

"I know." Heller's eyes twinkled.

Kira's eyes narrowed. She released his face and bopped him on the chest.

"What do you mean, you know?"

"You didn't say it out loud, but with each touch, I knew." He shrugged.

Kira couldn't think of a thing to say to that.

"I love you, Kira, and I'll be by your side forever," Heller said quietly.

Tears filled her throat. She knew it was a vow he would never break. Clenching her hands in his shirt, Kira pulled him down and kissed him. Hungrily, she mated her tongue with his. Heller met her with equal need. She murmured in his mouth as he purred in hers. Kira drew back and looked at him.

"Make me yours, Heller."

His eyes lit with fire, and Heller tightened his arms around her. He pulled her in closer to his body. A warm rush of energy filled her, then him. It went back and forth.

Kira shuddered. She saw a ghostly image of a white tiger flowing between them. It looked up at her, and the alpha purred, swatted her on the cheek gently with its paw, and continued to flow between them.

When Kira glanced at Heller again, she gasped as she felt his hot skin against hers. She didn't know how he had gotten them naked, but it didn't matter. Heller lifted her up, and Kira locked her legs around his waist and sank onto his straining erection. She moaned as it filled her up and up. The silken steel of his cock slid along her walls, leaving no place untouched. Kira moved her hips back and forth, taking him deeper. Heller's hands gripped her ass tightly, pulling her against him. The flow of power doubled at their joining. Kira moaned as she felt Heller between her legs and his alpha in her soul. It was overwhelming and necessary all at once.

"Kira!" Heller roared.

Mate, his alpha countered.

"Mine." Kira answered them both.

Heller and his alpha purred together. His hips went back and forth in a hard, fast motion. Kira tightened her legs, reveling in each hard thrust of his body against hers. Heller growled incoherently as he continued to thrust. Kira held him tight. She countered his motion. Heller shuddered, while his alpha shivered. Kira chuckled darkly and set out to drive them insane.

Heller heard Kira's laugh. It flowed along his skin, making the hairs rise up to attention. She undulated her hips in a sensually devastating movement that made his knees weak. He crashed to the ground, cradling her so he could stay joined to her. Kira purred and moved again. Heller couldn't think or speak. His mind was consumed with this woman who was his mate. The alpha in him roared and flowed between them. It moved back and forth between him and Kira.

She kissed him, her tongue spearing into his mouth, dueling with his. She licked the roof of his mouth and nicked his tongue. At the slight taste of blood, Heller tightened his arms around her and rolled his hips. Her pussy clenched around him like

a silken vise. It undulated, stroking along his cock. There was nothing like being inside of Kira--all heat, liquid, and wanton need rolled into one.

He would live for these moments of being with her and sharing the passion they both had. Kira moaned into his mouth, and he purred in return. She shuddered. He felt her body tightening and knew she was close to release. He sped up his thrusts. Kira gasped and went over. Heller roared as he joined her. Pleasure filled him and coated his skin. The alpha swatted at him. Heller gripped Kira's hair and pulled her head back. He licked at the pulse in her throat. Once, twice, and then a third time. He bit down. Kira shuddered, and another wave of her release flooded over his cock. The alpha purred and rolled onto its back with paws in the air. It was pleased and fulfilled.

Kira moaned and continued to work her hips and lick along his forehead. She made a kittenish sound that drove him wild, then settled against him. Heller loosened his grip on her hair, then pulled her face to his. He kissed her, licking along her lips. Kira opened to him. The kiss was lazy and soft. After some time, he released her from the kiss. Kira cuddled into his chest and sighed. Heller tightened his arms around her and stroked her hair. As the night got cooler, he stood with her in his arms. Quickly, he dressed them both and they started to walk down the path. He laced his fingers tighter with Kira's. Kira sighed and rested her head against his shoulder.

"Let's go home, Kira," Heller said.

Kira stopped and looked at him. He could see the devilish sparkle in her eyes.

"Oh no, Mr. Sidorov. It won't be that easy."

Heller narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not just coming home with you. All this left out a very important part of our relationship. You're going to have to woo me first." Kira let go of his hand and sauntered off.

Heller stood still a minute, confused, and then a predatory grin curved his lips. He caught up with her and stooped her. Kira turned to him, a smile on her face.

"Woo you, as in dates, late night walks, and so on? I can do that," Heller said.

Magnetism

Kira came closer to him and shook her head. "Again, you forgot the most important part. Lots and lots of mind blowing sex." Kira kissed him hungrily, then pulled away, exaggerating the sway of her hips as she walked down the path ahead of him.

Heller looked after her, the woman who had turned his world upside down. Their relationship would never be dull. Kira always did the opposite of what he expected. He loved her for it. She was the one who knew his soul and heart the best. Kira looked at him over her shoulder.

"Aren't you coming?"

She returned her gaze to the path ahead and continued walking out of sight. Heller let the silence fill him, and then he went after his mate. He ran down the path, sweeping her off her feet and into his arms. Kira laughed, a sound of pure joy. Heller looked at her and saw all his tomorrows in her eyes. He leaned down and kissed her. Kira met his lips with equal hunger. He drew back and said, "Forever."

"You are mine forever, Heller," Kira said.

Heller held her close and ran toward home.

We hope you enjoyed Magnetism. Check back next week at Satin Notes ~ <http://www.satinnotes.com> for our new story.

For more about Savoy Valley and Satin Notes check out the site.

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw