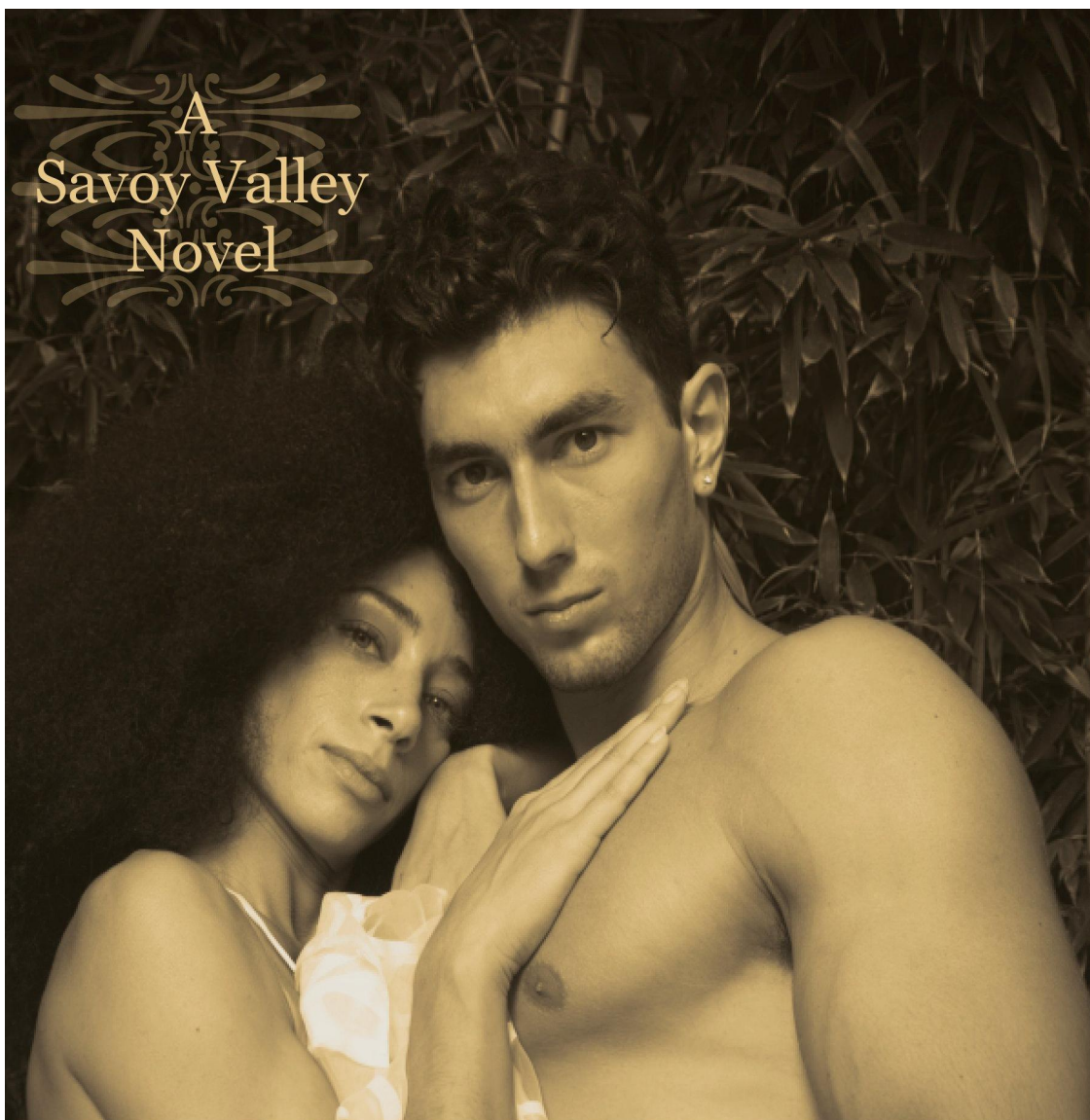


A
Savoy Valley
Novel



Sentinel

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Satin Notes

Sentinel

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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

Chapter One

Aren looked over the balcony as he leaned against the railing. His keen eyes picked up easily on the figure moving through the forest toward his home. The individual moved with a fluidity belied by his size. Shaking his head, Aren smiled. He should have known this man would be able to find him. The setting sun glinted off the approaching man's black hair.

"Long time, no see, *vriend*." Aren spoke normally, knowing full well he'd be easily heard.

"You're a hard man to track down," the response came as the man halted beneath Aren's perch.

"Is that so?" Aren asked, smiling and shaking his head at the man who leapt gracefully up to his balcony and sat crouched on the rail briefly before jumping to stand beside him. "It's good to see you, Dane."

Tawny-green-gold eyes stared back at him. "And you, my friend."

They hugged like brothers. Though not of the same blood, they were closer than many who were bonded by it.

"What brings you out here?"

Dane looked at him. "I need your help."

Aren crossed his arms. "Really? The great Dane Sidorov needs *my* help?"

Dane lifted a lip and snarled low. "*Klootzak*. And yes, I do."

Aren laughed. It had been a long time since he'd spoken Dutch with his friend. It'd been years since he'd seen him, much less talked to him at all. "Well now, that's not a nice thing to call someone you're asking for help." Another chuckle escaped at Dane's eye roll. "What do you need?"

"I need you back in Savoy Valley."

Aren sighed, walked to a large wing back chair, and sank into it. "I like it here."

"And it's very beautiful. You can stay at my home, I'm rarely there at all." Dane sat beside him and placed black steel-toed boots up on the railing.

Aren thought for a moment. Dane had this way of hearing only what he wanted to. "What do you need me to do once I'm there?"

"See what you can find out about a woman named Nahia Freeman."

"Nahia Freeman." Aren liked the way her name rolled off his tongue. "What am I looking for?" He was curious, for not much slipped past those watching over and protecting Savoy Valley.

"I'm not sure. I sense magic around her, but I can't tell any more than that. I don't have time to try and figure it out. Besides, we know you're better at that than I am."

Aren laughed again. That was true. Dane was more of an enforcer, tact not always high on his list. He could be polite, but Dane preferred to avoid it. "Okay. I'll go back with you."

"*Dank je,*" Dane said, visibly relaxing.

"Are you leaving Savoy?" Aren questioned.

"Yes. My unit's getting deployed in three days, and I don't know how long we'll be gone."

Aren nodded and accepted that. Dane was in a Spec Ops crew that he knew did more Black Ops than anything else. And he knew his friend couldn't discuss it. Nor would he, not even with his own flesh and blood. That code was something Aren truly admired about his friend.

With another sigh, Aren looked out over the view he had. He loved it here, where he was just the quiet man in the area. No one bothered him; there were no sympathetic looks from those who had known his family. Savoy Valley was a place where he had to face old wounds.

"I know this is hard for you, Aren. But you can be secluded at my place, as well."

"I know. It's just that I haven't been back since they died." A flash of pain lanced through him at the memory of losing his parents.

Dane looked at him, but remained silent. Aren knew Dane realized there was nothing he could say. They'd both lost people close to them, and when it came down to it, words didn't always help.

"Okay," Aren said, breaking the silence. "Let me pack, and we can be on our way." He stood and walked into the house he'd lived in for the past three years.

The flight didn't take long, and the closer they got to Savoy Valley, the more tense Aren became. The sights, sounds, and smells tried to drag him back to a time he didn't wish to recall. Dane drove silently, allowing him to come to terms with his emotions on his own.

The memories of losing his entire family to the *ater malum* of Drekflen became almost too much, and so Aren said, "Tell me more about this Nahia Freeman."

Dane shifted gears as they headed up into the mountains, where his home was. "I don't know all that much about her. She showed up here for her brother's wedding and is remaining at their house while they honeymoon."

"So why can't someone else tell what she is?"

Dane didn't respond to that. "It feels like she doesn't even realize she has any magic. As if it lies dormant within her, just waiting for the time to make itself known." Dane glanced at him. "Given the fiasco with the gateways, we just want her watched."

Aren nodded. He'd heard about the attack on Challen and his sister, Kira, who was now attached to Dane's brother, Heller. "I see. And how are Heller and Kira doing?"

"Fine. I don't see much of them. But from what I can tell, they're doing just fine. She's good for him."

Aren smiled. "Good. He deserves to be happy. So, does that mean you're next?" A low rumble filled the interior of the jeep, and Aren began to laugh. "Is that a 'no'?"

"I've got no plans to settle down."

"Isn't it great that plans have a way of changing?" The growl grew louder.

"Okay, okay," Aren snorted. "I'll stop before you try to hurt me."

"Try?" Dane challenged.

Aren shook his head as he looked out the side of the vehicle. The fresh air of the Pantera Mountains flowed into his body and soothed his soul. He'd missed this. It was good to be home.

"Feels good to be back?" Dane questioned without a hint of the earlier mockery. Surprisingly, it did. Aren nodded as he glanced over at his friend. "Yes. It does. Thanks for bringing me home, Dane."

"Well, you've been gone long enough." He tossed his head and grinned before giving the vehicle more gas and bouncing them over the almost nonexistent road.

Aren sighed again and looked over the view as they drove. The landscape was full of vibrant colors--rich greens, blues, purples, reds, yellows, and more. A smile filled his face. The sky was dotted with small fluffy clouds, and they seemed to welcome him home, as well.

Even though he'd been there many times before, Aren felt his breath catch as Dane's home came into view. It seemed to blend perfectly with the surrounding area. His home wasn't as huge as Heller's or his familial home, but it was still very impressive. The intricacies that made up the log cabin were nothing short of a work of art. He'd always felt at home here.

As the jeep skidded to a halt, Aren smiled, his eyes landing on the blonde woman who walked into view from around a corner on the porch. Climbing out, Aren released a slow wolf whistle, and the blonde woman snapped her head up, flames alive in her gaze until she saw him. A brilliant smile filled her face as she vaulted easily over the railing and strode toward them.

"Aren Van der Ness," she said, enthusiasm evident in her voice. "By the gods, it's so good to see you again." Her strong arms closed around him.

"And you, Bryndis. It's been far too long." Aren hugged her tightly to him. Her eyes were suspiciously shiny as he released her from his arms. "I've missed you."

Her gaze was gentle for about two seconds. Then she punched him in the shoulder. Hard.

He winced. Bryndis could pack one hell of a punch. "Ouch! What was that for?"

"For not letting us know you were okay."

Aren cast his gaze to Dane, who just stood there and shook his head. His meaning was clear; he wasn't getting in the middle. Grabbing the bags, Dane headed toward the front door of his house. Opening his mouth to try and explain things to Bryndis, Aren halted when he saw her half smile and wink. She slid her arm through his and walked with him from the jeep to the house, where she and Dane helped him get settled.

When he was finally alone, Dane and Bryndis having gone, Aren walked to the steps leading off the porch and leaned against the post there. Dane had offered him the master bedroom, but Aren declined, and instead willingly took the large guest bedroom upstairs that had its own private balcony. The house was stocked with food. Aren knew he was going to be fine.

The early evening air flowed over him, teasing his skin, enticing him to get out and enjoy the encroaching night. Setting his glass of water on the railing, Aren gave in to the call. He ran toward the meadow and called upon the power that flowed through his blood. A smile flashed as he felt his body begin to shift.

Nahia glanced up as the piercing cry of an eagle sliced through the air. Her gaze found a small speck way up in the sky, and she smiled.

"Lucky bird," she muttered as she continued on her walk. She kept along the road because her brother, Matxin, had told her to, and not to ignore any posted signs. Nahia preferred avoiding roads when she took her walks in the country, but her brother had made her promise. The Pantera Mountains could be very unforgiving, and he didn't want her to become injured and die because no one could find her. Nahia was house-sitting while Matxin and his new wife, Estrella, enjoyed their honeymoon.

Truth be told, Nahia wasn't in any real rush to go back to her life in Boulder, Colorado. Especially since lately, she'd noticed the same men showing up where she did, and they didn't ever seem to fit. All they ever showed interest in was her, and it made her very nervous.

Being here in Savoy Valley for the past week, it'd been so wonderful not seeing them every time she turned around. Nahia hadn't told Matxin; he didn't need to worry about her. It wasn't anything she could put her finger on anyway. It was more like how their presence made her feel. This place made her feel calm and safe, which she hadn't felt in the city. Even the strange dreams she'd been having for the past three months had ceased, and she had felt rested and undisturbed.

The wind picked up, and her skin prickled. Her body responded as if a lover caressed her. She shivered slightly as her nipples hardened, breathing and pulse increased, and small beads of sweat popped up along her skin. Stopping, Nahia wiped her hands off on her shorts. As she lifted her thick hair off her neck, she spied what looked to be a deer path leading away from where she stood on the winding road. Without giving another thought to all her brother's warnings, Nahia headed off down the path. It wove among the trees, and finally opened up into a meadow surrounding a crystalline lake. Her breath caught in her throat as she stood there.

Nahia remained at the edge of the path, but the wind seeming to be attempting to push her forward. She cast her gaze around and sighed in awe at the sight of a gorgeous log cabin, perched where it would allow the owner to have a wonderful view of the water. The house was impressive, as was the way it blended in with the wooded backdrop.

"It must be amazing to live there," she muttered to herself. "All this peace and solitude."

She wanted to go into the meadow, but didn't wish to trespass. Swallowing back her disappointment, she turned to walk back up the path and froze. Behind her was a man who, despite his casual pose leaning against a tree, watched her with an intensity that shook her to the marrow of her bones. Everything within her reacted to him. Nahia didn't know who he was, but the possessive way he watched her made her wonder if they hadn't met before.

He was very handsome. Dark, curly hair covered his head, but it was cut short along the sides, and, she'd assume, in the back. He had a sharp Roman nose that rested

above firm, kissable lips. Big brownish-gold eyes were framed by thick black lashes set off his aristocratic features. A small diamond stud sat in the lobe of his left ear, the sunlight glinting off it.

He wore a tight blue t-shirt that hugged his biceps, as well as his chest. The shirt was tucked into a pair of black jeans that seemed to be molded to powerful thighs. She licked her lips and tried to remember some manners as she dragged her gaze away from his crotch. Hers reminded her how long it'd been since it'd had any attention.

"Hello," she stammered. "I'm sorry if I'm trespassing. I didn't mean to." Tall, dark, and handsome remained silent, just watching her with a gaze that seemed to burn even hotter. "Okay, then," she gritted out. "I'll just get out of your way."

Nahia moved toward him, and her insides trembled when his nose flared as if he were inhaling her scent. Her body responded powerfully.

"It's not a problem," he said in a deep voice that made her knees weak. "Feel free to go into the meadow and to the lake."

She cast a glance over her shoulder before looking back at the man, who still leaned against the rough bark of the tree. It was like he hadn't moved an inch. "I shouldn't. I'm sure it's private property."

"It is."

Nahia stared at him, waiting for something more. "Are you the owner?"

"Nope."

Well, aren't you just full of freaking information? She had to bite back the urge to try and get him to talk more, just to feel the silky pull of his voice move over her skin.

"Then I won't go." Her steps had her next to him before he spoke again.

"I know the owner, and I'm sure he won't mind."

Again, that pull to walk through the thick, lush grass and dangle her feet in the sparkling water grabbed her. Swallowing as the scent of crisp mountain air and something else reached her, she shook her head. *This man smells as good as he looks.* "I'd just as soon not make anyone upset." Shoving down her attraction for this man whose name she didn't even know, Nahia kept walking.

Stay, Nahia.

The words were spoken in her ear and flowed both over and through her. A warmth covered her, and she felt someone over her shoulder. Jerking her head around, she expected to see the unknown man right behind her. She was wrong. He hadn't moved, except to turn his body around to watch her walk away. When she stared at him, he arched a black brow and waited for her to speak.

"Did you say something?" she questioned.

Instead of answering her, he pushed away from the tree and moved toward her. She gulped and tamped down the feeling of being his prey. His eyes moved along her face, but he remained silent. Her heart pounded erratically, and she wondered if he could hear it.

"Believe me, the owner won't mind at all," he said when he finally spoke.

"And how would you know?" she couldn't help but ask.

His eyes appeared more golden than brown as he looked her over again. "I'm house-sitting for him."

Nahia smiled at him, and watched his eyes darken and become stormy with emotion before he blinked and they were less tumultuous. "Are you, now? And who are you?"

He sketched a short bow and replied, "Aren Van der Ness at your service."

Aren Van der Ness? Maxtin had mentioned an incident where a family with that name had died. Nahia smiled to cover the throbbing in her head. "Nice to meet you, Aren Van der Ness."

"Shall we?" he asked, dragging his eyes slowly up her body and making her shiver all over again.

Yes. Yes we shall. Nahia cocked her head to the side and questioned, "Shall we what?" Her insides were a turbulent mess, her skin tingled, and her senses were on overload.

"Go to the lake."

She smiled at him. Nahia glanced away from Aren, to the meadow, and back to his face. He stared at her, waiting. Her breath caught as she skimmed over his features. *What is it about him?* Shaking her head, she replied, "No. I should get going. But thank you for the offer." Without another word, she turned and walked off the path back up to the road.

"What's your name?" he called after her.

She turned toward him, walked backward, and yelled, "Nahia Freeman." Then she waved and did an about face before disappearing from his view. As she strode away, she fanned her face. Her body felt like it was close to boiling. Her head felt like it was close to exploding.

Aren stood rooted to the spot as she left him. He couldn't move. How could Dane not have felt her power, only sensed it? It flowed off her in waves containing all the mighty force of a runaway freight train, and yet covering him like a silk sheet. His heart pounded so hard, he didn't know what to make of it. His hands were clenched into fists as he tried to calm himself down. *Is it wrong to want to fuck someone you're supposed to be finding more out about?*

Her face was framed by long, black curly hair that appeared very thick. He longed to wrap his hands in it as he made love to her. Nahia had light brown skin, like a lightly toasted nut, and she was about five-foot-eight. Her eyes were absolutely incredible; they were a mixture of blue, pale silver, crimson, and brown. If he was a man who believed in love at first sight, it would be with this woman. His body had come alive before he'd even caught up to her. But when he saw her and heard her voice, his reaction rivaled anything he'd experienced before.

She'd worn a pair of blue shorts--loose, not tight. Caressing her upper torso was a red halter top that tied on one side. Worn, not brand-new, brown hiking boots were on her feet, and he'd noticed a pair of jade green earrings dangling from her ears, peeking out from under her hair. On the left side of her nose was a small piercing that

looked like it was a diamond. Every motion she made, each inhalation she took, drove him crazy. She was entirely adorable and totally hot.

Aren walked the path she'd just taken, and when he got to the road, he looked for the direction she had gone. He could make out the gentle sway of her hips as she strode away, her motion more like an elegant glide, or as if she walked above the ground instead of upon it. He noticed one hand rubbing her temple.

"Nahia," he whispered to the wind, and ducked back when she stopped and turned to look back down the road. Instead of going onto the road, he headed across the meadow and back toward the house.

There was a smile on his face as he showered. Nahia Freeman had breathed new life into him. He was no longer dreading getting back into Savoy Valley and the memories there. Padding through the bedroom wearing only a towel, he stopped before the closet and opened it, deciding what he was going to wear tonight. Once he was comfortably dressed, he went out to the Jeep and headed off to his restaurant of choice for the night.

Pulling into the crowded parking lot, Aren jumped out of Dane's Jeep after he shut it off. He was standing before Sanjai's. Wiping his hands off on his slacks, Aren headed for the door and opened it. Many of people inside stopped and stared at him.

"Aren," a woman said on a sigh as she walked from behind her podium to hug him. It was a tentative hug, and he returned it with kindness.

"Hello, Sanna," he replied. Pulling back, he kissed her cheek and stared down at her. She had pale blonde hair that was gathered in a nice up-style. Smooth bangs framed her face. "You're looking beautiful."

She smiled as a blush ran up her fair cheeks. "You look just as handsome as ever. When did you get back?"

"Today." He glanced toward the main part of the restaurant. "Have room for me?"

"Always. Your old table okay, or would you like something different?" she asked as she grabbed a menu.

"Whatever is fine."

"It's really good to see you, Aren," she whispered as she led him through the busy establishment.

Aren was met by smiles or stares of curiosity from everyone he passed. He'd picked Sanjai's for a reason. It was a smaller place, kind of out of the way, and he knew the owners. Sanna was one of them. And, of course, they had wonderful food--simple, basic, and filling.

"Here you go," she said.

Kissing her cheek again, Aren smiled. "Thank you, Sanna."

"I'll have someone come by with a drink for you. Still drink the same thing?"

"Yes, ma'am."

After she left, he glanced around the place. It hadn't changed in the few years he'd been gone. Smiling, he took in the comforting, casual atmosphere. He could hear some whispering about him, and how he'd not returned ever since the death of his family. Strangely, it didn't bother him. The tingling of his skin told him why. He could feel Nahia. She was close to him. He wasn't sure where, but knew she was. His body cried out for hers, and he could feel hers answering. His cock hardened in his jeans. Aren's mouth grew dry, and his skin tingled with an electrical charge. He wiped his hands off on his thighs and reached for the glass of ice water he had.

"Aren?" a low voice questioned, jolting him away from thoughts of Nahia.

Looking up, he saw Jair, the silent partner of Sanjai's. "Hello, Jair," Aren said.

The man smiled as he placed a plate of food before him and then took a seat in one of the vacant chairs at the table. Jair Xiong stared at him out of his black eyes. Aren glanced down at the loaded cheeseburger, just like he liked it, with a hot order of fries next to it.

"It's been a long time, Aren," he replied. "How are you doing?"

Picking up a fry, Aren ate it before answering. "I'm doing okay. Haven't gone home yet, but I'll do that tomorrow."

