

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Moonlight
Ménage*

STEPHANIE
JULIAN

Moonlight Ménage

Stephanie Julian

Book Two in the Lucani Lovers series.

For eight years, Etruscan witch Tira Belludi has longed to give herself, body and soul, to the two shifter men who hold her heart. But visions of death and fears for her sanity have forced her to keep her distance.

Nic Rocca and Duke Ducati are brothers in every way but blood and partners who have each other's backs. They share a home, a job and had planned to share their life with Tira between them...until the night she saw their future and built a fortress around her heart.

Now danger and death stalk Nic and Duke. And Tira must make a choice—grab love while she has the chance, or watch Nic die from afar and lose Duke forever.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Moonlight Ménage

ISBN 9781419927485

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Moonlight Ménage Copyright 2010 Stephanie Julian

Edited by Grace Bradley

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication March 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

MOONLIGHT MÉNAGE

Stephanie Julian

Dedication

For David. Because...

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Barbie: Mattel, Inc.

FedEx: Federal Express Corp.

Harley-Davidson Motorcycles: H-D Michigan, Inc.

Jeep Wrangler: DaimlerChrysler Corp.

Jimmy Choo: J. Choo Limited Corp.

Maglite: MAG Instrument, Inc.

Mustang: Ford Motor Company

MXC: Network Enterprises, Inc.

Novocain: H. A. Metz Laboratories, Inc.

Sig Sauer: Swiss Army Technology AG Corp.

Velcro: Velcro Industries

Glossary

Arus: magical power inherent in the *Fata* and *Enu*, races of Etruscan descent

Boschetta: Etruscan coven, traditionally comprised of thirteen *streghe*

Candela: Etruscan sprite, tiny magical beings with wings and a certain glow about them

Decurio: legion rank of commander

Eteri (pl. *eteri*): Etruscan for foreigner, used to describe regular humans

Enu: humans of magical Etruscan descent

Fata: elemental beings of magical Etruscan descent

Folletta (pl. *folletti*): Etruscan female fairy

Linchetto (pl. *linchetti*): Etruscan night elf

Malandante: descended from the Etruscans but born with a bent toward evil, with a taste for power and wealth

Praenuntio: Goddess Gift of foresight

Salbinelli: Etruscan satyr

Sicari (pl. *sicarii*): assassin

Speculator: spy

Strega (pl. *streghe*): Etruscan witch

Versipellis (pl. *versipelli*): literally “skin shifter” – shapeshifters including Etruscan *Lucani* (wolves), Norse *Berkserkir* (bears) and French *loup garou* (wolves)

Chapter One

“Nic! Kaine! Where the fuck are you?”

Varro “Duke” Ducati squinted through the thick smoke that muffled the sound of his voice. Stumbling out of the bedroom and through the hall, he headed in the direction he thought the stairs were in.

Gods damn, his head fucking hurt, he could barely think straight as it was. An oppressive heat licked at his skin, making sweat pour from his body and his oxygen-starved lungs felt like lead.

If he didn’t get out soon, he wasn’t going to make it out alive.

But he wasn’t leaving without Nic or Kaine.

Gods damn it, they hadn’t been expecting this.

They should have. They should have gone in expecting anything.

The house was empty. None of them had scented another person before crossing the threshold. They’d taken every precaution to make sure they didn’t trip any alarms, wards or spells. Kaine had assured them she hadn’t felt any so he had no idea what’d set off the explosions.

Nic had been on the ground floor, Kaine in the basement and Duke had been checking the top floor when the explosion had gone off below him.

He’d been knocked off his feet and hit his head on a nightstand in the room he’d been searching. When he’d regained consciousness a few seconds later, smoke had already engulfed the second floor.

Hands outstretched, he hurried forward, knowing the stairs could open at any –

A break in the haze revealed the stairwell directly in front of him and he ran for it, grabbing hold of the handrail, still cool to the touch, then took the stairs two at a time.

“Nic! Can you hear me?”

“Duke! Back here.”

Relief barely had time to register before he turned and ran toward the sound of Nic’s voice at the back of the house. The house wasn’t that big and it only took him seconds to reach Nic –

“Oh *fuck*.” He froze in the doorway.

“Where’s Kaine?” Nic’s voice sounded thready and weak.

“Don’t know. *Shit*, Nic. Don’t move.”

Tinia’s teat, the ceiling had fallen in, pinning Nic beneath a pile of rubble and a wooden beam.

Duke didn't stop to think. He ran for Nic and started digging.

"No. No!" Nic shoved at him, strong enough to make Duke fall back on his ass. "Kaine. The explosion. Downstairs. I'll be fine."

No, he wouldn't be.

Blood dripped from Nic's temple and his ears and seeped from somewhere beneath his legs. His voice broke every couple of words to cough.

And the smoke continued to billow around them.

Duke shook his head. "I'll get you out first then go down for Kaine."

"Vaffan—"

"Shut the fuck up and help me dig."

Duke continued to tear at the rubble with his hands. Splinters dug into his palms and fingers, cutting into his skin but he didn't stop. He didn't know how long it took until he could finally lift the beam off Nic but he was drenched and lightheaded when he shoved it just far enough away to free his friend.

Gods damn, so much blood.

No. Can't think about that now.

With a strength he didn't know he possessed, Duke lifted Nic off the floor and ran for the back door that had been blown off its hinges in the blast.

The house was secluded in the hills outside Lebanon, Pennsylvania, and it would take at least twenty minutes before any fire or police personnel could get here. He had to get his people out before they arrived.

Once outside, he placed Nic on the ground and tried not to notice how weak his partner was. Pale and gasping for breath, Nic slumped over and passed out.

Pushing the fear away, he ran back into the house, headed for the door to the basement in the hall just outside the kitchen.

In the narrow stairwell, the air was hotter and he scented something besides smoke the lower he went. Something his heightened sense of smell knew to be a spell.

Was it the one they'd tripped to set off the explosion? Didn't matter now.

"Kaine!"

The only light came from the door above and it wasn't enough to reach into the dark shadows of the basement.

Pulling the tiny Maglite from a pocket on his tactical pants, he shone its bright beam into the far corners.

His mouth dropped open at the sight of the iron-barred cells lining the walls.

"Oh, fuck."

The basement extended so far beyond the footprint of the house above that he couldn't see the end of the cells. *Vaffanculo*, what the hell was this place?

"Kaine, gods damn it. Kaine! Answer me."

He heard something, a sound down the hall, and he took off, not bothering to check the other cells. If he had to, he'd make a more thorough sweep later if he didn't find Kaine on this first pass.

More sounds, closer. Like someone trying *not* to make noise.

Duke slowed, trying to pick out where exactly the sounds were coming from.

And nearly didn't dodge the fist aimed straight for his head.

His instincts saved him from getting cold-cocked as he ducked then grabbed the arm connected to the fist.

Sweat made the man's arm slippery. Duke lost his grip and nearly lost his footing as a wave of dizziness overcame him.

"Don't come near her, you bastard!"

Duke shook his head, trying to make his vision come into focus. Remembering the flashlight in his hands, he shone it into the cell.

A man stood there, naked except for a pair of basketball shorts. He had his hands up in a fighting position, though he dripped blood from a gash on his forehead and another on his powerful chest.

His short dark hair stood on end and he looked about as steady as Duke felt.

But his expression was determined and his words finally reached Duke's short-circuiting brain. He sent the beam of light around the cell until it fell on the wolf lying motionless on the floor at the guy's feet.

Shit.

Duke reacted without thought. Kaine was down and he had to get her out of the cell. Over this dead guy's body, if necessary.

He took a step forward, ready to beat the guy into submission, but the man held his ground.

He wasn't small and he was almost as heavily muscled as Duke. But the guy was *eteri*. He'd never win in a fair fight.

And Duke had to get Kaine out of there, so it wouldn't be a fair fight.

Yet something about the guy's stance made him pause.

Their mission had been to retrieve whatever *eteri* had been trapped in here. This guy was definitely *eteri*. And he seemed to be protecting Kaine.

He stood over her in a defensive position, almost as if he were ready to drop and cover her body if he needed to.

Knowing he could be making a huge mistake, Duke held up one hand in classic truce position. "Look, I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to get you out. That's my partner on the floor. Let me pick her up and we can all leave. Now."

Before we die in here.

He didn't say that aloud. Hell, he could barely think it but strength drained from his body with every passing second. He wouldn't be able to stand soon and he still needed to carry Kaine out of here.

The guy glanced down at Kaine for one brief second before tightening his fists and shaking his head.

"I'll take her. You don't look like you could carry her right now. You lead the way."

Since Duke didn't want to argue and it was looking less likely that they'd make it out of here alive, if the sound of the house creaking around them was any indication, he nodded.

"Fine. But we gotta go now."

Duke took a step back and watched the guy pause, as if weighing his options.

"Look, man, I'm about ready to keel over. Pick her up so we can get the fuck out of here. I don't have the strength to carry both of you and if it comes down to you or her, I'm choosing her. Now move."

The guy dropped his fists and bent to pick up Kaine.

Her dark gray fur looked black in the shadows and Duke caught a glimpse of what looked like blood trailing out of her mouth.

Vaffanculo, we're screwed. All of us.

Duke turned and started back down the hall past the cells. He didn't bother to make sure the guy was following him. He knew he was. He could hear him. His breathing sounded labored but he stumbled after Duke and managed to keep his hold on Kaine.

When they got to the steps, Duke figured the guy couldn't make it to the top with Kaine.

Honestly, he wasn't sure he could either but stopping now wasn't a consideration.

He turned, ready to take Kaine by force if he had to, but the guy looked at him with clear, determined eyes. He wasn't giving up Kaine.

Duke turned and led them out of the house.

Fresh air hit them in the face as they stumbled onto the grass just as Duke heard a loud groaning creak and the house imploded.

Reality wavered and swum in front of his eyes as soot and dust filled the air.

He couldn't stop now. He had to get everyone back to... Back to the den. Yeah, that's the plan.

Load everyone into the car and drive.

He could do it. He had to.

* * * * *

"I wish there was more I could do, Tira, but physically, she's in good health."

Tamra Rossini had her hand wrapped around a mug of tea as she sat at the island where Tira Belludi was chopping ingredients for her mother's calming potion.

"Well, I appreciate your time." Tira forced a smile and continued to chop, taking care not to cut her fingers. "I honestly didn't think there was anything you could do but..."

Hope springs eternal. Wasn't that the phrase?

Tira should have tossed that four-letter word out of her vocabulary years ago.

Tam shook her head, her expression soft with sympathy. "Do you know... Is this something that runs in the family? Like your, um..."

Tam paused, her face screwed up in a frown as she tried to find the right word. Tira sometimes forgot Tam hadn't been part of the Etruscan world until only a few months ago when she'd met and mated Kyle Rossini.

"My Goddess Gift." Tira nodded, trying not to think about the implications of her answer. "It can be, yes. My grandmother lived to be ninety but she lost her faculties around age seventy-seven. My mom's only fifty-one."

And that just absolutely sucked. But she couldn't dwell on it or she knew she'd start crying and not be able to stop for hours.

She couldn't afford that. She had responsibilities to the *boschetta*. She had her mother to tend to.

Panic wanted to strangle her lungs but she forced it back and continued chopping.

Tam absently tapped her fingers against her mug. "And there's nothing you can do to stop the psychosis...or reverse it?"

Tira shook her head. "Nothing we've ever found."

A hereditary Etruscan *strega* with the Goddess Gift of *praenuntio*, the ability to see future events, Tira was screwed no matter which way she looked at the situation.

The knife came down a little harder than she'd planned, causing Tam's face to scrunch into a grimace.

"I'm sorry, Tira. I just..."

"Tira, I smell smoke," Suvera Belludi called from her bedroom.

Her hand clenched around the knife handle as Tira took a deep breath. She smelled nothing but the mint on the cutting board. "Everything's fine, Mamma. Nothing's burning."

"Well, of course not. Not here, dear."

Concern licked up Tira's spine and Tam started to frown.

It was probably nothing. Her mother hadn't had a lucid vision in weeks.

Still...

Tira put her knife aside and headed for her mother's room, just down the small hallway to the side of the kitchen. Stopping just before the door, she made sure she pushed every thought out of her head. Then she steeled herself.

Stepping into the room, Tira looked straight into her mother's vacant eyes and forced a gentle smile. When what she wanted to do was cry.

Strapped to the bed, Suvera looked her way with a smile almost as vacant as her stare.

"Do you know where the smoke is, Mamma?"

Su shook her head, her gray-streaked ash blonde hair falling over her face in disarray. "No. But the boys can't see well in the smoke. And the blood is making it hard for them to think. I'm afraid they won't be able to get out, sweetheart."

Tira's heart tripped over the "boys" comment. There were only two men her mother called boys with that tone of voice. But she had to be sure.

She cleared her throat to get rid of the knot but didn't quite manage it. "What boys, Mamma?"

"Why, your boys, sweetheart."

All the air rushed from her lungs and black tinged the edges of her vision. She nearly fell to her knees before she grabbed the doorjamb and forced her knees to lock.

Su smiled. "They've always been such handsome boys."

Blessed Goddess. Something was happening or was about to happen to Nic and Duke.

Tira ran to the bed to grab her mother's hand, strapped with Velcro restraints to the bed, to see if she could tap into the vision, see what her mother was seeing.

Nothing. She saw nothing.

Behind her, she heard a faint beeping and turned to find Tam reaching into her pocket for her cell phone.

Tam's expression made Tira feel like someone had kicked her in the stomach.

"I've got to go." Tam turned on her heel and flew back to the kitchen.

Tira released her mother and ran after Tam.

"What is it? What's going on?"

Tam had already grabbed her medical bag and was halfway to the front door. "I don't know. But the code was 9-1-1. Four injured. That's all Dr. Marone said."

The *lucani* army doctor, Gio Marone, had worked on his own for decades before Tam had mated Kyle. But Tam was an LPN who had almost completed her degree work to become a registered nurse and Marone had taken to the young woman like a father with a long-lost daughter. He relied on Tam's help with the more serious cases.

Tira grabbed Tam's arm. "I need to come with you. Please. Give me one minute to find someone to take care of Mamma."

Tam just nodded and said, "Hurry."

* * * * *

Tam peeled out of the *boschetta's* village of New Tarquin in Oley Township with the gas pedal to the floor of her classic black Mustang.

Clinging to the holy-shit handle above the passenger-side window, Tira barely noticed the passing miles.

She kept her concentration focused on her breathing and on the continued steady beating of her heart. If she allowed the fear to consume her, she'd be curled up in a ball in the backseat crying. Or screaming.

Tam didn't speak, as if the other woman knew she wouldn't answer. Couldn't answer without losing control.

Only when they pulled to a stop in front of Tam's home in Alsace Township did Tira realize they weren't headed to the *lucani* den.

As soon as she slammed the car into park and twisted the key, Tam flew out of the car and raced for the house. Tira followed close on her heels but came to a stop on the porch.

She heard Dr. Marone shouting directions to Tam. Most of what he was saying didn't make any sense. She caught a few words—oxygen, concussion, bleeding—but her brain wasn't making connections.

Then she heard a voice that made her feet move.

"No, I don't know what the fuck happened."

Duke.

She crossed the threshold, her gaze searching for only one thing. The man attached to that voice. She had to see him. She *needed* to see him. Right now.

There was no one in the front room so she headed for the bedrooms on the side of the house.

In the first, she saw a man she didn't recognize sprawled on a bed that looked too small for him. He had dried blood on his face and bare chest but he looked to be breathing.

She turned and headed for the next bedroom.

Dr. Marone and Tam huddled over someone on the bed while Kyle knelt by a padded bench at the end of the bed and used a cloth to clean blood from the wolf lying there.

The doctor shifted as she stopped in the doorway and she caught a glimpse of the man on the bed.

"Oh *no*."

Nic lay there, still as death, his skin gray. She couldn't tell if he was breathing or what the doctor and Tam were doing to him.

She only saw the dried blood on his neck leading back to his ears.

"Duke," Kyle barked.

As she froze, stunned and unable to think, a broad chest moved into her field of vision.

"Tira. Out. Now. You shouldn't be in here."

That voice brought tears to her eyes.

She lifted her gaze to find Duke's dark brown eyes dazed and almost unfocused as he stared down at her.

Blessed Goddess, he was injured too. He had an angry bruise on the side of his face and dried blood at his ears. She was no doctor or nurse but she knew that was bad.

Fear swept through her like a deep chill, followed by sorrow. They could have died. And she wouldn't want to live if anything happened to either of them.

"Tira, you shouldn't be in here."

Of course he wouldn't want her in here. Duke had always protected Nic as best he could. And he still thought she was the root of all Nic's problems.

She should leave. She had no healing skills at all so she'd be useless here.

But Duke looked like shit too. He needed to be lying down or sitting down. And though she knew he didn't want her anywhere near him or Nic, she was the only one left to take care of him now. Since she couldn't do anything for Nic. Which she didn't want to even think about now.

"Fine. But you need to come with me," she said. "You should be lying down."

His half-assed sneer made her worry even more. "With you on top, sweetheart? Figures you're finally offering yourself up on a platter and I'm not in the mood to take you up on it."

She knew if he wasn't so badly injured, that dig would hurt more than it did now. Instead, her heart stuttered at the weakness of his voice. "You're not in any *shape* to take me up on it."

When he opened his mouth to respond, she shook her head. "No. Shut up, Duke. Just...not now. Come with me."

He stared down at her extended hand as if it might turn into a snake and bite him. It was a measure of just how bad he must feel that he didn't argue when she put her arm around his waist and his arm around her shoulders and allowed her to help him out to the living room.

So many questions raged through her mind but she bit her tongue. Now wasn't the time. He leaned so heavily on her, she thought he might pass out before they got to the large U-shaped sectional couch. They both released a sigh of relief when he sank onto the cushions. His head immediately settled back and his eyes closed.

For several seconds, she just stood there, trying not to think how close she'd come to losing him today. How badly Nic must be injured.

Her hand froze halfway to sinking into his beautiful black hair, the ends curling almost to his shoulders. Longer than the last time she'd seen him when they'd added another nail in the coffin of their tragic little story. The visions she'd drawn from one of

the men who'd tried to kidnap Tam a few months ago had nearly made her mad. They'd been such a jumble of pain and despair and destruction that she still struggled to make any real sense of it.

That day, she'd collapsed in a dead faint at the man's feet and Nic and Duke had been there to carry her out of the room.

She'd regained consciousness only to see Nic and Duke hovering over her. She'd been horrified to have them witness her breakdown. She didn't want them to think of her as weak. Even if she thought of herself that way.

Then she'd started to sob uncontrollably. And Dr. Marone had been called to sedate her.

She hadn't seen either man since.

She pulled back her hand before she touched him and hurried to the kitchen to find a bowl and fill it with hot water then headed for the bathroom to get towels so she could clean him off and tend to his injuries.

It only took her a few minutes but when she came back, she saw Duke staring at her. That intense dark gaze had always drawn her, even when he seemed to be looking right through her.

"Are you in pain?" she asked. "I'll get some medicine from the doctor or Tam."

He didn't say anything, just continued to look at her for so long she started to worry he was in shock.

Finally, he shook his head. "He's gonna be okay. Doc'll make sure of it."

Nic. He was talking about Nic and she wasn't sure if he was trying to make her feel better, or himself.

The murmur of voices from the bedroom was muffled and she'd noticed on her way to the bathroom that they'd closed the door. Probably for the best. She didn't know if she'd be able to function if she could see and hear what was going on in there.

Putting Nic out of her mind for the moment, she focused on Duke, curving her mouth in a cool smile.

"Why don't you take the shirt off so I can see your injuries? We need to get you cleaned off." The heavy stench of smoke from his clothing made her stomach roll. "Actually, why don't you just strip everything off and you can wrap a towel around your waist."

His mouth curled into his default expression of a sneer. "Why don't you come over here and do it yourself, babe. You know you want to."

The fact that she did made her fingers clench around the towels and the bowl in anger. "And maybe I should just let you lie here in pain on the couch. Is that really what you want?"

No, what he wanted was for her to get the hell away from him. She saw it in the flat line of his mouth and his cold stare. Why was she so damn attracted to a man who hated her so much?

And why was the man who loved her unconditionally the one man she couldn't touch?

Tears sprang to her eyes but she turned to set the bowl and towels on the coffee table so she could blink them away before Duke saw them.

Duke sighed, as if he barely had the strength to fight back, something he seemed to live for, and fear rose again.

"What I want is a shower."

Her gaze flicked back to his. "You're not strong enough. You'll fall."

"Fuck that." He lifted his head off the back of the couch and inched forward, as if getting ready to stand. "I need to wash this crap off me and I can't sit here while you do it. Just help me to the bathroom."

She froze and the metal bowl filled with water slipped out of her hand and landed with a thud on the table. Water sloshed over the sides but she couldn't move. She felt like he'd slapped her, his meaning as clear as if he'd spelled it out for her. He didn't want her to touch him. He didn't want—

"*Vaffanculo*. Don't look like that. Uni's ass, Tira, I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Of course you didn't." She struggled to keep all emotion from her voice. "I'll just help you to the bathroom."

She didn't let their gazes catch as she stood then waited for him to push to his feet. He made it, but not before she thought she might have to catch him as he fell. And if he had to rely on her to keep him upright, he was out of luck. He had at least eighty pounds of muscle on her. If he went down, they both went down.

And even though he made no bones about the fact that he didn't want her to touch him, she couldn't let him be hurt any more than he already was.

She wrapped her arm around his waist once again as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and they stumbled off to the bathroom.

"Do you want me to get Kyle?" she asked. "You can't be alone. I'm afraid you'll fall."

He snorted, the sound weak enough to make her arm tighten around him. "What? Afraid of a little nudity? Never figured you for a prude, Tira."

Her back straightened, even as she knew he was trying to get a rise out of her. "I just didn't figure you wanted me in here."

His hand clenched on her shoulder for a bare second before he released her to grab hold of the toilet and lower himself onto the closed seat.

"Shit, babe, can we call a truce here? Just for a few minutes? I really need this shower. And I know I'm gonna fall flat on my face without you here. So can you *please* just give me a *fucking* break?"

She'd give him a break. She'd break a few plates over his head, the arrogant bastard. Anger began to burn away some of her fear and she opened her mouth to blast him...

Until she took another look at his face as he bent to take off his boots. It took a lot for Duke's perpetually tanned skin to look as pale as he did now.

Stupid, stubborn SOB.

With a huff, she knelt and pushed his hands out of the way so she could unlace his boots and yank them off his feet along with his socks. Above her, she felt his breath brush against her hair before he leaned back to pull his shirt over his head.

Blessed Goddess.

The man's body was a work of art. Ripped didn't adequately describe him. Sculpted might be more on the mark. He didn't bulge obscenely but each and every muscle was lovingly defined.

He looked like he could play defensive tackle for a pro football team. And she loved it. Loved the sense that if he ever enclosed her in those strong arms, nothing bad would ever happen to her.

But the chances of that happening were slim to none.

Duke hated her.

Standing, she turned away to start the shower when he went for the button on his jeans.

Blinking back more tears, she thought maybe hate was too strong. He disliked her. Intensely. Sometimes he merely pretended not to know she existed.

And that could cut just as deeply.

It hadn't always been like this, the distance between them. She'd known since the first time she'd met Duke and Nic that she had strong feelings for both of them.

But when she'd kissed Nic that first time...

When everything had gone to shit and she'd pushed Nic away and Duke had cut her out of his life...

"Not that I don't appreciate the view, babe, but you need to move."

She turned to find Duke on his feet. And naked.

Oh Sweet Mother Goddess...

She'd never seen him completely nude and now her gaze tried to take in as much of him as she could. From his broad shoulders and chest to his six-pack abs and trim waist.

And lower, to his impressive cock, which started to fill as her gaze stopped to watch. Blinking, she forced herself to turn away and move so he could step into the shower.

Luckily, it was a stall and not a tub because she didn't think he'd have the strength to lift his feet over the rim. As it was, he nearly stumbled over the lip of the stall but caught himself just as she reached out to steady him.

His groan of relief as he stood beneath the water heated her skin and made her think of sex.

Tinia's teat, she was losing her mind.

"Are you going to be okay?" She managed to force the words past the lump in her throat but only because she focused on the tension in his arms. "Do you want me to leave?"

With his arms braced against the wall and his head and body under the showerhead, Duke let the water fall over him, soaking into his hair and plastering against his head until it fell past his shoulders.

Black tinged the water on the stall floor as soot and dirt washed off him.

Tira watched, waited and prayed he didn't fall and hurt himself even more.

After what had to be ten minutes, with her entire body tensed and ready to reach for him should he pass out, he finally sighed and lifted his head. With a visible effort, he pushed away from the wall and Tira had to clench her hands at her side to stop from grabbing him when he swayed on his feet.

"I hate to fucking ask because I know you're gonna hate this but...I'm gonna need help."

"What do you need?"

He snorted, as if he found the question funny, and her spine went rigid again. The implication that he didn't want to need anything from her was loud and clear. She should leave. Walk out and let the bastard fall and hit his head –

"I don't... Fuck, I don't think I can wash myself and I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to stay on my feet. I need you to do it for me."

Chapter Two

Duke knew he must be ready to keel over because he couldn't decide if he wanted Tira to tell him to fuck off and leave him to fall flat on his face or if he should embrace the crazy and let her put her hands on his naked body.

Considering he, Nic, Kaine and the *eteri* should've died in that house, he thought maybe he could be excused for going a little crazy.

The place literally should've landed on their heads. If they'd been seconds later walking out the door, they'd all be buried under the pile of rubble the house had become.

But somehow, they'd gotten here. He'd managed to get Nic and Kaine and the *eteri* in the car and drive them to Kyle's. He barely remembered the time behind the wheel. He'd been on autopilot the entire trip and he still couldn't believe he hadn't driven off the road or passed out along the way.

He only knew that the next thing he remembered was Kyle and Dr. Marone ripping open the car doors, pulling out bodies and taking them into the house.

The doc had examined Kaine first and declared her injuries superficial, unconsciousness her body's way of healing. The *eteri* had also been out cold by the time Duke got them to Kyle's. No one had been too worried about him.

But the doc had examined Nic and his entire vibe had changed. Duke had scented anxiety pouring off the veteran *lucani* doctor.

That had been bad. Tira walking in with Tam had almost been worse.

Duke had wanted to howl.

Her overwhelming fear for Nic's life had made him sick to his stomach. He'd wanted to comfort her but his default asshole had kicked in. Combined with coming off the adrenaline high, Duke felt like he'd just ended a ten-day bender.

Tired, angry, aching all over and terrified that his best friend was about to kick it, Duke had latched on to Tira's fear for Nic and her anger at him and let it fuel him.

He felt like he was gonna fall over at any second but he needed to wash the dirt and grime off his body. And since she was handy, she'd have to suck it up and do it for him.

Didn't matter that she hated him, that she thought he was demon spawn and the root of all evil.

Or that he wanted her hands on his body so badly he shook with it.

He could just imagine her reaction if he pulled her close and kissed her like he was dying to do. She'd freeze in his arms then pull away. Her gaze would go cold and she'd hightail it away from him as fast as she could go.

And he'd only have himself to blame for her reaction. The way he'd treated her since her vision...

Shit, he *was* crazy.

He hadn't had the strength to close the shower stall door and when he heard Tira moving around, he figured she was leaving.

So when she stepped into the shower with him, he nearly fell on his ass in shock.

Shorter than him by almost a foot, Tira's white-gold curls looked like moonlight against her pale skin. Wearing a white lace bra and plain white cotton bikini panties, she didn't meet his eyes as she stuck the washcloth in her hands under the water.

"If you fall, I won't be able to get you back up," she snapped, her tone cold.

Duke couldn't help himself. He nearly laughed at her unintentional sexual undertone because she sure as shit could get him up.

Hell, he would've bet the house, the farm and his life that he wouldn't have been able to get an erection right now but he would have lost that bet. He knew when she started to rub that wet cloth on his skin, his cock would start to harden and she'd have even more reason to think he was a prick.

"I won't fall. Just hurry up."

He braced for her touch but still wasn't prepared when she brushed the cloth against his back. A lightning charge of electricity shot through his body, making every hair stand on end.

Her strokes were tentative at first, but became firmer as she washed his shoulders and back.

Uni's ass, he could stand here forever if she continued. His shoulders dropped from their hunched position as the tension eased out of them and the pounding in his temples dialed down from excruciating to merely mind-numbing.

She moved in ever-widening circles down his back until she reached his waist, where she hesitated for several seconds before finally sweeping the cloth over his ass.

Desire for her bare hands on his body raged through him, but he knew he was reaching the end of his strength when his cock barely gave a twitch.

He had his mouth open to tell her to hurry the fuck up when she bent to take care of his legs.

She moved faster now, as if she wanted to get this over with.

"Can you turn?"

Good question. He was barely holding himself up now. Still, he wasn't about to fall in front of her.

And he had to admit he wanted her to put her hands on his chest. And lower.

Yeah, he was a son of a bitch. A pathetic son of a bitch.

Praying for strength, he forced himself to turn, ignoring the dizziness in his head and the weakness in his knees.

Now the water fell on his nape and shoulders, making his eyes close for just a second. When he opened them again, he saw an emotion on Tira's face that caught him off guard.

For a second, he thought he'd seen something hot and dark in her eyes. A yearning. For him.

He must be close to passing out.

He shook his head, spraying water droplets all around them. Tira quickly dropped her gaze and started to wash him again. Her left hand settled on his ribs, as if to brace him. The other swiped the washcloth as quickly as she could across his chest and stomach, then down his legs, carefully avoiding any contact with his balls and half-hard cock.

Vaffanculo, he hoped she didn't make some smart-ass or offended comment about his state. Because in the frame of mind he was in right now, he'd want to press her against the wall and kiss her. Show her just exactly how he felt about her.

Gods damn it, he was sick and tired—

He swayed on his feet, his head feeling like he'd just taken a blow.

As if from a distance, he heard her gasp. His arms and legs started to shake and he had three seconds to think, *Holy shit, I'm going down*.

Then her arms wrapped around his waist and her body pressed full length against his.

Holy shit became *Aw, fuck* as every one of his senses lit on fire.

How many times had he dreamed about her like this? Okay, maybe not with the bra and panties but this was closer than he'd ever thought he'd get to those fantasies and his body leapt to attention as if he wasn't about to fall on his face with exhaustion.

He felt her every breath, felt the lushness of her gorgeous breasts against his upper stomach. She was so much smaller than him, her head fit under his chin easily, which nestled his cock against her soft stomach.

He sucked in a deep breath as his naked cock rubbed against her naked skin. Jesus, he was completely fucked up. He wanted her until he throbbed but he could barely stand.

If he didn't have his hands planted on the stall walls, he'd be lying on the floor.

He groaned.

"Duke? Are you okay?"

Huffing out a laugh that made her stiffen against him, he knew she thought he was going to say something stupid and offensive. Like he always did.

"No, I'm not. If I don't get out of here soon, I'm gonna go down hard. I don't want to hurt you, Tira. I never want to hurt you."

Shit, his tongue was coming loose and that was dangerous. He had to get out of here and away from her. Now.

But his body had finally decided it'd had enough. The muscles in his legs shook like cooked noodles, his head swam in a fog. But damn if he didn't have a hard-on.

Tira took a deep breath and he nearly groaned as her tight nipples rubbed against his chest. "Okay, let's get you on the floor and then I'll go get Kyle to help you out of here."

He was too used up to argue with her. Instead, he let her maneuver him until his back was against the wall and he could slide down the slick tile until his ass hit the floor.

His eyes had closed for the trip down but when he reopened them, all he saw were her breasts.

She was bending in front of him, trying to free her arms trapped between his back and the wall. Her pale skin gleamed, the mounds of her breasts nearly falling out of that lace bra, which no longer hid anything at all. The water had turned it translucent.

If he could have, he would have leaned forward and sucked one of those pretty pink nipples into his mouth. Fuck the consequences.

But he couldn't even lift his head.

Uni's ass. He needed... He needed...

"Duke! Don't fall asleep. Not yet. Just let me get Kyle."

"What if I don't want you to leave?"

He forced his head back far enough that his eyes could connect with hers and saw her complete shock at his too-truthful statement.

Idiot. I'm such a fucking idiot.

But, oh, sweet Blessed Mother Uni, she was beautiful. He wanted to kiss that rounded mouth, put his hands around her tiny waist and lower her down onto his lap.

Onto his fast-fading erection.

He turned his head to the side, resting his cheek against the cool tile. "Make it fast, babe. I'm gonna be out cold in less than a minute."

Tira didn't want to leave Duke on the floor of the shower.

She actually worried that if she left him, he wouldn't be breathing when she returned. Logically, she knew that wasn't going to happen but her brain wasn't exactly up to speed.

And she wanted him to explain what he meant by his question. What if he didn't want her to leave? What did that mean?

As she stared into his dark eyes, pulled in way too many directions to think straight, she put her hands on his cheeks and bent to kiss him on the forehead.

Except for washing his body just now, she hadn't touched him like this in eight years. For so long, they'd been at each other's throats, since she'd forced herself to give them up. To push them away.

Nic had seemed to understand why she'd done it. Why she had to keep her distance from them or lose her mind. Nic never made her feel guilty about her withdrawal.

But Duke... He'd taken her actions as a slap to the face. As if they'd become prize fighters in a ring, he'd backed into the opposite corner, his defenses up at all times.

And his tongue could wound at twenty paces.

Whenever he made a smart-ass comment, she couldn't help herself. She had to fight back, even though she loved him just as much as she loved Nic. She wouldn't be able to bear it if anything ever happened to either of them. It might just push her over the edge into the abyss her mom was in.

She didn't linger, but she didn't just give him a peck and pull away. She pressed her lips against his skin, tried to let him know how she felt without saying the words he didn't want to hear. At least, not from her.

Blessed Goddess, she couldn't lose them.

"Don't move." She forced the words out of her mouth as she rose and turned away to leave the stall. Avoiding Duke's gaze, she wrapped a towel around her wet body and hurried back to the bedroom to get Kyle.

Fear made her freeze with her hand on the doorknob. What if something had happened to Nic? What if he'd died while she was in the shower with Duke?

How would they —

No. She couldn't do anything about Nic. But Duke still needed help.

After a deep breath, she opened the door and looked for Kyle. He was standing at the foot of the bed, arms crossed over his chest as he watched Dr. Marone and Tam hover over Nic.

Blessed Goddess, he looked...

She swayed on her feet. He looked dead.

Choking in a breath, she wanted to run to the bed but couldn't move.

"Tira, hey, it's okay. He's gonna be okay."

Kyle stepped into her field of vision and she looked up at him, expecting to see confirmation of her fears on his face. Then his words finally sank in.

She wanted to drop into a puddle on the floor as relief made her woozy but she forced herself to remember why she was here.

"I need you to help Duke out of the shower. I can't move him on my own."

Kyle closed his golden eyes for a brief second before he shook his head as he moved past her. He headed to the bathroom, muttering under his breath the entire way. "That stupid, fucking — Why the hell didn't he just — Shit, Duke. You're a stubborn ass."

"Yeah, and fuck you, too, *decurio*. Just help me up. I doubt Tam wants me as a permanent fixture in your bathroom."

Tira's heart stuttered. The language and the sentiment were all Duke. He made Kyle's higher rank as *decurio* sound like a swear word even though his voice had all the strength of a newborn infant.

Kyle's mouth pulled into a flat line, as if he too recognized how weak Duke sounded. He reached down to pull Duke off the floor, and his expression got grimmer as he practically had to carry Duke back to the living room. Before she left the bathroom, she grabbed several towels from the cabinet then hurried after the men.

Kyle had already gotten Duke onto the couch, where he lay with his head resting against the back cushion. His eyes were closed and he was so beautifully naked that it took her a minute to realize his skin was covered with goose bumps.

As Kyle stepped back, she moved in. The oversized towels still weren't big enough to cover his entire body. Starting at his shoulders, she pushed him forward just far enough to get one around his back then draped another over his chest. The next she lay across his stomach and lap then she knelt down to wrap another one around his lower legs.

"Can't stand the sight of me naked, huh?"

She bit back a sharp retort to his taunt and stepped behind the couch to wrap his hair in one of the towels. "You're cold. I don't want you to get sick."

"Not gonna get sick." Slurring more words now, his eyes closed, he was almost asleep.

Kyle stepped into her line of vision to get her attention, knowing she wouldn't have heard or comprehended anything he said. All of her attention was focused on Duke. "I'll go get a blanket for him and a pair of Tam's sweats for you."

As Kyle left, she looked down, realizing all she had on was a towel and her undies. She'd completely forgotten but now her own flesh broke out in goose bumps.

She shivered but Duke didn't notice. She was pretty sure he'd fallen asleep or passed out.

Standing above him, she watched his rugged features soften as she gently squeezed the moisture from his longer-than-normal hair.

Now that the adrenaline rush was wearing off, she'd started to shake. Her hands trembled. She needed to ask Kyle for a comb. Duke's hair would be a tangled mess if she didn't get it combed out before it dried completely.

Not that he'd care. And not that she should.

They'd survived.

She hadn't lost them.

And yet, nothing had changed.

"Tira."

Tam's voice cut through the growing haze in her head. She sniffled as she looked up, realizing her face was wet with tears.

“Nic’s asleep.” Tam’s voice was so soft, Tira had to concentrate to hear it. “Gio believes he’ll be fine but we’re going to have Nica come take a look at him if he starts to run a fever or has complications.”

Her best friend, Nica, had recently taken over her mother’s position as healer in the *boschetta*. As *streghe*, witches of Etruscan descent, she and Nica had been reared together in New Tarquin. “She, Tanner and Jensen took a...a trip to the shore for the weekend.”

The brothers and Nica were on a belated honeymoon and Tira would hate for them to have to cut it short but Nica would be here in a heartbeat if she knew Nic and Duke needed her help. Nica’s Goddess Gift of healing was a true gift.

Hers...

“Tira, maybe you want to sit down before you fall over.”

She forced a smile and shook her head. “I need to get him dried off so he doesn’t catch a cold. He shouldn’t catch a chill. Do you have a comb I can borrow?”

Tam nodded her head, her expression in nurse mode. Compassionate and calm. “Of course.”

“Tira, here’s the blanket and the sweats.” Kyle spoke from behind her and she jumped. “Hey, why don’t you let me take the towels and get him spread out on the couch? And why don’t you have a seat before you fall over.”

“No. I have to comb out his hair.”

A wide-toothed black comb appeared in front of her eyes as if by magic. “Here you go, hon.”

As Tam walked over to wrap her arms around Kyle’s waist, Tira saw them exchange a look. Kyle frowned down at his mate but Tam just shook her head as Tira began to comb the knots out of Duke’s hair.

It didn’t take her long and she knew she was starting to zone out but he was out cold and she could touch him to her heart’s content. Still, she knew she couldn’t do this all day.

She forced herself to stop after another minute then she stood there, unsure what to do next.

“Hey, hon,” Tam touched her towel-covered back, careful not to brush against any of her exposed skin. “Why don’t you get dressed then check on Nic? We’ll take care of Duke for a few minutes.”

“Okay, sure.” That sounded like a plan.

Turning her back to the room, she stripped off her wet panties and bra then pulled on the sweats Kyle had given her before she headed for the bedroom. She forced her feet to keep moving until she stood in the doorway, looking at Nic lying so still on the bed.

Dr. Marone was repacking his bag. The bench Kaine was lying on had been moved to the side wall where the wolf continued to sleep.

“Ah Tira. Looks like they’re going to be okay. Since I assume you’re staying, I’m ordering you to get some sleep as well.” He looked at her over his tiny reading glasses. “You look a little unsteady on your feet, sweetheart. Tam will obviously be here if anything should change. I’m headed back to the den.”

The elderly Dr. Marone had taken over as *lucani* army doctor two decades before she’d been born almost twenty-six years ago. Since she wasn’t *lucani*, they hadn’t had much contact but he looked exactly like her image of a doctor—short, round, bald and always smiling. She wanted to hug the man but she settled for a heartfelt though wobbly smile.

“I...” she wanted to say something. Needed to say something but she didn’t know what. Finally she nodded and walked to the side of the bed. “I’ll get some sleep. Thank you.”

He walked over to her and patted her on the back, making sure not to brush against her exposed skin. Her Gift wasn’t as strong as her mother’s, but skin-to-skin contact almost always triggered her visions.

Duke being one of the only exceptions.

Pulling the padded chair on the wall closer to the bed, she practically fell into it.

Eyes burning, she let her gaze eat its fill of Nic. From his gorgeous hair with its mix of shades from brown to red, to his starkly handsome features that never failed to make her heart ache. His skin tone was naturally pale but now looked ashen. That more than anything made her feel like crying.

She tried but couldn’t stop the vision as it ran through her head. The one she’d seen nearly a decade ago. She’d been a late bloomer, her Gift not kicking in until she’d been eighteen years old.

Blessed Goddess, she’d been so worried she’d never develop one. That she wouldn’t be the daughter her mother needed her to be. Would never be able to take her place in the *boschetta* when her mother finally decided to retire.

Now she wished she’d never developed it.

“Tira, here.” A steaming mug appeared in front of her face, the hand holding it connected to Tam. “Drink this.”

Tira took it without thought. “Do you believe in destiny, Tam? Do you believe that your entire life is set out before you and nothing you can do will change it?”

Tam didn’t hesitate. “No, I don’t.”

Tira lifted her gaze to meet the other woman’s. “Then you don’t believe I see visions of the future?”

Tam sat on the edge of the bed, her mouth curving in a comforting smile. “Yes, I do. I believe some people are set on a path they won’t deviate from. But I also believe your path can change in the blink of an eye and that what might have been doesn’t have to come to pass.”

Tira thought about that for a moment. Then she sighed. “Has Kyle ever told you our tragic little story?”

Tam nodded, her smile fading away. “What he knows of it, yes. He said you touched Nic and had a vision of his death. He said it was your first. I can’t imagine how horrifying that was.”

She didn’t bother to argue or agree. It had been hell, pure and simple. “I met Nic and Duke when I was fifteen and they were nearly eighteen. It was that lightning-strike moment, you know, when you realize what the whole chemistry thing is about.

“Nic always had this big grin that just made you want to smile along with him and Duke was always so quiet but he had that glint in his eye, the one that put you on notice that he was trouble. Good trouble. He never had a malicious bone in his body.

“For two years, I waited and bided my time. They were notorious flirts with the *lucani* girls and I hated that they always treated me like a kid because I knew they had feelings for me. I mean, I know why they did it now. I was young. And they were wild.

“And then Duke’s dad died and his mom took him away for all those months.”

She stopped to shake her head and take a sip of the decadent hot chocolate Tam had made, letting its heat seep through her cold body. “When he got back... That glint was gone. His mother dropped him at Nic’s parents’ house and disappeared again. He and Nic had to start their legion service in days. Nic and I, we kept in touch while Duke was gone. Nic gave me a cell phone so we could call each other. When he called me to tell me Duke was back, I snuck away from the *boschetta* so Nic could pick me up and take me to see Duke. I was eighteen then. And still a virgin. And I wanted them.”

She had to stop to take a breath but Tam didn’t try to hurry her along, she just sat there quietly, her focus squarely on Tira. Tam might be younger but she had an old soul.

“Duke seemed happy to see me and we had dinner together, just the three of us at Nic and Duke’s house and everything was going to be wonderful.”

Her throat closed as she remembered. “I was in love with these two gorgeous men who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Screw *boschetta* tradition that *streghe* never commit themselves to mates because it divides our focus between our duties and our love lives. I was stronger than that. I wanted it all.”

She forced her eyes to stay open. She didn’t want to remember exactly what had happened. But it was branded in her memory. Duke had stepped behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, Nic in front of her, reaching for her waist. Nic leaned down to kiss her, his mouth touched hers and—

Blinking hard, she tried to chase the memory away but the tears had already started. “I felt like I was right there, in the vision. I could smell the blood and see it pooling around his head on the ground. I heard Duke screaming for help. Then I flashed again and I saw the funeral.” She could actually feel the rain on her skin. “Duke had to take me back to my mom a crying mess.”

It hadn’t been pretty. Hell, it hadn’t even been simply messy. It’d been a disaster.

“Have you tried... Did you ever attempt to see if the vision changed?” Tam asked, her tone tentative.

Tira nodded, despair welling up along with the tears. “I got brave a few years ago. By then the guys had...moved on.” And so had she. For her own sanity’s sake. “But I couldn’t let it go. I just... I kissed Nic again.”

And nothing had changed. The vision of his death had been the same. The letdown had almost been harder that time.

“But you still love them.”

She met Tam’s gaze head on. “And I always will. How’s that for a sob story?”

* * * * *

Duke woke with a hell of a headache and a full-body ache.

Gods be damned, he hurt fucking everywhere.

Better than being buried under that house, though, so there was that.

Biting his tongue to stifle a groan, he sat up. The darkness disoriented him, so he closed his eyes and tried to get his bearings. Since he didn’t hear any movement, he figured everyone else was still asleep.

He rotated his neck until it popped a few times, relieving some of the pressure. Moving his shoulders, he rolled them to ease their stiffness then arched his back until it cracked.

His stomach rumbled and he thought about rummaging through Kyle’s fridge—

A soft snuffle from the other end of the U-shaped couch made his eyes pop open.

Tira lay curled in a ball, facing away from him. Her beautiful blonde hair shone like moonlight in the dark. She was covered completely in drab gray sweats, which made him long to see the creamy white skin he knew was beneath.

Shit, yesterday had been fucked up. But they’d made it back. Alive.

He knew Kyle would have woken him if anything had happened to Nic so he figured Nic was sleeping as well. And Kaine.

He had no idea what had happened to the *eteri* and didn’t really care.

But Tira... She sighed in her sleep but the closer he listened, the more he thought he heard her sniffing.

Was she crying in her sleep?

Hell, she should just take a dull spoon and cut out his heart right now.

She’d thought he’d been asleep while she’d been drying his hair earlier. Almost, but not quite. How could he sleep when she had her hands on him?

He’d wanted her to continue for as long as she wanted because if she’d known he was awake, she never would’ve done it.

And he’d enjoyed it too damn much.

What he couldn't figure out was why. Why had she touched him like he was her lover?

Why, when she'd thought he was asleep, did her hands linger, her fingers playing through his hair as if she loved the feel of it?

Was he insane to even consider that maybe her feelings for him had changed after all these years? That she still might love him, even though he'd done his best to push her away?

And could he touch her knowing Nic never could?

As her cries became more pronounced, Duke couldn't sit still any longer. He crossed the space between the couches, dragging the blanket along with him. He was naked and he didn't want her to wake and think he was taking advantage of her.

Without over-thinking it, he sat next to her, pulled the blanket over his lower body then, as gently as he could, lifted her onto his lap and into his arms. He almost expected her to fight him, so he kept a loose grip on her.

He shouldn't have worried.

She tucked her head under his chin as if she knew exactly where it belonged. She sighed, and the tears she'd been crying stopped with a sharp snuffle. Her entire body relaxed and her warm breath ruffled the hair on his chest and sent a sharp spike of desire from his chest to his cock.

Her ass shifted on his thigh as she wriggled closer, one hand rubbing from his pec to his shoulder and higher into his hair, where she wound her fingers around the longer-than-normal strands.

"Duke."

His name whispered from her lips, and his arms tightened around her in shock. He would've thought it'd be Nic she was dreaming about. Because she was still asleep. She wasn't faking that.

How the hell—

No, you know what? Fuck it. He could admit, if only to himself, that he loved to hear her say his name. Especially like this. Not in exasperation or anger. But as if she cared for him. As if they were lovers.

With one arm wrapped around her shoulders, holding her close, he lifted his other hand to brush through her silky hair. Her face still wet with tears, he let his fingers wipe them away.

"It's okay, Tira," he whispered against her crown, his lips brushing her hair. "Everything's okay now."

"No. No."

Damn, what could he do to calm her? He didn't want to wake her because he was a bastard who wanted to hold her.

She was shaking in his arms and burrowing closer as if she were cold. The air in the room was a little chilly but she was wearing cotton fleece from head to toe. Still, if he took off the fleece, his higher body temperature would raise hers in minutes.

Yeah and if you believe that one, I've got a bridge to sell you.

Fuck it.

As gently and as he could, he stripped the sweatshirt off her upper body without waking her. He tried not to make an ass of himself as her naked flesh met his.

But, *fuck*, it was torture. Yes, they'd been in the shower just like this earlier today but he'd been whacked out. He didn't have that excuse now.

And he was going to enjoy every fucking second.

Since he was still naked under the blanket, he left her pants on. Removing those was just asking him to step over a cliff he couldn't climb back up. And now he had to pull the blanket over her as well, enclosing them in warmth and darkness.

Her skin quickly warmed against his as he rubbed a hand up and down her arm and around her back. Settling even more heavily against him, her breathing got deeper until she lay completely unconscious in his arms.

Her crying had stopped, thank the gods. He couldn't stand to hear it. It ripped him apart inside.

He wanted to close his eyes and fall asleep with her in his arms but he was worried about what would happen when she woke. Would they go back to their battle stances?

Tinia's teat, he didn't want that. He was so sick of acting like he hated her because he knew she couldn't stand him. Yeah, it was a defense mechanism but it'd kept him sane these past years.

But...yesterday had changed things.

He knew that. He just didn't know how.

And as he lay there for hours, staring into the dark with Tira cuddled against him, he still had no answers.

Dawn was at least an hour away when he felt her begin to wake. He forced himself not to tense, to keep his arms loose around her, even when she shifted in his lap, brushing her thigh against his erection and making him want to thrust against her.

He knew the second she came fully awake and braced for her to push him away.

But she didn't. She lifted her hand to his shoulder and let it curve over the muscle before smoothing over to his neck.

He had a second to wonder if she truly was awake when she turned her head and let her lips rest against his chest.

He sucked in a breath as desire flashed through him like a lightning blast. How many times had he dreamed about having her just like this? Naked and warm against his own skin. Her mouth on his body.

Yeah, they were missing a crucial part of the equation but he couldn't be sorry about what they did have now.

And he wasn't about to waste the opportunity.

He needed her. He'd always needed her but knew they'd never be able to complete the triangle they were meant to be. For years, he'd let that fact keep them separated. He'd hurt her with his distance. He knew that now.

Well, he was done pushing her away and whatever happened, happened. They'd deal with it later.

"Duke." Her whisper brushed against his neck seconds before her lips, making his heart race and his skin tighten. His hands flattened on her back and started a slow, stroking massage that had her arching into him.

"Duke..."

Bending his head, he rubbed his nose against her hair, breathing in her scent, clean and bright and so fucking *her*.

She moved, as if to get up, and his arms tightened around her. Shit, he didn't want to lose her. Not now. He didn't think he could go another day if he didn't have her.

His throat tightened as his arms felt like rigid steel. He didn't think he could loosen them if he tried.

As her head tilted back, he actually felt fear coat his lungs in ice. What if she was still asleep? What if this was all a dream—

"Duke, shh. Let me up. Just for a minute."

He forced himself to obey but he didn't breathe as she slid off his lap, the blanket falling to the ground as she stood before him. He still couldn't see her face properly because of the dark but he could see when she bent to slide the sweats to her feet.

He was pretty damn sure she wasn't wearing underwear.

His cock pulsed, the tip wet with pre-cum.

She didn't say anything else and he was afraid to break the silence, break the spell.

Afraid she'd walk away.

She didn't. Reaching for his shoulders, she settled one knee on either side of his hips then wrapped her arms around his shoulders and settled her body against his. His arms bound her to him, bringing her even closer and trapping his cock between them.

It wouldn't take more than a repositioning of his hips to have his cock poised at her entrance but he was afraid to take any decision out of her hands. He had to know she wanted this as much as he did.

And gods damn, did he want her.

When her mouth settled over his and pressed his lips open so she could flick her tongue against his, he groaned and any chance at control blew apart at her taste.

Sweet, sexy. Forbidden for so long.

And now she was naked in his arms.

She kissed him for what seemed like hours, her mouth moving over his, unhurried at first but with a rapidly increasing sense of urgency. He sucked on her tongue, nipped at her lips. Her hands tugged and pulled at his hair, tiny frissons of pain zipping from his scalp down his back to his balls. Her fingers wrapped around the strands as if to stop him from getting away.

The hell if he was going anywhere. They'd have to pry her out of his arms by force. The fact that there were five other people in the house was a nagging fact in the back of his brain but easy enough to ignore.

Especially with Tira's hard nipples poking into his chest and her soft breasts filling his hands. He caressed her gently at first then harder as she pushed herself more fully into his palms.

He'd dreamed about touching her for so long that now that he had her, he wanted to spend hours on each inch of her skin. Her breasts felt like silk in his hands and each time he squeezed her, she moaned and arched closer.

His lungs working harder for each breath, Duke let one hand skim to her back then down to her ass, cupping the soft mound.

Tira's body made him want to worship her. She was all woman, soft and rounded. All curves, no hard edges. The only sharp bit of her was her tongue, which could wound at twenty paces.

He should know. He'd been on the receiving end of her barbs for years. With good reason. He'd been an ass, trying to keep her at arm's length.

But now, with her tongue flicking at his, playing with him, he couldn't seem to get her close enough.

He almost didn't notice the gentle motion of her hips as she rubbed her mound against his cock because he was so caught up in her taste. But when she gasped into his mouth as her clit connected with the wet tip, his hands grabbed for her waist, lifting her onto her knees.

He reached between her legs and stroked his finger through her sleek, wet lips, eliciting a moan from her that made his balls tighten in anticipation. She sounded hungry and a little desperate.

He understood the desperation. He felt the exact same way.

Especially when one hand released his hair to trail down his chest, her nails scratching erotically the entire way.

As he played his finger between her legs, teasing her clit with soft touches, she blazed a trail of fire. She tweaked his nipple between her thumb and forefinger before continuing to scratch her way down his abdomen to just above his cock.

Breaking away from his lips, she leaned back and dropped her gaze to where she slipped her hand around his erection. He fought to keep his eyes open so he could watch as well. He saw the narrow slit of her eyes, saw her parted lips as she struggled to draw in breath.

But it was the movement of her hand on his shaft that forced a groan from him. She started pumping slow and easy, her grip loose. If it'd been anyone else, the friction would have been barely enough to make him hard. Since it was Tira, he was ready to come in her hand.

He fought back the urge to thrust against her, to let her have the control. She played with him for several minutes, her palm against his skin no more than a brush of sensation. The air around them became heavier and harder to breathe.

Her breasts began to rise and fall more swiftly and her hand finally began to tighten around him. She rubbed him from root to tip, her palm cupping the tip on each upward motion.

Gods damn, he wished he had the strength to let her do this for hours. But he didn't. Already his balls were pulling up in anticipation and he knew he had to make her stop or he'd come in her hand.

And that would leave them both unsatisfied.

Of course, if he could get her to come before he sank into that tight pussy, that'd be just fine.

So he set about distracting her. Lowering his head, he cupped her breast in his hand and lifted it until he could get his lips around the nipple and suck it into his mouth. Her hand on his cock stilled as he let his teeth settle around her for a gentle nip before he started suckling her with steady pulls.

At the same time, he thrust one finger into her tight channel and bumped her clit with his thumb.

She froze as he worked a second finger into her, never losing contact with her clit. As he fucked her with his fingers and worked her clit with a steady circular motion, she finally began to move.

Her hand fell away from his shaft and both hands latched on to his upper arms. She moved with each thrust, following his rhythm. Her pussy clenched around his fingers, making him groan with the need to have her do that around his shaft.

Still, he had to get her off first because if he didn't, he was truly afraid he'd get inside her and lose it before she did.

And that was unacceptable.

So he concentrated every functioning brain cell on her pleasure. Admittedly, that wasn't many. Still, he had enough sense to follow her lead. When she twisted her hips, he gave her more pressure on her clit. When she arched away from him, he filled her more fully with his fingers, bringing her closer again.

Switching breasts, he made sure to tug on the nipple with his teeth, which made her moan and her fingers dug into his muscles. He wouldn't be surprised if she drew blood with her sharp little nails. Damn, he wished she would. He wanted her to mark him.

He wanted her. Always.

And he couldn't wait any longer.

Pulling his fingers from her pussy, he let them fall to his cock where he painted it with her juices, mixing it with his pre-cum.

Releasing her breast, he reached for her hips with one hand to guide her down. As she sank her fingers into his hair and sealed her mouth over his, he gripped his cock in his other hand and aimed straight into her body.

He wasn't prepared for her to force herself down on him, to take him all the way into her body in a flash of heat and friction.

His hips shot forward and they melded together so completely, he thought he might just spend now.

He fought back the urge to pump into her, to let her muscles milk him to climax.

But then she began to move. And he knew he had to last just a little bit longer. Just long enough to enjoy the ride.

Blessed Goddess, she felt like silk and dreams and tight, wet heat.

He wanted to close his eyes, to sink into the sensations but he didn't want to miss seeing her face when she came. While she controlled the motion, he slipped a hand between them to tend to her clit. Her gasping breath and the contraction of her inner muscles let him know he'd hit the perfect rhythm.

They moved together in the dark, straining toward completion. He watched her face, watched as her expression tightened from slack excitement to tense anticipation. She was right on the edge, her body straining for release, his holding back.

Until finally, she gasped and shook, her sheath clamping on him as she came. Her eyes shot open and stared straight into his, the connection flicking his switch with precision.

He pumped into her, flooding her with his seed, with his very soul.

As if she couldn't take it, she slumped against him as she shivered in reaction, her sex still clamped around him, his cock still twitching.

With his arms tight around her, he locked her to him.

And only after several minutes did he start to think that they were missing a piece of the equation.

And that they may never actually have it.

Chapter Three

At least an hour later, Duke heard the whisper of movement and voices from the other rooms.

The snick of a door opening made him look over his shoulder to see Kyle leave the bedroom, a pair of battered jeans his only clothing.

Kyle headed straight for the couch but his footsteps slowed as he caught sight of Duke and Tira, covered with the blanket but obviously naked and wrapped around each other beneath.

When their gazes connected, Kyle's brows lifted in a silent question. Duke didn't have an answer for the man who'd become more than his commanding officer in the past few months. He'd become a friend, something Duke didn't have a lot of.

Besides Nic and now Kaine, Duke couldn't think of anyone else who fit that title.

Not even Tira had fit into that category. Hell, he'd need a fucking thesaurus to figure out a title for her. Especially now.

Kyle held up his hand, his fingers spread. Five minutes. Then he disappeared into the bathroom.

Duke took a deep breath, the scents of sex and heat and Tira filling his head, making scenes from the past hours race through his head.

He didn't regret the sex. He'd never regret the sex, no matter what happened later. But the consequences... Yeah, those were gonna be a bitch.

Reluctantly, he set Tira's warm body on the cushion next to his, forcing down the urge to pick her up and run. The erection he'd been sporting since she'd fallen asleep deflated as the cool air hit it when he stood.

Running a hand over her bright hair, he was tucking the blanket securely around her when Kyle came back into the room holding a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt that he handed to Duke.

A few seconds later, dressed and feeling the walls closing in around him, Duke walked back to the kitchen where Kyle quietly prepped the coffeemaker.

"How's Nic?" he asked.

Kyle leaned back against the counter as the coffeemaker gurgled and popped. "Tam's checking him out now. Seems to be healing well. Even faster than Tam and the doctor thought he would."

"And Kaine?"

"Groggy but back in her skin. Somehow, she got into the *eteri's* room last night and slept there. He's still pretty out of it. Tam's going to check on him next, see if he's got any major damage. She didn't find any last night but...you never know with *eteri*."