Jair nodded with understanding. Aren and Jair had served together in the Army and had built up a strong friendship. After their tour was over, Jair had come to visit Aren here and had decided to stay. He'd agreed to start up the restaurant with Sanna out of friendship with her brother. He was just part of the financial backing, considering Jair had no desire to be a chef.

Aren had missed his friendship, but for the past three years, he had been completely off the grid, cut off from everything he'd known. "How are things with you?" he asked.

"Things are going well." Jair cast his eyes to where Sanna stood, talking with a man who had a large party with him. "As well as can be expected."

Fighting back a smile, Aren looked between the two, his eyes drifting over the sizeable group that Sanna was seating. "I wondered how long it would be before something popped up between the two of you."

Jair snapped his gaze back to Aren. "There's nothing between us," he ground out. "She's just...pushing it."

Raising a brow, Aren stifled a chuckle. "How's your family?" Jair began filling Aren in on how his family was doing, but his words fell on deaf ears when through the door walked none other than Nahia Freeman.

She stood alone, waiting to be seated, looking more serene than anyone had a right to. Her hair floated about her like a cloud. She wore white jeans, open toed sandals, and had a gray sweatshirt zipped up halfway, hiding her black shirt underneath. On the front of her sweatshirt, he read "COLORADO" and saw the embroidered buffalo emblem on the left side.

"Excuse me," he blurted out to Jair. "I'll be right back." Pushing away from the table, Aren wound through the tables and stopped before her. Sanna was beside her by the time he made it there.

Nahia looked up at him, and Aren could feel the sparks between them. He didn't know how to explain it; it was just there. Stepping closer, he inhaled, and found himself

surrounded by the scent of freshness. It was everything crisp and clean. When their eyes met, hers were just as amazing as they had been the first time he saw them.

"I'll be with you in a second, Aren," Sanna told him.

"Actually, Sanna, I'm here to see if Ms. Freeman would like to join me for dinner. That way she won't have to wait for a table to open up." Aren never looked away from Nahia's arresting gaze.

Nahia licked her lips and spoke in a soft tone. "I don't want to put you out. I can wait."

"It would be my pleasure to have you"--he paused--"join me for dinner." He saw the pulse in her neck as it throbbed faster, and he knew she was just as affected by him as he was by her. "Please," he cajoled. "I feel bad about scaring you off from the lake earlier."

Aren's skin prickled as he felt a gentle wind flow around him, caress him. Nahia stared at him, then dropped her gaze to the floor and slowly moved it up his body. As if her eyes could touch him, he felt it as she drank in her fill of him. She blinked, and the caressing breeze he'd felt disappeared.

"Thank you for your offer," she said.

Sanna just smiled and handed her a menu. "I'll send someone over soon to take your order."

Aren fought the urge to grin like a schoolboy. Stepping back, he gestured for her to go ahead of him. "My table is in the back on the left."

"I know," she muttered as she walked before him.

He watched her as she navigated the way with ease. The lower edge of her sweatshirt did little to conceal the sway of her hips or the delectable curve of her derriere. A wave of lust and longing surged through him, and he bit back a groan as his dick hardened again. It didn't help when she looked over her shoulder at him as if to ask, *Are you okay?* Aren sent her a small smile and licked his lips as she turned back around. He reached out mentally to see if he could read her mind. He was rebuffed, and

violently so. He winced with the force of the protection around her. And yet, at the same time, he noticed her body twinge as if in pain.

Like a gentleman, he held her chair for her. Unlike one, he inhaled the scent of her hair as she sat. It reminded him of pine trees, not in an overwhelming sense, just an erotic one. Somehow, Aren managed not to tug her head back and plunder her mouth with his.

Jair brought out Nahia's order. "Here you go," he said kindly. "Aren, we'll catch up later on." Then he nodded once and walked off.

"Did I interrupt your meeting with him?" Nahia asked as she ripped apart one of her chicken tenders and dipped it into the honey mustard sauce beside her plate.

"Not at all," Aren assured her. His body tightened at her dulcet tone. Picking up his drink, he took a swallow of beer. In an instant, Aren wasn't hungry, at least not for what was on his plate. It was as if his body knew nothing but the woman across from him would satisfy him. Forcing his waning control back in line, he picked up a fry and ate it. "Tell me about you, Nahia Freeman."

Her lips curled around the straw in her glass, and his dick jerked in his pants as his mind reinvented that image. His eyes followed the movement of her swallowing. Nahia ran her tongue over her bottom lip before answering. "Not much to tell. I'm just here staying at my brother's house while he's on his honeymoon."

"Where's home for you?" he pried.

Her eyes narrowed briefly before she said, "Boulder."

Aren nodded and tried to probe her mind a second time. He barely contained the jolt whatever was protecting her gave him. She winced and placed one hand up to her head, rubbing. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sorry, yes. Just this throbbing in my head. I thought I'd gotten rid of it, but I don't seem to be able to." She looked at him and shrugged before reaching for another tender.

Digging his fingers into his palm so he wouldn't reach across the table to touch her, Aren opted to give her a sympathetic smile instead. Staring at her, he picked up the

bottle and took another drink of beer. The liquid did little to quench the thirst that raged within him.

"And what do you do in Boulder?" he inquired.

Her eyes met his and sparkled in the lighting of the diner. "Work, mostly, and go out to hike in the mountains when I can get away."

"What sort of work do you do?" He was curious to know everything about her.

Nahia shifted and watched him. "I have a Masters in Science in Astrophysical, Planetary & Atmospheric Sciences, and an Interdisciplinary Certificate in Hydrologic Sciences. I used to work in a private firm, but I left to go back to school to get another degree. I have one year left to complete my studies, but I needed a break, so came to Savoy for my brother's wedding and stayed to housesit while they're on their long honeymoon. "

Aren was impressed. She was very smart as well as enticing. He watched her face and saw she was uncomfortable.

"So you know a lot about the earth's interior, oceans, and atmosphere. And your Interdisciplinary Certificate in Hydrologic Sciences basically is the quantitative study of water in the environment. What got you interested in all that?"

There was something about what she said that niggled at him, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. The surprise was plain on her face. She studied him with a slight smile.

"Well, the simple answer is that I've always been interested in the world around me. It's just something I've always been good at. Probably explains why I like to get away from everything and just hike." She shrugged and shifted again.

The closed look on her face made him know she didn't want to delve any further into why she studied what she had. Although he was curious about what degree she was pursuing now, Aren changed the subject.

"You love the outdoors?"

A smile crept over her face and her eyes lit up as she nodded. "I do."

One hand reached for her glass and, as he stared, the water seemed to sway toward her before she even touched the glass. If she knew what he saw, she didn't even acknowledge it. *Maybe Dane was right and she doesn't know. But whatever power she has, it's immense.*

The rest of dinner was polite chit chat. Aren didn't pry anymore, just spoke of what there was to do around Savoy Valley. After a short disagreement, Aren paid for both meals and walked her outside.

She pointed to a red Nissan Altima. "This is me."

Aren held the door for her as she climbed in. Before he shut it, he said, "I meant what I said about going to the meadow. Feel free to use it." He saw the flash of white teeth in her brief smile.

"Thank you," she said. "I may take you up on that."

"I hope you do." Again, the urge to grab her and never let her go swam over him. "Good night, Nahia Freeman. Until we meet again."

She inclined her head like royalty and replied, "*Gero arte*, Aren Van der Ness."

He shut her door and stood there watching until she drove out of sight. With a smile, Aren vaulted into the Jeep and started the engine. His entire drive home was focused on Nahia Freeman. When he got there, he didn't even go inside the house, just sat in a porch swing and thought about her some more. What was she? Who was she? And what was she doing in Savoy Valley?

Chapter Two

Nahia sat in her car in the driveway of her brother's house. Just now did her heart start to slow down from the rapid beating it'd been doing when *he* had been near. Just thinking about Aren Van der Ness kick started her pulse and breathing again. Swallowing hard, she tried to calm down.

The pounding in her head had subsided. Both times she'd had it, she'd been near Aren. Blowing out a breath in relief, she grabbed her purse and opened the door. Across the street, a man stood on the corner. He was on the phone, but to Nahia it looked as if he were paying her a bit too much attention. Recognition tinged her memory, and she struggled to see if she could place him.

"I'm just getting too suspicious," she muttered as she locked the car and headed up the steps to her brother's house. Before she let herself in, she cast one more glance over her shoulder, and sure enough, that man still stood there. As the door closed behind her, she engaged the deadbolt and walked to the kitchen, where she grabbed a bottle of water, opened it, and drank about half before she felt the heat in her body subside.

Heading into the living room, she lit a candle and sat down. Closing her eyes, Nahia felt her skin come alive again as her thoughts found their way back to the handsome Aren Van der Ness. Cracking open her eyes, Nahia frowned as she saw the candle. The flame appeared larger to her. Nahia shook her head, blinked, and took another look. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"I need to get some sleep." She stood, blew out the candle, double-checked the doors, and headed for bed. Her dreams were filled with images of Aren, rushing water, tempest winds, raging flames, and more.

It took a lot for Nahia not to head back to the meadow. Instead, she opted to go another way on a different road and explore up that way. She parked her car off the

road by a meadow and got out. The day was cooler, but she didn't feel cold; she felt invigorated, not to mention determined to put her dreams behind her. Putting her keys in her back pocket, Nahia began walking across the open meadow and toward the far tree line.

Every few steps she took, she stopped and looked around. She didn't know how to explain it, but it felt as if she were being watched. Not in a bad way, not like she'd felt with those men who seemed to follow her everywhere, but in a curious, assessing way. Still, she progressed closer to the forest.

The trees towered over her, and the leaves were so thick, they blocked out the sky. Unable to resist, she sat down on the lush grass and undid her boots. A smile crossed her face as she placed her feet on the carpet of plush grass. This was heaven. For a few moments, she skipped around like a schoolgirl, barefoot. Then she sat down and put her boots back on and proceeded to walk further into the woods. The grass gave away to a soft carpet of pine needles and leaves.

She navigated her way along until she reached a sparkling little brook that ran through the trees. Crouching down, she trailed one hand in the cold, clear water and looked up and down, taking in the vegetation that surrounded it. Everything looked so healthy here. Standing, she hopped over to the other side and continued on her way. As she began to climb, she could feel the muscles in her legs beginning to burn. It had been a while since she'd done this kind of hiking.

Time flew by as she continued along. She froze and shuddered as a lamenting cry filled the air. It was the mixture of a wail ripped up from someone's soul and the piercing shriek of a bird of prey. The need to get to the source of the noise filled her with an overwhelming rush, and she plunged along, not paying attention to where she was going. There before her sat a huge stone home surrounded by manicured lawns.

Shit! I'm trespassing. And that looks like a freaking lodge...it's huge!

Her eyes scanned the ground, and she realized that the area was a mess. Statues were broken, and there was a huge hole in the side of the house. Her skin prickled as her gaze landed upon a figure sitting on the rim of a busted fountain. *Aren*. She knew it

was him, just as she knew her own name. His head was buried in his hands, and she could see him taking deep, ragged breaths.

Licking her lips, Nahia stepped forward and moved out of the forest toward him. “*Eup*, Aren Van der Ness,” she said softly, not wanting to scare him.

He ran one hand, with its long fingers, through his hair. In a flash, Nahia imagined those exact fingers caressing her body. She gulped, shifted on her feet, and waited for him to look up and acknowledge her. His head turned, and she was immediately drawn into the golden-brown depths of his eyes.

“Nahia,” he said on a sigh. If he was shocked or angry to see her there, he gave no indication of such.

“I know I’m trespassing, but I heard something like someone was crying out.” She bit her lower lip as she stared at him, her normal calm shattered just by being in his presence. The throbbing in her head returned with a vengeance, and she winced from the pressure.

He sent her a small smile and stood, towering over her with his large frame. “I know the owner won’t mind you being here, either.”

“Good. But I don’t even know where here is. I got sidetracked when I heard the cry.” She inhaled deeply as he stepped closer to her, his masculine scent filling her senses. The lower part of her belly was a trembling mess, and she fought the urge to cross her legs to try and stop the flow of wetness. “What happened here?”

“A massacre.” He stood beside her and faced the building.

It dawned on her. He was the one her brother had mentioned. “This is your property.”

“Yes.”

“I know this is none of my business, but maybe it would get easier if you talked about it.” The craving to comfort him filled her so much, she could taste it. With an uncharacteristic motion, she reached out and placed a hand on his arm.

Sparks flew up her skin at the contact. Nahia was hit with such desire for this man, it made her knees buckle. She tightened her grip on his arm so she didn’t lose her

balance. Eyes flashed up to his, and she knew he was feeling it as well. His gaze swirled with passion, and he stepped closer to her, placing his lips on hers. The kiss, although gentle, rocketed through her soul. He traced her mouth with his tongue before slipping in through her lips. When his tongue touched hers, she needed her other hand to help support her. Aren placed his hands on her ass and drew her flush up against him.

New spirals of ecstasy flowed through her as he continued to explore her mouth. He flexed his hips against her, and she moaned in response, her pussy convulsing with want. Strong fingers kneaded the flesh of her ass through her jeans, and never before had Nahia wished so much that there were no clothes between them.

Aren left her mouth and moved down her neck, kissing along the way. She dropped her head back and took her lower lip between her teeth as he licked a path that led to the valley between her breasts.

"Aren," she gasped.

"Tell me to stop, Nahia," he said.

Even though every single fiber in her railed against her decision, Nahia managed to find the word. "Stop."

His frustrated groan filled the air, but he did as she ordered. Lifting her head, she met his gaze, which was a mix of frustration, passion, and restraint. His chest heaved as he took deep breaths. Slowly, he let go of her ass and stepped out of her reach. In order to try and calm herself down, Nahia looked up at the sky. The clouds were racing by at a fast speed, but she didn't feel any wind. What she felt was heat. A burning, intense heat for the man looking at her like he wanted to feast upon her.

"What the hell was that?" he ground out.

"I don't know. I'm sorry," she stammered, backing away from him. "I'll go."

"No!"

The forcefulness of his command surprised her, and she stared at him, eyes wide. Her head began to pound again. *Go to him*, her mind yelled. It was a sentiment the rest of her body agreed with wholeheartedly. Taking a step toward him, she saw him tense. Another and another put her right back in his space.

"Then I'll stay," she whispered. "What do we do now?"

His eyes darkened, and she knew what he was thinking. Closing his eyes, he shook his head and ran a hand over his face. Aren shrugged. "Come inside with me," he said.

Nahia nodded and walked beside him, careful not to touch him. Her body was still highly aroused, and her head hurt, but it was tolerable. Still, she couldn't stop herself from casting side glances at Aren, imagining him naked and making love to her. He was a walking work of art.

Forcing herself to stare straight ahead, she navigated her way around the rubble left in front of the door and entered after Aren. The inside took her breath away. Even with the damage and the hole in the wall, it was beautiful.

"Jesus," she breathed. "This is gorgeous." She looked to her left and saw a marble staircase leading up to the second floor. The intact furniture was antique and very breathtaking as well.

"It's something," he said in a tense voice.

Glancing down at the marbled floor, she shook her head in amazement. "You lived here?"

"At one time."

Knowing what happened the last time she touched him, Nahia reached out hesitantly and laid her hand upon his arm. The response was the same. Fire poured through her veins, and electricity skated along her skin.

He looked at her, and she saw mirrored desire in his expression. Without a word, he picked her up in his arms and carried her up the winding staircase. At the top, he headed to the right. He kicked open a bedroom door and stopped. Nahia looked, and then stared at the large room. It was done in earth tones and was totally masculine. A door leading out to a balcony caught her attention, before her eyes found and honed in on the large bed in the middle of the back wall.

Nahia reached for his face and touched his cheek. His eyes blazed as he stared down at her, and in that moment, she knew she wouldn't be stopping it this time. He strode effortlessly to the bed and laid her down upon its sateen cover.

Aren stared at the woman lying back on the bed. This was his old room in his parents' house. When he'd first gotten here this morning, and after he dropped the wards protecting the house, he had steeled himself for how he would feel, coming here after all this time. The wards had kept everything as he left it, just as he'd set them to do. They had made time stand still inside the house and the surrounding area he had set the wards around. The debris outside and on the one side of the house was untouched. As he watched the house, although he hadn't gone inside, he knew the rooms in the house that hadn't been affected by the attack were unchanged despite the time that had passed.

Standing in the courtyard of the house, surrounded by the broken statues and torn landscape, he hadn't been prepared for the amount of pain that would accompany his visit. He'd been even less prepared for the arrival of Nahia Freeman.

She'd seemed so concerned when she approached him, and yet there was that aura of serenity around her. Until they'd kissed. Never had he felt such passion in a woman. She tasted like lemon and chocolate.

Glancing down at her, he took in the creamy light chocolate tone of her skin as she lay upon the dark brown comforter. Despite all the pain this place held for him, this one woman seemed to hold the key to his sanity. Aren bent over and unlaced her boots before removing them and her socks.

Such lovely feet.

Aren moved over her and kissed her. Putting more of his weight on his arms, he maneuvered himself so he lay between her spread legs. He ground his erection against the juncture of her thighs. Her moan was almost his undoing. He could feel her fingers tugging at his shirt. Breaking the kiss, he rose up and whipped off his shirt.

"Damn," she expelled on a long breath.

Nahia scooted back a bit and got to her knees. Their mouths met again, and this time, it wasn't gentle. Aren plundered her mouth, seeking her submission. When he got it, he growled in satisfaction. The creature within him knew Nahia was his mate. He paused to remove her shirt, and then froze. A rumble of male satisfaction rose from deep in his chest. She had nice, firm breasts that he knew would fit perfectly in his hands. At the moment, they were covered by a white lace bra. His gaze skimmed over the rest of her torso. He smiled at the bellybutton piercing she had.

He reached up and cupped her breasts, skimming the hardened nipples with his thumbs. Her body shuddered beneath his touch. "Beautiful," he murmured. Leaning forward, he kissed the top of each breast, and then her mouth. Her skin was like silk under his.

Laying them on their sides, he gentled the kiss and allowed one hand to explore her curves, while the other sank into her thick hair. She purred in the back of her throat and arched against him. Nahia draped one of her legs over his and rubbed against him, still making those sexy little noises.

He moved his hand over her ass and squeezed. Her response was to bite his seeking tongue. It wasn't a hard bite, but it got his attention. Staring down into her eyes, he easily read her need in them. Within seconds, he'd stripped them of the rest of their clothing and, before he could comprehend the wisdom of his decision, he was sliding his cock deep within her wet pussy. A low groan escaped him as he felt her velvet heat gripping his hard shaft. One thrust, and he was completely buried inside her.

"Ohhh!" she moaned as he held still and allowed her to adjust to his size.

Aren bit the inside of his cheek to keep from exploding within her at that second. Slowly, he moved his hips, slipping his cock in and out. Her feet were placed on his lower back, and she undulated beneath him, keeping up with his speed. Staring down at her, he took in her flushed skin, her parted, slightly swollen lips, and her eyes, molten with passion.

Lowering his head, he teased her lips with his before beginning to match his actions with his tongue to that of his hips. He stroked deep within her, sliding along her

tongue, calling it out to dance with his. She eagerly followed his lead, and took everything he gave her.

In and out he moved. Her hands rested on his upper arms, and he could feel her nails digging into him. Her internal muscles gripped him harder as she moved her body in time with his. She was close; he could feel it. Small pants and mewls rose from her throat, filling him with the primal need to dominate. Lowering his head by her ear, he closed his eyes and tried to hold onto his control.

Harder he thrust. Deeper he sank. And louder she moaned, until she screamed her release to the room, her hips driving up toward him in a fierce motion. That did it. Aren pounded into her until he, too, came with a rush. His body shuddered as it erupted within her, echoed by the low roar from his mouth.

Sweat-covered and exhausted, Aren sank into her and the bed. His arms shook like saplings in a summer storm, and he made sure to fall to the side so he didn't crush her. The room was silent except for their harsh and rapid breathing. After a moment, he pulled out of her and flopped onto his back, the breeze coming in from the balcony cooling their bodies.

For the first time in a long time, Aren didn't feel the weight of not perishing with his family. He was content. And sleepy. Reaching for Nahia, he rolled her into his side, brushed his lips over hers, wrapped his arms around her, and fell asleep.

Nahia slowly opened her eyes. She was perfectly content. A pair of strong arms was wrapped around her, and she lay up against a solid wall of male flesh. Then the memory of what she'd done, and who she'd done it with, flashed into her mind, and she tensed. Aren's hand rubbed her back, and he muttered something in a language she didn't understand, although the meaning was clear. *It's okay.*

Turning her head, she stared over her shoulder at the sleeping man she lay with. His thick lashes rested on his cheeks, a look of tranquility filling his features, and for a moment, she just stared at him. The familiar fire being near him created in her began to burn again.

This is insane. I can't do this. Moving slowly and carefully, she slid out of bed, grabbed her clothes, and put them on. Stealing one more look at Aren, she snuck out of the room and headed quickly down the stairs to the door. Nahia broke into a run the moment her feet hit the ground outside, and she headed for the sanctuary of the forest. At the tree line, she stopped again, her body yelling at her for leaving him. Her knees were shaky, and she leaned against a tall oak for support. Her eyes stared back at the house she'd just run from.

Forcing steel back into her limbs, Nahia pushed away from the tree and headed back the way she'd come. Amazingly enough, she remembered the path she'd taken on her wild dash once she'd heard the anguished cry. "Way to go, Freeman," she admonished herself. "Go to help someone, and end up sleeping with a guy you barely even know."