"You think he's like Tam? That he's got a trace of the blood in him and that's why this woman was holding him?"

Kyle shook his head. "There's no scent at all. Is there anything you can tell me about the place you found him?"

"Yeah. It was meant to hold a whole lot more."

Duke told Kyle about the warren of cells beneath the house as Kyle's expression got darker.

"And you didn't see one gods damn thing in the whole house that could help us identify who was holding him?"

"Nothing. It was clean. Hell, I didn't even catch a scent of anyone other than the *eteri*."

"*Vaffanculo*, that's just fucking great." Kyle shoved a hand through his hair. "Back to square one."

"Maybe not. Maybe we'll be able to get something out of the *eteri*. Maybe he saw something. Maybe they didn't have time to wipe him clean. Maybe she thought the house coming down would take him out of the picture."

Kyle snorted as he poured coffee. "And maybe pigs'll fly. Whoever this 'she' is, she's been careful up to this point. She's not gonna screw up that badly now."

"You're in a foul mood this morning."

Kyle's eyebrows quirked upward. "And you're not?"

True.

Duke knew Kyle was giving him an opening. To talk. Something Duke didn't do. He didn't spill his guts. His mother had taught him that nothing good ever came of spilling your guts. Talking about your problems only meant laying them at someone else's feet and that only created more problems.

Hell, he didn't even talk to Nic. Mostly because Nic knew him better than anyone and could practically read his mind so he didn't have to talk.

Kyle was his commanding officer but that didn't mean he had to tell the guy his personal shit. And Tira was as personal as it got.

"I'm feeling fine so I should head back to the house, see if I can dig anything out of the rubble. Anything I missed the first time through."

Behind him, Tira shifted on the couch. Before he could stop himself, he'd turned to find her stretching her arms above her head. The blanket fell to the floor as she stood, completely naked and so fucking beautiful, his chest ached with it.

And when she bent to pick up the blanket, her perfect ass nearly made him groan.

She turned as she wrapped the blanket around her, though he knew she wasn't covering her nudity so much as she was chilly. Nudity wasn't shameful in their community.

But holy hell, he didn't want her wandering around naked all morning or he'd never be able to get up from the chair because of his hard-on.

She looked him straight in the eyes and her sweet half-smile nearly made him fall at her feet in abject worship. But by the time she'd crossed the room to stand next to him, he saw the shadows in her eyes and the effort it took for her to keep that smile in place.

He wanted to wrap his arms around her shoulders and press his lips to hers but he had no clue what her expression meant.

Did she regret having sex with him? Was she embarrassed? What the hell should he do?

Uni's ass, this was fucked up.

Nic would know exactly what to do to wipe that look off her face. But Nic was still unconscious in the other room.

And Duke had fucked the woman his best friend loved more than anything in the world. The one woman Nic couldn't touch.

"Tira, you want some coffee, hon?"

Kyle broke the silence and Duke sucked in a deep breath, his lungs starving for fresh air.

Tira blinked and forced a smile for Kyle. "Thanks, but if you don't mind, I'd like to take a quick shower and see Nic before I go home to check on my mom. I'm sure she's wondering what happened to me."

Shit, he'd forgotten all about her mom. He'd heard Suvera hadn't been doing well the past few months. Which probably meant Tira had been hiding just how bad her mom truly was.

"I'll run you home as soon as you're ready," Duke said before looking at Kyle. "Then I'll do that other thing."

"By that I guess you mean go back to the house you were at yesterday?" Tira lifted her eyebrows at him. "Where you all almost died. Do you think that's smart? To go back by yourself?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again before he said something stupid. "It's reconnaissance. And it's my job."

Her eyes widened even more. "And what *exactly* is it you do?"

Yeah, that was *not* a conversation they were going to have now. He didn't give a shit about *lucani* law when it came to Tira, about the oath he took not to reveal his status as *sicari* to anyone. He trusted Tira with his life.

But with Nic still unconscious, he didn't want her worrying more than she already was.

“You know what I do. I work with Kyle.”

“But—”

“Go take a shower, Tira.” Duke shook his head. “I promise we’ll talk about it later. When Nic’s awake.”

She took a deep breath and opened her mouth like she was going to say something else. Then her lips closed into a flat line and she nodded. “Fine. For now.”

He watched her walk away, shutting the bathroom door firmly behind her.

Before Kyle could open his mouth, Duke said, “I need to check on Nic,” and walked away.

He opened the door to the bedroom and slipped inside, making no sound. He didn’t want to wake Nic, who, thank the Blessed Mother Goddess, looked a little better than he had last night. Not much, but enough to make Duke nearly lightheaded with relief.

Walking over to the bed, he fell into the chair pulled up to the side. Nic’s eyes remained closed though he did turn his head toward Duke, as if he knew he was there.

Duke reached for his best friend, putting his hand on his shoulder. Closer than blood brothers, they’d known each other all their lives. Their parents had reared them together in the same house.

Until they’d turned eighteen and their lives had collapsed in on them.

Their fathers had been best friends who’d found two women strong enough to love them. Both of them. Yeah, it’d made for an unconventional upbringing, not knowing if he’d walk into his parents’ room to find one, two, three or four people in bed together. But when you grow up with something, you don’t think it’s odd or different.

And Duke and Nic had never left the den lands growing up. Why should they?

They’d had forests and fields to roam, school to attend, training. They’d known there were “others” beyond the boundaries of the *lucani* lands but they were *eteri* and therefore uninteresting.

They’d spent eighteen blissful years unaware of anything other than their own people, their own lives. They’d made their change within a week of each other at thirteen. They’d run as wolves, planned their lives as soldiers.

And met a girl who they’d both decided had been theirs. It’d been the weirdest thing, knowing that the skinny, fifteen-year-old *strega* with the moonlight hair was meant to be theirs, though they couldn’t have her until she grew up.

And they’d both accepted it.

But when Duke’s dad had died three years later, his mother had needed him. And when he’d gotten back, ready to reclaim his life and the woman, it’d all gone to shit. Again.

“Stop thinking so hard. You’re making *my* head hurt.”

Duke’s gaze locked onto Nic’s, open and still a little cloudy.

“Hey, bro.” Duke’s hand squeezed a little harder before he forced himself to release Nic. “You had everyone scared for a while. How’re you feeling?”

“Like a house fell on me.”

“Yeah, well, not quite.”

“Kaine?”

“She’s fine.”

“The *eteri*?”

“Him, too.”

Nic’s eyes closed again, and Duke thought he might go back to sleep. Then Nic’s nose twitched.

Without opening his eyes, Nic asked, “Tira still here?”

Duke froze. “She’s in the shower. She’ll be in as soon as she’s finished. I’m gonna take her home and head back to the site. See if I can’t dig anything out of the rubble.”

Nic nodded and Duke thought maybe the guy was still too tired or out of it to catch Tira’s scent on him.

Idiot. He should’ve showered before coming in here. Nic would be able to smell her on his skin. He’d know –

“You’re thinking way too hard again.” Nic opened his eyes and Duke saw Nic’s comprehension. He knew what had happened just hours ago.

Duke expected to see betrayal or, at the very least, anger in his friend’s eyes. He froze, bracing for Nic’s condemnation. For his anguish.

Nic just lay there, watching him.

Was he supposed to confess? Spill his guts?

Nic could *smell* her on him. He knew what they’d done.

“Is she okay?” Nic finally asked.

Blessed Goddess, he hoped so. “She’s worried about you.”

Nic huffed, frustration beginning to show in the slit of his eyes. “But is she *okay*?”

How the hell did he answer that? He didn’t have a clue. Everything was fucked up now.

“Duke, you *scazzacazzo*, if you –”

Nic’s mouth snapped shut as his gaze cut to the door. The knob turned a second later and Tira walked into the room, so quietly Duke barely heard her.

She caught Duke’s eyes then quickly looked at Nic. Her chin lifted, as if she were going into battle and Duke wanted to hit something. If she thought she had to worry about being in the same room with the two of them, he’d –

“Nic.” Her lips curved in a tentative smile as she moved closer to the bed. She stopped at the end, her hands gripping the footboard until her knuckles turned white. “How are you feeling?”

Nic smiled, making sure not an iota of his anger with Duke showed on his face for her. "I'm fine. Still a little tired but Tam says after a few days of rest, I'll be just fine."

Tira's eyes fluttered, as if she might cry. Then she took a deep breath and she nodded. "Good. That's great."

"Tam wants me to stay here," he continued, "but I told her, since I'm feeling okay, I'm gonna go back to the bunkhouse. I'll be more comfortable in my own bed."

Her face screwed up in a frown. "Is that safe? I mean, will you be able to take care of yourself?"

Duke's eyes narrowed as Nic's smile widened. Duke knew that smile. Nic was up to something.

"I'll be fine." Nic made a motion to sit up then tried to hide a grimace.

And that, of course, was his plan.

That sneaky bastard...

Tira's eyes widened. "No, you won't. You need to stay here where Tam can keep an eye on you."

"Sweetheart, I'm a grown man. I can take care of myself."

The doc hadn't given Tira the complete rundown but Duke knew just how injured Nic was. He had internal damage that would require him to spend time flat on his back to heal. Cracked ribs, bruised spleen and liver. His shoulder had been dislocated and he had a concussion in addition to fractures in both legs.

The doctor was worried that shifting into his wolf, which would heal almost all injuries, in his condition might actually do more harm than good because of the swelling in his brain.

Nic needed a few days in bed and he knew it.

He was playing on Tira's sympathies big-time. The question was why?

Tira turned to him, as if Duke could make him change his mind. "Are you going to stay with him?"

And the light bulb went off.

Damn, Duke had to give it to him. The guy should be stroking a hairless cat with a pinky at his mouth.

Duke shook his head. "Not all the time. Somebody's got to figure out what happened and since dickhead here let the ceiling fall on him and Kaine's still out of commission, I guess that's me."

Her distress grew by the second and Duke had a flash of guilt that they were forcing her to make a choice, one they shouldn't ask her to make—care for her mother or care for the man she loved but couldn't touch. With the man she'd fucked constantly underfoot.

"But," she frowned at him, "you're not up to that yet either."

Her concern made the tightness in his chest ease just a little. "I'm fine. He'll be fine."

Duke aimed a warning glance at Nic but Nic seemed to sink even farther into the bed when Tira glanced back at him.

Son of a bitch.

He opened his mouth to call Nic on his bluff and put Tira out of her misery but she huffed and walked to the window. "Let me talk to Eraia and Seramo, see if they can stay with Mamma for a few days."

Duke heard the emotion in her voice, could practically feel the indecision radiating from her in waves.

Gods damn Nic. This was not the way Duke wanted her to be with them.

And yet... This morning, hadn't he practically coerced her into having sex with him?

He shook his head and turned for the door. "I gotta go. If you want a ride, be ready in three minutes or I'm leaving, babe."

Then he walked out.

Nic watched Duke leave, knowing by the rigid set of his shoulders that he was pissed.

Fuck him. He'd get over it.

Just like he seemed to have gotten over his adamant refusal to seduce Tira.

Bitter anger tried to rise up from his gut but he couldn't let it. Shit, how could he be angry when he knew if he'd been in the same position, he would've jumped at the chance to take her to bed years ago?

"I guess I better get going," Tira said, drawing his attention back to her. "He won't wait for me if I'm late."

"You know that's not true." Duke had been waiting for her for years. So had Nic. They were done waiting. If this worked...

And if it didn't...

A faint smile on her face, Tira walked back to the bed, her hands clenched in fists at her sides. As if to keep herself from touching him. "No, I don't. Nic..."

He looked into her eyes and saw tears forming there. He wanted to pull her into his arms and onto the bed next to him, let her body curl against his like a lover's.

That bitterness rose up again, quickly followed by determination. Either his plan worked or... Or what? He gave her up?

He'd never had her.

He'd never felt those beautiful hands caress his body, wrap around his cock. Never felt the soft silk of her sex surround him as he sank deep into her.

And by all the fucking gods, he wanted to.

If this didn't work, he figured that vision of hers would be coming true soon enough and he wouldn't be around to know otherwise.

Forcing a smile for her, he nodded toward the door, not having to feign the weariness creeping through him. "I'll see you when you get back, sweetheart. I just need to close my eyes for a little while."

She nodded, pausing only for a second before walking out. Leaving him alone to contemplate the absolute mess he could be making of things.

Yeah, his plan could blow up in their faces. But nearly dying yesterday had made him realize they may not have much time left.

Tira's vision of his death, the one that kept her out of his arms, out of *their* arms, was bearing down on him. He swore he could feel his time running out.

Not just on his life, but with her.

From the first moment he'd seen her, when she'd been fifteen years old, he'd only ever wanted her to be his.

At fifteen, she'd been tiny and precious, curious and quietly funny. And still a child. He'd wanted to protect her from everything. He would've killed anyone who'd hurt her.

Sex wasn't an issue because she *was* still a child and he was old enough to know better. Even at almost eighteen.

But he had been old enough to realize that when she grew up, she was his.

His and Duke's.

Though they shared no blood between them—which was a fucking cosmic fluke as far as he was concerned, considering the life their parents had lived—they were brothers.

Born within months of each other, they'd shared a room in the house their parents had also shared. No, their life hadn't been ready for mainstream America, but it'd worked for them.

Until Duke's dad had died and his mom had taken Duke and—

Yeah, well, thinking about that just made his head hurt worse than it already did.

"Nic, can I come in?"

Tam popped her head around the slightly open door and waited until he nodded before entering the room.

"Did they leave?"

Tam nodded as she moved to the bedside and lifted his hand to check his pulse. "Wanna tell me why Tira looks like she's ready to cry?"

Nic had never had a sister to confide in or bounce ideas off of. He'd never had a woman in his life who stuck around longer than a few months and none of them had ever made him want to spill his guts.

In the short time he'd known Tam, he'd discovered her to be surprisingly easy to talk to. He didn't know if it was the nurse thing or just her personality but he knew whatever he told her wouldn't leave the room.

"Because I played on her sympathies so she'd come back to the bunkhouse with Duke and me to take care of us."

Tam's eyes widened in shock as her hand froze in midair on its way to check his other injuries.

"Huh. That's almost...amazing." Her hands began to peel back the covers to uncover his naked body. Her gaze dropped to follow her hands as they pressed and poked. "Are you sure that's the right way to handle this situation?"

"She told you everything, right?"

Tam nodded. "She told me about her vision. And how much she loves you both."

"Did she tell you she had sex with Duke last night?"

Her gaze flew back to his. "No. She didn't."

Nic saw the questions in her eyes and shook his head. "Don't worry. This isn't about revenge. Hell, I'm glad they finally did the deed. I can't touch her. Duke can. But he won't. Well...he wouldn't."

"They pretend to hate each other but Duke's so fucked up with guilt about being able to touch her when I can't and she's so damn fucked up about that vision of my death that they can't be in the same room without the tension level making everyone nuts. Yeah, the situation fucking sucks but I think...I think I may have a solution to all our problems."

Tam sat on the edge of the bed as she pulled the covers up, her exam over. "And that is...?"

He'd had a lot of time to think about this. Years, actually, but he never thought he'd get to put his plan into action. That they'd never be in the same room together to see if it would actually work.

And he was afraid if he spoke about it to someone else, they'd point out a flaw he hadn't seen. Something that would cause him to doubt. And he thought that might finally send him over the edge.

But for his plan to work, he had to get Duke and Tira and himself into close proximity. They needed time and privacy. And most of all, they needed to believe.

"I'll let you know when it works."

Chapter Four

A steady stream of guitar-laden metal leaked from the car speakers on the ride back to the *boschetta*.

Not loud enough to split ears but enough to cover the uncomfortable silence.

Duke didn't speak at all except to ask if she was okay when he got in the car. Of course, she said yes. She wasn't ready for an examination of what had happened this morning.

And she'd been rethinking her decision to go back to the bunkhouse with Nic and Duke since the second after she'd agreed.

How would she be able to take care of Nic when she couldn't touch him? And now that she knew how it felt to actually hold Duke—and be held by him—how would she be able to stop herself from reaching for him again? When she didn't want to hurt Nic?

By the time Duke pulled to a stop in front of her house, she'd almost convinced herself to thank Duke for the ride then tell him to return without her. They were grown men. They could take care of themselves.

But... She couldn't do it. She didn't *want* to do it.

As Duke got out of the car, she gave herself a moment to close her eyes and try to wipe her mind. She couldn't go in to see her mom with all this shit in her head. Her mom would pick up on it in a heartbeat and get upset.

She'd just turned to open her door when Duke did it for her. She thought he'd stand aside when she turned to slide out of the Jeep but she froze when he settled his hands on her hips and lifted her out.

Stunned when he didn't remove his hands right away, she lifted her eyes and caught his, staring down at her with that look—half torment, half desire.

Without stopping to think, she lifted her hands to his cheeks, rough with dark stubble. She wanted him to rub that scruff all over her body, particularly between her legs. While Nic kissed her and caressed her.

Duke's eyes closed for a brief second before he sighed and pulled her tight against him, her arms curving around his neck.

"Ti."

There was a wealth of questions in that one word but no answers.

"Not now, Duke. Okay? Not now. My mom..."

His arms tightened. "You're right. I'm sorry."

As soon as he released her, the front door of her home opened and a slim redhead bounded out with a huge grin on her face.

Kyle's teen daughter, Catene, ran up to Tira and gave her a hug, careful not to touch exposed skin. Tira had never wanted to stifle the girl in any way and the few times she'd actually tried to read Cat, the visions had been murky, as if something was intentionally messing with them. It was odd but made Cat one of a small group of people Tira could touch. Not including *eteri*, of course, who barely ever bumped against her *praenuntio*.

"How's Nic? Is he okay? And Kaine? Mom said they were hurt but they're going to be fine. Are you sure? Your mom's been really calm. She slept all night and I gave her breakfast. She seems to be in a pretty good mood this morning. She and Mom are talking about something they didn't want me to hear so they told me to come wait for you guys."

Without waiting for Tira to answer any of her rapid-fire questions, Cat turned to Duke, her gaze narrowing directly on the bruise on the side of his head.

"Hey, Duke. Heard you were hurt too. Are you okay? That's looks really painful." She grabbed his hand and started to drag him into Tira's house, leaving Tira to follow along, shaking her head at the girl's energy. "I can make you a poultice to cut down on the pain and the color. Come on in and sit down and I'll get the ingredients from the garden."

"Nice to see you too, kid." Duke's slow drawl held only a hint of his amusement. Tira knew he had quite the soft spot for Kyle's daughter. Hell, they all did. She was the youngest child of the *boschetta*, and one of the youngest *lucani* children as well. Her mother, Margorie, was a member of the *boschetta*, whose Gift for horticulture had been passed on to her daughter. And her fathers, Kyle and his best friend, Danilo Ferrante, had given her the ability to shift into a beautiful black wolf.

Every time she saw Cat, a piece of Tira longed for what she represented. Her mother had, at one point, had a successful relationship with two men, which had resulted in Cat's birth. And even though Kyle had found his own mate, Margie and Dan remained committed to each other and the three of them reared Cat.

She experienced that same longing whenever she met with her best friend, Nica. Nica was living with two brothers, Tanner and Jensen Miller. They'd made a commitment to each other, the three of them. And they were making it work.

"Tira, is that you?"

Her mother's voice calling from her bedroom jolted Tira out of her thoughts and she quickly wiped her mind before she hurried to her mother's room.

She blinked to see her mother sitting up in bed, the restraints undone as her hands moved in a motion Tira hadn't seen her use in months. She was knitting, a hobby she adored, always had. Until a few months ago, when the psychosis had gotten worse.

"Mamma, are you... You seem well this morning."

Tira turned a questioning glance at Margie, who merely nodded and smiled. "She had a restful night."

Slightly stunned at her mother's mood, she leaned in to kiss Su's cheek.

"I'm feeling well, sweetheart. How are your boys?"

Before she could answer, Duke stepped into the room. "We're fine, Su. Nic got his insides scrambled a little but he'll be good in a few days."

"That's nice, dear. Tell him not to worry about that pain in his lower back. It'll be fine in a few days." Her mother turned toward her again. "And I'll be okay so you don't have to worry about leaving me here while you care for the boys. I already asked Margie to enlist Lais and Ronia to stay with me a few days. They need something to keep them occupied now that their daughters have moved into the city for a while."

Tira felt tears rise at how much her mom sounded like the woman she'd been before the psychosis had gotten so bad.

Maybe I should go away more often.

Guilt smacked her hard in the heart. How could she even think that? She loved her mom. She would care for her until...

Until the end.

"Su," Margie said, "if you don't mind, I'd like to steal Tira away for a few minutes to go over some of the potions we talked about last night."

"No problem." Su waved them off with one hand and a knitting needle. "Duke will do just fine to entertain me while Cat goes to see Sera. She's about to call for you, sweetheart."

Sure enough, the trill of a cell phone sounded from the other room.

Cat laughed and yelled goodbye over her shoulder as she headed for the front room.

Tira caught Duke's gaze and he nodded once before transferring his focus to Su. Tears came to her eyes as Duke's entire demeanor changed. He reached down to take her mother's hand in his then leaned close to brush her cheek with his lips. Her mother couldn't read him either, which had never seemed to upset Su as it did Tira.

Su had merely shrugged her shoulders and said, "It happens."

Tira had always wished she had her mother's knack for accepting things she couldn't change. It'd make life much easier.

After assuring her mother that she'd be close, Tira followed Margie out into the kitchen and slid onto a stool at the island.

"So," Margie said as she got mugs from the cabinet and poured hot chocolate from a pot on the stove. "I'm sure you're wondering what happened since you left."

As she wrapped her hand around the warm mug, Tira let out a small snort. "You could say that. Yesterday, I...I had to use the restraints, she was so frantic and I was worried she was going to hurt herself. Today she's lucid. What's going on?"

Margie sat opposite her, her own mug in her hands. "Well, I'm not exactly sure and this could just be a short break in the dementia but I'm not convinced that's all that's going on here." She paused and the grimace on her face made Tira tense. "I think... Well, there's just no easy way to say this so... I think part of the rapid deterioration may

have been due to the close proximity you and she have been sharing these past few months. And...I think some time apart might not be a bad thing. For either of you."

* * * * *

"Now tell me how you're really feeling, Duke. I sense you're trying very hard to hide something."

"I didn't know you were an empath, Su, in addition to a fortune teller."

Duke smiled as she laughed, her voice not as strong as he remembered but not as frail as he'd feared when he'd first seen her lying in bed.

"No, no, I haven't developed another Gift. The one I have is more than enough. It's just that when you lose your sight, your other senses become much better."

Su's formerly clear blue eyes were clouded now and stared sightlessly in his general direction. That, more than the streaks of silver in her hair and the tremble in her voice, made his chest tight with frustration. Because there was nothing he could do for her.

He immediately flipped back to the first time he'd met Su. It'd been right after Tira's first vision, the one that had fucked them all over so badly. He'd had to take Tira home after she'd calmed down. It'd taken him an hour to get her to stop crying, holding her in his arms and rocking her. Nic had had to leave. Tira had been unable to look at him without sobbing.

He'd driven her home, his own shock and fear stealing his speech, and Su had met them at the door. She'd known what had happened, had seen it in her own vision.

He'd found out later that Su had known hours before what was going to happen. That she'd seen her daughter's agony but she'd never told Tira.

Su had taken Tira in her arms that night, nodded to Duke and shut the door behind her. He'd come back the next day to check on Tira and he and Su had forged an unlikely friendship.

Foolishly, he'd thought it was because Su knew she'd never have to share Tira with them.

But over the years, he'd begun to wonder if she hadn't been hoping...

"How are you really feeling, Su?"

Su's lips curved in what looked like a grimace. "Healthy as a horse and sharp as a tack. Unfortunately, I know it won't last. Tomorrow I may not remember my own name."

His hand tightened on hers and a cold shiver raced down his back. He hated the fact that he could do nothing for this woman. And that she was so calm about her own fate.

He couldn't even bear to think about this happening to Tira.

Before he could say something, anything, Su's expression became determined. "You need to get her to change her mind, Duke. I don't want her to rot away here taking care

of me. I made mistakes. I don't want her to repeat them. She won't listen to me. I've tried to talk to her but she's too much like me. Too stubborn for her own good."

Blessed Goddess, he wished he had that much control over Tira. But he didn't. He couldn't.

"I'm the last person she listens to, you know that."

"Then you have to change that. You and Nic. I don't want her to end up here, strapped to some damn bed like a lunatic. There have been times I've thought about telling her to leave the *boschetta*, to give up her Gift and let someone else carry the burden. But my daughter's Gift is strong and vital to the *boschetta*. She knows giving up her Gift to another, letting another carry her weight, would be weak. And Tira's not weak. She has to see that. She has to *know* it." Su stopped to take and release a deep breath. "I worry so much, Duke. You have to do something. And soon. Or I'm afraid it will be too late for all of you."

* * * * *

"Are you sure it's okay to move him, Tam? He still looks really pale."

Praying to the Great Mother Goddess that his knees didn't buckle as he walked to Duke's truck, Nic tried not to let the fear in Tira's voice get to him.

She and Tam had remained on the porch while he and Nic headed for the truck, ostensibly for Tira to get last-minute nursing instructions.

Nic knew she was worried about him. Which was both gratifying and ass-chafing.

Yeah, he looked like shit. For that matter, he felt like shit. He'd had his insides rearranged when that beam had fallen on him.

But he wasn't dead. At least, not yet.

According to Tira's vision, that was coming soon enough and he'd be damned if he went to his grave with regrets.

The three of them had wasted the past eight years. He wasn't wasting any more. His plan would work. It *had* to.

And after he and Duke made her theirs, then he'd be able to die. Maybe not happy but at least satisfied, knowing Duke would be there for her.

"Well, I wanted him to stay a few days more but you know what he's like," Tam said. "I don't think he'll do any more damage but keep him in bed as much as possible. The internal bleeding has stopped and *lucani* healing is remarkably fast so he shouldn't be in danger of starting again but keep an eye out for unusual paleness and lethargy."

Tira sighed deeply before she thanked Tam and headed for Duke's Jeep at the bottom of the steps. Nic had pulled himself into the front passenger seat. No way could he get in the back without contorting his body in ways it really wouldn't like.

Duke stood by the front bumper, watching him with narrowed eyes.

Yeah, he got that Duke wasn't totally on board with the plan. At least not yet. But when Nic got a chance to tell him what he planned, Duke would be fine. He had to be.

Because Nic couldn't bear to be apart from her any longer.

As he watched her come closer, he felt the arousal he tried to keep banked struggle to run rampant. He'd had years of practice keeping it confined but he'd hadn't spent much time with Tira.

That was going to change so he needed to keep it together.

When she reached the car, Nic watched her and Duke exchange glances, heat passing between them before Tira dropped her head and slipped into the backseat. When Duke climbed into the driver's seat, he sighed, shoved the car into gear and headed for Tam's old house.

Since joining Kyle as *sicarii*, he, Duke and Kaine had moved into the old Guiliano place. It was only a mile or so away from Kyle's and though it only had one bedroom when they'd moved in, he and Duke had added on another two bedrooms.

And he didn't plan on sleeping alone in the king-size bed he'd built with his own hands longer than a few nights.

Looking into the rearview mirror, he caught Tira watching him with those clear blue eyes before she quickly shifted her gaze out the window again.

Leaving him to stare at her perfect profile.

She personified the word lovely to him with her soft features, rounded chin and cheeks, full lips and huge eyes. Golden blonde hair fell in waves past her shoulders. She'd gotten the unusual color from her father, who she'd never met. Su had never even told the guy she was pregnant.

No way would he ever let a woman run him away from his child.

If he was ever lucky enough to have one.

Which wasn't looking too likely at the moment.

He caught back a sigh before it could escape. Didn't want Duke and Tira to think—What? That he was tired?

Hell, he ached all over, he wanted to close his eyes and sleep so badly his body had already started to shut down and he had a hard-on.

He was screwed. Completely. Absolutely.

And he needed a few minutes to recharge.

He'd close his eyes, just until they got to the house.

And when they were all enclosed by the same four walls, nothing was going to stop him from showing her what she meant to him.

* * * * *

The drive to the ramshackle-looking house took only minutes, so Tira didn't have much time to second-guess her decision. No, she had just enough time to work herself into a state of panic.

Which she absolutely hated. Hated the feeling that she couldn't handle herself. Handle her life.

Taking several deep breaths as Duke pulled to a stop at the steps to the front door, she tried to get the panic under control.

Idiot. Get a grip.

Duke opened the car door, the squeak of the hinges tearing her thoughts back to the present and, when he stuck his hand back in to help her out, she didn't hesitate to take it.

When she had her feet on the ground, she tried to release Duke, but he held on.

She looked up into his eyes and felt a little bit of the panic fade away.

His gaze narrowed on hers and his warm hand tightened the tiniest bit more. "Okay?"

She automatically nodded then realized she was. Just from his touch. Since her Gift had kicked in at eighteen, she hadn't touched many people. Her mom, Cat, the occasional *eteri* she picked up in a bar for a night of mindless sex.

She dropped her gaze, not wanting Duke to read the regret in her eyes. She wasn't ashamed of anything she'd done. She was an adult and she'd never had sex with anyone she didn't genuinely like.

But she could admit, even if only to herself, that those other men had only been stand-ins for these two.

"I'm fine."

His raised eyebrows let her know he didn't believe her but when she shivered as a cold breeze swept by her, he put his keys in her hand and released her.

"Open the door for me. I have a feeling I'm going to have to carry Sleeping Ugly."

Her gaze automatically flipped to see Nic asleep in the passenger seat.

Her lips curved at the exasperation in Duke's voice. "He needs the rest," she said as she headed for the door. "He should've stayed with Tam, at least for a few days."

She opened the front door and turned to watch Duke lift Nic out of the car as easily as if he was lifting her.

Nic didn't move as Duke transferred him from the car to the house and Tira hurried to shut the door and lock it then followed Duke through the house.