She got back to the brook and hopped across it. Her soul cried out for Aren, but she continued on. When she reached the meadow, Nahia began jogging again, fishing in her back pocket for her keys as she covered the ground. Barely slowing, she had her car unlocked before she got there and slid across the leather seat, starting the ignition and driving like a bat out of hell to get away from there.

Once she reached her brother's house, she locked the doors and went to her room, curling up on the bed and shaking like a leaf. Her mind raced and her stomach was nauseous. Covering her head with a pillow, she tried to get the feeling to go away, but it never did. Her insides felt tighter and tighter, and when she took the pillow off her head, she screamed. There was about a foot of space underneath her, between her body and the bed. She hit the bed when her scream faded from the air.

"What the fuck was that?"

Nahia scrambled off the bed and stumbled out the door, heading downstairs to the kitchen, where she grabbed a glass for water. Turning on the faucet, she scrunched up her face and cried when the water flowed from the faucet and snaked around her hand and wrist, almost, but not quite, touching her skin. Dropping the glass in the sink,

she shut off the faucet, backed up into the living room, and sat down on the couch, drawing her knees up to her chin. She closed her eyes and began to pray.

The sun set, and still Nahia didn't move. She just sat there and tried to figure out what the hell was going on. Nothing made any sense to her. Tears began anew as she sat there. "What's wrong with me?" At some point in the night, she fell asleep on the couch.

When she woke up the next morning, she walked slowly to the sink and turned on the water. It flowed like it should, straight down. Grabbing a quick shower, Nahia ate breakfast and then got ready to go grocery shopping. Shopping didn't take long, and soon she was back out walking around and exploring Savoy Valley. However, she didn't go further than the meadow she'd parked her car at yesterday.

Taking her sketch book, Nahia sat beside some flowers and began to draw them. She wanted to remember the plant life that grew around here, some of which she was sure must be native only to Savoy Valley, for she hadn't seen it anywhere else. Above her, the shadow of a large bird circled around, and Nahia looked up and smiled. The eagle soared lazily on the wind currents. "To know such freedom." Nahia sighed and put her attention back on her drawing. She shaded one side of the flower, and cocked her head from side to side. "Such a vibrant shade of purple."

Shaking her head, she flipped to a clean page. Her gaze moved across the open meadow, taking in the grass flowing in the breeze, the smell of the flowers in the air, all of it. Leaning her head against the smooth bark of the tree she sat beneath, Nahia started to sketch an image from memory. She started when a shadow fell across her paper, and glancing up, she found herself looking into the face of a man she didn't know.

"Sorry to bother you, miss. I was wondering if you could help me."

Her heart pounded hard as she closed her sketch book and slowly got to her feet. "What can I do for you?" she asked as her eyes searched the area. It was just the two of them.

"I'm trying to find a good place to eat around here. I am not from the area, and when I drove by and saw you sitting out here looking so comfortable, I figured you must know." He smiled, but Nahia took it more as a baring of teeth.

"What type of food are you looking for?" She tried to be as calm as she could, but her body wasn't helping. The wind picked up, and Nahia narrowed her eyes as the man frowned. He looked around as if expecting to see someone pop out.

"Um, anything really. Just good." He put his pale blue eyes back on her as he smoothed one hand over his goatee.

She shivered from the unholy light that seemed to shine in his eyes.

"I'd say try Sanjai's," a deep voice said. "Good food, and just up the road on your right. You can't miss it."

Nahia nearly groaned in relief as Aren strode up to them. He was dressed in blue jeans and a black sleeveless shirt. Both articles hugged him closely, highlighting all his glorious muscles. She ground her back teeth together and prayed for control over her lust for this man. He looked so damn hot.

The man looked between the two of them and nodded. "Okay. Will do. Thank you. Just up the road on the right. I appreciate it." Backing away slowly, he kept his eyes mostly on Aren, who stood with his arms crossed.

Not a word was spoken between her and Aren until the man's car disappeared from view. Expelling a breath, Nahia sank back down to the ground and rested her head against the tree. "Thank you," she muttered.

Aren looked at her. His eyes were hard and angry as he flowed toward her. "You left," he accused when he stopped in front of her. "You just ran away."

"I went home." *No, I ran away.* "You were sleeping and I didn't see a reason to wake you."

Aren crouched down in front of her, but didn't touch her. He just stared at her.

"I think it's best if we just stay away from one another," she said.

His golden-brown eyes narrowed and grew cold. "Are you kidding me? After what we shared, you want to stay away from me?"

"Look, I don't mean to insult your male ego or anything like that. It isn't you, it's me." She reached out to touch him, but pulled back. At the last second, he grabbed her hand. Volts of power surged through her, wrapping around her body and lighting her skin on fire.

"You feel it, too, Nahia. Don't deny it." His lips caressed the back of her hand, and her nipples hardened as her pussy convulsed. Nahia swallowed and tugged on her hand really hard. He let go, but his look told her she should be happy he did. "We aren't staying away from one another."

"I can't-" she tried. How could she explain what was going on?

He frowned, and his expression softened. "You're scared."

"Yes."

He ran his tongue over his lips and nodded. "Okay. What are you scared of?" Aren moved to sit beside her, leaving very little space between them.

"If I tell you, you'll think I'm crazy and lock me up."

"Nahia, trust me. That won't happen."

"Well, I think I'm going crazy. Water that snakes around my hand instead of falling down in the sink like it should. Flames that grow larger and smaller." She picked up her sketch book and held it like a lifeline. "Oh, yeah, and that whole floating above my bed thing." Nahia glanced sideways at him, and found him just staring at her.

"What? Nothing to say about it?"

"Before these things happened, how did you feel?"

She cocked her head. "Nauseous, like my insides were at war with one another."

"Have things like this happened to you before?"

Nahia was amazed he didn't laugh or call her crazy. "No. I mean, back in Boulder, I had some strange dreams, and then when I got here, the dreams stopped. That's when the nausea began. And, no offense, but being around you really makes my head hurt."

"None taken," he replied easily, sending her a grin. "Is it hurting now?"

She frowned. It wasn't. "No. It's fine." Frustrated, Nahia gathered her hair back and let it go with a groan. "I just don't know what's happening."

"Allow us to enlighten you on that subject, Nahia Freeman," a deep voice broke in.

Both of she and Aren jumped, and Nahia looked up to see two people standing before her. A tall man with very dark skin stood there wearing robes of a brilliant white. He had long black hair and onyx eyes. Beside him stood a pale skinned woman dressed in blue--a dress and robes. Her ash-blond hair fell free, and she had vibrant blue eyes.

Aren moved to get up, but the distinguished black man waved him back down. "No need to get up, Aren Van der Ness, although the gesture is much appreciated."

Nahia's skin tingled as she looked at the woman, who was only slightly less imposing than the man. Staring at them, Nahia asked, "Who are you? And what do you want with me?"

"My name is Olorun," the man said, with a regal nod of his head.

"I am Juras-mate," the woman in blue said in a husky voice as she, too, nodded once.

Nahia looked at Aren, who was staring not at the beautiful woman in blue, but at her. The smile he gave her was one of encouragement, and so she turned her attention back to the impressive duo before her. "Hello."

Olorun found her gaze and held it. "First and foremost, let me say, welcome home, Nahia Freeman." He bowed slightly and said again, "Welcome home."

Chapter Three

Nahia stared at Olorun. Welcome home--two words meant to bring comfort, but they only filled her with apprehension. She just continued to gaze at the man who seemed to have endless eyes.

"You are a special woman, Nahia Freeman. You are unique. Unfortunately, you are also untrained and unaware of your ability, or your purpose."

Fear settled in the pit of her stomach. "My purpose?"

Olorun waved off her question. "Let's work our way there." He sank down on the ground in such a graceful manner, Nahia almost asked him to do it again. Juras-mate followed suit. Nahia glanced over at Aren. He sat beside her, all attention on Olorun, and she did the same, placing her eyes back on the distinguished man across from her.

Work our way there. What the hell does that mean?

"I want you to read this," Olorun said as Juras-mate handed her a piece of paper. "After you hear what I have to say."

Nahia took the paper and placed it inside her sketch book before looking first at Juras-mate, and then back to Olorun. "Okay."

"I wish I could tell you more, but our presence here endangers you, so I must be brief. Both of us are Elementals. I am of the air, and Juras-mate is of the water. These things that have been happening to you--the water, fire, and air--you have been creating. You, Nahia, are of all the four main elements--earth, water, wind, fire. The world is composed of many elements, and therefore, many Elementals. But they all derive from the four main ones." He fell silent and watched her.

"So, I'm not going crazy? These things *are* happening?"

"No, child," Juras-mate broke in, "you are far from crazy. You have powers that we can't even fathom. However, there is a catch."

Nahia pursed her lips. *Of course there is.*

Olorun picked up the explanation. "It seems that there is one person who is capable of giving life to your powers, and therefore, you need to work with that person, to learn how to harness your ability."

She knew who he meant before he even said it. It had to be Aren, as it was thoughts of him or being in his presence that made logic go out the window and strange things start happening. Nahia glanced over at Aren. He watched her, like he knew it as well. "You knew?" she asked Aren. "You knew what I was?"

"What you were, no. But I could feel the power rolling off you. Still can, and it nearly overwhelms me. I don't understand why no one else knew what she was." He glanced away from her to look back at the two others.

"Until you showed up, Aren Van der Ness, all we got was a wisp of magic surrounding her. No one could break through into her mind and find out the truth. No one." Olorun raised a hand and pointed to the sky. "One day, she was observed paying extra attention to the eagles flying overhead."

Nahia frowned. She remembered that day. She hadn't known she was being watched. "What do eagles have to do with anything?"

"Dane," Aren said. "That's when he came to get me." Olorun nodded. "He knew, or at least suspected." Olorun nodded again.

"Who's Dane?" Nahia asked. "I can't work with him," she blurted out. Three sets of eyes landed on her.

"You won't work with Dane," Olorun said. "He's not here."

"Not Dane. Him." She pointed at Aren.

His golden-brown eyes narrowed slightly. "What's so wrong with me?"

Juras-mate and Olorun exchanged glances. Nahia's heart sank when smiles touched the corners of their mouths. The vivid blue gaze of Juras-mate grabbed hers. "He is the only one who can help you tap into your true self. Aren Van der Ness is your destiny."

"This can't be," Nahia insisted. "None of this makes any sense."

"Sense will come, in time," Olorun said softly. "Right now, you have to learn to use and control your abilities."

So much for staying away from Aren. Just my luck. The man I'm trying to keep some distance from and the one who is supposedly the only one who can help me are one and the same. Nahia reached for her sketch book and ran her fingers along the spiral binding. "So, let me get this straight. All these strange dreams and odd things happening to me are because of what I am?"

"Yes. Your dreams were sending you a message. They ceased once you arrived in Savoy Valley, right?" Olorun regained her attention.

"Well, yes, but that could also be that I wasn't as stressed anymore. I didn't feel like I was being followed anymore."

"Followed?" three voices asked as one.

"Just some guys who seemed to be wherever I was. It stopped when I came here...except for night before last, when I saw a guy hanging around Maxtin's house." She shrugged. "I mean, that's what it looked like to me, but I wasn't feeling the best."

"After we had dinner?" Aren questioned.

She looked at him. "Yes. When I got home that night."

"Why didn't you call me?" Aren demanded.

Was he serious? Nahia stared at him. His brows were furrowed in frustration, and she could see anger swirling in eyes that were a hard, dark gold color. "Why would I call you? I don't have your number, nor do I know you that well."

A muscle clenched in his jaw. He leaned in close and growled in a low voice, "You do now."

Her body flushed at the reminder of the time she spent in his arms, and his bed. His eyes filled with desire as he stared at her.

"Don't fight it," Juras-mate's voice broke in.

Nahia jerked her gaze from Aren's and looked at Juras-mate. "What are you talking about?"

"Your wanting to sleep with Aren again."

Juras-mate said it in such a plain voice that, for a moment, Nahia wasn't sure she hadn't imagined the whole thing. But then she caught sight of Aren's smile, and she knew it had happened. Nahia frowned. *How did she know about that?* She cut her eyes back to Aren, who lifted a shoulder and tried to look innocent.

Olorun stood and, in a graceful motion, Juras-mate followed suit. Black eyes burned a hole into her until she met his gaze. "Everyone knows, Nahia. Your scents are intertwined." He looked back to Aren and said, "We're sorry for your loss, and glad you have returned."

"Goodbye for now, Nahia Freeman," Juras-mate said. "It was an honor." She bowed her head slightly.

"Read the parchment," Olorun said as he walked away.

Nahia sat silently as she watched the two figures fade away into thin air. After a bit, she sighed and said, "Well. Wasn't that lovely?"

"Are you okay?" Aren's deep voice questioned.

"No."

"Look at me." His timbre reached out and wrapped around her.

With a deep breath, she did as he'd commanded. "What?"

"We'll figure this out."

"Sure." Nahia opened her sketchbook and pulled out the folded piece of paper. Carefully she unfolded it. The paper was heavy and very textured. Smoothing it out on top of the pad, she read the calligraphy scripted words.

In the beginning there was one.

One led to four and four to more.

On the day the gates turn

And the full moon rises to its zenith

The time will come for the One to return.

For a battle will ensue.

Only when the One gives its all

Will the tide turn in favor of good.

Nahia reread it two more times to make sure she wasn't imagining things. "I've read this before." She looked at Aren, who met her gaze with a question in his eyes. "I'm positive." Quickly folding it, she grabbed her sketchbook and got to her feet. "I have to go." She took one step, and stopped as he touched her arm. Nahia turned to face him. He was standing, and very close. Immediately, she felt that familiar longing deep within her as she stared at him.

"Where do you know this from?"

His eyes were brimming with barely contained passion as he gazed at her. She gulped. "Umm, my mother."

He nodded and said, "I'm going with you."

Not even bothering to argue, Nahia spun and headed for her car at a jog. He easily kept pace with her, and slid into the passenger side of her vehicle once she unlocked it. Stealing one more glance at the man who seemed to do a wonderful job of depriving her of oxygen, she ground her back teeth together and started the engine.

Aren reached for her sketchbook as she drove and took out the note again. How could she have known these words? Better question--what did it mean? He needed to get in touch with someone who had more knowledge of the gates than he did. The full moon wasn't that far away.

"Do you know what the saying means?" Nahia asked as she veered around another car.

His gut clenched as she drove. Never would he complain again about Bryndis's driving. He'd thought the blonde woman was a she-devil behind the wheel, but compared to Nahia, Bryndis drove like an old lady.

"No, not totally," he said in response to her question. "I get that a battle is coming, but I don't know about the gates." He swallowed as she tailgated another vehicle, only to swerve around it and squeeze back in front of the car before the oncoming traffic could hit them. Aren expelled a sigh of relief as she pulled into her driveway.

"You okay?" she asked with a smile on her face and an impish gleam in her eyes.

"Fine," he lied.

Nahia winked at him and got out. Aren followed her cute little butt up the steps to the door. As she opened it, she whispered, "The man sitting on the bench is the one who was here the other night."

Aren stole a glance at the man when he shut the door. He couldn't see anything around him, but that didn't make him any less of a threat. Vampires weren't the only ones who had minions. Making a mental note to check on the man later, he looked for Nahia. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Nahia?" he called out.

"Be right there." He heard some shuffling, and then she appeared from the hallway, holding a small picture in her hand. "I found it."

They sat side by side on the couch, and she handed him the photo as she took out a small yellowed piece of paper from behind it. Aren looked at the photo and smiled. Nahia appeared about seven or so, and she stood there with her brother, their parents behind them. A mischievous grin filled her features. She looked more like her mother, who was much lighter skinned than her father.

"You have a lovely family," he said. "You look a lot like your mother."

"Thank you. She was a beautiful woman."

Aren tipped her face to his. "And you *are* a beautiful woman." A blush ran up her cheeks before she lowered her gaze.

"She was the greatest story teller. Every night before bed, she'd tell me these stories about great battles between good and evil, magical creatures, and more. And no matter where the story ended, she'd finish up with what she called *Maitasun edo bat*. And it was this." She waved the paper in her hand.

"What does that mean?"

"Roughly translated, 'Love of the One'."

Nahia handed him the paper she held, and he opened it. He read both of them, and found she was right. Word for word, they matched.

"When did she give you this?" Aren asked.

"The night they died." Nahia expelled a sharp breath. "Now it seems as if she knew she wasn't coming back. She told me to never forget the stories, and most of all, the saying. Then she slid it behind the picture, and it's been there ever since." Nahia ran a hand over her face.

Aren put the papers on the coffee table and pulled her into his embrace. "It wasn't your fault." She stiffened and began to struggle, but he lowered his head to her ear and whispered, "Don't, Nahia. Let me offer you comfort."

Her body sank into his as if seeking his strength. Aren closed his eyes as they sat there. He could hear her sniffles, and her tears soaked his shirt. Still, he didn't let her go, or say a word. When she moved, she did it so fast, he wasn't expecting it. She shoved back from his embrace and stood.

"I can't stay here."

Aren looked at her red-rimmed eyes, and his heart ached to hold her again.

"Why not?"

Her gaze grew cold as she looked at a point past his shoulder. "I will *not* put my brother's life in danger. Or Estrella's."

"Okay." He understood her wanting to protect her only family. He'd gladly give his life to have his family back. "You'll stay with me."

"What?" Her eyes were wide with surprise.

"It's time I got to fixing up the house anyway. You've been there. There's plenty of room." *Once I get you in my house, Nahia, you won't be leaving.* She shook her head and chewed on her lower lip. He had to bite back a grin; she was just so damn sexy.

"I don't know if that's wise."

"Why not? Apparently, I'm the one who needs to help you. I promise, I'll be a perfect gentleman." He winked. "Until you don't want me to be." She tried to hide her shiver, but his gaze was too sharp to miss it.

"I have to take care of his house," she argued.

She's trying to talk herself out of it. "Thought you said you couldn't stay here."

Nahia blinked. "I...I...just don't know."

"I'll give you the upstairs. I'll take over my parents' old room." Deciding not to let her dwell on it any longer, he stood and placed himself in front of her, so she had to look up at him to maintain eye contact. "Get your stuff. I'll make a call, and someone will keep his house safe."

I will ward the house once you two are gone, Aren Van der Ness. A powerful and sensual voice entered his mind.

Who are you?

Darago.

Thank you. He'd heard of Darago. She was a fire Elemental.

Trust in your ability, Aren Van der Ness. You are fully capable of warding.

The presence left without waiting for a response. Which was good. Aren had doubted himself often since his family died. He sighed. He'd forgotten how public one's thoughts could be in Savoy Valley.

Hearing footsteps snapped him out of his thoughts. Before him stood Nahia. She had the same clothing on, and two suitcases beside her, but somehow she looked different. Her eyes seemed to be a blend of colors as he stared--blue, pale silver, brown, and crimson.

"I'm ready," she stated.

"That's all you have?"

"This is it. I travel light."

"Let's get going then," he said, scooping up the papers from the coffee table and putting them in the pocket of his jeans.

"Right."

Aren grabbed her suitcases and led the way out the door. Once they were on the way to his house, he looked over at her. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Scared. But not like I usually do around you." She blushed after the words came out of her mouth.

"I don't know if I should take that as a compliment or not," he teased.

"You said-"

"That I would be a perfect gentleman. And I will. I'd have to be deaf, blind, and dumb to not see what's going on between us, Nahia. But I don't want to add to your stress. So if you know that I'll let it be up to you, maybe you'll relax a bit." *God knows I won't be relaxed.*

He watched her lick her lips, and he bit back a groan. This was going to be hard. His cock jumped in his pants, as if proving a point. *Lots of cold showers for me.*

"I keep hoping this is some kind of a dream, and I'll wake up. I'm not anything special. I'm just delusional--seeing things. They have the wrong person."

Aren glanced over at her. She looked paler than normal. "You aren't delusional, Nahia. We'll figure it all out, together." Her eyes closed, and she sighed heavily before nodding. He put his attention back on the road and drove on toward his house.

He may have promised to be good, but that didn't stop Aren from putting Nahia in the room they had made love in. Her sharp intake of breath told him she'd just figured it out.

"Why am I staying here?"

"It's the biggest bedroom up here, and the one with a balcony." He prowled closer. "I have fond memories in this room, and thought you might as well." Her body shuddered, and he leaned down to whisper in her ear, "There's plenty of room in the master bedroom downstairs, if you want to share it with me."

"No. Here's fine." She put her bag on the floor, and he placed her suitcases next to it.

"Make yourself at home, I'll be downstairs when you're done." He brushed his lips over her cheek and walked out of the room.

Nahia sighed and sat down on the end of the king-sized bed. "Of course I'd be in this room." It looked the same as it had when she was in here with Aren. That memory sent spikes of longing through her body. Getting to her feet, she began to unpack her things. As she was closing the closet door, a box tucked in the corner grabbed her

attention. Turning the light back on, she dropped to her knees and reached for the box. She hesitated at the last second, unsure if she should snoop. Curiosity won out.

There were pictures in there, and she pulled a large framed one out. A family of five stared back at her, three men in back and two women in the front, sitting. It was Aren's family. She recognized him on the end. The women were beautiful, with long golden hair and blue eyes. And the men all had the same dark hair with the golden-brown eyes. The portrait was taken out in front of this house; it was stunning without the hole in the side. Flying high above the front door was a flag with an eagle on it.

I can't imagine what it must have been like to lose them. Nahia went through the other photos and felt tears prick the back of her eyes. There was so much love in each photo she looked at, it took her breath away. With a deep breath, she replaced the pictures and shoved the box back into the corner, then got to her feet.