"Pull the covers back, Ti. This bastard weighs more than he admits."

Her first impression as she caught sight of the bed was that he could fit an army in there.

Her second thought – she, Duke and Nic would fit just fine.

She tried really hard not to think about any other women he might have had in there.

Reaching for the deep blue satin quilt on top, she stripped it and the blue sheets beneath to the end of the bed then stepped aside for Duke to set Nic down. The blue sheets set off the brown highlights in Nic's auburn hair and made his light skin seem even more pale.

After Duke removed Nic's sneakers, she expected him to move away and let Nic sleep in his sweats and long-sleeved t-shirt. Instead, Duke stripped off Nic's sweatpants.

She had a brief, heart-stopping glimpse of strong thighs and tight cotton boxers before Duke pulled the covers up. Without conscious thought, her feet took her to the edge of the bed as Duke stepped back.

She stared down at Nic's pale face, sudden anger taking her by surprise.

She was angry that he'd forced her into this position. So close and yet not able to touch. Angry that she couldn't say no to him. She sighed, long and loud, her frustration building with each second.

This was wrong. She shouldn't be here. This was going to make everything worse. He—

"Tira."

Duke's quiet command jolted her out of her thoughts and she looked up to find him standing right next to her, concern in the depths of his dark gaze.

She wanted to throw herself at him, let him hold her against him and comfort her. Like he had early this morning.

They needed to talk about that. They needed to talk about a lot of things but she couldn't read him. She'd never been able to figure out what his expression said about what he was thinking. She was usually pretty good at reading body language but Duke... He was an enigma.

As much as she loved him, sometimes she felt she really didn't know him.

"Are you hungry, Tira? Do you want something to eat?"

Her eyes flashed wide. "You can cook?"

Well, shit. She wanted to take back the words the second they left her mouth. Damn, she needed a filter between her mouth and her brain. Duke probably thought that was a dig at him.

"No, wait, that didn't come out right," she hurried on before he could say anything. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply—"

"Hey. Ti." Duke did the only thing guaranteed to shut her up. He touched her, just one finger against her lips. "Stop over-thinking everything. You're gonna make yourself sick." Then his lips actually curved in a slight smile. "And yes, I can cook. Nic and Kaine would starve if they had to fend for themselves. You look like you could use some food. You've lost weight."

If anyone else had said that, she'd take it as a compliment. She'd never been model skinny. Her hips were too wide and her breasts too big for her to ever look good without a few pounds padding out the rest of her.

Duke sounded almost angry. As if he was worried about her.

"A few pounds." She looked away from his intense stare, down at her hands that she didn't know what to do with. "Mom's been sick...and I just haven't been hungry."

"Well, no more of that. You need to eat. Come on."

Grabbing her hand, he pulled her after him, out of the room and toward the tiny kitchen she'd seen when they'd walked in. And tried not to cry at the casual touch of his bare skin against hers.

It made her feel almost normal. Most people don't realize how much they rely on the touch of another person. The brush of skin against skin.

She hadn't realized until it'd been taken away from her.

When they reached the kitchen, he released her but put his hands on her shoulders and guided her into a chair. "Sit. An omelet okay or you want something else?"

What she wanted was his hands on her skin again. "An omelet's fine, thank you."

She barely got the words out around the lump in her throat and he had to be able to hear the tears in her voice. But he either didn't or he ignored it and got down to business, cracking eggs, heating the pan, chopping ingredients.

They didn't speak as he cooked. And the silence never got uncomfortable.

Which was amazing.

"He misses you."

Duke's voice carried loud and clear even though he was facing away from her at the stove. Her heart thumped at the sentiment.

But what was she supposed to say to that?

That she missed Nic too? With all her heart? That she missed Duke too? Would he even believe that?

How could he not after last night?

Damn it, she was sick of playing this game with him. Sick of tiptoeing around everything.

"I miss him. And I miss you, Duke."

He froze, the spatula he was using to make the eggs poised in midair over the pan. But he didn't turn.

"I miss what we could have had if I wasn't what I am."

"Shit, Tira, that's not—"

"No, Duke. You started this. Now you get to listen."

He fell silent, his hand tightening around the spatula's wooden handle. When he didn't say anything, she let him have it.

"I dream about the three of us, together. I imagine what it would be like if I were normal. If I could touch Nic without seeing his death, his funeral. If I could touch you without the guilt. If I could just let go of the fantasy that someday I could have the two men I want most in the world. I don't want to settle for empty sex with men who don't know me. Who *can't* know me."

The spatula handle broke in his hand, the wood making an audible crack as it splintered.

A small measure of satisfaction burned in her gut at his reaction, even though she didn't want to be that kind of woman. The kind who tormented the men she couldn't have or tried to make jealous the ones who didn't want her.

But she had several years' worth of gripes to get off her chest and Duke had pushed the right buttons.

"Tira —"

"No. Duke, just — just don't."

"Just don't what?"

Nic's gaze narrowed as Duke and Tira turned toward the sound of his voice.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Tira sounded both pissed off and upset as she jumped from her chair at the table. She headed straight for him then stopped just before she hit touching range. It was a now-unconscious habit of hers that made him want to punch a wall.

"Kind of hard to sleep with you two going at it out here." He let his mouth curl in a slight smile to let her know he wasn't pissed. "Besides, I'm not all that tired."

Duke snorted. "Yeah, that's why I had to carry you out of the car."

Nic caught and held Duke's gaze. "You've been carrying my ass a lot lately."

Duke nodded, knowing what Nic didn't add. "Then don't let any more ceilings fall on you. Your mom'll have my ass in a sling if anything happens to you."

Nic was about to spout his normal smart-ass response about his time being up soon enough but slammed his mouth shut before he did. The reason he knew he had limited time was standing not three feet away, staring at him with beautiful blue eyes.

He wouldn't do that to Tira, wouldn't make her feel any worse than she already did. Hell, he wanted to make her feel good, not rotten.

So he said, "I'll work on that," knowing he didn't mean a word of it. "Now tell me what you two are arguing about."

He honestly didn't know because he'd come in at the end where Duke had punished the spatula for something Nic was pretty sure it hadn't done.

Tira shook her head. "We weren't fighting. And you nee —"

"Bullshit. Neither of you can lie worth a damn. You know that, right?"

"You should be in bed." Tira completely ignored him. "You look ready to pass out."

“Well, I’m not.” His stomach rumbled as the scent of one of Duke’s excellent omelets drifted to his nose. “Actually, I’m hungry. You wouldn’t want me to starve, now, would you?”

He gave her one of his best pathetic looks, the one that always worked on his mom, and damn if her expression didn’t soften.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Duke roll his eyes. The guy never had understood the power of a well-executed pity play.

Turning, Tira waved at the table. “Sit down. Duke, why don’t you give him those eggs? I can make my own—”

“Why don’t you both sit and let me worry about the food.” Duke turned back to the stove to split the omelet he’d made onto two plates, which he then slid onto the table. “You both nee—”

“Stop it.” Tira’s voice cut through the air like a sharp blade. “Just...stop it. I’m not a child, Duke. I know what I need. I’m here to take care of you two idiots to make sure you don’t do anything stupid. But I’m not sure that’s even possible.”

Duke had turned away from the stove to watch her, his brows lifting further with each word.

Nic had to give it to her. Not many people had the balls to stand up to Duke. The guy looked like the kind of muscle hired to protect Mafia bosses. Dark, cold, ruthless. Duke used those looks to keep people at arm’s length.

Tira was the only one who’d never let him get away with it. She’d taken his attitude and thrown it back in his face.

Then again, Duke had only ever wanted her. Yeah, he’d slept with other women. But Duke could probably count that number on one hand. The guy just wasn’t the type to sleep around.

On the other hand, Nic had slept with anything that offered. Which made him a prick.

He’d excused his actions as those of a dying man. He figured since he didn’t have more than thirty years or so to live, and he’d never have the woman he loved, he’d be excused for being a jackass.

Until that ceiling had fallen on him.

And he’d realized that if he didn’t do something soon, he’d die a jackass and never have even one night with the woman he loved. Blessed Goddess, this had to work.

“I don’t think you’re a child.” Duke’s deep voice knocked Nic out of his thoughts. “But I cook better than you do. And I like it. And you need to eat. You look like a breeze would knock you over.”

Nic watched the heat shimmer between them like a mirage. But this was no illusion. Hell, he was getting a hard-on just watching them. Duke had to be sporting wood too, as he and Tira practically went nose to nose.

"Oh, please." Tira rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "You're being ridiculous. I'm perfectly capable—"

"Actually, I'm being pretty damn reasonable but if you don't sit down and eat, I'm gonna sit you in a chair and feed you like a child."

Nic's brows lifted even higher and he had to fight back a grin as Duke took one step closer to Tira. He towered over her but she didn't back down. She never backed down from Duke and she gave as good as she got.

She refused to do that with Nic.

She loved the guy. Just as she loved him. Nic had never doubted her affection for either of them and he'd never been jealous. Because it was Duke.

Any other man he'd kill for trying to take her from them.

Duke had never seen how much she cared for him because her guilt and his clouded everything. Made him blind to what was right in front of him. Hell, Tira had given Duke her body, had let him love her and still he refused to see how much she loved him.

Tira's eyes had narrowed down to slits and Nic didn't think he could get any harder. If Duke bent her over his knee to spank her, Nic figured he'd come in his pants.

Her right hand lifted, index finger pointed at Duke's chest. "If you *honestly* think you could *even* try that and get away with it, you're more delusional than I thought."

"And you are *the* most stubborn fucking woman I have ever met." Duke's voice rose to a level Nic had never heard him take with another woman. "*Vaffanculo*, Tira. I'm trying to take care of you, not fight with you."

"And like I said, I'm not a child. I don't need you t—"

"Fuck that." Duke's raised voice shocked the hell out of Nic. "You do need me, but only to fuck, right? But you know what? You're right about one thing. You're not a child. We proved that this morning, didn't we?"

Tira's startled gaze tripped from Duke to Nic, her mouth opening and closing. She looked like she'd been slapped, a red flush consuming her cheeks, before she let her gaze fall, as if she were guilty.

Damn, he hadn't thought Duke would take that tactic with her.

"Don't," she said, that one word sounding strangled. "Don't you *dare* do this now."

Nic pushed away from the counter and stood, ignoring the twinge in his side. "That's it, *scassacazzo*. Knock it off. Now."

Duke ignored him completely, his gaze glued to Tira's. "Poor Tira. How awful she can't have the man she loves. Too bad she has to settle for the asshole she can touch."

Tira's face went sheet-white and she actually swayed on her feet.

Fury raced through Nic's body like adrenaline and he felt his wolf snarl inside his chest. It wanted to rip into Duke's sneering face, tear him limb from limb and destroy him for daring to hurt Tira like that.

Gods damn him, the bastard didn't know when to stop. Nic strode around the counter and pushed Duke away from Tira.

"That's enough. What the fuck, Duke?"

Duke didn't take his eyes off Tira. "Yeah, that's what we did this morning. Right, babe? We fucked. So, as a stand-in, how'd I do?"

Nic's fist connected with Duke's chin the second after the words left his mouth. Duke's head snapped back, the sound of the impact like a lightning crack in the silence.

But it was Nic who groaned in pain as his bruised ribs protested the movement.

Tira turned to him with tears in her eyes, her gaze dipping to the hand pressed against his side. She took a deep breath then shook her head as her shoulders straightened. "You shouldn't be upright. Go back to bed. I'll bring breakfast in to you."

She turned to Duke, her eyes tracing the blood trickling from his cut lip before meeting Duke's gaze. She didn't say anything right away.

Nic thought Duke might actually be holding his breath, waiting for her to speak.

"You," she stuck one slim finger at Duke's chest, "are an ass if you think you've ever been a stand-in for anyone. Why don't you go for a run? Maybe when you get back, you'll be more sociable."

Nic had to bite his tongue not to say anything as Duke looked visibly shocked. The guy didn't know what to say. Tira had basically cut him off at the knees and that wasn't something Duke understood. No one ever spoke to him like that.

Good. The guy deserved it. He didn't care how much Duke was hurt or confused. He didn't get to take it out on Tira. Nic wouldn't allow it.

Tira took a deep breath then released it on a sigh as Duke finally turned and stalked away, tearing clothes off as he headed for the back door.

Tira watched him the entire way. Either she couldn't take her eyes off him or she didn't want Nic to know she was crying. He knew she was. He could smell the salt of her tears.

When Duke slammed through the back door, Tira turned to Nic. Her eyes were red but they were no longer wet.

"Ti, sweetheart. You know he can be a prick."

"But he's right." Her chin lifted and her mouth firmed. "I fucked him this morning."

He held her gaze steady. "No, you didn't. You had sex with him this morning. There's a difference, babe. You know that. And so does he."

She swallowed hard. "I'm not sure he does."

He wanted to grab her hand, wrap his arms around her, comfort her in some physical way. But he wouldn't risk making her cry with an accidental brush of their skin. So he could only sit here and stare at her. "Yeah, he does. Look, I'm not saying you need to cut him some slack because the bastard doesn't deserve any for that. You'd be

justified in any smack-down you might want to throw his way. But... Hell, I don't know, maybe we all need to cut each other some slack."

She nodded but he didn't think she took anything he'd just said to heart. Except for the part about the smack-down. Her eyes had lit up when he'd mentioned it.

Nothing he hadn't wanted to do himself lately.

"You really should be in bed, Nic. You're not completely healed. I want you to eat and then go lie down again."

Because he pretty much felt like crap since he'd popped Duke on the chin, he nodded. "Yes, dear," he drawled and sure enough, she smiled.

Damn, he was so pitiful it took something so little as a smile from her to make his day.

And Duke was out there working off his anger when he'd gotten to hold her in his arms and get deep into her body.

The guy really was an asshole.

Sometimes, Nic didn't know why he loved the bastard so damn much.

* * * * *

Freezing air hit Duke's naked body like a slap when he stepped onto the back porch.

His skin broke into gooseflesh and his balls tried to crawl back into his body.

Once he shifted, he'd be warm enough but for right now, he let the cold air dampen the heat of his anger and arousal.

He wanted to strangle Nic for putting them all in this position. Rage at Tira for agreeing to it.

And he wished like hell that he could just loosen his tight-assed control issues for a few hours so he could get with Nic's program.

He wanted to. Gods be damned, he wanted to so badly, he thought he might howl with the need.

Instead, he was out here freezing his ass.

Fuck that.

Closing his eyes, he let his magic rise up until it bubbled like lava under his skin. He'd long ago lost any desire to understand the process of how he shifted from human to wolf. That was for people who over-thought everything.

Duke believed in simply letting the magic happen and being grateful for the fact that it did.

His first shift had come when he was days away from his thirteenth birthday, early for a male. Most didn't change until they were months into their fourteenth year. He'd shocked the shit out of his parents when he'd begun the first transformation in the

middle of the night. Hell, he'd been just as shocked. And scared, though he'd never told anyone.

He shouldn't have been. Shifting came more naturally to him than anything else in life.

Even more so than talking. He'd been an antisocial kid, had never liked to talk much. He hadn't had to. He'd had Nic, who never shut up. Duke just nodded every now and then. And people got used to it.

He hadn't needed to develop advanced social skills. He'd known from the time he was a kid that he'd be a soldier like his dad. A guardian of his people. You didn't have to talk much to do that.

Nic had had other plans. After the mandatory three years of *lucani* legion service from ages twenty-one to twenty-four, Nic had planned to go to college, get a job. Maybe with the *lucani*, maybe with the *eteri*. He didn't care. He hadn't wanted to be a soldier all his life.

Duke didn't know why Nic was still here, why he hadn't bolted the second he'd completed his term. He hoped like hell Nic hadn't stayed because he thought Duke couldn't take care of himself. But that would be just like Nic.

Shaking off that thought, he reached again for his *arus*, the magic inherent in his body, which had burned just a little less brightly as his mind wandered.

He forced himself to push all thoughts but one out of his head.

The wolf.

He called on the *arus*, on the part of him that knew the shape he wanted to take. He let the burn seep through his body, let it take him to his knees as his body contorted and magic remade his cells into a sleek, gray Appennine wolf.

Most *lucani* took the form of the Appennine wolf, the animal native to the Etruscan homeland in Italy. Only a few, like Kyle and Cat, had a rare black pelt.

With the transformation complete, Duke stood on his four paws and gave his entire body a shake.

He still felt the cold air but now it tickled along his fur rather than against his bare skin. Drawing in a deep breath, he leaped off the back porch and made a run for the woods that separated this property from Kyle's. Protected by wards, and occasionally by the Lord of the Silver Light himself, the Etruscan Moon God Tivr, it provided a small but welcome sanctuary for a wolf in need of a run.

Later, he'd head back to the site outside Lebanon.

Chapter Five

Nic had fallen asleep in front of the crackling fireplace by the time Duke returned.

He lay on the plush couch to the left of the fire, his body stretched full-length on the cushions. She'd been watching him for at least an hour. He hadn't moved an inch. He'd been exhausted.

She should have been in the kitchen, getting something together for dinner but she couldn't seem to pull herself away. She'd never had the opportunity to study him in such an unguarded state. In sleep, Nic's expression actually made him look more vulnerable, more sad.

Awake, Nic usually had a smile and he could cover so much with a smile.

She almost missed the sound of Duke's claws clicking against the back porch, but she must have sensed his return because her heart began to beat harder, faster. When she finally heard the sound of his now-human footsteps as he entered the house, she tensed.

She knew Nic needed the rest but she'd actually hoped he'd be awake when Duke returned.

Not that she was afraid of Duke. Duke would never physically hurt her. She trusted him with her life.

But her heart, well...

Curled into the recliner on the other side of the fireplace in the front room, she forced her gaze to stay glued to the dancing orange flames. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw Duke walk naked into the room. She had to look. She just had to.

His cock twitched as she watched, slowly hardened before her eyes. She had to force herself to speak. "Did you have a good run?"

"I'm sorry."

It was so not what she'd been expecting to hear that her gaze flew to his, her eyes wide with shock.

His jaw clenched, the muscle in his right cheek flexing as he stared back at her. "I never mean to hurt you and I always manage to somehow."

"Just your gift, I guess." She tried for flippant but winced when it came out bitchy. "Sorry, you don't deserve that."

"Yeah, I do." He sighed. "Look, Ti, we gotta get past this."

She frowned, not at all sure what he was talking about. "Get past what?"

"You know why he guilted you into coming, don't you?"

She could lie and say no. She might have been naïve at first but the arousal in Nic's eyes when she and Duke had been fighting earlier had clued her in to what she'd been missing.

Nic wanted to watch. He wanted to be there when she and Duke had sex so he could participate, if only vicariously.

And surprisingly, the thought didn't make her squeamish in the least. Why would it? Her ultimate fantasy involved both of these men in her bed. Her only problem with the scenario was that she was afraid she'd reach for Nic and be upset that she couldn't touch him.

"Yes, I know what he wants."

Duke's gaze narrowed. "And you're okay with that?"

Her brows lifted as she put her hands on her hips. "Why? Aren't you?"

Duke looked shocked, the second time she'd done that to him in the past day. Her average was improving.

But she didn't have long to savor her victory.

Duke stepped right in front of the recliner and reached for her, pulling her to her feet. She wound up so close, she could smell the sweat on his skin. So close she could see the individual pores of his skin and lick the beads of sweat on his skin, if she wanted. Feel his cock as it continued to fill and press upward.

And she wanted.

Blessed Goddess, she wanted.

She took a deep breath, taking his scent deep into her lungs and letting it seep into her body. It spread like magic, making her tingle all over. But she didn't have time to savor the feeling because Duke cupped her chin in his hand to tilt her face up and covered her mouth with his.

He kissed her, hard, his mouth demanding she open to him. When she did, he slid his tongue between her lips and tasted her. His unique flavor, dark and spicy, made her moan.

She nearly fell into a puddle of lust at his feet. Her arms curved around his neck as she pressed against him until he put his hands under her arms and lifted her.

Her feet left the floor and she slid her hands into his hair as he kissed the breath out of her. As she slid up his body, she rubbed against his erection, feeling the tip of his shaft press against her mound. She tilted her hips into him, rubbing against him, trying to ease the ache between her legs.

He let her torment him for only seconds before he wrapped one arm around her to hold her in place and let the other drop to the waistband of her jeans. Ripping them open with furious fingers, he shoved them down her legs to fall on the floor.

His roughness only served to inflame her fast-growing passion and she nipped his tongue. He reared back, exactly what she'd been going for, and she began to string a line of kisses up his chin.

He let her have her way but only for a few seconds. Then he held her away from him and spun her around.

Her startled gaze landed on Nic, now sitting on the couch, watching them with an expression that made her chest tighten to the point of pain. His eyes burned with a wildness she'd never seen there before. His mouth was a flat hard line and a muscle ticked in his jaw.

He hadn't been wearing a shirt to begin with and her gaze locked onto his chest, rising and falling as if he couldn't catch his breath.

His left hand fisted into the cushion next to him but his right had pushed beneath the waistband of his loose cotton pants. The tip of his cock had escaped, the flushed head distended. A drop of slick moisture glistened there.

And the hand beneath his pants worked his cock in a slow, steady motion.

Her lungs contracted along with every other muscle in her body. Especially those between her legs. She wanted—no, she *needed*—to fill that empty space that begged for relief.

Her desire coated her pussy, made her slick and ready for sex. For them.

She wanted both of them. But she couldn't have both of them.

She trembled, tears pricking at her eyes, and Duke tightened his arms around her, crushing her against his chest, nestling his hard cock against the small of her back. As if he'd read her mind.

"Sweetheart, don't think." Duke's voice rasped against her ear. "Just feel. And watch. Watch Nic bring himself off."

She wanted to watch. Wanted to see it all. "His pants," she barely had enough air to gasp the words out. "I want him naked."

"You heard the lady." The command in Duke's voice made her sex clench with an almost physical pain. "Take them off."

Nic didn't hesitate. He pushed the pants down his legs until he could kick them off with his feet then his hand immediately went back to his cock.

Her mouth opened to draw in much-needed air, which was startled out of her when Duke grabbed the hem of her shirt and stripped it over her head, leaving her naked.

Her nipples peaked, but not from any chill in the air. Duke's body pumped off heat like a furnace and his hands covered her breasts and kneaded them, until her entire body felt boneless.

And ready to explode.

Mesmerized by the sight of Nic's hand on his cock, she almost didn't realize Duke was walking her backward until he pulled her back and down, onto his lap, as he sat on the wide leather chair across from the couch.

The silky hair on his thighs tickled the backs of hers and his cock felt like silk against her ass. It pulsed against her, a tiny amount of pre-cum dotting her skin.

She moaned and scooted backward, forcing herself to keep her eyes open to watch Nic, who'd slowed his strokes to a glacial pace.

"I'm gonna fuck you while he watches, Tira." Duke bit her earlobe and she shuddered as pleasure stroked through her body, a painful jolt. "I don't want you to close your eyes. I want you to put your hands on the arms of the chair and not let go. Understand?"

She nodded, too turned-on to speak, and did exactly as he said. The leather felt slick and cool beneath her hands. In sharp contrast to Duke's heat and the lust pouring off Nic.

His gaze dipped as Duke grabbed her hips and lifted her.

"Lean back, baby," Duke instructed. "Arch your — Yeah, that's it."

With her back bowed slightly, the angle allowed him to position his cock between her lower lips, poised to fill her completely.

He held her there, on the tip of his cock and the edge of her desire, her gaze glued to Nic's cock.

She imagined for a second that they were both going to have her and then she couldn't think as Duke began to lower her onto the thick length of his cock. The head barely sank in when she felt her sex contract, trying to drag him further into her.

The friction was incredible, sending shock waves up her spine. She arched just a little further, wanting him to pull her down and fill her completely.

But Duke wasn't to be rushed.

He fought gravity, holding her hips and only allowing a few centimeters at a time to invade her channel. She felt the effort Duke exerted in the rough sound of his breathing, the short, heavy movements of his chest against her back. His thighs rock hard beneath hers, he used his knees to spread her legs wider, opening her further until she felt air brush her exposed clit.

Torturous sensation caused her to cry out again and she fought against his hands, needing him to fuck her now. Hard.

"No, no. Not yet, baby. I'm not ready to come yet. And neither is Nic."

"Not at all." Nic's voice made her clench around Duke's shaft in desperation. "I want to watch you enjoy it all night, Ti."

Blessed Goddess, yes, she was enjoying this. But it was torture as well.

Duke allowed her to slide down a few more centimeters and she felt the brush of his pubic hair on her ass. Almost there. Almost —

With a short, sharp motion, Duke seated her on his cock.

She cried out as pleasure and a burning fullness coursed through her. The need for friction caused her to roll her hips. Duke allowed her to move for a brief second as Nic's hand paused, his gaze glued to where Duke and she were joined.

"Happy now, baby?"

She couldn't speak, could only shake her head. No. She needed him to move, damn him. Why wouldn't he move? And she wanted Nic to continue to jerk himself off. She wanted to watch him come. Needed to feel Duke's release in her body.

"No?" Duke's voice sounded surprised. "Then I guess we're not doing this right, are we?"

"Do you want us to stop, Tira?" Nic's hand loosened from around his cock and he made a motion as if to get up.

"No! Goddess, no, don't stop." If they stopped, she might just have to kill them.

"But we want you to be happy." Duke nipped at her neck, causing her to clamp down hard on him. She swore the arms of the chair squealed as she crushed the leather under her fingers. "How can we make you happy?"

"Just fuck me," she cried out. "Please."

She swore she heard Duke growl low in his chest. "Then hold on, baby."

Tira thought she was going to die before he started to move, she was so desperate for the friction. And when he grabbed her hips and lifted her off him, she wanted to cry.

But then he started to thrust, his motion limited because of his position and hers. But the friction... Oh, Goddess, the friction was amazing.

Her back arched, trying to get him as deep as he could go. Her eyes began to close but she caught sight of Nic stroking himself again.

God, he was so beautiful. His deep green eyes had narrowed to slits, the muscles in his right arm flexed and bunched as he stroked his cock. His abs tightened, the ridges of his muscles standing out in sharp relief.

In the back of her mind, she knew she wanted to touch him but couldn't. She wanted to lick her way down that perfect chest. Better still, she wanted to be sandwiched between the two of them, as Duke took her ass and Nic thrust into her pussy.

But she couldn't have that.

Despair threatened to tear away the bliss seeping through her veins. She pushed it away as she reached for the orgasm beating at the edges of her senses.

She needed just a little more. Making sure Nic was watching, she released one hand from the chair arm and let her fingers play over her stomach.

Each of Duke's inward thrusts pushed her closer to that climax but when she touched herself, her body responded as if it were Nic touching her.

She stroked down her stomach until her fingers touched the hair on her mound, trimmed short because that's the way she liked it. An inch or so lower and she found her clit.

Her breath left her lungs in a rush as she tweaked the little bundle of nerves and a short, sharp twinge of pleasure flowed through her like a jolt of electricity. If she did it again, she knew she'd come.

Instead, she let her fingers go even lower until she could brush her nails against Duke's cock as he fucked her.

"Gods damn, Tira." Duke's voice sounded low, rough and out of control. "Do it again. Now damn it."

She did, scraping her nails along his cock as he pulled out of her then fondling his balls when he thrust back in.

"Oh, fuck." Duke's fingers bit even further into her hips and Nic's groan made her gaze drop to his cock.

His hand worked the shaft with a steadily increasing motion, the head appearing and disappearing in his fist. Her own fingers rubbed her clit, her body tightening.

Duke's cock twitched inside her, triggering her orgasm as Nic's low shout cut through the room, his own cock releasing his seed onto his stomach in thick ribbons.

As Duke groaned behind her, he pulled her down one last time as he came, pumping his warm fluid into her.

Filling her with heat.

Nic's eyes closed as he sank back into the couch. Duke did the same behind her, wrapping his arms around her and keeping her locked to him.

Tira let Duke's heat cradle her as she stared out the window into the dark.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Tira slipped out of the house, holding her breath as she closed the front door behind her and hurried to Duke's Jeep, clutching his keys in her hands.

She couldn't believe neither of them had woken but Nic was still injured and Duke was probably exhausted and both men had...

Worn themselves out.

Her thighs clenched with remembered desire and she went wet at the images running through her head.

Watching Nic watch Duke make love to her. Feeling Duke's hands on her body as she watched Nic stroke himself to climax.

She'd come so hard she thought she might pass out. It'd been amazing.

And heartbreaking.

She'd wanted so badly to touch Nic, to feel his hands on her body in addition to Duke's.

But she couldn't.

And Nic hadn't seemed to mind.

He'd sprawled on the couch afterward with a smile on his face before his eyes had drifted shut. She swore it only took him seconds to fall asleep.

Duke had kept her wrapped in his arms, her back to his front, until he, too, had fallen into a deep sleep on the chair.

She hadn't been able to find that same oblivion. As Duke's arms finally loosened, she got up, dressed and, without really knowing what she was doing, grabbed Duke's keys off the table and snuck out the front door.

Where should she go?

Home? Where it was safe?

She remembered her talk with Margie. Hell, she couldn't go home.

Then she realized the only home she wanted she'd left back with Duke and Nic.

Tears threatened to spill but she blinked them away as she started the Jeep, put it in gear and headed down the lane. She wasn't a child. She was a grown woman. Time she started acting like one.

With a check in the rearview to make sure the guys hadn't run out after her, she set off down the lane.

If Nica was home, she'd go talk to her. But Nica was off enjoying her two men. Lucky girl.

Her hands tightened around the steering wheel, her knuckles cracking with the pressure.

Pain slashed through her chest like a dull blade and she took a deep breath to try to dissipate it.

By the time she reached the closest rural highway, her foot was pretty well plastered to the floor and Duke's favorite metal blared from the speakers. Slipknot suited her mood perfectly. Heavy drums, wailing guitars, Corey Taylor's raspy screaming vocals.

She played it loud enough to drown out her own thoughts and the dark night around her forced her to concentrate on driving.

But she still had no destination in mind. It was close to two in the morning. The *eteri* bars would be closed—

Howling Moon.

Howling Moon never shut its doors.

And maybe the Lady of the Silver Light would have some advice. At least Lusna, the Etruscan Moon Goddess, would have oblivion by the name of mojitos.

Only miles from Tira's village of New Tarquin, Lusna's home sat in a small valley in Oley Township, surrounded by old-growth woods, not farmland like most of the rest of the township.

Since she'd never actually driven to Howling Moon, Tira made a couple of wrong turns before she found the unmarked lane that led to Lusna's. She'd always walked the few times she'd visited. She knew she was on the right lane when she drove past a cluster of small, one-story stone and plaster structures with gabled roofs.

Any *eteri* wandering by would think them quaint. Of course, if they knew they were inhabited by *lucani*, they wouldn't stop to ooh and aah. Then again, no *eteri* would find their way back here. Tira was only able to discern the lane because the magic that kept it hidden from *eteri* made it visible to her Etruscan eyes.

Past the tiny village of eight homes, she turned a bend and caught sight of the two-hundred-year-old stone farmhouse, built in a time when the second and third floors had housed the humans and the first floor had held the animals.

Today, the ground floor was a bar. The sign at the door showed a cartoon wolf sitting on a stool holding a mug. Lusna had a somewhat twisted sense of humor.

When Tira parked in the small gravel parking lot a few hundred yards from the building, she didn't give herself time to second-guess. She got out of the car and headed straight for the door.

This late, she didn't think there would be too many people in the bar. There was only one other car in the lot. Of course, most of the patrons didn't drive here. They ran. On four paws. All of the *lucani* she knew kept a change of clothes in the back room.

A cold wind smelling of snow whipped around her just as she got to the door. She looked up at the sky. No stars or moon tonight. Billowy clouds blocked them from sight.

Yeah, there'd be snow soon enough.

Yanking open the heavy wooden door, wide enough and tall enough to accommodate a horse, she stepped into the warm, fragrant comfort of Howling Wolf.

Like a weight had lifted off her shoulders, Tira took a deep breath, scented with fir and wood smoke. No cigarette smoke. But beneath everything, the glaze of magic.

This was the home of a goddess, after all.

The mellow sound of an acoustic guitar caught her attention first. Looking around, she found Caeles, an Etruscan elemental *fauni* who never strayed far from Lusna's side, picking at the strings, the tune an old Etruscan ritual song, ancient and full of power. Tira figured that's what was fueling the calming spell.

Three *lucani*, two in wolf form, sat around him. They barely glanced at Tira as she made her way to the wide plank bar on the far side of the room from the front door.

No one tended bar but Tira knew it wouldn't be long before Lusna walked out to take her order.

Which had always struck Tira as strange. The Etruscan Goddess of the Moon serving her subjects instead of the other way around.

But Lusna loved it.

As if on cue, the door to the kitchen swung open and the Lady of the Silver Light stepped out with a smile on her beautiful face, her midnight-black hair loose around her shoulders and her gray eyes bright.

Lusna had the kind of soft beauty that made men want her and women *not* want to rip her hair out for being so beautiful. A fine line, but she walked it gracefully.

“Tira, sweetheart. It’s been quite a while since I’ve seen you here. Come sit down and I’ll get you a drink. You look like you could use something nice and warm. One café amaretto coming up.”

Until Lusna had mentioned that particular drink, it wouldn’t have entered Tira’s mind. Now she knew it was perfect for her mood.

As Lusna poured amaretto and coffee and topped it off with a huge dollop of whipped cream, Tira slid onto a barstool and propped her chin on her hand. Taking a sip of her drink after Lusna set it in front of her, she sighed. Exactly what she needed.

As the warmth of the coffee and liquor seeped into her, Tira felt herself loosening her tightly held control. She’d been holding back her tears but she’d reached the breaking point.

She’d never been a noisy crier. She didn’t sob and wail but her tears were just as real. They coursed down her cheeks in rivers.

Lusna said nothing as she moved around the bar and took Tira by the elbow, leading her to a table in the corner, away from Caeles and the three *lucani*. Producing a box of tissues from Goddess only knew where, Lusna waited while Tira wept.

And when she finished, Tira realized her café amaretto was sitting in front of her, still piping hot.

“Now,” Lusna said. “Spill.”

“I love them so much, Lady. I want them both but I can’t bear to see Nic’s death every time I touch him. Mamma isn’t doing well and I’m terrified I’m going to end up like her. I’m terrified of what will happen to Duke when...if anything happens to Nic. And I’m sick of being weak.”

Lusna’s head cocked to the side, a slight frown making tiny Vs between her eyes. “Why do you think you’re weak?”

“Because I feel like my life is out of my control. That I have no say in anything I do. If I was a stronger person, I’d be able to handle it. I’d know how to act. I’d know how to handle my Gift. I wouldn’t be so damn...” She stopped, reaching for the right word, the right combination of words to explain her feelings. “Inadequate. Unworthy.”

Lusna reached across the table and took her hand. Tira automatically recoiled before she remembered deities were typically immune to her Gift as well.

Lusna’s cool, slim hand pressed against her own overheated, too-tight skin, sparking no images. “Then do something about it. If you truly feel that way, then make changes in your life.”

Tira’s gaze narrowed as she tried to understand what the Lady was saying. “Are you telling me I should give up my Gift?”

Lusna shook her head. “I’m not telling you what to do. I’m only trying to help you see all the options.”

Tears pricked Tira’s eyes. “There are none, Lady. At least none that make any sense. If I give up my Gift, someone else would bear my burden. This is *my* Gift. I was born to

serve my people, to take my mother's place. If I pass my Gift to another, the *boschetta* may never be the same."

"That's true but there are always options, sweetheart. Sometimes we just don't recognize them, at first." When Tira started to shake her head, Lusna just smiled. "And sometimes we need something to take our mind off our troubles." She pointedly looked over Tira's shoulder. Following her gaze, Tira saw the baby grand piano Lusna herself sometimes played for her guests.

It had been weeks since Tira had touched her own piano at home. She'd been so worried about disturbing her mother. Music had always been the one thing sure to calm her nerves and, at that moment, she realized she missed it. Desperately.

"Go ahead, Tira. Play. Caeles loves the company."

Her emotions still jumbled, her mind cluttered with too many thoughts, Tira actually tingled with anticipation.

"Go on," Lusna encouraged her when she hesitated. "Music always helps me to think more clearly."

With a nod and a distracted smile for the Lady, Tira slid off the stool and walked to the piano. The instrument was sleek, the bench padded and the keys gleaming white and smoky black.

Sitting on a stool to the left of the piano, Caeles finished his song as she sat down.

"Are you going to grace us with your playing?" he asked, his golden eyes and soft smile welcoming. His curly hair was pushed behind his distinctly pointed ears. Here, he didn't have to hide those ears.

"I wouldn't exactly call it 'grace'." She forced a smile for the three *lucani* males sitting in front of Caeles. She didn't recognize them but she didn't know all of the *lucani* who lived in this small village. They were exempt from serving in the legion because they directly served the Lady of the Silver Light.

"You're too modest," Caeles said. "I've had the pleasure of playing with you before. You have a true gift."

His choice of words made her smile slip. Her "true gift" brought her much more pain than this. Occasionally, she'd let herself wonder what her life would have been like without her Gift. But she didn't let herself think about that anywhere but in the privacy of her room and only then late at night, when her mother was asleep.

"Thank you, Caeles. What should we play?"

"Your choice for the first song."

She thought about it as she slid onto the bench, letting her fingers get the feel of the ivory.

Without conscious thought, she began to pick out the opening notes to *Heaven Help My Heart* from the Broadway show, *Chess*.

She stopped when she realized Caeles probably wouldn't know a song from a show that never really hit the big time. But he immediately picked up the melody.

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and released her brain.
And let the music take her away.

Chapter Six

"Gods damn it, Nic, wake the fuck up. She's gone."

Nic's eyes flew open and he sat straight up, only to gasp in pain as his broken ribs protested.

"Shit. *Fuck*, that hurt." Shaking his head, Nic tried to make sense of Duke's words. "*Vaffanculo*, what do you mean she's gone?"

"My Jeep's gone and so is she, that's what I fucking mean."

"Is her stuff gone?"

Duke stopped pacing the living room and practically ran for the bedroom where he'd stowed her bag— Yesterday?

Nic turned to look at the clock on the microwave in the kitchen and winced again at the pain in his side. Not as bad as earlier, which was good.

"Stuff's still there." Duke stalked back into the room, running his hand through his hair, a sure sign he was scared. And Duke didn't do scared.

Nic had to admit he was a little freaked as well but the fact that she hadn't taken her stuff was a point in their favor.

If she'd abandoned them, she would have taken her bag. Unless she'd been too freaked to even remember she had brought a bag.

"Shit, Nic. Where the hell'd she go? Damn it, we shouldn't have pushed her."

Nic felt a momentary twinge that had nothing to do with pain and everything to do with guilt. Yeah, he'd pushed her. But she hadn't been unwilling. They'd given her more than enough chances to say no.

And he didn't regret it. Not one fucking bit.

Tinia's teat, it was the best sex he'd ever had. And he'd only touched himself.

Watching her had been amazing. He swore he'd been able to feel her pleasure in his body.

"*Ceffo*, stop pacing for two seconds and think about this. It's almost three in the morning. Where could she go?"

Duke gave him the finger for calling him an asshole but he paused long enough to take a breath, his unfocused gaze staring out the window. "Nica."

Nic shook his head, his own mind shifting through possibilities. "Away for the week. Home?"

"She would have taken her stuff. And she wouldn't disturb her mom in the middle of the night. Tam and Kyle."

Nic nodded. "Possible, yeah.

"I'll take a run over –"

"I'm coming too."

Duke snorted as he headed for the front door. "Yeah, right. You can barely move. I don't want to have to be dragging your sorry ass again. Just stay the fuck here."

Nic felt his blood pressure start to soar at Duke's dismissal. He wasn't a scraggly little kid anymore, trailing in Duke's sturdy, athletic wake. And he wasn't a gods damn invalid.

Knowing he'd actually be speeding his healing process by shifting into his wolf, but also knowing it was going to hurt like hell, Nic pushed off the chair and stood. He refused to look at Duke and refused to show any sign of pain.

Already naked, Nic didn't have to do anything other than reach inside himself for his pelt.

He almost stopped when his injured ribs broadcast their agony through his body but he needed to go with Duke. He needed to be there when he found Tira. They were meant to be in this together. He wasn't fucking dead yet.

Somehow he managed to hold on to the magic as his ribs and, to a lesser extent, his head protested. He still had a lingering headache from the concussion but none of that mattered.

Only Tira mattered.

He held on to the thought of her as time stretched into forever and finally he called forth his wolf. Each part of the shift seemed heightened. He swore he felt each hair as it formed his pelt, each transfiguration of his bones. The way his muscles reattached themselves.

The way his cells magically turned his body into his wolf.

He'd never had that happen before, had never cared to break down the process like some others. Like Duke, he merely thanked the gods for their Gift and ran with it.

After he gave his final, full-body shake, just to make sure everything was where it should be, he cocked his head, hearing a strange, clacking noise.

He realized a second later it was his claws on the wood floor. He was shaking from the effort.

Still, the pain in his ribs had dialed back to a dull ache and his headache was only a distant throb in his temples.

A quiet huff caught his attention and his head swung around toward the kitchen, where Duke sat, already shifted. Duke cocked his head at him then shook it back and forth and huffed.

Yeah, yeah. Fuck you too.

They left by the special flap they'd installed in the back door. Bigger than a normal doggie door, it accommodated their unusual size and they could lock and unlock it from the outside as well as the inside with their paws.

Duke shot off, heading for the woods that separated this house from Kyle and Tam's place. He disappeared the second he hit the tree line but Nic knew Duke would double back for him if he didn't follow right away.

But first, he took a moment to enjoy lingering flashes of magic through his body, little zings of pleasure almost like mini-orgasms.

Then he leaped off the porch and headed for the woods.

Damn, he loved the smell of the forest, even in the winter when the ground was frozen and the trees dormant, waiting.

The scents were more subtle now, fresher, as if scrubbed clean. He could almost smell the anticipation of spring in the leaf buds and slow-moving sap.

As he ran, his muscles stretched and sang with relief, cold air brushing through his fur.

He caught up with Duke halfway to Kyle's. Duke must not have been running full out because Nic caught him easily.

So Nic poured on the speed, pulling ahead of Duke, knowing Duke would be forced to give chase. Nic knew the guy better than anyone and, though he tried to hide it, he had just as much of a competitive nature as the next person.

They ran silently, focused on getting to Kyle's as quickly as they could. They almost didn't realize they'd been joined on their run until Tivr streaked ahead of them, a flash of gray in the dark.

The god obviously wanted them to halt so Nic and Duke stopped on a dime as Tivr turned back on them. Staring at him with their heads cocked, they waited for him to tell them what he was doing here.

Tivr sat on his haunches in front of them. "She's not there."

Nic automatically shook his head at the sight of a wolf's mouth moving and human words coming out of it. He'd been reared around magic. He'd seen people disappear in front of him or create fireballs with their fingertips. But no *lucani* he knew could speak in wolf form. Except Tivr. Yes, the guy was a god but still...

As Tivr's words sank in, both he and Duke shook their heads to the side and waited for him to continue.

"She's at Howling Wolf. I don't know what the hell you two yahoos did to her but you better get the hell over there and fix it. Mom's pissed and sent me out after you. Run fast. You don't want your patron Goddess mad at you, gentlemen. Trust me on that one."

Nic didn't wait for Duke. He changed direction and headed toward Howling Wolf. Being so late at night and with a decent amount of open ground or forest between here and there, the run would take less than an hour.

He just hoped they got there before the Lady of the Silver Light lost her patience and decided to teach him and Duke a lesson.

* * * * *

Duke slid through the low-hung swinging door at the back of Howling Wolf into the mudroom behind the bar.

Since this was a place he and Nic spent time on a regular basis, they kept a locker with spare clothes. Not much, just a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, enough to let them enter the bar in their human bodies without showing all their assets.

He and Nic didn't say anything as they shifted back but Duke hurried his change as much as he could so he could watch Nic to make sure he was okay.

He knew Nic's change back at the house had been agonizing. He also knew Nic would heal faster now that he'd shifted.

Still, Nic's hand pressed against his ribs as soon as his change was finished and he tried to bite back his wince of pain.

Duke opened his mouth but Nic stared him straight in the eyes, his brows raised, daring him to say anything.

Duke shut his mouth and reached for his clothes. As he dressed, he heard music from the bar, piano and guitar. Some song he didn't know.

No, that wasn't right. The song sounded familiar. He just couldn't...

Desolation Row by Bob Dylan.

But not the Dylan version he knew. This one was raw and vicious. You'd think the piano would soften the sound, especially since it was accompanied by an acoustic guitar.

Not at all.

The voices were rough and raw. And he recognized both of them. Caeles and Tira.

He heard pain and frustration in her voice and it cut him like daggers.

Shit.

Duke felt as if his feet had been nailed to the floor. He was afraid to go out there, afraid if he did she'd run from them again. And he didn't think he could stand it.

Nic obviously felt the same. His hand rested against the swinging door, ready to push through into the bar, but he wasn't moving either.

Duke couldn't see out into the bar from where he stood but he knew Nic could. Nic's gaze was glued to the scene. The hand hanging at Nic's side curled into a fist and his jaw tightened until Duke thought it'd crack.

The guy was wound so tight, Duke thought Nic might actually burst a blood vessel.

Duke finally got his feet to move and he walked over to Nic, putting his hand on his shoulder. "Nic. Chill. You're gonna give yourself a stroke."

Nic didn't speak right away and Duke followed his gaze out into the bar.

He saw Tira right away, her blonde hair a bright beacon in the dusky bar. Light from the fire in the opposite corner bathed her in a golden glow and his breath caught at her beauty.

Gods damn, he'd never been affected by another woman the way she affected him. And he knew he never would.

"Do you remember the first time we saw her?"

Duke had to take a second to play back Nic's question before he could answer. Then he had to think about his answer as he watched her long, slim fingers fly over the piano keys.

He'd been lucky enough to feel those hands on his skin. Nic had, too. Once. And it had nearly destroyed her.

"She was fifteen," Duke said. "She had braids and dressed like a tomboy. She barely said a word to anyone. She looked terrified, remember? Like she was afraid she'd be eaten by the big bad wolves. I had this overwhelming need to protect her. Hell, I didn't even think she was pretty, just this gangly kid with huge blue eyes. But I *knew*. I knew she was ours."

"Yeah," Nic said. "And she still is. I'm not fucking dead yet. There's a way around this. You just gotta trust me."

Duke had never trusted anyone more in his life.

But Nic didn't have all the answers. And he might destroy them all in the process of trying to find the answers he wanted.

Neither of them made a move to enter the bar and Duke hoped the shadows kept them hidden. He never saw much of her smile and he wanted to watch without having her upset by their presence.

Apparently Nic felt the same because he remained by Duke's side.

They watched her tear through three more songs with Caeles, all songs Duke never would have thought she'd know. The Dylan wasn't surprising, really. Or the Sinatra. She'd always had a taste for the classics. But Bullet for My Valentine's *Hearts Burst into Fire* and Disturbed's *Indestructible* were a complete shock. He hadn't known she liked his kind of music. Or that she knew it well enough to play it.

It was something they shared, another tie.

One he never wanted to undo.

One that would be ripped apart if anything happened to Nic.

* * * * *

Tira had forgotten how much she enjoyed playing the piano.

How the music could transport her, make everything else disappear for a time.

When Caeles asked if she knew *Indestructible*, she started to laugh. Not because she'd never heard of it but because it was by one of Duke's favorite bands. Of course she knew it.

Yes, she knew rock music was supposed to be played with pounding drums and thumping basses. But she thought she and Caeles were doing pretty well.

Her muscles had loosened, the tension in her head and neck had eased and she was smiling.

She couldn't actually remember the last time she'd smiled.

With the last notes of the song ringing in her head and her fingers still vibrating as they lay on the keys, she sat back on the stool and released a deep breath. The three *lucani* sitting in the bar gave them a round of applause, at least the one who had hands did. The wolves gave howls.

"I may not know much about that type of music," Lusna said from her spot at the other end of the piano, "but I can say it sounded amazing."

Tira rose from the bench and curtsied for the Lady of the Silver Light. "Thank you, Lady. Would you..."

She trailed off as an odd feeling of disorientation swept over her. Almost as if she were going to have a vision. But that couldn't be right. She hadn't touched anyone.

Shaking her head, she looked into Lusna's eyes. And found the goddess staring at nothing, a blank expression on her face.

"Lady? Are you okay?"

Beside her, Caeles set his guitar down and got up to walk over to Lusna. He reached out to touch her arm, softly speaking her name, and Lusna shook her head, blinking her eyes as if waking from a dream.

"Yes." But she didn't look okay. "Yes, I'm fine." Lusna forced a smile but it was weak. "Tira, did you... Are you feeling okay?"

Tira frowned. "Yes, Lady. I feel fine. Why?"

"I believe..." She shook her head again, as if trying to clear it. "I believe I just had a vision of my own future."

Tira stilled, the blood in her veins glazing with ice. "But... I didn't do anything, Lady."

"No, no. That's not..." Lusna reached out to touch her but stopped short, as if afraid.

And Tira felt her stomach roll as if she were going to be sick.

She barely noticed Duke and Nic enter the room from the door next to the bar as Lusna's eyes welled with tears. "Oh, Tira. I'm not saying you did it deliberately. I think... I think it..." She took a deep breath then waved at the table in the corner where they'd been sitting before. "I think we should sit down."

Strong arms encircled her from behind. Duke. But she couldn't feel his warmth. She felt only icy cold fear. And isolation.

Even her music was going to be off-limits.

"Tira. Let's sit." Duke's voice rumbled in her ear but his tone was gentle, as if he thought she were damaged.

And she was, wasn't she? A freak.

Her eyes lit on the keys she'd left on the bar.

"No. My apologies, Lady." Behind her she felt Duke draw in a short, sharp breath, probably at the tone of her voice. Even she could hear the shock in it. "I need to go somewhere."

"You need to come home." Duke again, his voice flat and hard.

"No." She took a deep breath and walked out of the comfort and safety offered by his arms. Away from the anguished frustration she felt pouring off Nic. "There's someplace I need to go. And I don't want you two to follow me this time."

"Ti—"

"No!" Her voice ripped through the silence of the bar. "Just...no. There's something I need to do. Somewhere I need to go. And I don't want you there. Either of you."

Duke's expression went stone cold but Nic looked like she'd slapped him. The blood drained from his face, leaving him looking more pale than when he'd been injured.

Tears sprang to her eyes but she blinked them away. She needed to do this. Right now.

She needed...just a little peace.

"Lady, promise me you'll make them go home. That they won't follow me."

Typically, she would have never presumed to demand anything from a goddess. They had a tendency to turn you into furry little creatures with beady eyes. But Lusna only nodded, her expression full of compassion. And sorrow.

"Tira, where are you going?" Duke again, his voice as emotionless as hers.

"I'll be back to the house later. Go home. Get some sleep. You both need it."

At the bar, she picked up the keys. She almost felt as if she was floating, no motion registering at all. Or as if she were outside her body, cut off from all sensation.

Without a glance back to see if Nic and Duke were following her, she headed out the door and to the Jeep.

She knew where she was going this time. Knew exactly what she needed to do.

* * * * *

Nic felt as if someone had taken a knife to his guts.

He watched the door close behind Tira, blocking his view of her, heard the Jeep start and heard her drive off. She didn't peel out like she was speeding away. It sounded controlled. Too controlled.

Like the look on her face when she'd left. Blank. No shock, no fury, no emotion at all.

Fuck that. He couldn't let her go like this.

He'd taken two steps toward the door before Duke stepped into his path.

Nic didn't hesitate to shove him out of the way. Or at least try. Duke was an immovable object when he chose.

So Nic cranked back his arm and hit Duke in the chin with a roundhouse that would've flattened anyone else. Duke's head snapped but he didn't move. And his expression didn't alter one bit.

Nic knew that look too well. Duke had shoved every bit of emotion in his body into that tiny black hole in his gut. Nic wanted to hit him until Duke screamed at him, raged, cried. Anything but look like he had when his father had died.

Tira wasn't dead. He was going after her to bring her back.

"Nic. That's enough." Lusna's voice rang out, stopping him as only the voice of a goddess could. "You're going nowhere except back to your home."

He turned a furious look at the Lady of the Silver Light, noting the unnatural brightness of her gray eyes and the faint silver aura surrounding her body.

It made him automatically bow his head, as did Duke, Caeles and the three other *lucani* in the room.

"You and Duke will return to your home. You will not follow Tira. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Lady." Duke's immediate answer made Nic's head snap around to look at him. Gods damn traitor.

"Nic."

The command in Lusna's voice made his teeth grit with a defiance he dared not utter. His hands clenched at his sides as he nodded. "Yes, Lady."

Lusna's shoulders slumped as she turned from them, her head shaking. "Go home. Try to get some sleep. You both need it."

Fury still raging in his blood, Nic sketched a bow, just this side of deference, and turned to walk back to the mudroom.

Behind him, he heard Duke say, "I need to make a stop at Kyle's, Lady. We have things to discuss."

"That's fine," Lusna said. "Just do not go after her. She needs space."

Nic had shifted by the time Duke caught up to him and Duke made no attempt to call him back when he raced out the back door.

Heading for home.

* * * * *

Tira made sure she saw no one on Fifth Street when she parked her car in front of the three-story brownstone housing Marelli's Trattoria.

The restaurant had been a Reading institution for forty-five years. Before that, the building had housed apartments, and a few still remained on the top floor. Of course, only Etruscans lived there, keeping the secret of Uni's Temple.

Rather than hide the Great Mother Goddess' temple somewhere in the countryside, the Etruscans had chosen to build it directly over the ley line that ran through the center of the city. That vein of magical energy had drawn the Etruscans to settle here when they'd moved from Italy and set about rebuilding their civilization.

They'd chosen this neighborhood because, in the late eighteen hundreds and early nineteen hundreds, it had been populated almost solely by Italian immigrants.

Though that wasn't the case today, the Etruscans continued to hide their most sacred temple in plain sight.

Built into the back of the building, no *eteri* had ever suspected the treasure hidden there.

Though the restaurant was closed at this time of night, the temple was always open to those of Etruscan blood.

With a softly whispered unlocking spell, she slipped past the iron gate at the tiny breezeway that separated the restaurant from the next building. Hurrying through the darkness of the early morning into the small courtyard at the rear, Tira reached the heavy iron door that guarded the temple.

Placing her palm on the handle, she felt the metal warm beneath her skin before she depressed the lever and pushed open the door.

Making sure it shut securely behind her, Tira leaned back against the door and took a deep breath before pushing away and entering the temple proper.

Open to the third floor, the temple had beautiful white marble walls imported from Italy almost two centuries ago. Three columns on each side of a center aisle led to the wooden altar decorated with gold leaf.

Wooden benches lined the sides of the temple, leaving the floor mosaic bare for everyone to see. Crafted by the some of the most skilled Etruscan artists, the mosaic showed a Tuscan forest populated by the various members of the *Fata* and *Enu*.

A half-hidden *salbinelli* chased a winged *folletta*. A mass of tiny human-shaped *candelas* glowed like fireflies and danced around a tree stump. A *linchetti* couple, their pointed ears prominently displayed, lay entwined on a moonlit patch of grass.

Several *lucani versipelli* howled at the bright moon, the wolves a sleek gray, while a *strega* bent over a moon bowl and her male companion held an athame in his hands.

Tira headed straight for the altar, the white marble base topped by an oak slab six inches thick.

But when she got there, she stopped, unsure now what to do.

How to ask for what she wanted.

She'd gone over everything on the ride, talked through each point and debated each argument. But now her thoughts were all jumbled.

She knew what she wanted. But how should she actually beg a goddess—

"I find it's best just to blurt it out. Less painful that way."

Tira spun away from the altar and had fallen into a curtsy before her brain made the connection her body had already figured out.

"Lady of the Hammer, I didn't know you were here."

"I wasn't until a second ago." A blonde Barbie doll of a goddess, Nortia, Goddess of Fate, shook her shiny white-gold hair over her shoulder. Her curls bounced, her blue eyes shone and her perfect rosebud mouth curved in a smile. She looked like a twenty-something out for a night of clubbing in her short, purple leather miniskirt, tight white baby tee and four-inch metallic red Jimmy Choos.

Beautiful and wise, and still one of the most powerful Etruscan goddesses on Earth, Nortia was the only one who could help her.

"I heard your call."

Tira frowned, the Lady's words not making any sense. She hadn't even begun to pray. "But... My call? I'm sorry. I don't understand."

Nortia shrugged, her tiny pointed nose wrinkling prettily before her smile popped out again. "That's okay. You don't have to. Now you have a question to ask. Shoot."

Tira froze, unable to actually say the words. How did she phrase it? How could she even ask? How could she avoid offending the Lady of the Hammer, whose Gift she'd been granted?

As the Goddess of Fate, Nortia could control certain aspects of the future. And Tira saw the future.

At this moment, she hated her Gift.

Nortia's smile softened the goddess's beauty until she seemed much more approachable.

"Tira, despite my reputation, I am not an unreasonable being." Her nose wrinkled again. "At least, most of the time." She sighed as if someone had contradicted her, which Tira would never do. "Okay, *some* of the time. And this is one of those times. I feel your despair. Just speak your mind."

Bowing her head so she wouldn't see Nortia's anger, Tira took a deep breath. "I wa— would ask for three days, Lady. Three days without my Gift. Three days to be able to touch the men I love without the vision of Nic dying and Duke..."

Lost to her. Forever.

It was the one part of her vision she'd never revealed to anyone. The one part she refused to acknowledge because it hurt too much.

“Three days, Lady, without consequence. I don’t want anyone else to have to pay for my...weakness, to—”

“You believe your love for Duke and Nic is a weakness?” Nortia’s head cocked to the side, her eyes narrowing as if to see inside Tira.

Honestly? Yes, she did. If she’d never met them, she wouldn’t be in this situation. But she’d fallen for them, both of them and that meant double the heartache.

“Don’t you think love is a weakness, Lady?”

Nortia didn’t answer right away and Tira chanced a glance at the goddess. Nortia’s expression showed no sign of anger. Or any emotion, for that matter.

“I believe you believe. But I can’t give you three days, Tira. Not under the conditions you want. There are always consequences, always a price to pay for everything. Some you don’t mind paying. Others are more costly but the reward is more dear. And therefore worth the cost.”

Tira blinked away tears but refused to give up. Not yet. “Then allow only me to suffer any consequences.”

Nortia took a deep breath before releasing it on a sigh. Her cold expression melted into one full of compassion. And regret.

Tira braced herself for denial.

“One day,” Nortia said. “I can give you one day of release from your Gift. From sunrise this morning to sunrise tomorrow. And I agree to the terms. No one will suffer as a consequence. But the *boschetta* needs a *praenuntio*, Tira. The time is coming when one will be needed more than ever. After the day has ended, I want you to return here, to me. I want to know if you wish to cede your Gift forever.”

Her skin prickled, as if she stood naked in a cold wind. Everything froze inside her and she had to tell herself to breathe. Nortia’s demand shouldn’t come as a shock. It wasn’t anything she hadn’t considered herself.

But hearing it aloud made it too real.

Her lungs began to seize, unable to draw in enough air. Her head actually swam but she nodded, pushing away the fear and the uncertainty. Instead, she reached for the anticipation, the desire, the longing she felt at all times for Duke and Nic.

And felt a small measure of calm ease her unsteady nerves.

“Thank you, Lady.”