Walking down the curved staircase, Nahia tried to imagine the home without that huge hole in the side. She heard Aren's deep voice as he spoke to someone, and so without thought, she headed toward it. At the bottom of the stairs, she turned to the right and peered in the doorway of what appeared to be a study. He stood there on the phone, back to her, looking out the window.

"Thanks, Samir. I'll see you first thing tomorrow then." Aren hung up the phone and turned to face her. A sexy smile filled his features as his eyes raked over her.

Nahia inhaled deeply and tried to remember that he was only supposed to help her learn. *Well, he taught you something, didn't he?* her inner voice teased. "Am I interrupting?" she asked.

"Not at all. I was just talking to a contractor. He's coming out tomorrow to start rebuilding the stuff that's not there. So, until it's done, we'll have to eat in the kitchen, since that big hole is where the dining room used to be."

Aren sat down on the edge of the large, dark red desk and waved her to a comfy leather seat. "Is that cherry?" she asked.

"This?" He tapped the desk he sat on. "No, it's African Padauk. My father loved the rich red color."

"It certainly is beautiful."

His eyes bored into her, making her skin burn. "It certainly is."

Wiping her hands off on her legs, she looked up at him. "So, what do we do now?"

He pushed away from the desk and strode toward her. "Let me give you a tour of the place."

Shoving down the disappointment that he wasn't trying to seduce her, Nahia stood. "Sounds good." She followed him out of the study and toward another set of stairs, this time leading down.

"Be careful," he warned. "I haven't been down here yet, so I don't know how much damage has been done."

Nahia was extremely pleased that he didn't try to keep her away from it. She wanted to be with him as he walked through his home. "Damn," she said on a harsh breath. It was immense. Even with the destruction, she knew that this was one hell of a home.

She looked at Aren. He stood in front of her, body tense as he looked around. Nahia reached out her hand and laid it against his back before moving to step beside him. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I think so. Stay here for a moment, will you? I want to check something out in the rubble."

Nahia didn't think to argue. She doubted he was going to check something; more like to erase the presence of tears. "Sure. Take your time. Mind if I go in the other direction?"

"Go ahead," he said as he walked away from her without looking at her again.

She took two steps and turned. Her eyes stayed glued to his back as he walked around a pile of debris and out of sight. Instead of exploring, Nahia sat back down on the steps. Her mind drifted to her time spent with her mother, and a good many other things.

"You all right, Nahia?" a deep, sensual voice questioned.

She opened her eyes to find Aren crouched on his haunches before her. Those amazing eyes of his were full of concern. With a small smile, she nodded. "Yes. Just thinking."

"Come outside with me," he said.

Nahia put her hand in his outstretched one. She felt the usual shockwave when touching him, and shoved it to the back of her mind. Hand in hand, they walked through the basement and out a backdoor. Aren led her to a small fountain in the back of the house. He sat down on the smooth stone and tugged her to sit beside him.

"Care to tell me what we're doing out here?" she questioned as she pulled her hand from his.

He glanced from her down to the water in the fountain's pool. "Touch the water."

One eyebrow rose as she looked between him and the clear water. "Okay." Reaching down toward it, her eyes flashed up to his when his hand grabbed her wrist. "What? You told me to touch the water."

"Bring it to you." He positioned her hand at the same height as her shoulder.

"And how do you propose I do that?" she snapped, feeling foolish.

"What did you do the last time it happened?" he asked.

"I wanted a drink."

"So...ask it to come to you."

"What? Ask water to come to me?" She shook her head. He was delusional.

"Look, Nahia. I don't know how to try and tap into this, so will you just work with me here?" His tone grated on her nerves, and she narrowed her eyes at him. He winked and said, "Unless there are some *other* pursuits you'd like to explore."

Her belly clenched, and she fought the urge to cross her legs and squirm in her seat. Declining to respond to his challenge, Nahia looked at her hand, and the water under it. As she stared, a thin stream of water rose up toward her palm. "Aren," she whispered, "look."

Aren had to drag his eyes away from her chest as it heaved with her frustration at his words. Following her gaze, he looked down and stared. She was doing it. The lone stream of water shifted from one to four. All of them wrapped around her hand and forearm. Nahia turned her face toward him, and he found himself staring into blue eyes with a ring of pale silver, brown, and crimson surrounding it.

"It's not even touching my skin," she commented in awe.

Aren could feel the waves of power flowing off her body. It passed over him, making his skin tingle with anticipation. Reaching out, he touched her fingertips with his, and smiled in wonderment as the water circled around his arm as well. He could feel the coolness, but the water never alighted on his skin. *Un-fucking-believable.*

"Amazing," he said, tearing his gaze away from his arm and placing it back upon her face.

Nahia moved her arm back so they were no longer touching, and the water flowed back toward her, merging effortlessly with the strands closer to her. "I want to try something," she murmured.

"What?" he asked in the same hushed tone.

"This," she said, seconds before a bunch of water splashed into his face.

"What the...?" Aren wiped off his face and looked into her laughter-filled one. He raised a brow. "That...was not nice."

She snorted, and moved her hands as if to tell him she was sorry. After a minute, she held up both hands and chuckled. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to see if it would work. You should have seen your face." Nahia reached out and wiped some excess water from his cheek.

Shivers rocketed through him. Her skin was like silk against his. Aren grabbed her hand before she could remove it from his face. Pressing her palm against his cheek, he held her gaze. He could see her desire for him in the depths of her eyes. As he stared, they once again became the perfectly blended mix of colors he'd come to expect.

"Aren," she breathed.

"I know. I promised I'd be good, but-"

She leaned in and placed her lips on his. His body responded like a volcano erupting. Her sweet, addictive taste infused itself in his taste buds, sending him into overdrive. He felt his hard cock straining against the material of his jeans. His free hand curled into a fist to keep from reneging on his promise. His heart pounded like he'd just run twenty miles.

Ever so slowly, she pulled away, her teeth grazing along his lower lip. Her gaze was passionate as she looked at him. "I guess we should get back to seeing about this whole element thing."

It helped a bit, knowing she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Just a tiny bit. "I guess so," he rasped.

Chapter Four

"Nahia, let go," Aren demanded.

Rolling her eyes, Nahia didn't bother to tell him for what seemed the millionth time that she was letting go. She stared at the water pouring from the facet of one of the large fountains Aren had his contractor put in the back yard. She called it to her. It didn't move. She growled, frustrated.

They had been at it for months, working on her gaining control over her powers, and they were failing. When the first full moon came over the summer, she was nervous. Yet nothing had happened. Whatever she was supposed to do hadn't come. She hadn't known if she was disappointed or relived. Since then, as the months passed and another full moon came, she got tense.

Now they were in January, and another full moon had passed with nothing happening. Another month of her not being in control of her power. In another few weeks, in February, there would be another full moon. She wondered how long it would be before they all gave up on this miraculous thing that she was there to do. Her supposed power wasn't cooperating, and everything seemed normal. Even the men who had been following her had stopped.

Thankfully THE full moon—the important one-- hasn't come yet, or we'd all be up shit creek. I knew I wasn't some special being.

"Nahia, you're not letting go. In order for you to gain control, you *have* to let go," Aren said in that damnably patient tone of his.

She was getting to despise that tone. Nahia glared at him. He was standing some distance away, leaning against the wall. His muscular frame was deceptively relaxed, legs crossed at the ankles. Her pussy clenched and nipples pebbled as they usually did whenever she glanced at him. She silently cursed her reaction to him. Aren hadn't made any moves to seduce her.

You haven't done anything to seduce him either.

She hadn't, afraid of what letting herself need him would mean. He gestured with his hand toward the fountain. Narrowing her eyes, she returned to the task at hand. Focusing on the water, she concentrated on it blocking everything else out. Minutes passed and nothing happened.

"Damn it." She turned away.

Aren hadn't moved. She put her hands on her hips, pacing and muttering. She couldn't figure out why she couldn't get the water to move. A body blocked her path. She gasped, stopping. She hadn't heard him move. A flash of hunger filled his golden-brown gaze, but was gone so quickly she thought she had imagined it.

"You're holding back. You need to let go and relax under the power. Let it flow through you without trying to control it," he stated for the millionth time.

"I'm doing that," she growled.

Shaking her head, she pushed her hand through her long black curly hair. Aren just sighed and shook his head. She cut him off before he could speak.

"Don't even say I'm not."

Turning from him, she went back to the fountain and hit her fist into the water, making it splash. Gasping, she shook her now wet hair and pulled at the front of her wet sundress. Aren made a sound. She looked at him. He was walking away.

"That's enough for today. We'll try again tomorrow," he said without stopping.

He walked toward the destroyed area of the house that the contractor was still working on. She wondered why he had cut their session short. Absently she looked back at the water. A sound made her turn. Horror filled her as a chunk of the wall started to fall right toward Aren.

"Aren!" she screamed.

Raising her hand, she thought of the wind, then felt a rush of power raise the hair on her arms. Her hair whipped around her. Shuddering, she held it, then controlled it. She imagined a palm cupping and felt the wind shift, doing as she imagined. The falling debris stopped right above Aren. She made her hold firmer and then looked at

him. He wasn't looking at the piece of wall, but at her. The calm indifference on his face confused her.

"See? That's what I mean about letting go," he said smugly.

A strong suspicion overcame her.

"Did you make the wall fall?"

"Yes."

"How? Why? Are you crazy? Suppose I didn't catch it," she sputtered.

"I would have taken care of it myself." He shrugged.

His smug look was pissing her off.

"How?"

He looked at her, and then his eyes dilated. She blinked. The gold of his eyes filled his whole retina. He flicked a hand lazily. A shaft of white light flowed from his hand. She felt his power lance through hers. The piece of stone incinerated. Aren crossed his arms over his chest, raising his eyebrow at her. Nahia lowered her hand, recalling the wind. She strode over to him.

"You have powers, too. Why didn't you tell me? You could have been showing me how to control it." She poked him in the chest as she asked.

"Did you know your eyes change color when you use your power?" Aren stated.

"What?" She blinked, stopping.

"They take on four rings. The biggest and center one takes on the color of the element you are using. Like just now, when you used air, your eye color was pale silver in the center with blue, brown, and then crimson around it," he replied.

Nahia frowned. She hadn't realized that. But she was more curious about what he had done.

"Forget about that. What about your own power?"

"It isn't the same as yours. It comes from my alternate form."

She stared. This was also new to her. She hadn't known he had another form. With a start, she realized she wasn't even sure what he was. Before she could say anything, Aren spoke again.

"We'll have to change focus with our training. It's as I suspected. You need to tap into your emotions and then gain your power. We'll do that tomorrow." He turned on his heel and left.

Nahia stood there, still stunned. Aren had powers too, and another form. She thought of all that had happened in the last few minutes. With determined steps, she headed around the house, then to the side door. Opening it, she strode through the house. She figured he would be in the study, as he usually was whenever they finished training for the day. Striding past a mirror, she glanced up. She stopped, then retraced her steps, then stared. Her eyes were four colors. Crimson in the center, with pale silver, blue, and brown. She put up her hand and thought of power. With a whoosh, her hand flamed. Awed, she turned her hand from side to side, looking at it. Her whole hand was engulfed, but it wasn't burning her. She thought for a second about how she had done it.

You need to tap into your emotions to gain your power.

Her mind filled with what Aren had said. Thinking of him again, anger bubbled in her. The flames shot higher. A picture on the wall caught fire.

"Oh crap." She waved her hand.

Water shot out, dousing the fire. She blinked.

"I'll be damned," she whispered.

Shaking her head she went down the hall and around the corner. She threw open the door. Aren glanced up, a quizzical look on his face. Striding to his desk, Nahia stopped just before it. Putting her hands on her hips, she glared at him.

"You've been hiding things from me. Why didn't you tell me about what I needed to do to gain control over my power?"

"I suspected, but I wasn't sure. And besides, even if I told you, you wouldn't have listened." His answer was cool.

"You had no right to not tell me what you suspected."

"You weren't ready. Like you're not ready for a lot of things," he countered.

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Just like you won't face what's in front of you, you won't let go enough to let your power flow."

"You know nothing." Nahia slammed her fist on the desk.

It broke in two. Startled she stepped back, dismayed. The beautiful African Padauk desk was in two pieces, split right down the middle. Looking at her hand she couldn't believe she had broken it. She raised her eyes to Aren. He watched her calmly.

"I couldn't have done that." She waved her hand at his desk.

"You did. The power gives you what you need when you need it. You felt rage and needed an outlet for it. The power gave you the strength for it."

"Oh, my God! What if I hurt someone?" she cried.

"You won't if you learn how to harness it and work with it. Now, fix what you've done." He waved his hand at the desk.

"How?" Ashamed she had lost control of her temper, but not sure what to do, she stared at him.

His look softened. "You need to trust yourself. You know what to do. Let go."

The faith in his gaze humbled her. She took a step closer to the desk. Blocking everything out, she focused. Her need to fix the desk filled her. Her power started to build. Instead of the fear she usually felt when it came on her, she embraced it. She thought of repairing and opened her hands, palms down to the desk. Her eyes widened as light flowed from her hands, around the desk. It shifted together, and then in a whoosh, it was whole as it before. Whole and beautiful. Awed, she glanced at him. Aren smiled. She laughed.

"Good job. Tomorrow we work on this."

The day's accomplishments were the most progress they had made in months. She nodded at him, then turned to leave.

"Trust yourself, Nahia," his sensual voice said behind her.

She shivered. Rapidly, she walked out the door and then up the stairs to her room. Going inside, she shut the door behind her, leaning her back against it. She couldn't afford to trust what she wanted to do with Aren. She knew once she was with

him again, nothing would make her leave. She knew it wasn't possible. His life was here, and she had to someday get back to hers. Also, her history with men sucked. They didn't understand her need to know more. Her studies consumed her, leaving space for nothing else, and she wanted it that way.

Do you really? Aren might be different.

She pushed away from the door. No, she couldn't take the chance. If they got together and he wasn't, she didn't think she could survive him leaving her. Walking over to the window, she looked out at the setting sun. Leaning against the window seat, she prayed this breakthrough would continue. She turned, went in the bathroom, and stripped off her clothing. She twisted the faucet on, letting the water warm up. Donning her shower cap, she rolled her neck to relive some tension. After a few moments, she stepped below the spray. The slick hot water cascaded around her. Washing up, she stepped out when done. Wiping off, she put on her nightgown, then returned to the bedroom. Going to her bed, she sat, then lay down. Tiredness filled her. Yawning, she snuggled into the pillow next to her and fell asleep.

Jerking awake, Nahia bit off a curse, then looked down at her floating body. She glanced back at Aren's closed bedroom door. For months now, she had been finding herself floating in front of his door, with no idea how she got there.

Your body wants him and keeps bringing you to him. Do something about it. She bit her lips, undecided about what to do. Usually, she went back to her room as fast as she could. Raising her hand, she put it close to the door, almost touching. It would be so easy to just knock on his door and ask him to take her. Sighing, she lowered herself to the floor, turning to leave. Then the door opened behind her. Almost afraid to look, she stilled and waited. No sound came. Finally giving in, she turned.

His glistening chest made her lick her lips. She dropped her gaze, taking in all his hard male body. A firm chest and flat abdomen led to short curling black hair surrounding his nice long cock. His rigid thighs were braced apart. She bit back a moan, then slowly raised her head, retracing the path of his body the opposite way. His neck muscles clenched and unclenched. His firm chin made her want to bite. His

aristocratic features were captivating, from his sharp Roman nose, high cheeks, and broad forehead to his firm kissable lips. His dark curly hair fell messily around his head. The small diamond stud he wore winked in the little bit of light. Her gaze met his brownish-gold eyes framed by thick black lashes. Her breath caught at the hunger, need, and possession there. He raised a hand, palm up, to her.

Nahia stared at the offered hand, unsure what to do. She knew going to him now would change everything. There would be no running away. She would have to face everything. Give it all to him. Studying his waiting face, she wondered if she could. Could she let herself care about this man who had captured her from their first meeting? Realization dawned. It was already too late. She already cared more than she was willing to admit, even to herself. It wasn't only sexually she wanted him. He had silently seduced her with his care, ability to play, and laugh. Most especially his care.

They had trained hard these last few months, but he had taken time to show her around Savoy Valley. The various places he had taken her were all so interesting. For instance, the Velen Cliffs, one of the highest points in Savoy Valley. The view from the cliffs was breathtaking. On Panthera Street, in the northern part of Savoy, she had gotten to eat at Winters, a fabulous restaurant. He had introduced her to the owner, Kira, and some of her friends were there also. She had liked Mika, although she seemed a little sharp tongued. Zanna, on the other hand, was funny.

While they were there, Kira's mate, Heller Sidorov, had come by. She had recognized the name from the fond, yet exasperated things Aren had said about his good friend, Dane Sidorov. She hadn't met Dane, since he was out of town. But from things she had gleaned from Aren, Dane sounded like a fun, sweet, easy going guy with a devilish sense of humor. His brother Heller, on the other hand, was another story. When she'd met him, she could feel the intensity rolling off him. When she had mentioned it to Aren later, he'd told her later that was Heller's power she felt against her skin. She had asked what he was. He had refused to tell her, as he did whenever she asked about anyone she met. His explanation that she would know herself when she let go had irritated her.

Another day, he had taken her to meet the other Sidorov family members who were in town. Their homes were scattered all around the Panthera Mountains, which Aren told her was a closed path to those humans who didn't know of the other beings in town. She still didn't fully comprehend the whole thing about testing people and then taking them away if they couldn't be comfortable around the other beings in the town. There were a lot of things she had experienced since being in Savoy Valley that she was confused about. When they got to the Panthera Mountains, they had gone to Dane's house, although he was still out of town. The house was just as awe inspiring as it had been the first time she'd laid eyes upon it, even more so inside. The simplicity of it only added to the allure.

Heller had come and called the family together. There were a lot of them. They were welcoming, and she stopped trying to remember names after being introduced to over 30 people. Some of the Sidorov women had even taken her out for a girl's night at Winters. Kira, Mika, Zanna, and a few others had also joined them. They had used one of the private dining areas and had so much fun.

Although she didn't know everything yet that she needed to know about Savoy Valley and its residents, the one thing Nahia did know is that Aren had always been there by her side. His interaction with everyone and their genuine pleasure at his return was telling. He was well respected and cared about. Watching him now, she thought of all those things. Her respect for him, his care and steadfastness, but mostly she thought of her desire for him. And his desire for her. He still wanted her, yet did nothing to act on it, waiting for her to decide. She held his gaze and put her hand in his. Aren shuddered and pulled her into the bedroom, closing the door.

He pulled her into his body and kissed her. Nahia relaxed into him, murmuring.

Aren had felt her come to his door every night. He stood on the other side, waiting for her. Each time, it had taken all his control not to wrench open the door and take her where she stood. He had waited for her to make the first move. He stood in front the door, as he did every night, and his knees had almost buckled when she

reached out to the door and placed her palm almost touching against it. He couldn't stand it anymore and opened the door. Her fear had kept him from grabbing her. Instead, he had held out his hand and waited for her to choose. He had seen the struggle it took for her to make the decision. The few minutes she took felt like an eternity.

When she finally placed her hand in his, he squashed down the cry he would have made. Pulling her into him, he kissed her, closing the door behind her. Not letting up in his kiss, he led her to the bed. Releasing her from his kiss, he removed her lacy white gown. As it dropped at her feet, he growled at seeing her beautiful caramel body again. Lifting her, he placed her on the bed.

She shifted, moving sensually on the bed. He gulped. She was temptation incarnate. Nahia chuckled softly and held her hand out to him as he had done to her. Unhesitatingly, he took it. He covered her with his body, rubbing against her heated skin. A gasp tore from her, and she gripped his shoulder. He could not wait. With impatient hands, he lifted her hips, then thrust into her silken wetness. He sighed as she enclosed his hard shaft. She threw her head back, moaning and thrashing. He stroked forward, increasing them, wanting all she could give and more. The walls of her pussy clenched around him, hungry and slick. His balls tightened. He growled, fighting off the need to come. Biting his lip, he held off his orgasm. After waiting so long to have her again, he would not let it be over so soon.

"Mine," Aren growled.

There was a certainty in his tone. He knew no matter what happened, she was his, and no one, including herself, would part him from her again. Lowering his head to the base of her neck, he pumped in and out. He was starved for her luscious body. This time, she was not going to hold back. She would give him all. Widening his legs, he grunted as she locked her legs around him tighter and dug her nails into his shoulders. He licked along her neck. The salty sweetness of her coated his tongue, setting off explosions of heat. He bit her pulse. Her pussy spasmed. She screamed as an orgasm ripped through her. The hot wet gush of her fulfillment drenched his cock. He thrust

harder. A grunt of pleasure passed his lips onto her skin. He inhaled, taking in her scent. Fresh air, rich nutrients of earth, the crisp, clean water and ash mixed with his own essence on her skin. Although he hadn't slept with her in months, his scent was still strong on her. It had driven him nuts to be so close to her, with his scent on her, and not touch her. Yet he knew her coming to him and making the choice was necessary. Once she did, she would hold nothing back. Her being here proved it.

Nahia clenched her legs higher on his back and rolled her hips. Widening his knees even further, he pumped faster. Her nails dug into his skin. He hissed at the sting of pain. Her cunt clenched around him in time with the tightening of her legs. He licked across her lip. She growled, opening her mouth, sucking in his tongue. Grinding against her, then pushing in and out of her with his hardened cock, he felt the tightness again.

"Mine," he moaned.

She whimpered and moved in countermotion to him. The friction it created made his balls tighten even more. She cried out in frustration, hitting his shoulder with her fist. A predatory smile curved his lips as he continued to take her.

"Mine. You're mine, Nahia."