“Don’t, Tira. Not now. Not until all is said and done. Because I can assure you, nothing ever works out as we intend.”

With those cryptic words, Nortia disappeared.

Tira stood silently, waiting for something to happen. To feel differently. Some physical sense that her Gift was gone.

But she felt nothing like that. Only fear. Not that Nortia wouldn’t keep her end of the deal.

No, she feared she would want to give up her Gift tomorrow. And that would make her an even worse coward.

Chapter Seven

Nic couldn't sleep when he got home.

Duke had headed to Kyle's to check on Kaine and talk about what they were going to do next about the *eteri* kidnappings.

Yeah, it was only six in the morning but Kyle wouldn't mind. He never got upset if they dropped in on him unannounced for whatever reason.

Besides, they knew better than to knock on Kyle's door if he and Tam were getting it on. A *lucani's* incredible sense of smell came in handy for avoiding awkward moments.

Of course, now Nic didn't know what the hell to do with himself.

He had too much restless energy to sleep but he knew his body couldn't take another run. He needed some downtime.

Catch-22.

So he paced. Then he threw himself on the couch and picked up the TV remote, forcefully avoiding thoughts of what he'd done the last time he'd sat here.

He flipped through three hundred channels. Kaine's television addiction was legendary. God forbid she couldn't watch her shows, however many there were.

He checked the DVR and found a couple of old *MXC* episodes. Typically the show's crude, juvenile humor made him laugh. Not so much today.

With a disgusted sigh, he shut off the TV and turned on the satellite radio. Duke's metal blasted through the six speakers in the open living space.

Definitely not in the mood for thrash or death metal. He'd be bouncing off the walls in no time.

No, he definitely needed some Sinatra.

He swore his pulse settled as the first few bars of *New York, New York* eased into the air. The man's voice was pure solid gold.

With Frank taking care of his blood pressure, he figured he might as well do something constructive. He booted up his laptop, sat on the couch and started to run down the address of the house that had nearly killed him.

Before Tira had laid out his death sentence, he'd considered getting a degree in computers. He loved them, loved putting them together, loved coding. Computers were puzzles that had fascinated him since he'd begged his parents to get one when he was ten.

They'd relented after almost a year of constant begging. And when he'd shown an aptitude for it, they'd actually considered sending him to a private *eteri* school to study.

That consideration had been turned down in seconds, though. Since you could never be sure when your change would come, and because preteen *lucani* males needed to expend a lot of excess energy, *lucani* children were all homeschooled. At least as far as the human government believed. In reality, the *lucani* who lived in the den attended classes together.

Now he was damn good at finding information other people wanted to hide.

He hadn't gotten far when he heard Duke's Jeep in the distance.

Tira.

The relief was almost painful. But on its heels came doubt.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his now-uneasy stomach.

Would she stay?

Though he hadn't said anything to anyone, Nic knew his time was running out.

He was going to die. Tira had seen it and she hadn't been wrong yet.

For years, he'd been throwing himself into danger without fear because he'd known it wasn't his time to die. Not yet.

But he couldn't say that anymore. He felt it, like a hand on his back. Always there, pressing him forward, urging him closer to the end.

For years, he'd said he didn't care so long as he lived the time he had to the edge. And he had. He hadn't let fear dictate any part of his life. The only regret he had was Tira.

His death would be hardest on her because she'd seen it already. At least twice.

And when he was gone, he knew she and Duke would shatter too. Unless he helped them form a bond now that could withstand his death.

But he still wanted her.

And she was coming home.

With his heart pounding almost painfully in his chest, he put the laptop aside and walked to the window by the door. He watched her park the Jeep in front of the house, watched her sit in the car, staring at the slowly brightening horizon.

Was she praying? Thinking? Was she going to get her stuff and run?

She couldn't. He couldn't let her go. Not now.

He could barely see her face in the hazy light. But when the sun finally broke over the hills, he watched her leave the car, her expression calm as she walked toward the house.

Or was it?

He couldn't read her. Duke was much better at reading people than he was. The guy might not know what to say most of the time, or even care to say anything, but he knew what people were thinking, even when they didn't.

Nic tended not to look below the surface. Usually because he didn't want to see what people were hiding.

By the time Tira reached the porch, Nic realized what he thought was calm was actually determination.

His heart stuttered. She was leaving. Gods damn—

She opened the door as he stepped away from the window, ready to beg her to stay.

She *had* to stay.

He forced the demand back down his throat and took a deep breath as her gaze met his.

The look in her eyes...

Something had changed. He didn't know what but a yawning pit opened in his stomach.

"Tira. What... Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Where's Duke?"

He frowned. Her voice held a tone he hadn't heard in years. At least not directed at him.

"At Kyle's. Ti, what's going on? Where were you?"

She nodded, her gaze dropping for two seconds before meeting his again. "I love you. You know that, right? Even though I haven't said it, you know, don't you?"

That pit kept growing. "Ti, what—"

"I went to Uni's Temple. I wanted three days. I didn't think that was too much to ask, but Nortia would only agree to one. Sunrise to sunrise."

Vaffanculo. Nic thought he knew where she was going with this. "Sweetheart, what did you ask for?"

"You understand, don't you?" She bit her lip, her expression falling as if he'd told her she'd done something wrong. "Why I had to."

She moved closer and kept coming even when she reached that invisible barrier she'd never crossed before with him. He sucked in a deep breath then couldn't seem to release it.

"You won't turn me away, will you, Nic?"

"Tira, what—"

She lifted her hands, so slowly he couldn't help but freeze, their gazes locked as he waited for the touch he craved.

The only woman he'd ever wanted to touch him held her hands centimeters from his face.

"Do you love me?" Her gaze burned into his.

"With all my heart, Tira."

Her hands shook as she finally pressed her palms to his cheeks. They both drew in sharp breaths as her cool flesh met his overheated skin.

The look on her face was sheer joy and her wavering smile was a revelation.

“We have one day, Nic. She released me from my Gift for one day. No consequences, just twenty-four stolen hours. I don’t want to waste a minute.”

His body moved before his brain completely processed her words. Wrapping his arms around her, he brought her flush against him. His cock had already started to thicken by the time he put his mouth over hers and kissed her.

Blessed Goddess, he wanted to savor every sensation firing through his body. The silk of her lips under his, the rise and fall of her chest against his.

His eyes closed so he could taste her better. Desire, heat and desperation. He couldn’t remember if this is how she’d tasted so many years ago. Didn’t know why he even thought of that other than the fact that she *felt* different.

She’d been so slim the first time he’d held her when she was eighteen. A beauty with a hint of curves to come but tiny and breakable. Too fragile to release his full desire.

Since then, she’d filled out the promise of those curves. With her arms wound around his neck, her full breasts nestled against his chest. His hands latched on to her hips so he could lift her off her feet.

He wouldn’t drop her, he’d never drop her. He just needed to hold her.

She sighed into his mouth, a surrender if ever he’d known one.

And his brain simply cut off all higher functions. Such as thought and reason.

He knew only one purpose.

Get inside her. Make her his.

With one arm wrapped around her, he used the other to loosen her jeans. He didn’t have to tell her to take her shoes off. She’d already toed them off herself. When he pushed her jeans down her legs, they slid right to the floor.

He didn’t hesitate to rip her underwear off. He’d buy her as many more pairs as she wanted. All sky-blue silk to match her eyes.

Though they’d never match the softness between her thighs.

He moaned as he let his fingers glide through the moist lips of her sex. Wet and hot. For him.

“Nic.” She moaned his name, her mouth breaking from his to settle on his neck, nipping and sucking. His cock throbbed in his jeans, frustrated by the imprisonment. “Please. Hurry.”

“Yes.” He could only say yes. To anything she said.

He knew what she wanted. What he wanted.

He opened his eyes, his fevered brain spotting exactly what he needed.

Taking two steps forward, he pressed her back against the front door. With solid oak at her back and his body plastered to her front, she was trapped.

Thrusting his hips against hers, he nestled his cock between her thighs, let himself rest there for two brief seconds before he shoved the denim over his hips and freed his cock.

Warm air brushed against overheated skin, making his balls tighten. Her hips tilted the slightest bit forward to brush her sex against the tip, causing them both to shudder.

Mindless desire threatened to sweep him under and he wanted to take her hard and fast. Make her his completely.

He tried to rein in the impulse but his body had a mind of its own.

And Tira wasn't helping. She moaned as the tip of his shaft brushed against her clit then wriggled until it happened again.

Flames licked through his cock and balls and up his spine as his head fell back. Her tongue swiped at his Adam's apple before her teeth nipped at the tendon. Her labored breathing rivaled his own and the motion of her hips became demanding.

Her hands slid into his hair, her nails scratching along his scalp before her fingers curled and caught in the strands. She tugged on the curls he'd tried to tame. But the last few months he'd forgotten to get a haircut. Now he groaned at the sheer ecstasy of her hands tormenting him.

And how much better it would be when he got inside her.

He couldn't wait any longer. Had to—

Grabbing her hips, he lifted her slightly and plunged home.

They both sucked in deep breaths, their gazes connecting as he buried himself in her warm, tight depths.

Her eyes widened as her lips parted and the look of sheer pleasure on his face made his blood pump furiously through his body. He wanted to fuck her so hard and long that she knew only him.

But that wasn't going to happen. At least, not this time.

Already, his orgasm built in his balls, warning flashes of sensation prickling down his spine and through his cock.

He was going to come. Any second.

She had to come too.

Planting his mouth over hers, he kissed her hard, stole her breath as she moaned into his mouth.

Her fingers dug even harder into his scalp and her hips arched higher, forcing more of him into her. His hips took up the cause, faster and faster, shuttling in and out as her sheath rippled and flexed around him.

She sucked on his tongue with intense pressure as she mimicked the motion of his cock. So much sensation. Too much to hold back.

Gods damn. He was coming, his cock spurting his seed hard and fast inside her. Frantic to make sure she came as well, he continued to thrust.

He dragged his mouth away from hers. "Come on, baby. Come for me. Now." He thrust hard, ground into her. "Right now. I want to feel you give in too."

Whether it was his words or his actions, she shuddered in his arms, her legs tightening around his waist as she sobbed out his name and climaxed.

Nic forced his knees to lock so he wouldn't fall as she continued to ripple around him, milking his cock of every last drop of his orgasm.

Eyes closed, he soaked in the feelings. Her breasts crushed against his chest, her hands in his hair. Her pussy gripped his shaft as tight as a fist.

And the words spilled from his mouth. "Love you, sweetheart. So much."

With a little sigh, she nipped his earlobe. But said nothing.

* * * * *

"So he won't say anything?"

"He refuses to say anything, except to thank Tam for her medical care," Kyle said.

Duke stood in the doorway of Kyle's daughter's bedroom, studying the sleeping *eteri*. Kyle had one of the guy's ankles cuffed to the four-poster bed, allowing him some freedom of movement. Just not enough to make a run for it.

Kaine, in her wolf pelt, slept on the floor by the bed.

"Is that safe?" Duke asked. "Letting her sleep in there?"

Behind him, Kyle sighed. "Of course not, but she refuses to leave him."

"Have you had Kaine talk to him?"

"She refuses to talk to him in her skin." Kyle shook his head. "She's got a fucking crush on the guy. She's protecting him, won't leave his side. She was so injured, I haven't pushed it. But this is a fucking Greek tragedy waiting to happen."

"You think he's hiding something?" Duke turned his head to look at Kyle, standing a few feet behind him.

"Oh, hell yeah." Kyle sighed and ran a hand through his hair, his frustration starting to show. "And he won't talk because he thinks he's traded one prison for another. But until we know who he is and why he was being held, I can't risk telling him more than he's safe and we don't want to hurt him. I'm thinking about letting him go and having Kaine track him so we can put some eyes on him, see what he does. Maybe whoever took him will take another stab at him and we can follow him back to them."

Duke nodded as he turned back to watch the guy toss and turn in his sleep. Kaine had erected a primitive but useful barrier spell around the room. Almost like a cone of silence except it only worked one way. The *eteri* couldn't hear anything in the house but they could hear him. Not that he'd said anything, apparently.

"You think Nic's up to doing some digging, see if he can find out who this guy is?" Kyle asked.

Duke nodded. "Yeah, he'll do it." Nic needed a distraction and this would be a good one. Especially when Tira left.

And she would leave.

His hands tightened into fists at his sides and he forced them to relax only through sheer willpower as he turned for the back door.

Gods damn, he wanted her to stay. Wanted her to be with them. He'd gladly take any little part of her she gave to him.

"Duke, wait. How's everything going over there?"

Duke paused to snort before he continued to walk to the back door. As he shed the jeans and sweatshirt he stored here and set them in the cabinet by the door, he shook his head. "You know that Greek tragedy you got brewing here? Well, our fat lady's already singing."

* * * * *

Tira lay sprawled over Nic in his huge bed, wrapped as closely around him as she could possibly get.

Their legs tangled together, the warmth of his body seeped into hers as Nic slid his hands up and down her back in a gentle caress.

She felt like a lazy, satisfied cat. Sleep hovered around the edges of her awareness but while she closed her eyes, she fought to stay awake. She refused to waste one minute of their day unconsciousness.

She would demand they stay naked all day, preferably in bed, and eat only when they absolutely had to. Sleep was the enemy.

If she fell asleep, she wouldn't hear Duke when he came home. And she needed to intercept him before he had a chance to see her and Nic in bed and decide he wasn't needed. Or wanted.

As much as she loved Nic, she loved Duke equally. They completed her in a way she had never expected.

Sure, it wasn't the norm, but she'd known how much these men meant to her since she was fifteen. She'd expected to grow up and make them both hers.

Of course, that'd been before she'd seen Nic's death.

"Hey, babe. I can hear you thinking." Nic's voice held a sexy, satisfied tone she never thought she'd hear. "Shut it off for now." He paused, his hands stilling. "Or do you want to talk about it?"

She had to laugh at the trepidation in his voice. No way did he want to talk. Not now. But guys did need a certain amount of downtime between sex. Although...

"Talk about what?" She let the hand resting on his shoulder begin a slow caress of his pec. Lightly dusted with dark brown hair, she combed her fingers through the silky fuzz to tweak his nipple.

His sharp, indrawn breath sounded like a hiss to her ears and his hands latched on to her waist.

And beneath her thigh, draped over his lap, she felt his cock twitch and stir.

"Ti—" He froze as her thigh shifted, rubbing against his balls. "Sweetheart. Wait a sec."

"Why?" She moved just enough to be able to lick the nipple just under her cheek then bit it lightly. He rewarded her with a groan and slid one hand into her hair to hold her to him.

"Because we should probably talk...about..."

She continued to ply his nipple with her tongue as her hand began a slow descent. Over his ribs to his abs, the muscles taut and well-defined. She found the thin line of hair that led from his navel to his groin and let her index finger follow the trail.

His groan vibrated through her lips, making her sex tighten with desire. She wanted to fill it right now, to lift herself onto him and take him inside. But she also wanted to play. Needed that lightness, the simple joy of it.

"There'll be time for talk later. Right now, I just want to be loved."

Both hands now slid into her hair and tugged until she had to release his nipple or hurt him. She didn't make it easy for him, though. She let her teeth graze the skin for a second, instinctively knowing he'd love it.

And if his indrawn breath was any indication, he did.

"And I will, baby, I swear," he said. "Just..." He paused and his head cocked, as if something had caught his ear.

His darkened green gaze caught and held hers.

And she knew Duke had returned.

Nic nodded as if she'd asked a question. "Go," he said. "He's gonna fight you. Just don't take no for an answer."

Her breath caught in her chest as she slid off the bed. She didn't bother with clothes. The air in the house was warm, her body temperature even warmer. Hurrying into the living room, she slid to a stop before the front door just as it opened.

Duke stepped through, naked and oh so beautiful. He had his clothes clenched in one hand and when he caught sight of her, his gaze devoured her in seconds. From the tips of her toes to the top of her head, he let his eyes caress her, her body temperature rising even more.

Then she watched as he realized what her nudity meant. Watched him take a deep breath, smell the scent of Nic on her skin.

So many emotions crossed his expression, she couldn't decipher them all. Only his longing and desire registered. And those were all that mattered right now.

Anything else could wait. During these stolen hours, only those were important.

He had to understand that or this would never work.

“Don’t say anything,” she said as she held her hand out to him, waiting for him to take it. “Don’t ask any questions. Just come with me. I need you too. Please.”

He didn’t move and pain began to beat in her chest, sending little frissons radiating out and making it increasingly hard for her to breathe. She knew he saw what happened, knew he’d caused this pain and some dark emotion flashed through those brown eyes as his mouth flattened into a tight slash.

Blessed Goddess, please don’t let him say no. He can’t say no.

“What did you do, Tira?” He shook his head as if trying to make facts fall into place for him. “How –”

She didn’t want to explain, not now. Her body was awash in conflicting emotion – desire, despair, longing and heartbreak.

She wanted him to take her hand and let her lead him into the bedroom. She wanted him to give in to her. But she didn’t want to beg. She shouldn’t have to beg.

“We have less than twenty-four hours,” she said. “Do you want to waste it asking questions? Or do you want me?”

He hesitated and she thought the pain in her gut might make her cry. He was going to reject her. He was going to turn around and walk away.

No. He couldn’t do that to her. He couldn’t.

Tears welled but she blinked them away. She refused to guilt him into anything. If he truly didn’t want her like this –

“*Vaffanculo*, Tira, don’t look at me like that.” The tone of his voice was harsh, almost angry but the underlying emotion tugged at her heart.

“Then come with me.” She swallowed back the tears. “Come join us. Please.”

He shook his head and she could practically hear him gritting his teeth. “You think I don’t want to? That this isn’t what I’ve been dreaming about for almost a decade? But whatever you did, you did for him, Ti. Go be with him. I’ll be around. Later.”

Her mouth opened but nothing came out.

Idiot. He was a first-class idiot. Her brain practically stuttered in her amazement.

Duke had convinced himself she only wanted Nic. How could the man be so stupid as to not realize what she wanted was both of them? Equally.

She would beat him for this. Later.

Now she let her anger flare, giving the desire flowing through her body a run for its money. She didn’t have time to temper her words. Didn’t care how he took them. “Are you really this completely clueless? Or do you have to work at it?”

It was his turn to look dumbfounded. His mouth opened as if to say something but nothing came out. She didn’t think she could have stopped anyway.

“Do you honestly, *honestly*, think I begged Nortia to take my Gift for the day so I could spend the day fucking Nic and shutting you out? Is that what you think of me?”

Do you think I want to stand here arguing with you when I could be in bed enjoying the two men I have loved since I was fifteen?"

She paused to take a breath and, in the space of a heartbeat, he closed the distance between them. With no time to breathe much less speak, she could only gasp when he tossed her over his shoulder in a fireman's hold and stomped into the bedroom.

She had no time to wonder about the indignity of her position before she was flying through the air to land on her back on the bed beside Nic.

"Duke—" she managed to say before he crowded onto the bed next to her and silenced her by putting his mouth over hers.

The roughness of his kiss stole her breath and fired every nerve ending in her body. She felt the heat of Duke's body press against her front as he crowded onto the bed beside her. Turning her body into his, seeking more of his heat, she pressed herself to him, arching her back for more contact.

Duke ravaged her mouth, his hands framing her face to hold her steady for his onslaught. The intensity of his passion consumed her, lit sparks in her blood that heated and pooled low in her body.

Her sex clenched and ached as he fit his cock into the notch of her thighs, the length hard, firm and hot. They were both naked and the heat of their bodies fused them together.

Her arms wound around his neck, her fingers digging into the flesh of his back, entranced with the flex and play of his muscles. As his tongue dueled with hers, she wriggled her hips into position, lifting her leg over his thigh to open herself to him.

She needed Duke to fill her, needed the friction—

Another hot male body conformed to her back. Another hard cock pressed against her ass.

She began to drown in sensation as Nic put his lips against her left shoulder and sucked on her skin, drawing it into his mouth before he bit her. Hard enough that it could mark her skin.

Her body bucked against Duke's, making him groan as his cock pressed against her throbbing clit. But Nic's hands on her hips held her in place as he began to rub the tip of his shaft between the cheeks of her ass.

Duke's mouth released hers and she was able to draw in a breath before she had it stolen again as he lifted her higher on the bed, just enough that he could get his mouth on her breasts.

Nic followed, his mouth moving to her nape, where he bit and licked, inciting her nerves to dance and flame.

Conscious thought fled as she became a creature of pure sensation. She wanted to drown between them, let them take her under and never come back up for air.

Duke's lips covered her nipple with uncharacteristic gentleness, almost too meek for her mood. She wanted him to devour her. But he refused to take the hint. He laved

the taut tip with his tongue, one hand cupping her breast, kneading her with a gentle motion that made her squirm and beg for more.

"Please. Please."

She kept repeating the word, the necessary language escaping her. She wanted to arch her back and force him to suck her hard, bite her, to ease the building wave of tension in her body.

Between them, Nic and Duke held her almost immobile. Their hands played her body with competing caresses, her mind not knowing which one to respond to.

"Ti, baby, don't fight it." Nic's voice cut through the arousal even as he rubbed his cock against her, mimicking the motions of sex. "Just give in. Just feel."

She wanted to. But how was she supposed to do that? She wanted to memorize each touch, each caress. The slightly rougher texture of Duke's hands as he kneaded her breast. Nic's almost painful bites that were sure to leave marks. The feel of Duke's cock lying heavily but still against her thigh as Nic stroked his against the sensitive skin between her ass cheeks.

Her entire body felt as if it were engulfed in flames, her sex weeping with moisture, flowing down to wet her thighs.

"I need..." Hell, she couldn't articulate what she needed. She only knew she couldn't stand much more teasing.

Pressing back against Nic, she felt the loss of pressure on her mound. She needed to be filled.

Opening her eyes, she glanced down. Duke's dark hair looked inky next to her skin but the sight of his lips on her breast made her lungs nearly collapse in on themselves with lust. He suckled her with such care, careful to keep his teeth from hurting her.

Deliberately tormenting her because she wanted him to bite her, mark her.

Sliding her hands around his head, grabbing the long strands and yanking, she pushed his head away from her until he was forced to release her breast or hurt her. He released her and lifted his eyes up to meet hers.

"Now," she said, wanting absolutely no misunderstandings. "I want you both now."

She saw something flitter through Duke's gaze. "I— We don't want to hurt you, baby. We've never done this. Just give us time. You need—"

Her breath caught in her chest and her eyes actually teared up. She was the first woman they'd shared. She knew they'd been with other women as she'd had other lovers. But to know this was special, this was unique, it made it clear she was special to them.

"Ti, what's wrong?" Duke's voice held a hint of panic in it, probably because of her tears. Nic stilled behind her at Duke's question, his entire body tensed.

"Nothing's wrong. Absolutely nothing's wrong. There's nothing to figure out. This is what is meant to be for us. Take me. Please. I can't wait any longer."

“You heard the lady, Duke. Hang on, babe.”

Nic shifted away from her but just as she was about to protest again, he pulled her along with him.

Duke moved too, just enough that he wasn't hanging over the side of the bed when he lay flat. As soon as his back hit the sheets, he reached for her waist, just as Nic rose to his knees and helped maneuver her over Duke's body.

Her legs fell on either side of his, the sensitive skin of her thighs brushing against his hard muscles. The position opened her, cool air brushing against the lips of her sex and making her gasp with the sensation.

She needed more, needed to be filled but she didn't have time to complain because her men knew exactly what she wanted. Before her knees even touched the sheets, Duke had one hand wrapped around his erection, holding himself steady for her descent. Nic wouldn't let her move as fast as she wanted, though.

He held her just above the tip of Duke's cock, his arms wrapped under breasts, controlling her movements.

She wanted to sink down onto Duke, to ease at least some of the ache, but Nic refused her.

“Please,” she begged.

“Shh, Ti. It's okay,” Nic whispered in her ear then bit the lobe. “Anticipation makes everything better.”

Beneath her, Duke let his cock brush against her labia, smoothing the moisture leaking from her over him. She watched him watch her, saw raw desire burning in his gaze, felt the heat of his body pull at her. At her side, Nic's body gave off a similar heat, wrapping her in lust.

But Nic's arms held her tight, refusing to let her do this her way. She was at their complete mercy.

“Slow and easy, baby.” Nic bit the thundering pulse in her neck. “There'll be time for fast and hard soon enough.”

Her gasping breaths sounded almost like sobs as Duke nudged her clit with the head of his shaft. Her body tightened, her muscles clenching, waiting, only to burn in desire when he moved again.

But this time, she had some relief. He lodged the thick head between her lower lips, so he was embedded into her by only centimeters.

Biting her tongue to keep from crying out, she arched as much as she could and was rewarded by another inch of penetration.

“*Fuck*, you are so fucking tight.” Duke's rough words sizzled along her skin, igniting a tiny waterfall of ripples in her sex. He thrust up, burying himself even deeper. Nic held her steady as Duke continued to work his shaft into her, filling her.

She moaned as she slowly sank down, each inch of his thick cock bringing the impending orgasm just a little closer. And Duke's expression when he finally seated himself deep within her nearly pushed her over the edge.

He was gritting his teeth, as if he could barely restrain himself. The muscles in his arms jumped and flexed as his fingers dug into her hips.

"Does he feel good, Ti?" Nic's voice, unexpected and oozing sex, washed over her, making her shudder. "Is he thick and hard inside you? Do you think you're stretched as far as you can be? Think how much better you're going to feel when I'm in you too. It's going to be amazing, baby."

Rational thought fled and only the need to orgasm remained.

She couldn't speak, could only trust her men to take care of her.

"Lie forward, sweetheart," Nic said. "Let Duke hold you, baby."

Listening to the command in Nic's voice, she let herself be lowered onto Duke's chest. Let him tip her chin up to capture her mouth and kiss her while he remained unmoving within her. She didn't fight him to give her friction. She knew... She knew...

Nic moved and shifted as she lay against Duke, feeling his heart thunder against her chest as his tongue wrapped around hers, flirting and licking.

Then more shifting as Nic moved behind her. She felt one hand spread her even more than cool liquid dripped between her cheeks. The lubrication made her buck and Duke groaned into her mouth before pulling away.

He wound one hand into her hair and forced her to look into his eyes. "I've got you, baby."

She knew he did and she knew when Nic finally made her his as well, she might not ever want to leave this bed.

Other thoughts, dark thoughts tried to inch back into her mind but she pushed them away and instead focused on the feel of Nic's fingers as he smoothed gel around the small puckered hole of her back channel.

"Just hurry," she whispered, to both of them. "Please."

"I'm not hurrying, Ti," Nic said as one hand rubbed up the center of her back in a rough caress. "No way. Now don't tense."

She felt the slightly smaller head of Nic's cock press against her anus and her body wanted to tense. Instead, she forced herself to relax.

Nic took it slow, stopping to let her get accustomed to the feel of him when he had the head lodged just inside.

The burn of stretching tissue made her gasp, the sensation making her yearn for more.

But she couldn't force the words from her mouth as Duke held her even tighter, tucking her head under his chin and keeping her from moving at all.

Immobile and burning with desire, she felt every tiny thrust and retreat of Nic's cock as he worked it into her. It seemed to take forever and her entire world narrowed down to this room and these two men and the sensation of being caught between them.

Nic whispered something behind her, something she didn't understand but language was beyond her at the moment. She could only feel.

And when Nic had sunk as far as he could go, she felt like she'd explode with the force of their desire.

Then Duke began to pull out and lightning flashed through her at his slow retreat. She began to think she couldn't live through this, that it would be too much for her. She couldn't open her eyes, couldn't move, her body under the control of these two men.

Nic and Duke began a wicked dance, rough and unsure at first, but all the more enticing for it. Their labored breathing filled the air around her, their hands held her steady as her body wanted to shift and move.

And when they finally found their rhythm and quickened the pace, she began to burn.

It started between her legs but spread from her thighs and down to her toes and up through her torso and arms. Her fingers tingled and her lungs tightened.

Her love for them, theirs for her, made her heart fill to bursting. They moved together and when one groaned, each of them felt it. She was sure of it.

They were one and she never wanted it to end. Their bodies connected, they moved as one until, finally...

She burst into climax. The force of it caught her off guard and her cry echoed throughout the room. Her body bore down, drew them in, closed around them.

And triggered Duke's and Nic's orgasms as well.

She felt their release, felt their seed fill her.

Nearly insensate now, she closed her eyes and drifted in the heat created by the two men she loved.

Chapter Eight

Nic dragged himself out of a deep sleep, knowing by the struggle that he hadn't slept as long as he should have.

But he wanted to waste as little time as possible unconscious today.

Turning his head, he checked the clock on the bedside table. 9:38 a.m. Three hours down. Twenty-one to go.

Tira's warm body curled into his side and behind her, Duke was plastered against her back, his face partially hidden by the golden length of her hair.

Duke looked exhausted and Nic knew he hadn't slept as much as he'd needed to heal completely. Duke hadn't been as injured as Nic but the guy had been hurt. His body needed some downtime.

So he wouldn't wake Tira or Duke just yet. He'd wait a few more minutes then he'd slide down her body, pressing his mouth against every inch of skin he could reach. He wouldn't linger until he reached his destination. He wanted to wake Tira with his mouth on her pussy while Duke filled her mouth with his cock.

Wanted her to be lost to desire and naked in this bed that he'd built specifically for her. For them.

He refused to believe today was all he and Duke would have with Tira. No way was he giving her up now that he'd had her.

Even though *she* believed it, he'd make her see the error of her ways. And she'd enjoy every second of it.

Tomorrow morning, he'd make her understand that this is where she belonged. No matter how much time he had. Or didn't have, as the case may be.

He and Duke had let her run for years. Utter stupidity on their part.

He intended to cure that.

Right now, though, he just wanted to savor the feel of her in his arms, her silky skin pressed against his. Her deep, rhythmic breathing brushed against his chest, raising gooseflesh and his body temperature, not to mention pumping blood into his cock. Her breasts pressed into his skin, warm and soft, and the trimmed hair on her mound teased his thigh.