Her swirling eyes of various colors studied him, and then a seductive smile curved her lush lips.

"That goes both ways, Aren. And if any other woman touches you, I'll fry her ass," she growled.

He rumbled, pleased. As he stroked deep, her gaze went glassy with pleasure. Her caramel skin glowed with sweat. A fierce pleasure gripped him. The possessiveness in her voice coupled with the need lining her face made him know she was in this for the long haul.

"Mine, mine, mine, mine!" He punctuated each word with a hard thrust.

She bit her lip, her body shaking with pleasure. Leaning over, he licked her tongue, then sucked it into his mouth. He continued to thrust. Another wicked smile curled her lips, and then she rolled her hips in a devastating move that made his heart

beat a wild tattoo. She clenched her pussy around his cock. Her orgasms pulsed. The carnal decadence on her face spurred him on.

"Mine. There will be no one else for either of us," Nahia vowed.

She grunted, then rolled her hips and clenched around him. His sacs went tight, and then the pressure inside of him burst out. His cock pulsed with his release. He shuddered uncontrollably. She groaned and came again. He continued to pump. His cock hadn't gone down and was now hard again. Nahia bucked her hips. He countered, moving his cock in and out of her.

Aren's lips turned up into a predatory smile as he continued to lay claim to her body and soul. Willingly, she gave it all to him, and demanded all of him in return. She gripped his shoulders and, with a throaty chuckle, clenched her pussy. He arched against her, roaring. With a sensual glide, she countered his movement, enjoying the thrust of his hardened shaft inside of her. She licked the side of his face, then across his cheek. Covering his mouth, she kissed him. She speared her tongue into his mouth, dueling with his. She licked the side and roof of his mouth. He groaned and shifted against her. She gasped as his shaft went deeper. She released their kiss, fighting to catch her breath. She thrashed her head from side to side, murmuring incoherently.

A harsh groan fell from her lips as he raised her leg higher on his back. His hot hand held her ass, pulling her against him. A painful ache of desire flooded the pit of her stomach.

"Ples... sssee... mo..... g... e...y.." Her voice was hoarse.

He chuckled, dark and decadent. He thrust in and out, faster and faster, going deeper and deeper. The pleasure built in her again. She ground down against him. Inhaling deeply, his sexy lush scent filled her. It was the same scent that had been on her skin ever since their first coupling. She hadn't been able to escape it. He wasn't only on her skin, but in her soul. Yes, she had faced it when she accepted him tonight. No matter what happened, Aren was in her soul and heart. She couldn't bring herself to tell him, so she showed him with her body.

Mine. He is mine, and no one will take him from me. The certainty in the thought surprised, yet pleased, her. He swiveled his hips. All thought fled from her mind as she felt the velvet touch of the mushroom head of his cock abrading her inner walls. Wanting more, she moved her hips. His hot length slid smooth and deep. Moaning, she wondered if you could die of pleasure. If so, she must have. There could not possibly be such pleasure when you were alive. Shifting her legs up, then down, she impaled herself on his rampant erection.

"Ohhh..." Nahia moaned as his cock filled her up and up.

She continued to rock on him, gasping as his long, thick length filled her to overflowing. His teeth gently scraped against her neck. He bit down. Lightening white hot heat flooded her. His lips burned a trail against her skin. He bit again. She moaned. He sucked on the pulse in her throat. Her pussy contracted in time with it. She groaned as she went over into a flash of heated pleasure. He thrust hard, riding out her release. He stiffened, and then his cock pulsed with his orgasm.

Her heart raced while her pussy continued to clench in mini orgasms. She gripped him, holding him close. He moved, sliding out of her. He shifted her so her back was against his front. His warmth against her back made her feel safe. He nuzzled the side of her neck, and she sighed. Sleep tugged at her.

He kissed the side of her mouth softly. "Rest."

She relaxed and went to sleep.

Nahia woke startled. She looked down at the masculine hand around her waist. She looked up at Aren asleep beside her. She smiled softly. He had a sexy, rumpled look. He shifted, releasing her from his hold. She lay there for a bit, unable to sleep. Looking at the clock on the bedside table, she noted the time. It was after midnight. She slid off the bed and, looking around, found a thick plush robe. She sniffed it, taking in Aren's scent. Going to the balcony, she looked out at the bright moon. A noise caught her attention. Eyes narrowed, she observed the muscular man sneaking across the yard.

Fury raced through Nahia. No way in hell was anyone going to come into Aren's home. She used wind to raise herself off the balcony. Silently, she flew across the yard.

When she was close to him, the man stiffened, then turned. She raised her hand, and light flew from her fingers. The man flew back. He flipped and landed on his feet. He crossed his hand over his chest, then tilted his head to the side, smiling mockingly.

Nahia pushed her palms outward and let water fly. The man slid backward under the force. He grunted, then held his ground. Changing tactics, Nahia called lightening and shocked him. The man fell backward, shuddering on the ground. She flicked her hand, binding him to the ground with cords of power. Walking over to him, she was startled at the look of arrogance on his face.

"Who the hell are you? And give me one good reason I shouldn't light you up?" She closed her fingers into a fist, then flicked them out.

Flames leapt around her hand. The man yawned as if bored.

"You must have a death wish."

"Better people than you have tried and failed," the man said flippantly.

Nahia narrowed her eyes, then lengthened the flames toward him. The man's eyes went cold as he watched her. Then he smiled a chilling grin.

Chapter Five

A shiver went down Nahia's spine. For someone who was defenseless and in her control, the man wasn't showing any fear. Instead, for some reason, she was afraid of him. Shaking off the feeling, she continued to lengthen the fire. It was almost to his face.

"Nahia! Stop playing with Dane," Aren called.

Confused, she glanced at him. He was striding across the yard in only slacks. She looked back at the man she had on the ground. This couldn't possibly be the Dane Aren had told her about. No way was this man the fun, sweet, easy going guy with a devilish sense of humor she pictured. Danger was all over him. And he seemed even more intense than Aren, which she hadn't thought was possible. Tawny-green-gold eyes watched her coldly, and then the man smiled. He moved his head forward. She cut off the stream of fire before his face could touch it. He chuckled, a dark sound. Nahia shivered. It was sensual, yet almost threatening. Aren walked to her side and stared down at the man she had pinned to the ground.

"Stop messing around with her." He rolled his eyes.

"Hey, she's the one who had me pinned." Dane smiled a disarming grin.

She blinked. It changed him, making him look harmless. Something made her believe he wasn't.

"Like that can hold you." Aren snorted.

Surprised, Nahia looked at him. "What? You told me with my powers, I could hold anyone."

"Almost anyone. Dane, if he would stop playing, is one of them you can't hold, along with Heller, Killian, and a few others in their family. And a few other beings here and there, but not many."

She opened her mouth to question him further, but a bit of pressure made her turn. Her mouth dropped open. The bonds she had used on Dane seemed to be absorbed into his body. Power crawled up her skin, yet in no outward way did he show

it. He flipped up onto his feet with a fluidity belied by his size. Dane shook out his black hair and rolled his neck.

"What the hell are you?"

"You don't know?" Dane frowned, then looked at Aren.

"We've had some issues with her training."

"Really? What are the Elementals saying?"

"They've been suspiciously silent."

"So what are you doing to fix it?"

"We're working on it," Aren defended.

Nahia looked back and forth between them, then growled. They looked at her-- Aren like she was crazy, and Dane with a sexy look.

"She's right here." She put her hands under her breasts, tapping her foot.

Dane whistled, looking away. Aren pulled her robe closed where it gaped. She slapped his hand away.

"Is there a reason you were skulking around the house?" she asked rudely.

"I like her." Dane grinned.

He whistled, looking at his nails.

"This is what you have to put up with?" she asked Aren.

"Pretty much. Dane only answers questions when it suits him." He shrugged.

"You know me so well." Dane batted his lids exaggeratedly.

Nahia laughed. He was weird, but she could still feel the power coming off him.

"Have a bed for a friend? I didn't want to go up the mountains tonight," Dane said, looking innocent.

"You're such a liar. Come to check up on me?" Aren made a rude kissing noise.

"I didn't know you cared."

"Don't make me hurt you." Dane scowled.

Aren laughed and pushed him playfully. Dane retaliated, and then before Nahia could blink, they were chasing each other around the yard. Aren chased Dane, both of them moving so fast she barely saw them. Her eyes widened. They were each some sort

of shifter, judging from the fluidity in their movements and effortless strength. She just didn't know which. Dane ran to her, then behind her.

"Protect me from mean Aren, Nahia," he whispered dramatically.

"As if." She snorted.

Aren chuckled. She glanced from one to the other. They weren't even out of breath.

"You're shifters," she said triumphantly.

They looked at her and smiled. Dane walked over to Aren and slung an arm over his shoulder.

"What type?" he purred.

"I don't know that yet. But I'll figure it out." She frowned.

"Let us know when you do." Dane laughed.

"Come on. Give me a hint at least."

"We're not the same type," he said.

She stared at both of them. Dane studied her just as intently.

"Wolf."

"No."

"Snake."

"No."

"Gator."

"Now, I'm offended," Dane growled.

"Panda." She smiled sweetly.

He glared. "Are you going to keep asking me all night?"

"Maybe." She grinned impishly.

"Well, I'm going home. Don't tell lunkhead, but he was right. I was checking on him." Dane dodged Aren's swat, laughing.

"Actually, I'd like you to help me with her training," Aren said.

"What can I do?" Dane looked at him curiously.

"Be the pain in the ass you are. Be a target," he replied.

Dane smiled evilly, then looked at her. "That, I can do." He looked back at Aren.
"Is my usual room empty?"

Aren nodded.

"Good. See you in the morning." Dane nodded to them and loped off.

He leapt from the ground onto the ledge of the balcony of one of the rooms in the west side of the house. Nahia gasped. Dane looked at her over his shoulder and winked. He flipped onto the balcony, then disappeared from view.

"Why are you wandering around?" Aren asked, his arm around her shoulder, leading her back toward his room.

"I heard a noise and saw him sneaking across the yard."

"Why didn't you wake me? Why were you awake anyway?"

"I didn't think on it. I was restless."

He looked at her in disbelief. "After I made love to you?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "I didn't do it good enough, then."

"You mustn't have, if she was walking outside! Losing your touch, old man!"

Dane called.

"Shut up and go to bed!" Aren yelled back. "Damn noisy idiot," he muttered.

"I would if you all would shut the hell up," Dane said.

"This is my house, Dane."

"So what? You're disturbing *my* sleep," was his languid reply.

Nahia looked up, but didn't see him. She gasped as Aren swept her off her feet. He leapt onto his balcony and strode with her in his arms into his room. He slammed the door behind him. Her heart was racing. He stripped her out of her robe, then put her on the bed. He took off his pants. He covered her body.

"Now, let's see about making sure you don't leave my bed until morning." Aren smiled wolfishly.

He kissed her. Nahia laughed and held him close.

* * * * *

Nahia sat cross-legged on the hill, looking out at the beautiful green fields and flowers. She sighed. This place always calmed her. She had been coming here since she first came to Savoy Valley. Living with Aren made it easier to get to, since it was on his land. A sound came behind her.

"I was wondering where you were today." She didn't turn around.

A warm body lay next to her leg. She reached out a hand and stroked. Soft fur tickled her fingers. A rolling purr came from her side. She glanced down at the beautiful white tiger that was next to her. It looked at her with what she swore was intelligence. From her first trip here she had seen this tiger. The first time, she was so afraid she had run. She had been grateful it hadn't chased her. She had decided not to go to the valley again, but couldn't resist. When she went back, she hadn't seen it and enjoyed the time. As she'd turned to leave, she had almost jumped out of her skin when she realized it was a little away from her, just watching her and sitting. Again, she had backed away and left.

Each time she had gone to the area, it had sneaked a little closer. One day, she finally got the courage to touch it. It purred and rolled over. Now he sat by her side, and she petted him.

"Sorry I haven't been around these last few days. Aren and Dane, his friend, have been working me hard." She paused, then laughed. "Dane makes a good target, but he strikes back, and I have to be on my toes. He's teaching me a lot. At least now I'm getting better at controlling my powers. Aren was right. I needed to let go."

The cat made a sound like agreement. She stopped stroking and watched him narrowly.

"Hey. Whose friend are you?"

He butted her hand, rubbing it against his head. She rolled her eyes and started to pet him again.

"Typical man. Siding with each other." She felt a sizzle of power, then a hiss.

The tiger growled, then ran to the bushes. Nahia looked down at her hand. She got up and walked over to the bush he had run to. She bent over. His bright blue eyes glared at her from under the bush.

"I'm sorry I zapped you," she apologized.

He growled softly.

"Please come out," she said.

He didn't move. Nahia looked around, not sure what to do. She looked back at the tiger.

"Here kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty."

He raised his head, then made a weird noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter. She narrowed her eyes.

"Here kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty."

"Nahia, what're you doing?"

She jumped at the sound of Aren's voice.

She looked at him. He was dressed in an unbuttoned white shirt that showed his bare chest, and dark brown slacks with knee high boots. She licked her lips.

"Nahia?"

She remembered his question when he said her name.

"I shocked my friend, and I'm trying to coax him out, but he's being stubborn." She gestured.

Aren strode to her. "What friend?" As he got close, he stiffened, then stopped, putting his hands on his hips glaring at the bush. "Get your ass out here."

Nahia watched, eyes wide, as the white tiger came out from beneath the bush. Its head was up, and it returned Aren glare, then bared its teeth.

"What's the meaning of this?" Aren demanded.

She saw he was talking to the tiger. Standing, she went to stand by it.

"Aren, I talk to him, but he can't talk back. Are you feeling okay?" she asked, concerned.

Aren narrowed his eyes. "Are you going to answer this one, or am I?" he asked the tiger.

"You see what I mean? I knew his intensity would make him lose his mind." She looked at the tiger, who gave her a look of sympathy, then back at Aren. "Reall-" Nahia stopped.

A rush of energy rippled along her skin. Dazed, she looked at the tiger. One minute it was a tiger, the next, a man. He stood, rolling his head from side to side. He looked over at her and grinned. He was devastatingly handsome. His blond hair hung in unruly curls, framing a face that was masculinity perfected. Tanned skin, bleached white teeth, and vivid blue eyes surrounded by thick golden blond lashes completed the package. She dropped her gaze, taking in his naked chest. Then she gasped and turned away.

"Put some clothes on," Aren snapped.

Aren pulled her to his side, away from the awe-inspiring man.

"You can look now," Aren said grudgingly.

She looked back at the man, who was now clothed in khakis and a white shirt.

Dangerous surfer dude, she thought.

"Explain," Aren snapped.

"She needed a friend to confide in, and someone who could protect her if need be."

Nahia blushed, remembered all she had shared with what she thought was a tiger. Intimate things.

"Don't worry. No one will ever know," a voice purred in her mind.

"Who are you?" She stared at him.

"Killian Sidorov, at your service, my dear," his deep voice purred.

Nahia had heard of him from Aren. Although he was in town, she hadn't met him when she met the rest of his family.

"I thought you were a white tiger. I didn't know all the animals here were shifters."

"Actually, there are animals who are just that--animals. They usually shy away from people," Aren corrected.

Now he told her. She glared at Killian.

"You tricked me."

"I did."

She blinked, not expecting him to agree so readily.

"But I had to best of intentions. You looked so lonely when I first saw you. I knew if I approached you in human form, it would freak you out more than help. So I coaxed your trust in my other form. When you found out about your power, I wanted to tell you, but by then, you talked to me and I knew you needed an impartial ear. I'm sorry. I'm still the same one who listened in tiger form."

For some reason, she knew that he didn't apologize often, but she still had to think about it. She nodded.

"I need to be alone."

He exchanged a look with Aren, then walked away.

"You can leave, too," she told Aren.

"Why?" Aren protested.

"I need some time alone to think," she stated firmly.

She kissed him on the lips. Reluctantly, he turned and went the same direction as Killian. Sitting back in the spot she was before, Nahia put her hand under her chin. Although Killian was the tiger, it was hard to take. She knew she would probably still talk with him. He had been a good listener, even though she didn't know he was human. A rustling came from the brush, and then a warmth came by her leg.

"You don't have to be in tiger form for me to talk to you, Killian."

The cat was silent. Sighing, she stroked his fur.

"I get why you did it, but I don't like it. Now, change to hu-" She looked at the tiger, trailing off.

The eyes were grey and not the color of Killian's. Suddenly, her hand stung, and she jerked back. The white tiger changed. Its colors reversed. The fur became black with

white stripes. The tiger roared and lunged for her. Nahia scrambled backward, putting up a shield of fire. She struggled to her feet. The tiger came through the flames. It wasn't even scorched. Quickly, she dodged as Dane had taught her. The tiger was relentless, slashing at her. Its claws were elongated. Nahia barely escaped the swipe. In quick succession, she threw water, earth, air, and fire. Nothing slowed it down.

Stumbling back, Nahia fell. The tiger with black fur and white stripes stalked toward her. Frantically, she tried to figure out what to do. A sting came on her palm. She hissed, glancing down. The handle of a whip was in her hand. Quickly, she stood and looked at it, unsure what to do with it. Suddenly, it lit with white light. The scent of ash came into the air. In that moment, she knew what it was. In her lessons, she had been told of weapons provided by the earth to defend. The Whip of Brimstone was the most powerful and deadly. It could kill almost anything with one blow. For a moment, she wondered if she really wanted to kill. The tiger roared. She looked up in time to see it rush her.

Raising the whip, she flicked it. The tip glowed red with hell fire. Bringing her hand back, she lashed the whip at the tiger. It roared, faltered, and kept coming. Nahia swore. Of course this being would be one of those the whip could not kill. Fighting for her life, she kept slashing out with the whip. It crackled as it kept hitting the tiger. The beast yowled, but kept coming. In quick strokes, she wielded the whip as the tiger continued to come at her. It was almost on her when it collapsed at her feet, its breathing labored. Nahia took a step back. The tiger shifted, and she found herself looking at a naked woman who looked to be in her sixties. The woman was striking, her silver eyes and hair offsetting her ebony skin.

"Thank you," the woman whispered.

Nahia didn't know what she meant. A sound made her look up. Another tiger burst out of the brush. Instinctively, she raised the whip and let it fly. One second it was a tiger, then a man. He grabbed the whip, jerking it out of her hand. In a flick of his wrists, he wound the whip across his chest and, with a hiss, the whip disappeared, absorbed into his body. It took a second for her to register that the man was Dane.

Dane's eyes were frigid. He walked over to the woman. The look of rage in his eyes made Nahia back up. She gasped as she bumped into a large body. Aren's scent came to her and she relaxed.

"She tried to kill me. Then she said thanks." Nahia looked at Aren.

The anguish on his face made her gasp. She reached for him.

"What's wrong?"

He looked at her. There was pain and torment in his eyes. She glanced back at the woman. Dane was on his knees by her side, his head down. Confused, she looked back at Aren.

"What's g-"

An earthshaking roar cut her off. Startled, she stepped back. Dane's head was thrown back, tears falling from his face as he roared. He bellowed again and again, pounding his fists on the ground. Tears choked Nahia and she didn't know why.

"What's happening? Does he know her? Aren!" She gripped his arms.

The ground shook again, almost knocking her off her feet. Aren held her and pulled her back.

"Wha-"

Another roar cut her off. This one was different than Dane's. It made the hair on her skin crawl. Another white tiger came out of the trees, shifting on the run. She gasped as Killian ran to Dane, then stopped, looking down at the woman. Killian threw his head back as an eerie cry came from him. Nahia covered her ears. It was painful to listen to them. Dane continued to pound the ground, roaring. A half tiger, half man came running from over the hill. It was Heller. He joined Dane and Killian. He glanced at Nahia, and his look was chilling. His roar joined Dane's and Killian's in a chorus.

"Aren, what's happening?" She was afraid.

Instinct made her want to comfort them, but fear made her stay back.

Her hands shook as she reached for him. "Are-."

The trees and brush rustled. The hills spilt open, and bodies poured out. She scrambled back. Aren gripped her hand, pulling her to him. Thousands of white tigers

came from everywhere, flooding the clearing. When the first set reached close enough to see the prone woman, they raised their heads and roared. It echoed through the clearing until they all bellowed. A woman skirted through the white tigers. Nahia recognized Bryndis. She rushed to Killian's side, then hugged him.

"What's going on?" Nahia asked again.

"They're mourning," Aren said, his voice sounding choked.

"What? Why? She tried to kill me. Who is she?" she demanded.

"Sirantha, Dane and Heller's sister," he stated quietly.

Shocked, Nahia looked at Heller and Dane. She had met all their brothers. No one had mentioned a sister. Sorrow filled her as she looked at the people she had come to think of as friends.

"Why did she try to kill me?"

"I don't know, but Sirantha would never come back willingly to Savoy Valley."

"Why not?"

Aren looked away, then back at Nahia. The sorrow in his eyes was even worse than before.

"She left when I did. Sirantha, like me, couldn't take the memories, or the pain." He looked away again, and then met Nahia's gaze again. "She couldn't take living without my brother, her mate, who died in the attack on our family home. She tried to save them, but despite her gifts, she couldn't. Usually, when one of their kind loses their mate, they choose to die with them. Sirantha couldn't. Her power would not let her. She is the most powerful in the Sidorov family."

Surprised, Nahia glanced at them again. Their howls were a rippling melody of mourning. She would have pegged Dane as the most powerful, then Killian, Heller, and Bryndis. She looked at the ebony woman again, then back at Dane and Heller.

"Their power decides the skin tone of their human form," Aren said, answering her unspoken question.

She remembered when she had met the Sidorovs. She had been awed at the variety of nationalities and ethnicities.

"In power order, it's Sirantha, then Dane, Killian, Heller, and Bryndis. She left the four of them in charge when she left."

At least she had the rest of the order right.

"She told me thanks," Nahia said.

Aren's eyes dampened. "You did the one thing she could not--make her die."

She winced. He hugged her close.

"It's okay. She had hidden from us all. None of them could find her, although they looked exhaustively. She went to live among the humans, cutting herself off from all of us. Her choice made her weak. That's why you were able to injure her so severely that she would die."

"What do you mean?"

"Just like it would take a hell of a lot to contain, much less kill, Dane, Killian, Heller, and Bryndis, it's even more difficult with Sirantha."

"If that's true, then why send her to kill me?"

"Whoever did this did not realize how weak she was. They're stupid. If she had been at full strength, they would never have taken her, or been able to control her enough to implant the suggestion to kill you." He looked off toward Sirantha.

"So, if she wasn't willing herself to die, and here in Savoy, they would not have taken her will away."

"No, they wouldn't have."

Nahia's mind started to race. She glanced at the thousands of tigers in the clearing, and then back at Sirantha. She wiggled out of Aren's hold. He caught her.

"No, don't. They're mourning and may hurt you--not because they mean to, but just because their emotions are high. "

She didn't have time to explain. Instead, she gave him a brief kiss, just in case it was the last time. Then, in a sudden move, she used wind to push him back. He wasn't expecting it and flew through the air. He landed on his feet some distance away, then ran toward her. She turned and took off. The tigers looked at her, roaring. She flung her hands wide, blasting them back with water. They roared and rushed at her. She blew

cold wind out of her mouth, icing them out. Dane, Killian, Heller, and Bryndis stood between her and the body. She called the earth. It spilt, sucking them in. Dane roared, scrambling up out of the hole. The rest spring up into the air. Using their spring she pushed wind under them, throwing them over her wall of ice. Dane stood before her, legs spread. Fear coated her throat, but she had to do this.

She rushed Dane. He blinked, shocked. Using his surprise she brought roots out of the earth, and they grabbed him quickly, pulling him into the hole. She directed it outside the wall.

"Nahia!" Dane roared.

She ignored him, closing the hole. She heard the claws as they climbed the ice wall. Blasting water and breathing cold air she created a roof. Bryndis's face appeared just as she sealed it. The scratching became louder. Ignoring it, she walked over to the mature woman. She was bleeding badly and barely breathing, yet her silver eyes watched Nahia.

"Do you want to live?" she demanded.

"I've been trying to die for years. Why would I want to live?" the woman growled.

"If you want to die so badly, why are you still fighting to live right now?" Nahia asked.

The woman looked contemplative, and then she chuckled, wheezing.

"Even almost dead, I can't do it right."

"You should be ashamed."

"Watch what you say." The woman's silver eyes narrowed, then started to glow. The silver in her hair became white fire.

"No. I get that your mate died, but there has to be a reason you can't."

The woman stared at her, then sighed. "What would you do if Aren died?"

"Want to die with him." Nahia closed her eyes, battling tears, but then she looked at Sirantha. "And if I couldn't, I would curse that bitch Fate for making me live. But I would live."

"Ah... so you've met Fate. Yeah, she is a real bitch," Sirantha replied.

Nahia blinked. "Fate is a person? I was being figurative."

"Yeah. One of many types of Fates. There a whole clan. Worthless, all of them. None would help me die. Figurative--there is no such thing. Any being you can think of, there is one." Sirantha wheezed.

Anxiously, Nahia asked again. "Do you want to live?"

Sirantha studied her, then said, "Even so far away from Savoy, I knew something was wrong. The balance we maintain is off. I tried to ignore it, but here I am. Those who did this to me, who took my will, had no idea what they did. They brought me home. Stupid of them. Yeah, I want to live to make them pay. They will die for this."

Although it wasn't what Nahia had hoped to hear, revenge was at least a start to making Sirantha want to live. Kneeling next to her, Nahia glanced around, uncertain.

"Do you even know how to save me?" Sirantha sounded amused.

It reminded Nahia so much of Dane, it was uncanny. She looked at Sirantha. The same devilish look that was often in Dane's eyes was in Sirantha's.

"You're just like Dane."

"Nah. Even if he is oldest, he's like me." Sirantha winked.

"He's older? How old are you?" Nahia blinked.

"A woman never tells her age." Sirantha grinned widely.

Knowing she was only stalling, Nahia laid her hand between Sirantha's breasts. She shocked her.

"Son of a bitch!" Sirantha screamed.

"Sorry." Nahia jerked her hand away.

Sirantha shook her head. "Do it again. It's helping."

Unsure if it really was, Nahia did it again. Sirantha murmured, shifting. Her cuts started to bleed less. After many shocks, the bleeding continued to slow, but didn't stop.

Earth, a voice whispered.

Wind, another added.

Water, still another interjected.

Fire, another said.

Earth, Wind, Water and Fire. All the voices said it together.

She recognized the voices of the Elementals. Nahia spilt the earth open below Sirantha. It created a bed for her deep in the earth. She blew wind over her. Sirantha moaned and shivered. Putting out her hand, palm out, to her side, Nahia released fire against the ice wall. Water poured over them, soaking them. She closed her eyes, and then, after the water stopped, she opened them. The hole she had created for Sirantha was filled with water. A roar made her turn. Dane and the others ran for the hole. She turned and flicked her hand, creating flames along the top. They stopped and turned on her as one.

"Give us our kin," Dane growled.

"You don't intimidate me." She crossed her arms under her breasts and glared back at them.

Aren came to stand by her side. Dane took a step toward them. A rumble shook the earth. A body burst out of the water, spinning in the air. Silver whooshed, sparking the area. Sirantha landed on her feet. She rolled her head, making her silver hair swish. Nahia gasped. Sirantha looked now to be in her early thirties. Sirantha glanced at Dane, raising an eyebrow. She walked forward, unconcerned with her nakedness.

"You always were an impatient cuss," she said, then flung her arms wide. "Come give me a kiss, big bro."

"Are you staying, or leaving again?" Dane watched her.

"Staying, for now. You all need my help. After that, we'll see," she said.

"That's good enough for now." Dane whooped, then lifted her off her feet. The others joined them, hugging her.

Nahia smiled, turning from them. She gasped. The rest of the tigers had been so silent she had forgotten about them. They looked at her as one, then lowered their legs, bowing their heads. She slid up to Aren.

"What are they doing?" she asked.

"Giving you their loyalty. You saved their leader, and if you ever have need, they will give their lives for you. They see you as family now."

She thought about it, then grinned, pleased.

"What do I do to accept?"

"Go with what you feel," Aren replied.

A ripple of energy went across the clearing. Shocked, she stepped forward. The white tigers' colors started to change. The colors and stripes of each ranged from red to any color you could imagine. She spotted a lavender with dark green striped tiger. Another was pink with white stripes. The combinations of colors went on and on.

"Oh, my."

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Aren said. "You're seeing something most don't know. As I mentioned, their power determines their skin color. Also, although they're what humans see as white tigers, their coats and stripes actually come in a variety of colors."

"Wow," she whispered.

"That's one way of putting it." Sirantha spoke next to her.

Nahia turned to her. Sirantha put out her hand. Nahia put out hers. Sirantha clasped it, raising it in the air.

"Our new kin, Nahia Freeman."

The tigers roared. Sirantha put out her other hand. Aren placed his hand in hers. They shared a sorrowful look, and then Sirantha smiled.

"Our returned kin, and Nahia's mate, Aren." She raised his hand also.

Startled, Nahia looked at Aren. His look was sexy. She didn't want to mess up whatever was going on, so she let it go, not correcting Sirantha's assumption.

Sirantha continued. "They took my will. They were stupid. They brought me home. Home to my kin. Home to Savoy Valley. Those who tried to taint the Sidorov name with deceit will know no peace. Those who tried to take the will of Sirantha Sidorov will pay." It sounded like a vow.

Nahia looked at the tigers roaring in the clearing. Power rushed from her. Sirantha gasped and looked at her.

"Share." Sirantha's voice was hoarse.

Nahia raised her hand, and warm light spilled from it. It flowed over all the tigers in the clearing. They stilled, raising their faces, embracing it. The power flared stronger when it touched Dane, Killian, Heller, and then Bryndis. It slowed when it reached Aren, then went sensual. Nahia shuddered, and so did Aren.

"Now, now. None of that. You two don't want to start a sexual frenzy. The last time Savoy Valley had one of those, the Olympus Gods got into so much trouble with the Council." Sirantha laughed.

Nahia flushed and withdrew the power back into her. Sirantha squeezed her hand, then spoke again.

"Tomorrow, we start the hunt to weed out the betrayer. Today, we run and enjoy our home." Sirantha roared.

The tigers roared, then started to run toward the trees.

"Join us," Sirantha stated, partially shifting.

Nahia looked at her tiger legs and replied, "I can't run like you do."

"Use your power. Feel as we feel," Sirantha challenged.

"You're pushy." Nahia's eyes narrowed.

"Don't worry. I'll grow on you," Sirantha replied.

"Like a wart," Killian said.

"A blot on your ass," Heller added.

"A pimple on prom night," Bryndis interjected.

"Hush, all of you. Come, Nahia," Sirantha said.

Taking her hand, Nahia looked for Aren. He came to her side, taking her other hand. Sirantha started to run. Using her power, Nahia matched her. Aren ran with her. Laughing in joy, she felt the air flow by her as they sped through the trees.

Aren glanced at Nahia as her laughter spilled across the clearing. He smiled. The joy on her face calmed the rage he was feeling. Someone had tried to kill her, and had

used Sirantha to do it. He didn't want to imagine what would have happened if Sirantha had been at her full power. Closing his eyes briefly, he strove to calm his rage.

We'll find out who did this and make them pay. Dane's voice in Aren's mind was deadly certain.

Aren looked at Dane. He let the rage he hid from Nahia show in his eyes. Dane's flared to match his. Death was coming and taking no prisoners.

Chapter Six

Nahia stood alone beside one of the huge statues that graced Aren's property. The noise from the workers barely registered. Her mind kept repeating the message from the parchment and her mother.

In the beginning there was one.

One led to four and four to more.

On the day the gates turn

And the full moon rises to its zenith

The time will come for the One to return,

For a battle will ensue.

Only when the One gives its all

Will the tide turn in favor of good.

"What does it all mean?" she whispered as a breeze flowed over her. Even though it was February, she didn't feel cold standing outside.

"Why do you try to force an answer from something when you already know?" A deep voice broke into her thoughts.

She turned with a slight jerk. Nahia bit back a sharp retort as she found herself face to face with Olorun. Instead, her head lowered briefly in a sign of deference. She'd missed him, something she hadn't known until just now. "Olorun," she said quietly.

Her nod was returned as he smiled, his white teeth vibrant against his dark skin. "Lady Nahia, it is good to see you again."

A brow arched as she held his gaze. *Lady?* In the depths of his onyx eyes, she saw humor and respect. "What can I do for you?" she questioned, not really sure she wanted to know the answer.

All the days of training, practice, and feelings of letting everyone down continually had sapped her. Her nights now were spent in Aren's arms, and they were perfect, a time she never wanted to end. But the fact something evil loomed over them scared her. Immensely.

"Walk with me," Olorun said as one arm swept out before them in a flutter of pristine white robe.

Without hesitation, Nahia fell into step beside him, and they headed out across the huge manicured lawn. Silence reigned between them for a while, but Nahia didn't mind. Unlike the first time she'd met him, she now felt relaxed around Olorun. She never spoke, just waited for him to say something first.

"*Maitasun edo bat,*" he spoke mildly, as if just to the air.

That brought her up short as her head jerked in his direction. "What did you say?"

"You know what it means." Olorun made a statement; it wasn't a question. And he was right. It was spoken in her native tongue of Basque, and was something her mother had always told her at the end of the nightly stories she'd been entertained with before bed. *Love of the One*.

A gust of wind flowed around them, raising the hair from the back of her neck and moving her clothes. There was power in that wind, and she could feel it.

"Yes, I do," she said, responding to his statement.

"Take my arm, Lady Nahia," he commanded, holding out his left arm to her.

Again, there was no delay in her movement to do as he bade. Slipping her hand in the crook of his arm, she was amazed by the warmth radiating from him. "I need to show you something," he said before he began walking again.

A funny sensation skimmed her skin, and she looked down as she walked. She blanched as it appeared there was nothing below her, just wisps of clouds. Olorun continued to walk as if upon the earth itself. A large mountain appeared before them, and he continued uninterrupted toward it. Then, he went through a shimmering portion that Nahia determined to be some kind of doorway.

Her eyes took in the majesty of the place before her. If she were ever asked had she seen Shangri-la, Nahia now knew she could answer that in the affirmative. Never before had she set eyes on anything so breathtaking--sparkling blue waters, lush green grasses, snow capped mountains and more.

Paradise.

Olorun stopped and looked down at her. "Where is this place? What is this place?" she queried as her soul cried out to go explore and seek out the treasures this area offered.

He just smiled. "Welcome to *The Medius*. Enjoy yourself. I'll find you later and return you to Aren."

The cry of an eagle grabbed her attention, and without conscious thought, her feet took her toward the location it soared around. The ground with its thick grass seemed to cradle her steps as she moved in the direction of a large eagle aerie which sat on an outcropping of a sheer side of a mountain. As she neared, the loud, piercing cry of the bird broke the air again, and she looked up to see a majestic golden eagle settling into the nest. The intelligent creature stared down at her, and Nahia swallowed as the assessing gaze moved over her. Then, just as quickly, it turned its attention to something else.

Moving to the side of the smooth yet jagged rock, she placed her hand upon the warm stone. A small ripple of energy moved across her palm, and she looked down. Before her was a shimmery wall, similar to the one she'd seen before Olorun walked her through to this place. Hesitantly, Nahia reached out to the near liquidy appearance of the spot. She was met by no resistance, and so continued forward. After she was fully through, her eyes took in the most extensive records room she'd ever seen. Books, scrolls, and more were shelved before her gaze. There were plaques of coats-of-arms along one wall, more than she'd ever imagined. Her inquisitive mind was working overtime as she approached the nearest table.

Nahia froze as she glanced down. Lying on the brown marble table was a thick book. Nothing else was near it. The tome was obsidian black and had a gold seal in the middle of the cover. An eagle with widespread wings was on the seal. Below the eagle, it read "Van der Ness" in a large, beautiful scrawling script. Biting her lower lip, Nahia reached for the book, opened it, and began to read.

Aren lifted his head from where he worked beside Samir. Something wasn't right. Nahia. *Nahia! Where are you?* He searched with his mind, his connection to her weak, and it made him growl low in anger.

Lady Nahia is fine. A voice entered his mind.

Where is she, and who are you?

Where she is, it is not my place to tell you. I, however, am Haurun.

An Elemental. That much he knew. Again, he reached out with his mind for her, wanting to at least feel the block she had there. Nothing. Again, it was just the whisper of familiarity there. Aren didn't like it, not at all.

"Everything okay, Aren?" Samir asked with concern.

The winds shifted and brought the scent of evil to his sharp senses. "No. Send everyone home, Samir. Let's call it a day."

He knew his friend had picked up on his urgency, and in no time, he had the crew on their way. Standing beside his truck, Samir looked at Aren and questioned again, "Would you like me to stay?"

Aren glanced at his friend, who was a formidable warrior in his own right. But this wasn't his fight. The stench on the air was the same stench that had lingered over the bodies of Aren's slain family.

"Dank je, vriend." It is, however, unnecessary. This is something I need to deal with alone."

Samir inclined his head once in understanding. "Think nothing of it. Call if you need me." With easy movement, he slipped his body behind the wheel of his vehicle and drove off.

As the truck disappeared from view, Aren still remained immobile, for the moment glad Nahia wasn't near. The wind blew again, and he hissed in displeasure and disgust. Gazing over his lands, his incredible sight allowed him to pick up on the slightest shimmer that might be there. But there was nothing. Whatever it was had gone, or had concealed itself better. Hands flexed into fists as he turned around and looked at his home. Construction was nearly done, and the Van der Ness home had

almost been restored to its former glory. Soon, he would raise the flag bearing the Van der Ness symbol over the house.

"Where were you?" a voice that, although melodious, was lined with steel, questioned from his left.

He turned his head and saw a woman with silver hair, eyes to match, and flawless ebony skin. She wore loose fitting black pants and a white shirt. Sirantha. Aren held her gaze as she flowed across the space between them.

"What does it matter, Sirantha? Where I *wasn't*, was here." Her gaze narrowed slightly before she stopped beside him.

"Dane has never ceased being your friend?" Her question had a hint of anger and jealousy in it.

"Never. Why would he?" Aren wanted to know how deep her resentment of him went. He put his gaze back upon his familial house and imagined how different everything was going to be there from now on.

"Because I left after Jokull was murdered," Sirantha said.

This was a clash he knew had to happen, but even so, his skin prickled with anger. Forcing it back under control, he glanced briefly at her before looking away. "I know whose lives were taken that day. I felt each and every one of their deaths, just as I know who took them." Aren automatically shifted his body into his battle-ready pose. "The day they killed my family, their lives were forfeit. And the day of my revenge draws near," he said in a low snarl.

"You still haven't answered my question. Where were you? Had you been here..." She let the implication hang ominously in the air.

A harsh chuckle burst from his chest. "You think that your antipathy and loathing toward me, because I wasn't here, is any more than what I heap upon myself daily? Then think again." Aren turned toward her. "I know you lost your mate, and I'm sorry, more than you could ever know. But don't forget, Sirantha, that Jokull was *my brother*. And I didn't just lose him. I lost my *entire* family. So hate all you want, if that's what makes it easier for you. But know this: no matter how much you hate me, it will

pale in comparison to how much I hate myself. I will *always* despise myself more for not being here when they needed me."

Her silver eyes seemed to soften just for a brief second, and then they grew hard again. "Perhaps." With a lazy ripple of movement that her kind were so well known for, she put her hands into the pockets of her pants.

Aren faced away from her and the house, staring off across the vast lands of his family estate. He didn't want to argue with her. Even seeing Sirantha was hard. After a few terse moments of quiet, he felt her leave just as silently as she had appeared. The winds shifted, and again, that decaying, pungent stench of the Drekflen reached him. The power within him raged to life, preparing for battle. Outwardly, Aren remained calm and almost indifferent.

The air wavered in front of him before seven beings appeared, four men and three women. The man in the middle was flanked by the others, and Aren kept his gaze upon him. They were impeccably dressed in a multitude of colors, but the stink of evil wafted off them all. The center man stepped forward, and the other six adjusted their stances to best protect him. Aren didn't think he needed it, for immense energy surrounded him.

"Aren Van der Ness. Finally, we meet. I *so* missed you the last time." The Slavic tone dripped with sarcasm and just plain nastiness.

Ready for any move, Aren started toward his visitors as he reined his temper under control. "As long as we're exchanging chitchat, why don't you enlighten me on who you are, since you seem to know my name." *I want the name of my family's killer.*

"My name is Krylov," the man said as he sketched a brief bow. "I assume you've heard of me."

Anger was in full flight inside of him, but none of it showed. Aren knew the name Krylov, the second-in-command of the *ater malum*. "Yes, likened to things that live in the ground and aren't worth my time."

Glacier blue eyes narrowed. Aren knew that wasn't the response he'd been expecting. Then the expression smoothed away as Krylov stroked his goatee. In that

second, Aren recognized him as the man who'd approached Nahia that one day in the meadow. Another wave of rage flowed through him and again, Aren tamped it down. Losing control would not help. It had been a long time since he'd battled, but there were some things that were infused into your soul and never forgotten.

Krylov chuckled slightly. "Trying to make me angry, Aren? You should know better. This is not a day for battle; I'm here to make you an offer."

Without relaxing a single iota, Aren bit off his question. "What could you possibly have to offer me that I would want, aside from the blood of your dead carcass spilling into the ground?"

His nemesis made a tscking sound. "Not polite, Aren." He lifted a hand and made a motion of squeezing, as if his hands were around Aren's neck.

For a moment, Aren felt the air cut off, but with an easy surge of his own power, he eliminated the threat. "Parlor tricks, Krylov? Is that the best you've got?"

Cold blue eyes narrowed again. "Don't push it, Van der Ness. In my blood, I've got more power than you can imagine." He took a deep breath and smoothed his hands down his multihued velvet brocade.

He hates to be challenged. "Really?" Aren asked in a disinterested way. "Let me spill your blood and see for myself."

Krylov gave a tight smile, which was more a baring of teeth than anything else. With an arrogant tilt of his head, he reached one pale hand into the pocket of his vest and drew something out. "What I'm proposing is a trade," Krylov said.

"A trade? What makes you think I would even consider something like that with you?"

As if Aren hadn't even spoken, Krylov continued. "You hand over your houseguest all nice like, and I'll—"

"Never!" Aren swore. *I'd die first.*

"It's rude to interrupt, Aren. I know you were raised with manners, even if you weren't the heir-apparent. Now, as I was saying, if you hand over Nahia Freeman, I'll

return *this*." Krylov held up his hand, and between two fingers dangled a gold rope chain. At the end was a large amulet.

Aren's breath caught in his throat. He'd never for one second believed his eyes would see his family's crest again. It had been handed down for generations from father to eldest son. Jokull had been in possession of it at the time of his murder, but Aren had never seen it since. Until now. The rectangle was made of charoite, a purple gem found only in Russia, and had been infused with strands of selenite. Upon the surface of that sat the gold eagle, wings out in flight and talons extended. Certain feathers were edged in silver, and those had the names of the rulers of the Van der Ness family etched into them. Every fiber in Aren's body wanted to reach out for that item, but there could be no deal.