Behind her, Duke stirred, his breath feathering her hair, his hand tightening on her hip. Even in sleep, Duke never really lost that guarded expression, as if he was always looking behind him, waiting for an attack.

It sucked that his best friend, a man he considered his brother, felt he had to be so damn wary all the time. Duke never stopped being a soldier. Not for five minutes.

Even now, Nic was sure the guy was dreaming of ways to keep Tira safe, to figure out who had kidnapped her six months ago, how it was linked to the kidnapping of the *eteri* Kaine was currently obsessing over...and how to find a way to cheat Nic's death.

Nic knew Duke's greatest fear was failing to save Nic when the time came. Since Tira's vision all those years ago, Duke had been holding a silent vigil, watching over Nic like a guard dog, making sure Nic didn't do anything stupid to bring about his own death.

Nic sometimes felt like a child on a short leash with overprotective parents, of which he already had two. Well, three, if you counted Duke's mom. But Kathryn... Well, he didn't want to think about her now. He didn't want to be pissed off and whenever he thought about Kathryn, he got pissed off.

The woman had been as close to him as his own mother growing up. She and Duke's dad, Varro, had loved him like a son. And as much as he loved his own parents, there'd been something special about Varro.

The guy's laugh had lit up a room. Nic had never had any doubts as to why Kathryn and his own mom, Roni, loved him so much. Nic's dad, Frank, would have done anything for Varro.

When Varro and Frank had been sent in to deal with the *Malandante* bastard who'd been kidnapping and raping young *lucani* females, the *Mal* had gotten one spell off before Frank had torn the guy to pieces. Varro had thrown himself in front of the bastard's latest victim, saving her life but forfeiting his own.

Before he'd died, Varro had made Frank promise to take care of Kathryn and Duke, something Nic knew his father would've done even if Varro hadn't asked.

It had nearly driven his parents mad when Kathryn had disappeared with Duke shortly after Varro's death. Nic and his parents had felt betrayed, abandoned. Devastated. They'd lost Varro, the glue that bound their nontraditional family, and then they'd lost Kathryn and Duke.

And even when they'd returned, months later, things hadn't been the same.

Duke and Kathryn had just appeared one day after almost six months away. Duke had refused to talk about the scar on his face and Kathryn... Kathryn had been different. She'd changed even more than Duke.

Duke had come back a soldier. Hardened. Almost unemotional. Battle scarred.

Kathryn had trained him to be invincible. They'd spent so much of their time away as wolves, Duke had had trouble holding his human form during the full moon, something they'd learned to do by the time they were fifteen. Duke had been twenty by then.

And Kathryn hadn't stayed. She'd spent a few days at the house, talking to Nic's parents while he and Duke began their legion service. But she wouldn't sleep at the house. She left every night in her pelt to run.

Then one morning, she just didn't come back. She disappeared for months and when she finally returned to check on Duke, the veneer of humanity she'd clung to after Varro's death had faded to almost nothing.

Duke sighed again, snapping Nic back to the here and now. He watched as Duke shifted, crowding against Tira, pushing her even more fully against Nic. Trapping her between them.

Where she should've spent the years since she'd turned eighteen.

More than eight years lost. And only one day to spend together?

Fuck that.

If he was going to buy the farm in a matter of weeks or months, then she was damn well going to stop running and make a few memories to remember him by.

Okay, maybe he was holding on to a little anger at the fact that she'd kept him and Duke at arm's length for eight *fucking* years.

But they'd been just as guilty for letting her get away with it. Yeah, there'd been extenuating circumstances. Her mother. The *boschetta*. Duke's guilt.

And Nic's death wish.

That's what Duke said he had. A death wish.

Which was bullshit. Nic had a death sentence hanging over his head. That didn't mean he *wanted* to die. But it also meant no matter what he did, he had a set time and place to die.

So he'd become something of an adrenaline junkie. So what?

He loved the high he got from jumping out of airplanes or off bridges with only a bungee cord around his waist. He loved to race cars, motorcycles, boats...

And have sex. He'd had a lot of sex with a lot of women.

But none of the other women held a piece of his soul like this woman did.

Sweet, warm-hearted Tira. Beautiful. Kind.

Sexy and oh so hot.

Moving carefully so he didn't disturb her, he maneuvered himself down her body until he could get his mouth on her breasts. With a quick glance up to make sure he hadn't woken her, he flicked his tongue over her nipple, wetting it and blowing a soft stream of air over it until it puckered and pebbled. His mouth watered to suck her into his mouth but he restrained himself. He wanted to tease her but not wake her. Not yet.

Next, he moved lower, brushing his lips against the soft skin below her breast, breathing in the warm, sweet smell of her body.

He barely touched her with his hands, let his fingertips graze down her ribs to her stomach. Sighing, she shifted her hips, seeking. Already he smelled her sweet arousal, teasing him.

He shifted again, farther down the bed until his mouth was right above her mound. Her thighs pressed tightly together but, with gentle pressure, he stroked a finger along the crease, easing her legs apart until he could see the plump red lips of her sex.

Tira still slept but her body was aroused, hot, wet. Wanting.

Behind her, Duke moved and Nic looked up into Duke's dark gaze, still a little cloudy from sleep but watching every move he made. Nic glanced at Tira's perfect mouth, slightly parted in sleep, then looked back at Duke.

Nic saw comprehension pass through Duke's gaze before he nodded. With a few slight adjustments, Nic and Duke moved Tira until she lay crosswise on the bed. As her eyelids fluttered open and she took a deep breath, Duke turned her head and bent to kiss her as Nic spread her legs and put his mouth on her.

She moaned, the sound muffled by Duke's mouth, and she relaxed for a second before her body recognized it was under an erotic assault.

Then she tensed, her thighs tightening against his hands as he kept her spread so he could lap at her.

This time, he refused to treat her with kid gloves. He wanted to make her come hard and fast. Then he wanted to bring her off again slower but still with his mouth. Only then would he get up on his knees and take her with his cock while she sucked Duke off.

He glanced up to see Duke ravaging her mouth, kissing her like he was starving for her. She kissed him back with just as much passion and Nic settled in to get her off.

With his rigid cock pressed against the warm sheets, he lapped at her sex, taking the taste of her into his mouth and swallowing it down like nectar. She was creamy and smooth, her lips bare and silky. She wanted to move but he wouldn't let her, holding her still for his tongue to slide into her in fast thrusts before slowing to take leisurely licks.

When he'd made her so wet she glistened, he moved to her clit. Baring his teeth, he nipped the tiny bundle of nerves and felt her entire body shiver. Above him, Duke's arm crossed her body, holding her to the bed while Nic held her hips. They had her under their control, exactly where they wanted her.

Nic's entire world narrowed down to Tira's pleasure. Every tightening of her thighs, each muffled moan, the way her hips tried to lift off the bed to push her pussy further against his mouth even as she kissed Duke feverishly.

He teased her unmercifully, worked her into a frenzy with his teeth and tongue then pulled back and sank his fingers into her sheath. She tried to move, tried to urge him to go faster but he refused to be rushed.

Pumping his fingers inside, he stroked her inner walls while his tongue played over her clit. The little nub hardened even further as he pushed her closer to the edge.

When he heard her gasp, he paused to look up. Duke's expression had hardened with lust and he'd pulled away with a groan. As Duke repositioned himself higher on the bed, Nic pulled Tira a few more inches toward him.

Her eyes were closed as she turned toward Duke, her cheeks rosy with desire, her lips puffy and moist.

And when Duke slid his cock between them and she started to suck, Nic groaned in unison with Duke.

Nic watched her suck Duke into her mouth, her cheeks hollowing with each pull before he pulled out to have her suck only on the tip. Tira's tongue played around the tight skin, as Duke's hands sank into her hair and cupped her head so he could fuck her mouth.

Duke went slow, clearly savoring the sensation of Tira's mouth on his cock. And her expression showed only bliss.

But her hips writhed, her body aching for more.

And Nic intended to give it to her.

Rising to his knees, he moved forward, sliding his thighs under her ass until her sex was almost where he needed it to be. Then, wrapping one hand around both her ankles, he rose to his knees as he lifted her, one hand on his cock to guide him into her.

Even as tight as she was because of her arousal and the position, he slid into her in one smooth motion. His balls slapped against her ass as he started to thrust, hard and unrelenting.

Duke held her wrists above her head much as Nic held her ankles. Each man moved to his own rhythm and Tira accepted them both.

Already close to the edge, Nic felt an electric jolt every time he slid into her clenching sheath. His cock swelled, full to bursting but he didn't want to come yet.

He wanted this feeling to last hours, days. The pleasure pounding through his body ravaged all his nerve endings, throwing him into a place of sensation that was almost transcendent.

It felt like the rush he got from jumping out of a plane or hitting one-twenty on an open stretch of highway on his Harley.

His climax pooled and threatened in his balls. Watching Duke slide in and out of her mouth pushed him too close to the edge but when he dropped his gaze, he caught sight of his own cock shuttling in and out.

With a groan, his control snapped. Tossing back his head, he buried himself as deeply as he could, his cock pumping his seed into her body.

With his free hand, he brushed her clit, once, twice, and felt her tighten even further around him as she came.

And with Duke's muttered "Fuck", he joined them.

* * * * *

“Come on, Sleeping Beauty. You need a shower. And Duke needs to help us keep our strength. We need food, man. Now.”

Duke forced his heavy eyes open and turned toward the sound of Nic’s voice.

Tira lay beside him on the bed, the warm, sweat-slickened skin of her side pressed against his as she lay with her eyes closed though not asleep. Her chest rose and fell in a fast-paced rhythm as she tried to catch her breath.

Duke was right there with her. He felt like he’d just run a marathon.

While Nic... He looked strong enough to run one.

Nic’s normally pale skin no longer held the gray tinge he’d had since the ceiling had fallen on him. His green eyes were bright, no longer dull with pain.

Nic looked a whole hell of a lot better and that made Duke’s lips curve in a smile. The feel of Tira against him made his blood run thick and hot through his body and he just wanted to lie here and have her again.

He hadn’t realized –

Nic ripped the pillow out from under his head and hit him with it.

“Sex later. Food now.”

Duke’s immediate response was to give Nic the finger, to which Nic replied with a laugh. “Yeah, I love ya, buddy, but you’re not my type. Now, the beautiful lady...” Nic reached over Duke to lift Tira off the bed and into his arms.

As Nic lifted her, the silky strands of her hair trailed across his chest and upper stomach, making him groan. And her husky laugh as she wrapped her arms around Nic’s neck was a sensual punch in the gut.

Rolling to his side, he watched Nic carry her to the attached bath where he stopped when she put her hand on the doorjamb. Looking over Nic’s shoulder, she smiled at Duke.

“Aren’t you coming?” she said.

Duke’s breath caught in his chest as he hesitated. Yeah, he wanted to join them but he’d figured Nic would want time with her alone. And Duke would never want to get in the way. But when the expression on Nic’s face turned wickedly erotic, Duke realized Nic didn’t see him as a rival. He’d wondered about that. Worried about it, how they’d actually handle this situation if it ever came up. How they’d –

“Duke.” Nic’s steady tone dragged his gaze from Tira’s. “Did you *honestly* never wonder why I built the shower to hold three people? Hell, I’ll actually help you cook later.”

Two sets of eyes gazed at him. Waiting. For him.

Rolling to his feet, he started toward them. “I’ll do the cooking. We need to actually be able to eat the food.”

Tira's smile spread until he could barely see her eyes then she started to laugh. Sliding a hand into her hair, Duke tugged until she bent her head back. He kissed her hard, caught her sigh in his mouth and felt his pulse race when she kissed him back.

"Let's make this fast. We need to eat at least once today."

* * * * *

Tira sat at the table half an hour later, nibbling at her third pancake and fourth piece of bacon.

Across from her, Nic had almost finished a half pound of bacon and his tenth pancake. At the stove, Duke had at least six more on the griddle and he'd had just as many as Nic, though Duke had rolled his up like tortillas and stuffed them with bacon which he ate while he cooked.

She loved sitting here, watching them. She'd made a conscious effort to shut off the part of her brain that wanted to analyze and count down every second they spent together today. She concentrated only on feeling happy. Content. Even with desire beating along with her pulse.

Huge wet snowflakes fell outside, but the guys wore gym shorts and no shirts because the house held an almost subtropical heat from the hot air pumped out of the roaring fireplace in the front room. It was so warm she only needed one of Duke's t-shirts and a pair of Nic's boxers, rolled over at the waist a few times to make them sit on her hips.

If the guys had had their way, she'd have stayed naked in bed while they catered to her every whim. But she didn't want to be treated like a queen.

She wanted to spend this day as if it were a normal day, just a day the three of them might share. If things were different.

If *she* were different.

Her gaze fell on Nic, his beautiful auburn waves sticking out at odd angles. He was smiling at something Duke had said. She had no idea what because she hadn't really been listening to their conversation so much as listening to their voices. Duke's low, rough rumble and Nic's smooth-as-silk, drop-your-panties drawl.

Duke's voice rubbed against her senses like raw silk while Nic's brushed like satin.

Both made her wet, hot and horny. Together... Well, she was in a constant state of arousal.

She'd eaten only because they'd insisted and because she wanted to keep her strength up. But she couldn't eat much because her stomach jumped with excitement.

She wanted them again.

What would they do if she spread herself on the table and ordered them to feast on her?

Heat burned low in her body and between her legs. She knew exactly what they'd do.

Her gaze tripped to Duke, leaning against the counter, watching her with heavy-lidded eyes. The dark lust blazing there made her swallow convulsively.

"Are you finished eating?" Duke walked over to the table and, without waiting for her answer, took her plate. "You've been pushing those last few pieces around for a few minutes."

She nodded, sliding a quick glance at Nic who'd also turned to stare at her. "You're a very good cook. Did your mom teach you?"

As soon as the words were out, she knew she shouldn't have said them. Talking about Duke's mom was a surefire conversation killer. She wanted to say she was sorry, to ignore the question as he stiffened when he turned to put the dishes in the sink. Then he released a heavy sigh as he turned to lean back against the counter again and stare at her.

"Some, yeah," he said, shocking her into silence. "When we were gone those six months, she taught me how to hunt and how to cook what we caught. After she left, it was something I just kept doing. I enjoy it."

"Do you miss her?"

Tira didn't know why she had such a burning urge to talk about Duke's mom but she couldn't seem to stop. Nic was an open book. She knew she could ask him anything and he'd give her an answer. Maybe not the answer she wanted to hear but he wouldn't blow her off.

If Duke didn't want to answer a question, he simply shut his mouth and nothing would entice him to open it.

But right now, she needed him to give up something of himself.

Answers she knew Nic wanted as well.

Duke barely hesitated. "Of course. I honestly thought I'd never feel worse than I did when my dad died. I thought my heart would stop beating and my lungs would forget how to work, that I'd die from the pain.

"And then I looked at my mom and I knew she was going to leave. She was going to leave me behind and go off somewhere to die."

Tears formed and began to roll down Tira's cheeks at the matter-of-fact pain in Duke's voice. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nic's hands clench into fists on the tabletop. Duke let his gaze move to Nic, the muscle in his jaw jumping as his teeth clenched.

"She wanted me to stay. Here. With you." Tira knew he wasn't talking about her right now. He was talking about Nic. "She knew about Tira, about what we wanted to have with her. Hell," he snorted softly, "I think the entire legion knew what we wanted with Tira."

"You went after her." Nic's voice held revelation. "She didn't take you. You followed her."

Duke nodded. "Took me a few days to find her because she didn't want to be found. And when I did..." He shrugged.

"The scar..." Tira bit her lip. The words had slipped out before she could catch them back.

Duke nodded, his gaze darting back to hers. "She didn't do it intentionally. I snuck up on her and she scratched me pretty good before she realized who I was." He lifted a hand to rub at his right temple, where the scar started. "I couldn't shift to heal it, though. She would've run and I wouldn't have been able to catch her. She kept running but I wouldn't give up. Finally, I think I just ran her down. It took me three months to convince her to shift into her skin to talk to me. Another three to get her to come back to the den. By that time, she said she was too ashamed to show her face."

Duke's gaze went back to Nic. "I told her I wasn't coming back without her. She told me she couldn't stay. We compromised."

"She came back for *five* days." Nic shook his head, his eyes wide. "That was the compromise?"

Duke nodded. "I'd hoped your mom and dad could convince her to stay longer. But when she was there, I knew it'd never work. She couldn't stay. I understood that. So did your parents."

Nic shook his head. "I don't understand. We were her family. You were her *son*. You needed her."

Duke was shaking his head. "Don't lay that on her. Hell, I didn't even lay that on her. I was twenty years old. I was a man. I was taking my legion post and..."

He paused and ran a hand through his hair then pushed it away from his face.

"And I was supposed to be there," Tira said.

Duke and Nic both looked at her.

"Yeah." Duke nodded as a muscle ticked in his cheek. "You were supposed to be there."

Tears threatened again but she bit them back. No more tears. "I'm sorry."

Duke shook his head again. "This isn't about blame, babe. I don't blame you for anything."

She rose from her seat and walked over to him, lifting her hands to cup his whisker-roughened cheeks. "But if I had been stronger —"

Duke bent and kissed her, effectively cutting her off.

He grabbed her hips, his desire hitting her with the force of a hurricane. She tasted his heated longing as he slid his tongue into her mouth and engaged hers. He didn't hold back but he didn't do anything other than kiss her.

And when she finally went weak in the knees, his lips curved in a smile she felt against her own.

"I'm gonna clean up the kitchen and go for a run." Duke nodded at Nic. "Why don't you two go find something to do. I'm sure it won't be hard."

Nic didn't move, just watched Duke, his eyes narrowing. "Where are you going?"

"To stretch my legs. I won't be gone more than half an hour."

Tira saw indecision in Nic's eyes and it took her a second to realize he wanted to go with Duke. He wanted to run too. Then his gaze sliced back to hers. But he didn't want to leave her.

"I love the snow," she said. "Just give me a few minutes to dress."

Chapter Nine

Nic shook snow from his fur on the porch before he headed into the house.

Duke had already shifted and headed for the shower, brushing a brief kiss across Tira's lips as she unwrapped herself from the layers of clothing she'd dressed in to play outside.

While he and Duke had stretched their legs in the field, she'd rolled a snowman. The thing was lopsided and only about three feet tall but she'd enjoyed it.

Now her cheeks were bright pink, her eyes sparkled and Nic's heart hurt like someone had reached into his chest and pulverized the damn thing.

Gods damn it, *this* was how their lives were supposed to be. Not just one fucking day.

The anger and frustration he'd tried so hard to lock down started to leak past his guard, raising his blood pressure. He wanted to growl but he didn't want to scare Tira.

If he was in his skin with the ability to speak, he'd be shooting off his mouth. Probably better to keep the pelt for a while.

So he sat on the floor in front of the fire and let the warmth soak into his fur. The snow melted, most of it dripping into the rug on the hearth but some had worked through his fur and onto his skin, making him shiver. With a full-body shimmy, he shed the water from his coat, hearing it sizzle and pop as it hit the flames.

Behind him, Tira gasped. He turned to find her wiping her face.

"You're supposed to do that outside," she said, laughter apparent in her voice. "Didn't your parents teach you any manners?"

He grinned at her, knowing it was an odd sight on a wolf and knowing she'd love it. And shook again.

Her return smile was exactly what he'd wanted to see.

"You think you're cute, don't you?"

She obviously did, if her expression was anything to go by. Now down to her undies and a t-shirt, the rest of her wet clothes on a pile on the floor, she walked over to the fire with him.

Lowering herself onto the floor, she sat cross-legged on the plush carpet in front of the hearth. Her hair shone with red highlights from the flames as she used her discarded sweatshirt to wipe the water from his pelt.

His eyes closed as she rubbed his fur then sank her fingers into it. As she began to pet him, his entire body went boneless and he sank onto the floor in front of her, stretching out on his side so she could pet more of him.

She laughed, a throaty murmur that made him growl deep in his chest.

"I swear I heard his IQ drop a hundred points." Duke walked out of the bathroom, rubbing his hair with a towel, wearing only a pair of gym shorts. "You're such a man whore, asshole. Have a little dignity."

The sneer in Duke's voice made Nic want to give him the finger. Since that wasn't physically possible at the moment, Nic ignored him. Duke was only busting on him, which actually felt pretty damn good. They'd all been under so much stress lately, no one had had much cause for ribbing or laughter.

Falling onto the couch behind Tira, Duke let his eyes close as his head rested on the cushion, only to open them when Tira scooted back until he spread his legs far enough for her to sit between them.

As she continued to pet him, Nic saw Duke's hand rise to brush against Tira's hair.

Now this is how it's supposed to be.

The thought wouldn't leave him alone. It kept rattling around his head. But on its heels was, *It wouldn't be like this always.*

He and Duke were *sicarii*. They did wet work for the *lucani* king. They kept the secrets of their people by force and with bloodshed when necessary.

They were damn good at their jobs but their lives were in constant danger and Tira wouldn't be able to help but see that with her Goddess Gift of *praenuntio*.

If she hadn't seen his death eight years ago... If the three of them had set up house together, bucking all the rules of Tira's *boschetta* at the time... If he had gone ahead with his plan to go to college and get a degree in whatever the hell he'd planned to get a degree in...

Duke could be dead because Nic wouldn't have had his back all these years. Kaine, too, because she was more like Nic than he cared to admit.

Nic had no fear of dying. He only had a fear of not living enough before he did.

But Kaine... She didn't seem to care whether she lived or died and that was somehow worse.

This woman who was stealing *eteri* for whatever reason... She had men willing to kill for her. She'd already taken Tira once. There was no doubt in his mind that the same woman who'd kidnapped Tira was behind the *eteri* kidnapping as well.

The woman had plans. She wanted to use the *eteri* for something the Etruscans really weren't going to like, something that could expose them.

His people had kept their secrets for so long. And so much depended on keeping them forever.

Duke had been right when he'd told Nic their skills were needed here, with their people. To keep not only his parents and the legion safe but also the rest of the Etruscans.

The legion couldn't afford to stand apart any longer. The *Enu* and the *Fata* needed to pull together. The Etruscan races had kept to themselves for too long. They needed to pool their power.

Didn't the rest of the Etruscans see what was happening?

Or would they look away again, as they had a few centuries ago when the *Mal* had enslaved a group of *lucani*, forcing them to become beasts who killed for their masters?

Lucani could hold a grudge a very long time. Some still blamed the other *Enu* and the *Fata* for their failure to intervene.

They couldn't afford that grudge any longer.

Vaffanculo, this shit made his head hurt.

Only Tira's gentle petting made it better.

He stretched out his neck, wanting her to scratch... Ah, right there under his chin.

Damn, that felt good.

He wished he had all night to lie here and let her pet him.

But then he wouldn't be able to kiss her, to caress her, to thrust inside her warm, willing body until he came.

As if she'd read his mind, her hands faltered then dug into his fur. Opening his eyes, he saw Duke had tilted her head back to kiss her, his lips fused with hers.

Duke kissed her like he couldn't get enough of her. Couldn't live without her.

Like he wouldn't be able to breathe if she wasn't in his arms.

Nic knew the feeling.

Sliding out from under her hands, Nic walked a few feet away and started his change. He forced himself to speed through the process, to recall his pelt until he knelt on the floor in his skin, the magic energy seeping back into the earth through his hands on the wooden floor and through that, back into the ground.

Standing silently, he watched Duke and Tira kiss, noted the almost desperate scent of Duke's desire. The guy couldn't seem to get close enough to her.

Nic knew that feeling too.

His jaw clenched and he almost decided to leave, to let them have this time alone.

But as he watched them, he realized while Tira had one hand curled around Duke's neck, her other stretched out on the floor.

Reaching for him.

He took the two steps that closed the gap between them, his gaze following the fall of Tira's golden hair down Duke's leg. The ends nearly reached the band of her underwear where he caught the pale flash of her belly in the gap between her underwear and the hem of her t-shirt. Lifting his gaze to her breasts, he saw her tight nipples poking through the thin cotton of her shirt.

Dropping to his knees, he put his hands on her shins, letting his heat soak into her, enjoying the smoothness of her skin against his palms.

She'd sighed into Duke's mouth when Nic had touched her and she reached for him with her free hand. He let their fingers entwine as he ran his other hand up her leg to her thigh.

He stroked her silky skin as he drew her hand to his mouth and slipped her fingers between his lips. He nibbled on her fingertips, felt her body squirm restlessly beneath his. Her hand tightened in Duke's hair but Duke kept kissing her, his mouth working over hers with a deliberate sensuality.

Stroking his hand higher, Nic's fingers brushed against the edge of her underwear. He felt the heat of her arousal, scented it in the air. It made the small hairs on the back of his neck stand up and his already-hard cock throb.

Releasing her hand, he used both of his to grip the tiny straps on the sides of her panties to draw them down. With a moan, she lifted her ass off the floor so he could pull them down her legs and out of his way.

When he had her bare, he let himself look his fill. He'd never seen a more enticing sight. The hair on her mound was just slightly darker than the hair on her head and she kept it trimmed short. She either waxed or shaved because her sex lips were bare. And glistening with moisture.

He heard the rough sound of her breathing as Duke let her catch her breath for a second as he drew her shirt over her head before he covered her mouth again. Duke's one hand threaded through her hair again as the other drifted lower, to her breasts. He cupped one, his thumb and forefinger tweaking the tight peak, making her arch her back.

And making her thighs clench together.

"That's not going to work, sweetheart," Nic murmured. "Come on, babe. Up you go."

As if Duke had read his mind, he lifted her off the floor and settled her in front of him on the couch. Widening his legs, Duke allowed Nic to spread Tira's. On the edge of the couch, she was in the perfect position for Nic to put his mouth on her sex.

With his hand on the inside of her thighs holding her open, he bent close, breathing in her scent. His heart pounded like a bass drum, lust and love and desire tangled in a ball in his stomach, making him burn.

Above him, he heard Tira gasp and in his peripheral vision, Nic saw Duke's hands cup her breasts while his mouth fastened to the sensitive skin beneath her left ear.

Her scent intensified, drawing him closer, closer...until he opened his mouth and settled it over her sex.

His tongue swiped through the juices seeping from her body, drawing her taste into his mouth, making his desire flare red hot. He'd thought to take this slow and easy. Not devour her. But all rational thought departed when she reached for him, sinking her hands into his hair and tugging him even closer.

The beast of his libido loosened its chains and he set on her like a starving man at a feast. He nipped at her clit, drew his teeth over the tiny jut of flesh and felt her thighs shake and quiver.

Her breathy moan cut off as Duke must have taken her mouth again.

Nic concentrated on driving her wild, following the cues of her body.

He licked and sucked, swiping his tongue through her plump lips with a light touch before thrusting between them to fuck her with it. He had his hands on her hips but he didn't confine her at all. He let her push against his mouth, telling him without speaking how much pressure she wanted and where.

But as she began to grow frantic, her hands wound so tightly in his hair it almost hurt, he became more insistent, more demanding.

He wanted her mindless with desire, much like he was.

His tongue plunged deep again and he felt the tiny contractions of her pussy as she started to fall into orgasm.

Yes, that's what he wanted. He needed to feel her body shivering in ecstasy, had to have it.

And when she did, he felt it in the snap of her hips as she arched and in the force of her thighs as they tried to close around his head. He continued to draw out her orgasm with his tongue on her clit until she must have wrenched her mouth from Duke's so she could draw in ragged breaths.

Caught in the ruthless grasp of his own pounding desire, Nic rose to his feet.

"Duke."

Nic didn't have to say anything more. Putting his hand under her arms, Duke lifted Tira until his cock slid between her thighs. She immediately reached to position him and groaned when he settled her on the tip.

Nic watched Duke's cock sink into Tira, the thick flesh stretching her, filling her. His gaze lifted to Duke's hands filled with her breasts, Tira's one hand covering Duke's while the other latched on to Nic's hip, drawing him close.

She opened her eyes to lazy slits before she leaned forward and kissed the underside of his cock, featherlight and burning hot. As he gazed down, she looked up and smiled, so sweet he couldn't help but smile back.

Which she wiped off his face when she bent and let his cock slide over her lips and into her mouth. She didn't take him deep at first, let her tongue rub against the underside before she drew back and let her teeth scrape lightly across the top.

Behind her, Duke held still, his eyes dark slits as he watched them.

She sucked on the tip, the suction of her mouth pulling on him, drawing his lust into a fine point of fire centered on his cock. Then she surged forward, taking him almost to her throat.

He tried not to move but when she swallowed, the movement caressed his cock and he lost control.

His hands cupped her face to hold her steady but he took over, fucking her mouth with a slow, steady rhythm.

Relaxing her jaw, she gave herself up to him and to Duke, who moved his hands to her hips so he could lift her just enough to thrust.

Tira gave herself to them, let them hold her up and take her, her body at their command.

Her lips clung to his cock, her tongue rough yet soft against his skin.

Gods, her mouth... He'd never thought anything could feel this good, could make him want to fight for...

His release surprised him with its intensity. He thrust and held deep in her mouth, her lips tightening around the base of his cock while she increased the suction. As he pumped his seed into her, he felt her moan around him, her hands gripping his hips as she too climaxed, drawing Duke with her.

The sound of their ragged breathing filled the room as they rode out the dizzying wave of desire.

When his spasms had subsided, Nic eased from Tira's mouth and watched as she slumped back against Duke, her eyes closing as a tired smile lifted her lips.

Duke wrapped his arms around her and fell back against the cushions.

A good idea, Nic decided. Taking two short steps, he twisted around to sit on the couch as well, letting his head drop back.

Nic knew he'd never been as happy as he was at this moment.

If anything was worth fighting fate for, this was it.

* * * * *

Tira didn't want to hear her cell phone ringing but she knew she couldn't ignore it. She wanted to. Oh, Blessed Goddess, how she wanted to.