"I've got a counter offer for you, Krylov," Aren said, forcing his hands to remain by his side. "You give me that which belongs to me, and I'll kill you quickly instead of making you suffer as you so deserve." He stepped toward the group of people and, as one, they adjusted their stance.

"Or," Krylov threatened, "we could kill you, keep this, and just take Nahia."

"You could try," Aren responded, not keeping the promise of retaliation out of his voice.

"Seven against one," Krylov said, as if telling him he didn't stand a chance.

"No one said there was just me here." Aren spoke in a low tone.

Krylov waved him off as if his words weren't important. "Do we have a deal?"

"Not even close. If you're as powerful as you're spouting to be, then why would you even need to make a deal? Why not just try to kill me and take her yourself?" The flare of anger in Krylov's gaze told Aren all he needed to know. One side of his lip curled up in a mocking sneer. "Still not your own boss? All your so-called power, and you still can't make your own decisions."

Krylov's eyes changed from glacial blue to reptilian as he took a step closer to Aren. Elongated fangs extended from Krylov's mouth, and Aren matched the step with one of his own.

"After what happened to your family, what makes you think you stand a chance against me?" Krylov sneered.

Anger flared dangerously close to overflowing. And it took more control than Aren believed possible to keep it contained. The tables had been turned, and now it was Krylov's turn to try and get him to do something stupid or foolish.

"There's no deal, Krylov. Get off my property. And remember--eagles eat snakes."

"Think about it, Aren. Don't be so hasty in refusing my offer." Krylov swung the amulet again.

Aren felt the power surge up through him, and he stepped closer. The energy from the amulet called to him in a way that was almost too strong for him to ignore.

"Get. Off. My. Property."

"Repairing a desk is a far cry from battling for one's life." The words were silky with threat.

So we've been being watched closer than I'd believed. That didn't sit well with him, especially since he was unaware of her current location.

"You know, you're right, Aren. I will kill you and just take her for my own."

"You may *try* to kill me, but if you touch her, I *will* kill you," Aren growled.

Krylov chuckled, a raspy, grating sound. "We will battle, Aren Van der Ness, but not today. I was to deliver the offer to you, and nothing more."

Aren's fingers clenched into fists. "You can bet on it. Now go before that day becomes today."

"Today works for me," a deep voice broke in.

Everyone glanced to the right as another person appeared almost like out of thin air. Aren glanced back to the seven others and saw the shock on their faces before they controlled it. A small smile curved up the corner of Aren's mouth. The powerful movements of the tall black-haired man tended to do that to people.

"Sidorov!" Krylov spat. Dane responded with a hiss. For a few seconds, they glared at one another before Krylov waved his hand and all seven disappeared.

After Krylov and his lackeys had gone, Aren allowed himself to relax. Turning toward his friend, he said without preamble, "He has the Van der Ness amulet."

"Damn it!" Dane swore. "I'm sorry, Aren."

With a sigh, Aren said, "Krylov wanted me to trade Nahia for it." He shook his head in disgust. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes before looking at Dane again. "What brings you here?"

"Sirantha."

Raising a brow, Aren waited for more of an explanation. Dane shrugged, but didn't elaborate. Instead, he changed the subject. "Where's Nahia?"

Worry set in again. "I'm not sure."

Dane raised a black brow. "Well, I had come to tell you about the Ater Malum, but I see you've found out."

I found out all right. Aren nodded even as he tried not to focus on the whereabouts of one Nahia Freeman. "There's something else going on here, Dane. If they're so strong, why try to make a deal?"

Dane shrugged. "Perhaps Krylov's way of trying to rattle you."

"It worked. I never believed I'd find the amulet. Never thought I'd even lay eyes on it again." He shoved a hand through his hair. "I could feel it calling to me. I wanted nothing more than to touch it."

Dane moved toward him and hesitated before patting his shoulder. "The time is nearing for revenge."

Aren held his friend's tawny-green-gold gaze and frowned. Dane Sidorov had been a true ally for many, many years, and something wasn't right. "Dane, *kak dyela?*" he asked in Russian.

With a slight smile, Dane said in the same language, "*Prekrasno.*"

You're lying my friend. Everything isn't fine. But he left it alone. There was another look in Dane's eyes, one that told him another story and one he knew he used to have in his own eyes at times. "You're leaving," Aren stated.

"*Da.* Time for me to return to my unit. Keep an eye on my house for me."

Aren sent him a light snarl in return for the order. One would think Dane was the elder of the two, the way he loved to boss Aren around. Although he was joking again, Aren still recognized there was something Dane was trying to hide. "Will you return home?"

An indescribable emotion crossed Dane's face before it vanished. He turned away and headed for the trees, saying over his shoulder, "I'll return for the birth of your son. I expect him to be named after me."

"What, asshole?" Aren shook his head. "My son needs a better name than that."

Dane flipped him off without slowing or turning back. Aren watched until Dane entered the tree line and vanished from view.

Nahia paused a bit outside the huge door leading into Aren's home. Her head was swimming with the information she'd gathered today. That place had been a vat of knowledge, and she'd been sorry to see Olorun arrive to retrieve her. He'd told her the place she'd spent time with all the books and scrolls was called *Agnitio infinitus*, which meant boundless or infinite knowledge. The time had flown by, and Nahia was shocked when he said she'd been there for a few hours. She'd left, but with great reluctance.

So many questions had been answered, but she'd been left with many more unanswered questions. And yet, despite it all, Nahia felt remarkably calm, as if being there gifted her with a sense of self. Closing her eyes, she gathered herself, pulled open the door, and stepped inside. The warmth of the house sank into her, reminding her how chilly it was outside with the light shirt she wore.

As the door closed softly behind her, Nahia felt a shiver run down her spine--a shiver of a sexual kind. Glancing up, she saw Aren coming down the staircase. He was dressed in a white pirate shirt with a banded wrist cuff and a pair of black lounge pants with a colorful silver and purple flame design up the legs. His eyes bore into her soul, and Nahia licked her lips as he held her gaze. The light from the crystal chandelier glinted off the diamond stud he wore.

"I was worried, Nahia," he said as his powerful body continued down the stairs with fluid and predatory motion. "Where have you been?"

Despite the calmness of his tone his question was asked in, she knew he was pissed. There was a tick in his clenched jaw, and his eyes were as unyielding as steel.

"I was with Olorun," she responded softly. Today, in the tome on his family, she'd discovered Aren was an eagle-shifter, and as she looked at him, she wondered how she didn't see it before. He had such a haughty look to him at times, just like the majestic birds.

Aren proceeded down the stairs to her, stopping millimeters before her. Her senses swarmed with the smell of crisp mountain air and the masculine scent she'd come to identify as pure Aren Van der Ness. She could feel his sigh of relief, even if it wasn't audible. His entire visage relaxed.

"Didn't think I'd be curious as to where you were heading off to?" Aren grabbed her elbows and tugged her to where their lower halves touched. "I was beyond scared, Nahia."

Heart overflowing with love for this man, Nahia reached for him. Touching his face with her hands, she smiled and pressed her lips briefly against his. "I didn't mean to worry you, but Olorun appeared and said he had something to show me. So I went with him." She stared at his features and frowned. "What happened today, Aren?"

"Dinner's ready," he said.

"Aren, tell me," she insisted.

"After we eat." He raised a brow and just kissed her quiet.

Heat spiraled throughout her body as his tongue swept through her mouth. Her fingers closed around the silk of his shirt as they pressed harder against one another. Wetness pooled between her thighs as her body throbbed for the man kissing her like she was his last meal. The tightening of her nipples told her she was a second away from jumping on him, so she reluctantly ended the intoxicating kiss.

"You said something about dinner," she murmured, barely able to form the sentence.

His eyes nearly melted her into the floor, they contained so much passion for her. "So I did. How about we skip and go right to dessert?" His question was so full of sexual promise and satisfaction her knees almost buckled.

"As lovely as that sounds" --Nahia released his shirt, smoothed her hands down his chest, and marveled over the rippling muscles for a moment-- "I'm hungry for food-food." She shook her head and stepped back from him. "Yes, food-food." *I've got it bad when I have to convince myself of that fact.*

He gave an exaggerated sigh and took her arm in his, leading her to the room they'd had their meals in since she'd arrived. A grin snaked across her face as she took in the meal. She loved this about Aren. He didn't need overly rich food. He was a down-home kind of guy, despite the home he lived in and the wealth he grew up with. Waiting for them on the small round table was a roast and potatoes with a fresh salad and warm bread as well. The fact he'd prepared it for them made it all the more special. Ever the gentleman, he seated her and brushed a kiss behind her ear. Dinner was filled with light chitchat. Nahia knew he was worried about something, but she was content to let it go. *For the moment.*

They partook of dessert in front of the living room fireplace. He'd made chocolate fondue, and had fresh fruit, cake chunks, biscotti, and more to dip into it. As she stuck her fresh strawberry into the rich, warm, creamy chocolate, she asked, "What happened today?"

Aren ate a piece of pineapple and sighed. "I came face to face with one of the *things* that killed my family." His jaw clenched as if reliving the encounter.

Nahia's mouth formed a circle of surprise. She forced herself to stay where she was, intuitively knowing there was something else he needed to say. But when he remained silent, she prodded. "What else, Aren?"

"He had something in his possession that belongs to my family, passed down from father to first-born son. I never believed I'd ever see it again."

"He wanted something for it?" she questioned.

"Something I'm not willing to part with."

Nahia shook her head. "Aren, what could be more important than getting back something which has been in your family for generations?" She had seen this amulet in the book and could only imagine what it meant to the Van der Ness people, and especially to Aren as the last of his family.

"You," he answered simply.

She didn't know what to say. He spoke with such conviction and honesty, Nahia just froze for a moment. She placed her chocolate-dipped chunk of angel food cake back on her plate and crawled to him on her hands and knees. Straddling one leg, she moved up and sat upon his upper thigh. Her hands cupped his face, and she lowered her mouth to his.

The kiss was gentle. Rich chocolate and coconut taste lingered on his tongue as hers stroked along it. Slowly, like she was savoring an expensive wine, she tasted him, explored him. Her hips ground her against the satiny material of his pants. His hands slid around her waist and brought her closer.

Her synapses began to spark as he growled from deep in his chest and thrust against her. Closing her eyes, she bit back a whimper as her body pulsed with desire. Lids heavy, she opened her eyes and found herself falling into his deep golden-brown pooling gaze. Pulling back from his mouth, she moaned softly, "Aren."

He didn't say a word, just released her waist and began unbuttoning her coral shirt. When it was open, she shivered as his warm breath traveled along her sternum. A moan escaped as his lips covered one sensitive breast and tugged the pebbled tip deeper into his mouth.

"Mine, Nahia." His words resonated through her, making her body shudder all over again.

"Aren," she panted as his teeth grazed the tight nipple.

"Yes, love. What is it?"

More electricity powered through her as he continued to tease her. Aren brought a hand up to play with her other breast.

"I want..."

"Yes?"

Fire raged through her veins. She didn't want any clothing separating them. Nahia burned for him. "Clothes...off...now!"

He chuckled, a wonderfully deep and sexy sound. It didn't take long before the only thing beneath her was the plush rug in front of the roaring fire, and above her was the powerful body of Aren Van der Ness as he drove deep into welcoming heat.

Nahia screamed as an orgasm rushed over her. Aren's hips never relented; he continued to thrust into her, deeper and deeper, never allowing her a moment's rest.

"You. Are. Mine." Each word was accompanied by a powerful stroke of his erection.

Nahia could feel the flames from the fireplace burning hotter and larger, but they were like the Arctic compared to the heat the man loving her provided. She undulated against him, matching him thrust for thrust. Placing her feet higher up on his back, she purred with pleasure as he filled her even more.

"More, Aren," she begged as her eyes began rolling back.

He gave her what she wanted. He moved faster, deeper, and harder. His hands palmed her breasts and tugged on the tight nipples. She bit her lower lip to contain her cry of pleasure. His mouth replaced a hand, and Nahia jumped when his teeth grazed the nipple before rolling it around in his mouth.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she yelled to the room.

On each drive forward, the fur teased her skin as his cock filled her. On every retreat, her legs clamped tighter around him as if to refuse him exit. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his shoulders, and it egged him on. Aren seemed to swell even more inside of her. He left one breast and dragging his tongue through the valley between them, then suckled the other one into his wet mouth. She shuddered as he tweaked the other nipple.

"Aren..."

"Hmmm?" he asked, vibrating her overly sensitive pebbled tip.

"I need...you...want...more...please...let..."

He must have understood her blabbering, for he moved up her body with his mouth until their lips met and he kissed her. Nahia poured everything she had into that kiss, including words she couldn't form, or was too scared to utter. Her body tingled with the approaching orgasm. The kiss intensified, and opening her eyes slightly, Nahia could see a flame tip on the edge of her thumb. Instead of being scared, she closed her eyes again and gave herself over to the feeling only Aren could give her.

His teeth scraped along her lower lip before he soothed it with a swipe of his tongue. He murmured something as he drew back and thrust deep into her again, but she was swiftly lost in a haze of their own making. She jumped over the edge, allowing the orgasm to sweep her away. His deep grunt filled her ears as Aren drove into her one final time and erupted, covering her womb with his thick semen.

Nahia shivered again and sank into the thick fur rug beneath her with exhaustion. A satisfied smile filled her face as Aren's golden-brown eyes landed on her.

"Better than any chocolate fondue," he murmured, kissing her lightly.

"I'm not so sure. That was pretty damn good fondue."

He arched a brow. "So chocolate was better than me?"

She stretched beneath him and gave him a siren's grin. "Never underestimate the lure of chocolate to a woman."

His eyes smoldered hotter than the fire burning behind them. "How about chocolate *on* a woman?"

"On a man works better for me," she responded, rolling so she was on top of him. Shoving her hand through her mass of hair, she looked down at him. "Let's find out."

"Let's," he agreed in a deep, sensual voice.

Chapter Seven

Aren watched Nahia as she spoke to Sanna in the living room. As they stood before the fireplace, he compared them. Dark hair versus pale blonde. Light brown skin versus fair. Sanna's blue eyes measured against the multi-colored ones of the woman who made taking the next breath worthwhile. Nahia's husky laughter floated across to him. Fighting back the longing to take her upstairs, he headed for the kitchen to grab some refreshments. When he returned to the living room, the women just glanced at him, but didn't stop their conversation.

He listened in silence, even as his mind whirled around the idea that this entire thing was about to end. It scared him to think he could lose Nahia. They'd practiced hard, and truth be told, there wasn't anything more he could teach her. Nahia had to learn to trust herself and let the power come through her. For a while, he'd thought the encounter with Sirantha had been a fluke, for Nahia couldn't seem to concentrate after that. Then it came back--slowly, but she had seemed to find her focus. It was like she'd discovered something that gave her confidence in herself and her ability.

I know it helps that her brother and sister-in-law have left Savoy Valley for a while.

Nahia had been petrified they would be used in this chilling game that was being played between good and evil. A tingling at the back of his neck grabbed his attention, and he walked outside onto the deck off the living room.

Above the Pantera Mountains, he could see the full moon slowly making its appearance, allowing the dark purple of the mountains beneath the snowcaps to be seen. The land was quiet in an eerie sort of way, almost like it was waiting to see what was about to happen. Thick tendrils of fog rolled over the tops of the mountains as well and headed down toward the valley, blanketing everything in its path.

Suddenly, the screams of his family as they were cut down filled his head. The pain was so sharp, it took him to his knees. Grabbing his head, he rocked back and forth as their final battle played out in his mind's eye. Each cut they took, each blow they

endured, rocked him to the core. And every cry of pain emitted from their mouths was like a knife to the heart, and he lost a part of his soul, all over again. Time lost all meaning as he knelt there on the wood slats of his porch in the cold night.

"Aren?" A concerned tone broke through the haze he was in.

At the sound of Nahia's voice, he jerked. Looking to his right, he found her on her knees beside him. "Nahia?" he croaked.

"Aren? What happened? What's going on?"

It took him a minute to realize he was still outside. Shaking his head to try and clear the confusion, he pushed to his feet. Nahia followed. "Where's Sanna?"

"Aren, she left about an hour ago. What are you doing out here?"

An hour? I've been out here that long? He cast a glance around the property surrounding the porch. The fog had arrived. "I...I...I'm sorry, Nahia. I didn't think I was out here that long."

"I don't give a damn about the time you were here, Aren!" she snapped. "I want to know why, when I found you, you were on your knees clutching your head like you were in pain."

Despite the anger in her voice, he smiled. She was so protective of him. "I had a flashback of my family and when they died," he said. "The pain was so real, I guess it was more than I'd been expecting."

"Aren," she said on a soft sigh. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could make it better for you."

"You do, baby, just by being here." She drew back slightly, and he frowned as he led her to the door. Once they were back inside, he cupped her chin in his hand and waited for her to meet his gaze. "What's wrong?"

Nahia ran a hand over her face and tried to look away. He refused that request. Aren arched a brow while he waited for her to respond.

"My life isn't here. I have to get back to Boulder."

And for the second time within a short amount of time, pain lanced his body. *She wants to leave?* "What do you mean?" Aren did his best to keep the anger out of his tone, but knew he'd failed when she stiffened.

"I mean, I have a job, schooling, and a life back there." Nahia pulled out of his grasp and stepped back.

"What about here? The things going on here?"

"I'm not sitting around here waiting for something to happen. I'm sorry, Aren. I never intended to stay this long."

He ground his back teeth as his inner being roared in anger. "And us?"

Sorrow filled her big eyes. "I don't know."

"I'm not letting you go, Nahia," he vowed in a low tone.

Anger and resentment replaced the sadness that had been there moments before. "You planning on kidnapping me, Aren Van der Ness? Because as I see it, I'm my own person, not a possession." The rings of color in her eyes began rotating, and he could feel the power welling up within her.

"I will if I have to. I'll be damned if I lose you. We belong together." He stepped toward her, and she backed up the same distance. He progressed, and again, she retreated. That continued until she finally halted beside the marble staircase.

"Did you ever, for one second, think of what all this did to *my* life? I came here to escape, not to be thrown into...into...whatever the hell this is." She tossed her hands up in exasperation.

"Fine. No, I didn't. I'm sorry. So tomorrow, we'll go to Boulder and get your things, and move you out here permanently," Aren said, pleased with his solution.

"Argh! You don't get it. I never said I wanted to move here. I happened to love my life in Boulder." Nahia spun around and stomped toward the door. He moved as she began to open it.

Aren could read the surprise in her eyes as he halted her attempt to leave the house. "I told you, Nahia. Our lives are one. There is no other way. Accept it."

"Bullshit!" she yelled in his face. "I'm not living my life with someone just because *that's the way it is*. What the hell happened to romance? Love? You know, things like that. You make me feel like it's your goddamn duty to be with me. I won't have a life like that, Aren."

He was so shocked by her words, he didn't protest when she shoved him back and slipped out the door. *Is that how she really feels? How can she not know I love her?* Aren allowed the door to close, and he leaned against it, trying to remember if he'd told her he loved her. Sure, he'd used endearments while making love to her. But for the life of him, he couldn't recall a single time when he'd told her he loved her.

"Way to go, Aren," he berated himself.

Time to rectify the situation. Aren yanked open the door and stepped through to the covered stoop, stopping long enough to shut the door behind him, and froze. Fear shot throughout his body.

Nahia muttered to herself in Basque about the arrogance of that man as she strode across the manicured lawn. "Just thinks I'll give up everything to be with him because the sex happens to be good." She grinned. "Okay, damn good. But still, I'm my own person and I won't be with him just because it's his duty."

She sobered as she thought of him with another woman, and growled low in her throat. *He's mine!* Nahia shook her head as she continued on her way. No matter how she felt toward him, she still wasn't going to be a charity case. There were times when she would swear he loved her, but he hadn't ever said the words to her, and that didn't sit well. Calling her "love" in the throes of passion didn't equate the same to her.

As she walked through the thick fog, her skin prickled as it parted as smoothly as Moses parted the Red Sea. It didn't disappear; instead, it wove around her feet, winding against the ankles of her hiking boots, reminding her of snakes. The light from the full moon gave the land a look of being covered in a blanket of sparkling gems.

"Hello again," a voice said from the night.

Nahia turned, careful to hide her surprise, and found herself face to face with the man from the meadow. His blue eyes glowed eerily in the light from the moon. His long black hair hung free, except for the high top knot he sported. Tilting her head to the side, she asked, "Can I help you?"

He stroked his goatee and stepped closer to her. The air felt colder, and she contained a shiver as the frigid night worked its way beneath her jacket. Nahia refused to back away, and so raised her chin and held his gaze straight on. Her hands remained in her pockets and wrapped around the small pendant that Dane had given to her. It was a small, pure white tiger, joined with an eagle. It looked almost as if they were the same being. When she'd asked him, Dane just pressed a kiss to her cheek and told her it was a small gift for putting up with Aren, and to keep it with her. Nahia had attached it to the zipper of one pocket, and when the pocket was open, she could hold the animal.

"Again, can I help you with something?" This time her tone had an edge to it.

"I'm looking for someone," he said in a smooth voice.

"And that would be?" The power inside her flared to life, and she had to control the urge to throw something at him and run to Aren.

His eyes narrowed and he smiled, but to her it was more a baring of teeth. "I think you know exactly who I'm after, Nahia Freeman," he purred in a dangerous way.

Fear flooded her. *Is this it? Is this where I see if I learned anything?* "How do you know my name?"

He clucked in disappointment. "Didn't Aren tell you of our meeting? Or perhaps of *this*?" His left hand rose, palm up, and above it appeared an amulet with a gold chain. A sphere of light surrounded the object, allowing her to see it in all its glorious detail.

The Van der Ness amulet. Nahia knew who he was now. Before her stood the man who'd killed Aren's family.

"Tell me your name," she ground out, feeling the hair on her arms beginning to stand on end.

"Krylov is what people call me." His fingers closed, and the amulet vanished from view.

"What do you want from me?" Nahia demanded, standing tall.

"All you have to do is get down on your knees and pledge your allegiance to the Ater Malum, and to me, and I will leave, and no harm will come to Aren."

The chance to save Aren was something worth thinking about. Perhaps this was her sacrifice to be made. Although she knew very little of the Ater Malum, the basic jist she got from the small part she'd read, and what Olorun had glossed over, was that they thrived by killing and eating the souls of beings with magic. It made them stronger.

Don't believe him, Nahia. He will use your powers against Aren, a voice said in her mind. It was the same voice from the day she met Aren, when it had told her to stay. It gave her more confidence.

"And if I say no?"

He frowned at her. "I wouldn't advise that course of action, Lady Nahia. Things wouldn't go well for you at all."

The malice in his words made her long to hide until the confrontation was over. The arrogance he spoke them with made her long to make him eat his words. *He's very powerful.* That much was obvious. He oozed confidence, kind of like Aren did. But where Aren's was sexy and hot, it was dirty feeling and evil from Krylov.

Before she could even blink, the air around them shifted, and Nahia found herself totally surrounded by creatures the likes of which she'd never seen before. They were grotesque creations that *must* have been made in a lab. They were half man, or woman, and half animal. Whatever they were, they had, scales, feathers, fur, and more, and they seeped evil into the air.

For the first time in her life, Nahia knew true fear. Not even when Sirantha had attacked her had she felt this much pure terror. In her hand, the tiger felt warm and comforting. Something moved out from the background and stood beside Krylov. Her

breath hitched in horror. It looked like a collection of human body parts stitched together, forming some sort of figure. The stench of decaying flesh filled the air.

"Krylov!" The single word was said with such loathing, Nahia jumped. Aren was beside her, anger and power radiating from him.

"Aren." The mocking response filled the night. "I wondered how long it would be until you showed."

"I warned you, Krylov," Aren ground out. "No more games."

"Oh, I agree, Aren. Tonight is the night. Not only does the Van der Ness line get destroyed, but also Lady Nahia's line."

Nahia wasn't sure what to say. The earth rumbled below her feet, and another force washed over her. This time it was kind of familiar, and in the open meadow under the full moon, Nahia watched as Sirantha and her kind flowed into view. She recognized a few others--Kira, Zanna, Mika, and more. But the number of them overwhelmed her. Still, the number of Krylov's minions grew as well. Large, lumbering beasts charged toward them.

Krylov stared at her, sent her an evil grin, and shot a bolt of lightning. Without thinking, she raised a wall of wind and blew it back to him and his people. There wasn't a word spoken that officially began the battle, yet suddenly it erupted. Before she could blink, Krylov had taken to the sky and began showering bolts down toward them. Aren threw her out of the way, some of the shots hitting him directly in the chest.

"Aren!" she cried.

"Defend yourself, Nahia. Don't worry about me."

And so she did. In less than a second, she found herself engaged in battle. Nahia stared into the eight eyes of a six-legged creature with liquid dripping from its fangs. Calling upon the earth, she launched the being with a pillar of clay, sending him far from her to land on the ground, legs in the air. That thing hadn't been gone a second, and there were more facing her.

Ice. Wind. Earth. Fire. Air. All the forces of nature. Nahia used them as best she could to defeat those coming after her. Her eyes searched the destruction for Aren. She found Sirantha fighting Krylov, and Heller fighting beside her.

A set of claws reached for Nahia, and she jumped back at the last second. The creature wounded her, and she hissed in pain. The animal was wraith-like, white like the fog but shaped like a full grown male lion about ten feet long, and its claws were just as real. Her arm throbbed, and she stumbled, finding herself face to face with its wicked fangs. It roared, the sound making her bones knock together.

The piercing shriek of an eagle reached her seconds before a huge golden bird swooped in and dug his talons into the beast before her. It bellowed in pain as it tried to shake the bird of prey loose. It didn't work, and soon those two animals were engaged in a battle of their own.

Aren. She knew it was him.

Hopping out of the way, she focused on her next opponent. The battle dragged on. Nahia was exhausted, but the fight didn't seem to be ending anytime soon. Blood poured from numerous cuts on her body, and still her focus remained on the battle. At the moment, she was engaged in a fight of element versus element. It was a fire Elemental she now faced--a male, and he was fast. Everything he touched burst into flame, and it took a lot of concentration for her to tamp it out, along with dodging his next move.

"Nahia!" A voice screamed for her.

With a burst of water from her hands, she doused her opponent a final time and turned to find whoever had called for her. People she'd come to call friends were bleeding as much as she was.

"Lady Nahia!"

Glancing up, she spotted Krylov. High in the night sky above him flew a lone eagle, engaged in a fray with another winged creature. The two would lock talons and spiral like a rocket toward earth, only to break away and climb before doing it all over again. Their cries clawed at her soul.

"Final chance," Krylov roared in her direction.

Nahia launched an aqua jet surrounded by a spiral of fire at him. "Go to hell, Krylov," she snarled in return.

"You've been warned," he said as he waved a hand and her attack dissolved into nothing.

His left hand rose, palm up, and again the amulet was there in the same sphere of light as before. He began muttering words she couldn't understand, but the chain and pendent rose before him. When it hovered a distance away from him, he dropped his hands, and blue electricity began gathering around him. Those pale blue eyes of his stared back at her briefly, and in them, she swore she saw glee. As if watching in slow motion, she saw Krylov sneer and turn his head toward the fighting creatures above him. Before she could blink, the glowing orb left his hands and took off like a shot toward Aren.

"Aren!" she screamed. "Look out!"

The ball engulfed him, and tiny streams of blue light radiated out from the main part of the orb, encompassing his entire body. A scream of pure pain left the eagle, and before her eyes, it turned into human form. Aren hovered for a second before his body plummeted toward earth.

"Noooo!" The wail was ripped out of her chest as immediately she called upon the wind to cushion his fall. So intent was she upon seeing Aren to the ground, that it was only at the last second she saw the bolt of energy coming at her from Krylov. She was barely able to avoid it.

"He will die. You aren't strong enough to save both him and yourself. And because of your actions, you've forfeited the life of your brother and his wife as well. When your body lies beneath me, and your powers are mine, I will collect their souls."

Something inside of her snapped. It was as if the flood gates had broken, and power unlike any she'd ever felt before poured through her. Calling upon the wind, she rose up to meet the one threatening those she loved. Out of the corner of her eye, Nahia

witnessed Aren's body settle gently upon the ground and a few people run to him. Then her full attention was back upon Krylov.

"You and I have something to finish. I won't let you harm any more people I care about."

Nahia began firing elemental shards at him. Krylov was quick, yet Nahia knew her direct attack had surprised him. When he glanced to the ground, she looked as well. Aren was up and limping in their direction, yelling something she couldn't make out over the rest of the noise. She watched another being attack him, and Aren barely escape from the first assault.

We're losing. Sadness filled her. The enemy was unending. Wave after wave appeared, flowing like water from the surrounding mountains.

Maitasun edo bat.

With those words, she knew. Taking a final peek at Aren, she saw him engaged in a sword battle with two others. When he fell to his knees, streaming blood, Nahia did her best to heal him. Drawing upon the nurturing power of the earth, she closed his wounds much like she'd healed the broken desk. That seemed like a lifetime ago. From her vantage point, she could see it worked. And she knew Aren knew, for he met her gaze, and in the depths of his eyes she read his love for her.

"Goodbye, Aren," she whispered.

"Giving up, my dear? I thought we had business," Krylov taunted.

Nahia turned from the man she loved to face the one she despised. "No. I'm not giving up. I'm ending this."

The ground below them opened up, and a strong wind picked up each of Krylov's warriors and dropped them in the hole. She didn't know how she kept them contained, but it was happening. There were spears of fire, electricity, shards of ice, and more ricocheting off the walls of the hole.

Meeting Krylov's gaze again, she saw fear and surprise in the pale blue depths. "You wanted my power. Let me *share* it with you." She pulled him to her. He struggled,

and she could feel it, but her power was stronger, and before long they were close enough to touch.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

The wind roared around them, the earth shuddered and shook, and fire and water surrounded her. "Showing you what my power feels like." Nahia reached for his arm, and he screamed in pain. His free hand shot energy at her, and it evaporated before touching her. Flames moved from her body to his, igniting his brocade.

"How is this possible?" he thundered, his eyes becoming reptilian in his anger. More and more attacks were launched against her, becoming stronger each time.

Nahia could feel herself weakening. The battle had taken its toll on her, and these unrelenting shots from Krylov were not helping. *I can't do this.*

Lady Nahia Freeman, trust yourself. This is your destiny.

I am the one who can save them. Nahia redoubled her focus, and the earth reacted violently. Spears of the earth began to shoot up, and other parts cracked open.

"Nahia!" Aren's voice barely reached her. "Nahia!"

Grabbing Krylov's other hand, she glanced down to where Aren was and saw he and the others were in danger because of the fireballs that were raining down from the sky, along with lightning, splinters of ice, and other things.

I must protect them.

Holding Krylov close to her, she whispered in his ear, "Time for you to meet your maker."

She closed her eyes and burst into flame, alighting Krylov in the process. His screams of pain reached her. He struggled and did his best to get away, but she held on tighter. Water roared around them, icy cold, but not putting out the flames. It caused Krylov to yell louder.

I love you, Aren. Goodbye. Nahia used the wind to keep Aren and the others away from the hole in the ground as it closed upon the now dead or dying allies of Krylov.

Aren rose on shaky legs. Whatever Krylov had hit him with had sapped his powers, and he'd turned human and plunged toward earth, unable to shift into his other form. A gust of wind supported him all the way to the ground. When he'd been able to rise again, he'd rejoined the fighting.

The moment his wounds healed, he knew it was Nahia who'd done it. He searched the sky for her and found her. She was having a one on one with Krylov. Panic roared to life inside him, and he made his way toward her as fast as he could. Beings that got in his way were downed as fast as possible. He was amazed by the extent of her power when the enemy was lifted and put into a hole. No one could get through. There was some kind of force field surrounding the crater, although he could see the damaging hits that were coming from somewhere and hitting the creatures in there. When fire began raining down from the heavens, he knew something huge was about to happen, and he called out to her for help. He was lifted off the ground and moved back from the hole, which had begun to close upon itself. The objects falling from the sky began falling into the crater, and onto Nahia and Krylov. The entire area was lit as if it were daytime.

He couldn't take his eyes off Nahia. She never backed down from Krylov. In fact, she reached for him and set him on fire. It would have been amusing had he not been so concerned for her safety. As if she knew he thought of her, she looked at him. Her eyes were shifting every millisecond. Each color flashed as if it had no idea which power was being used the most. Then they closed.

His heart stopped when she pulled Krylov into her arms. They rotated in the air so that she looked at Aren. Her mouth moved, but he couldn't make out what she said. In the next second, she burst into flame, along with Krylov.

"Nahia!" Her name was ripped out of his chest. Rolling streams of water joined the flames in surrounding them. He lunged forward, but was met with a wall of air forcing him back.

The creatures that had been in the ground were being covered up. Bolts of fire rained down on the contained beings. Before his eyes, it turned into a solid ball of hard

clay. Everything inside of it was dead. Yanking his gaze back up to her, his heart caught in his throat again. Nahia was higher than Krylov now, and the snake writhed in agony as a mixture of fire, water, and electricity flowed around him.

Aren focused on Nahia. Her hair was wild about her head, streaks of brown, red, blue, and silver-gray running through it. Her jeans and jacket were almost translucent in color. This was the power he'd felt rolling off her that first day they'd met. Her eyes glowed a whitish-yellow, almost like staring at a solar flare. One hand was balled into a fist, and he could see energy gathering around it.

Even being wrapped up by her attacks, Krylov still managed to fire things at her. She stared at him and narrowed her gaze. "Your attacks are feeble and a waste of time. Why do you persist?"

Aren frowned. That wasn't Nahia's voice. There was something different about it, a more hollowed sound quality to it. *What the hell is going on?*

"Who are you?" Krylov croaked.

Nahia's form looked at him, but didn't speak again. Instead, a culmination of energies from their surroundings gathered around her. Her body floated back down so it was level to Krylov, and everything encircling her moved like a shot into his body. At the last second before contact, it formed a laser-like point and moved through him like a warm knife through butter. His body crumpled, and if it weren't for the wind holding him up, he would have fallen to the ground.

Slowly, they lowered to the earth, which had repaired itself and was now flat and as green as it had been to begin with. There was no sign of the battle that had been going on. The force holding him back vanished. The moment they landed on the ground, Aren moved forward. Krylov's body crumpled into a heap, and Aren barely registered the ones who circled him and did something with the body. It was Nahia he was concerned about.

Her thin form sank to the ground, a bit more gracefully than Krylov's, but it was just as still. Her hair was black again, but he didn't feel the energy from her as he was used to. Aren dropped to his knees beside her still body.

"Nahia," he said, with a mixture of hope and fear. "Nahia, answer me." Aren could feel some of his friends gathering around behind him, but he ignored them.

Ever so slowly, her eyes opened, still that solar flare color. "Aren," she rasped. It was her voice.

"Baby," he murmured, gathering her close to his chest. "I'm right here, Nahia. Stay with me."

"*Nere maitea*. I love you," she muttered as the light faded from her eyes, leaving him staring into medium cocoa brown irises. He wasn't allowed to stare into them for long before they closed, and she sighed one last time. Then her chest didn't move again.

"No," he moaned. Checking for a carotid pulse, his heart stopped when he didn't find one. "No!" His voice raised to the heavens in agony.

Words from behind him floated unheard past his ear. The fog rolled in again and floated around them. Aren couldn't stop touching her face. He could feel the wetness running down his cheeks, but he didn't care one bit.

From the fog, a shape materialized. Lifting his gaze, Aren recognized Olorun, his white robes near glowing in the moonlight. His face was somber as he looked and the woman Aren held with such love.

"Bring her back," Aren demanded. "Damn you! Bring her back!"

From behind Olorun, out walked Juras-mate, along with two others he didn't know. "Why are you just standing there? Bring. Her. Back!"

"I'm sorry. That is not within our power." Olorun sounded sorrowful.

That was not what Aren wanted to hear. Anger roared up inside of him. "She shouldn't have had to give her life. *You* should have been able to protect her. Aren't you one of the elders?" He noticed a flash of something in Olorun's gaze, but the man still said nothing.

A bright light shone from the pocket of Nahia's jacket, and Aren glanced down to see what it was. As he and everyone else watched, a pendant rose into the sky. A white light, so intense he almost turned away, emanated from it. From the figure, two shapes emerged, one an eagle and the other a tiger. A different feel of energy exuded

from them. The eagle settled near Nahia's shoulder, while the tiger stretched out beside her and rested his massive head upon her jean-clad leg. Both creatures stared at him, and when the tiger rose, Aren hugged Nahia closer to him.

"No. You can't have her." The animal approached closer and closer until his face was in Aren's, and it bared its teeth. Aren narrowed his eyes and bit off again, "You can *not* have her."

I'm sorry, Aren Van der Ness. You have no say in this matter.

The voice was not one he recognized, but from the depths of his soul, he would have sworn it was coming from the tiger. "I will not sit here-"

This is not up for debate. Lady Nahia comes with us.

With that directive, the eagle took to the sky, and the tiger straddled her legs and lowered his head to Nahia's. Before his eyes, they vanished. He tried to move and stop them, but something held him immobile until they were gone.

Aren raised his head to the sky and released a scream like none other. Glaring at Olorun and the other Elementals there, he hissed, "This is your fault. You wouldn't tell us enough to properly prepare. And you all just...just stood there and let them take her."

Tapping into the power in his blood, he shrieked again as it answered and gave him the shape he longed for. He flew from everyone who tried to offer sympathy. Solitary was the word flowing through him. Aren needed to be alone. He needed time to mourn.

Winter vanished and spring arrived, bringing with it new life. Aren had debated leaving Savoy Valley again, but in the end decided he wanted to be where he and Nahia had been together. It was as if he could feel her presence still around. Part of that had been due to the fact he'd found a sketch of him in her book. Behind him was an eagle in full flight. It sat framed in his office beside a photo, the only one he had, of himself and Nahia. All of her drawings had found their way up onto the walls of his house.

Surprisingly, Maxtin, her brother, had accepted the explanation given to him about his sister's passing. Aren still kept to himself, venturing off his property only when absolutely necessary.

He moved silently through the woods until he reached a brook. Changing his course, he followed the water until it entered into a meadow. Aren stopped and knelt beside the flowing liquid. He trailed one hand in it and allowed the coolness to bite into his skin, relishing the fact he felt something. On the other side of the stream, he noticed a brilliant blue and yellow flower. The joy he'd gotten watching her as she sat and sketched couldn't be described.

His heart ached. A gentle breeze blew across his skin, bringing with it a particular scent--the light hint of pine trees, which had been present on Nahia. He dropped his head and stared at the clear water as it ran unending over his fingers.

"Nahia." The word was torn from his chest. "I don't know what to do without you. It's getting harder and harder to get through a single day. I miss you, the feeling you brought me, the joy you brought to my life. I'm so sorry I never told you I loved you. I thought it was understood. But I do love you. I think I've loved you since the day I met you. And I always will."

"Aren?" The question flowed to his ears in a low melodious voice.

I must be dreaming. Lifting his gaze, his breath caught in his throat. With only the small creek between them stood Nahia Freeman. Her eyes were how they had been the last time they'd been open--medium cocoa. Her skin seemed a bit paler than he recalled, but in all his life, he'd never seen a more beautiful sight. Wrapped around her body was a white gauzy thing with solid white designs on it, creating an even more enticing image.

"Nahia?" he questioned as he rose to his feet. "Is it...are you...real?" Aren longed to jump the water and pull her into his arms, but he still wasn't sure it would be feasible to trust his own eyes.

"Yes."

He moved through the water, not caring that it rushed over his boots. Aren hesitated, when he got to the other side, before he touched her. Would she vanish, as she had in so many dreams? Would he wake, only find himself all alone?

Nahia stared at him, her gaze guileless as she waited for him to make a move. He reached for her slowly. As his hands curved around the bared flesh of her upper arms, his heart sped up. Warm flesh met him instead of nothing, like it was in his dreams.

It was her.

"By the gods," he murmured, drawing her flush against his chest. "I never thought I'd see you again." Tears threatened as her arms closed about him in return.

"I love you, Aren." Nahia pulled back and pressed her lips to his.

Aren eagerly accepted the feel of her soft mouth against his. He sucked on her seeking tongue, his body aflame with passion and love. For a moment, he let the kiss continue before he drew back. Her eyes were smoky silver, and he noticed the winds were whipping around them.

"Nahia-"

"I have something for you," she said softly.

"You're all I ever wanted."

A soft blush filled her features. "Likewise, Van der Ness, but this is what I was talking about."

She let go of him with her right hand and turned it palm up. Aren watched as a golden sphere appeared above her hand and faded, so only the ring of the circle was still there. In the middle of the orb, suspended in the air, was the amulet of the Van der Ness family. He didn't know what to do, or say.

"Take it, Aren. It belongs to you."

Hesitantly he reached out for it. The charoite felt warm against his skin as his fingers closed about it. Bringing it closer to his face to inspect it, Aren tensed as he saw a feather begin to glow, and a sheen of silver appeared, momentarily blinding him. When the light faded, he noticed the single feather was edged in silver, and his full name had been etched into the gold.

"Nahia," he said as he tightened his fist around the amulet. "Tell me you're here for good."

She smiled, and his heart soared. "I'm here for good. I'm sorry about the fight we had. I just wasn't ready to accept what my heart already knew."

"I'm sorry, too. I promise, I will tell you how much I love you every day." The urge to make love to her nearly swarmed him. But he had to know. "How?" he asked.

"Spiritus Sanctimonia."

"The Pure Sprits?" He frowned. "The eagle and the tiger I saw with you? That's who you're talking about?"

"They saved me. They healed me and nursed me back to health. Aren, it was Dane. I know it sounds crazy, but from the very first day I arrived and met you, I had a voice in my head. It told me to stay and not leave you the day we met. During the battle, it was with me again, giving support and power. When I woke, I'm not sure where I was, but I know he was there. I could *feel* him. The tiger was his. I think he gave up part of himself to save me, because he knew what was going to happen. The eagle became a man and gave me back the pendant, and I knew I was coming home to you." She shuddered, and tears filled her eyes. "Can we go home? I'm a bit weak still, and I'm kind of tired."

Dane? Was this what had him acting so odd? Aren searched along a link he and Dane had long ago discovered they shared with one another, but there was nothing. It felt empty, hollow. So many questions raged through his head, but she'd said she wanted to go home. "Yes. Anything you wish." Aren swept her up in his arms and headed back to their house. Her body pressed against his, and everything was right in his world.

That night, Aren and Nahia lay in bed together under the light from the full moon, which sprinkled down upon them. Exhausted from their long day of making love, they were being observed by a pair of animals and some Elementals. An eagle and a tiger stood in the air, accompanied by Olorun, Juras-mate, Darago, and Haurun. There

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were smiles on their faces as they realized all was right for a time. The Ater Malum had been contained for a while. Peace reigned again in Savoy Valley.

We hope you enjoyed Sentinel. 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.

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