Lying on the bed with Nic curled around her as she curled around Duke was like a dream come true.

The almost inaudible ping of her cell signaling a call from her home phone threatened to cut her heart out.

Part of the reason she didn't want to answer it was fear. What if something had happened to her mom?

While she'd been here?

Fate really wouldn't be that cruel, would it?

As her phone continued to ring, she knew it could be.

"Where is it, babe? I'll get it."

She heard resignation in Duke's voice and, behind her, felt Nic stiffen.

It was only just after six in the evening.

Dawn was still almost twelve hours away.

"It's in my bag in the bathroom," she said, noting that it had stopped ringing. "My mom..."

"I know." Duke slid out of bed. "I'll get it."

As he went into the bathroom, Nic's arms gathered her close. "Maybe your mom just wants to check in."

She nodded, hoping against hope that that's all it would be. Even if the pit in her stomach was convinced it was something else.

In less than a minute Duke returned, her cell in his hand. It began to ring again as she took in the masculine beauty of his body. Ripped with muscle and stunning to behold, she wanted to run her hands all over him, kiss her way up the hard plane of his stomach until she reached that mouth. Duke was a man who knew how to kiss, was a master of it. And who enjoyed it.

Nic's hands smoothed up and down her back, refusing to allow her body to tense. How could she when he made her feel boneless?

Duke stopped by the side of the bed and held out the phone. With a deep breath, she sat, trying not to shiver or sigh or in any way let the fear break through the cage she had it trapped in at the moment.

She pressed the button then touched the screen to redial the last number.

The phone barely rang when someone answered.

"Tira, is that you?"

Her heart stuttered in her chest. "Yes, Lais, it's me. Is everything okay with Mom?"

"Your mother's fine, Tira. That's not why I'm calling."

Confusion began to set in at Lais' reluctant tone. Lais was never one to hold back on anything. If she had an opinion – and she always did – she told you.

"Then what's going on?"

Lais sighed heavily into the phone. "Tira... A man showed up at the door today. He set off none of our alarms. It's almost like he disabled them then marched right up to your house and knocked on the door."

"What? Lais, I don't understand. What –"

"He claims to be your father, Tira. And he wants to talk to you."

Chapter Ten

Duke drove, Tira rode shotgun and Nic sat in the back.

Duke figured out of the three of them, he was the only one who'd keep his mind on the slick road.

And he did. For the most part.

Still, Tira's father... Or some guy claiming to be Tira's father had walked through the *boschetta's* formidable wards without so much as a blip on their radar, strolled up to Tira's front door and knocked on it like he was the FedEx guy.

The guy had to wield some serious power.

Who the fuck was he? Was he really Tira's father?

If he was, what the hell was he doing here? And if he wasn't, that just opened up a whole other can of worms.

Tira stared out the window, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. He could smell her anxiety, wanted to comfort her but didn't know what the hell to say.

Nic sat behind her, one hand on her shoulder, the other on the back of Duke's seat. He swore he felt Nic's concern like a wave of heat through the seat itself.

It didn't take them long to reach the *boschetta* village but the atmosphere in the car made his skin tighten by the time he pulled to a stop in front of Margie's house. Lais had called Margie, and Dan, Margie's mate, had taken the guy back to their house down the street.

Apparently, the guy hadn't put up a fight, had done nothing antagonistic or aggressive.

But he seemed to know Su was having health issues. And that he had a daughter.

Duke wanted to check the guy out himself before he allowed Tira anywhere near him. He knew Nic wanted the same though Nic was probably smart enough not to say it in those exact words.

And Tira would tell them both that she could take care of herself and to stop acting like cavemen.

Duke didn't care. She wasn't getting near the man until they knew what he wanted.

And he had to want something. Where the hell had he been for the past twenty-six years and why had he turned up now?

"Tira—"

"Don't say it." She didn't bother to look at him, just stared at Margie's house. "Just don't. I'm going in there to talk to him and you do not get a say in the matter."

"Ti—"

She cut him off with the classic talk-to-the-hand, which he was inclined to ignore.

“But—”

She opened the door and jumped out, slamming it behind her before marching toward Margie’s house. Nic practically knocked him over as they both tried to shove their way out of the Jeep at the same time.

Duke actually stumbled over his own feet in haste to follow her and only Nic’s quick grab for his collar kept him upright. Nic muttered something under his breath that sounded like an insult but Duke didn’t bother to call him on it. He was too focused on getting to Tira.

Gods damn, she must’ve run for the fucking door. She already had it open and nearly slammed it in their faces before Nic got his hand on it to keep it open.

They both reached for her as they crowded inside, each of them pulling her back as they stepped around and in front of her.

Duke caught Dan’s carefully blank expression a second before he noticed the man slowly making his way to his feet on the other side of the room.

Duke’s breath froze in his chest.

Holy shit.

“Whoa.” Nic’s whisper was barely audible, but his “*Fuck*” was loud and clear.

Duke stole a quick look at Tira, her wide eyes glancing into his before she too looked at the man who only had eyes for her.

Duke wanted to pick her up and stuff her back in the Jeep and get her and Nic the hell out of here.

Because even a blind man couldn’t fail to see the resemblance.

The guy had Tira’s golden blonde hair though his was cut short and shot with silver. Tira’s blue eyes were an exact match to his, right down to the shape and size.

If the guy wasn’t her father... Hell, there was no other explanation.

He wore a dark suit, a striped tie and a pristine white shirt, expensive as hell if Duke had to take a guess. Shit, the guy’s shoes looked as if he’d had them custom made and just picked them out of the box this morning.

His mouth held no curve at all and if it weren’t for the tiny muscle ticking in his jaw, you’d never know he was nervous.

Duke took a deep breath and caught the scent of the man’s anxiety and the faint whiff of desperation. Joy. Pride.

“Hello, Tira. I’m Mark Daniels.”

Duke took another deep breath, trying to get his thoughts in some kind of order.

Tira hadn’t ever really talked about her father, which wasn’t surprising considering she’d never met him. Su had never even mentioned his name and Duke had always chalked that up to *boschetta’s* tradition.

Until Dan and Margie had set up house almost sixteen years ago, none of the *streghe* had stuck with the fathers of their children. Not one. The *streghe* claimed it kept their power focused, without the distraction of men and relationships.

Margie had proven that theory wrong. And a few months ago, Tira's best friend Nica had also broken that long-held tradition when she'd moved in with Tanner and Jensen Miller.

Right after Tira's kidnapping. Which he and Nic had known nothing about until weeks later.

That still had the power to make Duke's blood run cold.

And now this.

Duke tried to ignore the gnawing pit in his stomach but knew it was a losing battle when Tira's hand slapped on his shoulder as the other smacked Nic's and she pushed them apart far enough to squeeze between them.

She stepped past them but didn't move out of their reach, as if she knew he and Nic wouldn't let her get far.

Her hair fell down her back in a sleek ponytail, revealing the tightness of her shoulders and the rigid line of her back.

Vaffanculo, he was a thoughtless bastard. He needed to pull his head out of his ass and make sure Tira knew she could count on him.

On them.

He glanced at Nic, who caught his eye and nodded, just once. Enough for Duke to know Nic was on the same page.

After a short pause, Tira took another step forward and held out her hand. Duke had a second to think, *Holy shit, what the hell's she doing?*

Then he remembered her deal with Nortia. And her reason for making that deal.

And how they were never going to get this time back.

"Tira Belludi," she said, taking another step toward the man as he came forward and took her hand.

What looked like a small measure of relief crossed the man's expression as he nodded. "It's very nice to meet you," he said in an accent Duke identified as British. The guy sounded like the Prince of fucking Wales. "You're every bit as beautiful as your mother. And I'm sure you're wondering why I'm here."

"I guess that would be a good place to start," Tira said.

He nodded as he released her, reluctantly it seemed. "Your mother sent me a message yesterday morning. I would have been here sooner but I wasted a few hours trying to authenticate the message. When I came to my senses, I caught the first flight to New York. I apologize for the surprise and, apparently, the fear my appearance has caused. I certainly am not here to harm anyone."

As Tira shook her head, Duke watched the hard set of her shoulders begin to shake just a bit. He moved closer until he almost but not quite had himself pressed against her back. Nic followed his lead, putting his hand on the small of her back.

The man claiming to be her father gave them a fairly thorough once-over, no sign of what he was thinking in his expression before he refocused his attention on Tira.

“And how exactly did she contact you?” Tira’s tone held a healthy amount of disbelief. And with good reason. As far as they knew, Su didn’t have access to a phone or a computer and it wasn’t like they had mail service.

Mark Daniels didn’t look at all taken aback by the question. “I received a phone call yesterday from a young woman who told me Su wished to speak to me and that I needed to come immediately.”

“And you just picked up and flew across an ocean because someone told you a woman you slept with nearly twenty-seven years ago wanted to see you?” Tira’s head shook back and forth slowly. “I’m sorry but that just doesn’t make sense.”

“Whoever called knew intimate details that only Su would know. She also told me that Su was ill and that my daughter needed me. Before I arrived, I had assumed you had been the one to make the call. But when I got here, I realized I was wrong.”

“Then who contacted you?”

Daniels didn’t answer but movement from the doorway into the kitchen caught Duke’s eye.

Dan and Margie’s daughter Cat stepped forward, her blue eyes wide but no guilty blush stained her cheeks. “I did. Su asked me to.”

* * * * *

An hour later, Nic watched the sky darken through the window of Dan and Margie’s house.

He held Tira’s hand as they sat on the couch. The man claiming— Oh hell, at least he didn’t have to lie to himself. The guy was Tira’s father. He could smell the blood connection between them as clearly as Dan and Duke were able to.

If Dan hadn’t scented it right away, he never would have called Tira. He would have disappeared the guy right away.

Because Mark Daniels was *eteri* from the tips of his fancy loafers to his so very British accent.

Whether he had any idea of who or what Su was, what his daughter was, hadn’t been answered yet. No one dared broach the subject. At least not until Daniels did.

And if he never brought it up...

Duke paced behind them as Tira and Daniels felt their way around a delicate conversation.

After Cat had confessed her role, Dan had nearly blown a gasket which Margie had smoothed over as best she could. Nic understood Dan's fear. If the guy had harmed Cat in any way, he would have been a dead man. Dan and Kyle would have hunted him down and torn him to bits.

But Daniels hadn't hurt her. And he'd done nothing aggressive or provocative. He seemed to have an almost unnatural calm but that could just be the British stiff upper lip.

Any emotion he showed was aimed at Tira. His lips curved with the hint of a smile as he spoke to her, told her about himself and what he did. How he'd met Su twenty-seven years ago in Reading at a bar. He'd been in the States "acquiring a bank" for his employers. Today, he *was* the employer. He was the CEO of one of the largest international financial institutions based in Britain.

He wasn't married, had no children—and Nic couldn't tell if the man was happy to have one or was simply trying to figure out if Tira would want something from him now that she knew he had money.

And Daniels had a shitload of it, if his clothes and attitude were anything to go by.

If the guy looked at her sideways, just once, Nic was going to take his head off. Duke could have the arms and legs.

Nic had to give it to Daniels, though. If he was sweating anything, he didn't show it.

Calm, cool and collected described him perfectly.

Tira, on the other hand, was starting to unravel. He heard it in her voice, the emotional wear and tear that made it shake. "Have you ever tried to find my mom before?"

Daniels nodded. "Actually, yes, I did. I returned to England shortly after the night we spent together. But when I came back to the States several months later, I tried to track her down. I soon found out, however, that she'd given me a false last name." He smiled then but he wasn't amused. Nic figured he wasn't a man who liked to lose. "I thought that was the end of it. I have to admit I was quite put out about not being able to find her. And I admit to thinking about her over the years."

He paused and Nic thought he was going to stop there but then the guy took a deep breath and continued, his gaze never leaving Tira's.

"If I had known I had a child, I would have...demanded to have a place in your life, Tira. I can only imagine why she never told me about you all these years. But that's a question I wish to pose to your mother. She sent for me. I would like to see her. Now."

Duke stopped behind Tira, his hands landing on her shoulders as she clutched Nic's hand.

Nic watched Daniels note each point of contact, his expression registering nothing at all. *Vaffanculo*, the guy was nearly as stoic as Kyle, before Tamra had come into the picture. And that was saying something.

Tira paused for a brief second before sighing. "My mother's not well. Hasn't been for several years."

Daniels stilled, his eyes narrowing. "Is she ill?"

Tira paused again. "Not physically, no. It's...hard to explain. There are circumstances..."

"What kind of circumstances?"

Tira looked at Nic, her blue eyes dull with confusion, pain and grief. He wanted to wipe those emotions away, hated to see them there. He wanted to go back a few hours, to when they still had the rest of the day ahead of them.

Now...

Nic looked at Daniels. "Su's mental health is compromised. She has episodes of psychosis that have been getting worse. She can be lucid for days then be out of it for a week." Or a month.

Now the man actually showed some emotion. He blanched, his skin becoming the color of ashes.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Years," Tira continued. "It started when I was in my teens."

That muscle in Daniel's jaw ticked again. "I'm sorry. If I had known..." He took a deep breath. "I would like to talk to your mother now, Tira. She did send for me and there are things we need to discuss."

Tira nodded. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just wanted you to be prepared if she should...become agitated or incoherent. It can happen in a split second. She can be lucid and hold a normal conversation one second and the next she'll be...off. I don't know why she called for you but if she sent for you, she had to have a good reason."

As Tira stood, Nic again had the urge to grab her and run. Instead he rose with her, releasing her hand as Duke's hands fell away from her shoulders.

The lump in Nic's gut twisted and rolled and muscles tightened with anxiety.

Which was stupid. The guy didn't pose a threat, not with him, Duke and Dan ready to tear him limb from limb if he so much as looked at Tira or Su cross-eyed.

And no one except Tira had the right to deny Su the opportunity to talk to Daniels.

Nic had deliberately listened in on Dan and Margie's conversation with Cat while Tira had been talking to Daniels. Only weeks away from sixteen, Cat was bright and levelheaded but she had a soft heart. Everyone, including her three parents, spoiled her but she managed not to be a brat.

Dan was furious with her for shielding the man and bringing him through the wards around the property without telling anyone, but Margie had wanted to know more about Su's state of mind when she'd told Cat her plan.

Cat had explained how she'd carefully considered Su's request and taken into account her mental state before she'd agreed to help. Nic could find no fault with her reasoning.

Daniels had no power. He hadn't simply walked through the wards, he'd been brought through. If he knew what Su and his daughter were, he gave no indication and so far he hadn't lied about anything. He, Duke or Dan would have smelled it on him.

"Please, follow me," Tira said. "I'll take you back to our house."

Tira and Daniels made polite small talk about the weather as they left Dan and Margie's. They didn't linger on their walk. It was too cold for that. Nic followed along behind Tira, only realizing as they reached Su's house that Duke had stayed behind to talk to Margie and Dan.

Or not.

Duke had his cell phone at his ear.

Vaffanculo. Duke would only have answered the phone for Kyle.

"Nic? What's wrong?"

Tira called to him from her mother's porch, where she had one hand on the doorknob.

As he watched Duke, he reached for his own cell and pulled it out to check for messages or missed calls, knowing he didn't have any. He wouldn't have missed the vibration.

Duke's expression went from guarded to stone in a split second. His gaze caught and held Nic's for two very long seconds before he looked away, nodding as he said something and then pushed the phone back into his pocket.

Tinia's teat, what the hell else was going on? And did he really want to know?

"Hang tight a sec, Ti."

After a few words to Margie, Dan and Duke started toward them.

Duke's expression was carefully blank and that told Nic almost everything he needed to know.

"What's going on?" he asked when Duke reached him.

"The *eteri*'s gone and so is Kaine." Duke shook his head. "Kyle's pretty sure Kaine released the guy then followed him. I'm going back to help Kyle track Kaine. You stay with Tira. With any luck, we'll find them both in a few hours."

Dread made Nic's stomach tighten into a ball. Dread and resignation.

"One of us needs to stay with Tira," Duke continued. "It should be you."

Because you only have a few more hours to touch her.

Duke didn't say it but Nic couldn't argue the fact.

He *wanted* to stay.

Duke should have no trouble tracking Kaine. But...Nic and Duke were a team. They worked like a well-oiled machine, their strengths complementing each other, filling in the other's weaknesses.

And Kyle was used to working solo. Not that Nic didn't trust Kyle with Duke's life. He did. But... *Shit*.

Torn, Nic battled back the rage threatening to make him howl.

One day. All she'd asked for was one *fucking* day.

"Go."

Tira's voice sounded right behind him and he turned to see her standing only two feet away from him.

"Ti—"

"Whatever's going on, you need to go." The resignation in her eyes made his chest throb with pain. "This is going to be hard enough to get through without having you and Duke hovering over my shoulder." When he winced, she shook her head. "I don't say that to hurt you. I *never* want to hurt you. But this is something Mom and I need to do on our own right now. Dan and Margie and the *streghe* will be here if I need anything. Go. But be careful. Please."

Nic swore he ground his molars into dust.

He understood. He hated it but understood where she was coming from.

Ho nodded. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

Then he reached out to grab her shoulders and bring her close enough for a long, hard kiss. One hand reached up to cup her chin, his other pressed against her back and brought her flush up against him, fitting them together so tightly, he felt her heartbeat.

He kissed her until he had to stop to draw in air or risk passing out then let his forehead rest against hers.

"Ti, just... I love you, sweetheart."

Her lips curved in a bittersweet smile. "I know. I love you too."

And that would have to be enough.

When Nic stepped back, Duke stepped around him, reaching for her. She wound her arms 'round his neck and let him lift her off her feet in a tight hug. Then she kissed Duke with just as much passion as she had Nic.

Nic's gaze flipped to Daniels, standing on the porch watching everything with that impassive expression. If he had a problem watching his daughter kiss two men equally lovingly, he gave no outward sign.

As Duke moved to pull away, Tira's hands caught him to her and she whispered something in Duke's ear, something Nic wasn't quick enough to catch.

Duke nodded before giving her another hard kiss then turning to Nic.

"Come on. Kaine has at least an hour jump on us."

Nic nodded but didn't move. His gaze followed Tira as she opened the door to the home she shared with her mom and waved her father through.

Only when she shut the door did he turn to Duke.

"Let's go."

Chapter Eleven

Two hours later, Tira's head spun with a thousand different emotions, none of which she could make settle long enough to think about.

She'd just met her father. Duke and Nic had left to find Kaine and the *eteri* who'd escaped, probably with Kaine's help.

And any help she might have provided to the guys by using her Gift was gone.

But not for long.

"Mom, I need to step out for a minute," Tira said when her parents—Goddess, that sounded so strange—paused long enough in their conversation for her to get a word in edgewise.

They'd been sitting in the living room, where her mom had been waiting when Tira had opened the door two hours ago. Tira had caught back a gasp at the sight of her mother, clear-eyed and even wearing a tiny bit of makeup. And no longer blind. Blessed Goddess, Su looked so much like the woman Tira thought she'd lost months ago. So much so it nearly made her cry.

But she'd bitten her tongue to fight back tears as Su had smiled at Mark, holding out her hand to shake as if they were meeting for the first time, which wasn't too far off the mark. They hadn't spent much time together all those years ago. Just enough to fall hopelessly in lust and create Tira.

When Su and Mark had looked into each other's eyes today, Tira saw that spark remained. Even though her mom had kept his daughter a secret all these years.

He'd asked about that, about why she'd done it. And her mom had given him as much of a straight answer as she could without divulging *boschetta* secrets.

He'd appeared to accept her explanations at face value and their discussion had turned from *Why did you do that?* to *What have you been doing? What are you doing now?*

They hadn't gotten to the *What do we do now?* part.

But Tira could tell by the way Mark looked at her mom he wasn't going to be going anywhere fast. He still wanted her.

And her mom deserved that chance.

"Mom," Tira tried again to catch Su's attention. "I'm just going to go talk to Margie for a minute, okay?"

Su glanced her way, her smile so sweet, it nearly made Tira tear up. "That's fine, hon."

Mark stood as she did, the old-fashioned gesture endearing. And his small smile warmed his expression by a few degrees when aimed at her.

"I'd like to talk to you as well, Tira. A little later. I'm afraid we've cut you out of the conversation, haven't we?"

Tira forced a smile for him, hoping he didn't notice the strain behind it. "Not a problem. There'll be time. I'll be back a little later."

And when she returned, things would be different. Better.

They had to be.

* * * * *

Tira walked back to Margie's and asked Dan if he wouldn't mind keeping an eye on her house.

After a piercing stare which she held, he nodded and headed for the kitchen and the back door, shedding his clothes as he went.

"Is everything okay, Tira?"

Cat walked up to her, teeth lodged in her bottom lip. The girl looked more worried now than she had earlier and Tira gave her a hug.

"Everything's fine, Cat. Thank you for helping my mom. And I'm sorry you're going to get in trouble for it."

A little of the tension eased from Cat's pretty face and a smile lifted her lips. "The 'rents were pretty cool about it, after Daddy got over being so scared." Her eyes rolled in classic teen disgust but Tira knew Cat idolized her parents. All three of them. "Of course, Daddy Kyle'll make me go through my self-defense training again. I swear he's worse than a girl sometimes."

"Your dad's worry, Cat." Margie's droll reply made Tira glance behind Cat to her mother. "And so do I. We'll be talking more about this. But not now. What can I do for you, Tira? You have something on your mind."

Yeah, she did. Something she should have agreed to do a long time ago. Before her mom's condition had gotten so bad. Before she'd let herself even consider the insanity of giving up her Gift.

She was tired of being considered weak. Hell, she was tired of *being* weak.

Time to pull her head out of the ground and use it for more than weeping and mentally wringing her hands.

"I need to use your landline," Tira said. "I need to get in touch with Nortia and I need you to get Kotev."

Cat drew in a short breath and held it, her blue eyes going wide as Tira mentioned the name of the leader of the *boschetta*. As the strongest of the *streghe*, Kotev needed to be here to do the transfer.

Margie reached for Tira's arm.

"Tira, I'm not sure now is the time to make this decision. With everything going on—"

“It’s the right time.” Tira knew it down to her toes. This was right. She had a direction, a goal. A purpose. She wasn’t going to be talked out of this. “I should have done this a year ago but I was scared. I’m sick of being scared. I’m sick of being weak and frightened and without direction. I refuse to let my mom suffer any longer when this is what I was born to do.”

“You have to be very sure, Tira.” Margie’s expression didn’t lighten a bit. “This isn’t a decision to make in haste—”

Tira stopped her with a shake of her head. “This is all I’ve thought about for the past year. Agonized over for months. I know what I’m doing. Please. Send Cat for Kotev while I make this call. I want this done as soon as possible.”

* * * * *

They picked up the *eteri*’s trail easily.

The guy had had training on how to cover his tracks but Duke wasn’t looking for tracks. He followed scent. All he had to do was sniff the sheets the guy had lain in then follow that.

Kaine was a different story. He didn’t catch more than a whiff of her but it was enough to know he was on the right track.

And that Kyle was probably right. Kaine had released the *eteri* and set off after him.

The question was why.

With Nic beside him, Duke ran, the pack Nic had fastened to his back with their clothes and weapons barely noticeable. If any *eteri* caught sight of them, they’d do a double take but Duke would be long gone by the time their brain registered what they’d seen.

Duke wasn’t sure how long they ran but it had to be almost an hour, heading east into District then Hereford Township. The distance between houses grew farther and farther apart and forest and farmers’ fields took the place of suburban developments.

Duke had to wonder how the guy had run so far and so fast. Yeah, he’d seemed to be in pretty damn good shape and he was probably Duke’s age if not younger. Still, they’d covered a fairly decent distance in a short amount of time.

So where the hell was he going and why?

Too many questions. Duke hated not having any answers.

What’s worse, he hated having to chase this fucker down when he really wanted to be with Tira.

Gods damn—

Duke skidded to a stop, realizing he’d lost the trail.

He sniffed the air, lifting his snout in all different directions. Shit, what the hell—

With a yip, Nic tore off to his right and Duke followed, realizing that the scent hadn’t disappeared, he’d just run past where the guy must have veered off.

The scent grew stronger in seconds and they slowed to a wary stalk. Through the trees, Duke saw a small, old stone house that looked mostly deserted. There was no car in the rutted track that led to the house from the two-lane country road Duke and Nic had crossed almost a mile away. It closely resembled the *streghe* houses in New Tarquin but this was run-down, older and not as well-cared-for as the *streghe's* homes.

But the guy was in there. And so was Kaine. In her pelt.

Beside him, he felt Nic's energy brush against his as he shifted. In seconds, Nic was back in his skin and unfastening the pack from Duke's back. He dressed in seconds. The temperature hovered around freezing and seemed to be dropping every minute. The snow had stopped falling but it covered the ground in a thin blanket of white.

Following Nic's lead, Duke shifted and dressed as quickly as he could. He hated not having his boots but they were too heavy to carry and too bulky. The sneakers were unwieldy but not as heavy and took up less space in the pack.

After stuffing his knife sheath in the small of his back, Duke and Nic made their way around to the back of the house.

About five feet from the back door, Nic froze in his tracks, signaling for Duke to do the same. Nic scanned the ground in front of him then finally pointed in front of them.

Looking down, Duke searched for whatever had set off Nic. And saw a razor-thin wire running along the ground only inches from his feet.

He looked at Nic, who raised his brows then began to search the area more carefully.

Still out of sight of the windows, they made a more thorough perimeter check and found several other wires, probably connected to alarms in the house.

This guy either had a lot to hide or was very, very paranoid.

Since they already knew they'd have to expose themselves to get to either the front or the back door, they decided to head for the front. Back doors usually led into mudrooms or kitchens, smaller spaces, easier to defend from inside. Front door meant front room, more space, more room to move.

After a nod from Nic, Duke headed for the entrance, not trying to hide. Nic waited in the shadows, waited to see if Duke made it to the door without alerting the guy inside. Maybe they'd get lucky –

Or maybe the guy would open the front door and level a Sig Sauer at Duke's chest.

Duke immediately put up his hands. "Hey, man. I'm not here to hurt you." But he would if the guy didn't put the gun down. Duke had no intention of getting shot or letting him shoot anyone else, for that matter. "Why would I do that considering I'm the one who pulled your ass out of that house a few days ago?"

Green eyes stared at him, no hint of confusion or anxiety. "Who the hell are you people and what do you want?"

"We're friends. We didn't save your ass just to put it back in a sling."

"Then why'd you follow me and why wouldn't you let me leave? Seems like I traded one prison for another."

"Look, you wanna be out here on your own so whoever took you can get at you again? No skin off my nose. Just don't take Kaine down with you."

The guy's eyes narrowed but the gun never wavered. "She followed me. I didn't take her. Hell, I told her to stay but that damn dog doesn't listen worth a damn."

Duke nodded, breathing a silent sigh of relief that Kaine hadn't revealed her true nature. "Yeah, she certainly does have a mind of her own. Let me get her and we'll leave and you'll never see us again."

Duke meant what he said, even if Kyle would kick his ass. This guy was the only link they had to the woman who was kidnapping *eteri*. Still, Duke didn't give a shit if he got himself killed but he wasn't willing to risk Kaine.

The guy's eyes narrowed. "Is the dog yours?"

Kaine would have his head for this one later. "Yeah, you could say that."

The guy nodded. "She's beautiful. What is she?"

Wouldn't you really like to know. "She's a wolf."

The guy's brows raised just the slightest bit. "If she's yours, why'd she follow me?"

Duke sighed. "No idea. Look, man, I'm not here to jack you up. I'm here to get Kaine."

After a second, the guy whistled, a short, sharp blast that made Duke cringe.

Duke looked into the room behind the guy, expecting to see Kaine's small gray wolf trot out.

Instead, Kaine walked up behind him in her skin, wearing a hoodie three sizes too big for her and nothing else. She must have just shifted and grabbed the sweatshirt.

Duke never broke their stare but the guy realized someone had snuck up behind him. Someone who wasn't a small gray wolf.

With unconscious ease and almost scary speed, the guy moved to put his back against the nearest wall, keeping both of them in sight.

Military training. The guy definitely had military training.

Kaine moved slowly, her hands held where he could see them. "John, please. No one will hurt you."

"Who the hell are you? And how the fuck did you get in my house?"

Kaine never took her eyes off the man she'd called John. She kept her voice low and soft and stopped several feet away from him on the porch. "I'm a friend. We want to help. I know about your sister. I know you're worried about her. We can help you get her back. You just have to trust us."

Vaffanculo. Duke wanted to spit out curses and maybe bang his head against the nearest wall.

If the guy really was missing a sister, that changed everything.

Not one expression betrayed John's surprise that Kaine knew about his sister, but Duke smelled it on him. He couldn't hide that.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about. You all need to leave right now."

"Listen, man." Duke continued to hold out his hands as he listened for any hint of where the hell Nic had gotten to. "Why don't you tell us what's going on and we'll help you get your sister back?"

"I don't need any help."

"Yes, you do," Kaine said. "You don't have any idea what's going on. You need us." She held out her hand, palm up, silently asking for the gun. "Please."

"I have no idea who you are or what the fuck you want —"

"We only want to help."

"No." His green eyes grew even colder. "Go now."

Duke sighed. He didn't like having a gun waved at him and he especially didn't like *eteri* waving guns at him or his partners. Kaine made it obvious she didn't want him hurt but he'd had enough.

He knew Nic was just waiting for a signal from him to pounce, probably from inside the house.

Time to end this now.

With a flick of his fingers, he signaled to Nic. And in his peripheral vision, he saw the shadows flicker inside the doorway.

He moved his gaze to Kaine, warning her to be prepared.

In the split second before Nic attacked, Kaine tensed.

And tipped off John.

And everything went to hell from there.

* * * * *

"You're sure this is what you want?"

Nortia leaned against the counter in Margie's kitchen, arms crossed over her chest. Her expression held absolutely no hint of what she was thinking.

Tira stared straight back, her gaze never wavering. Even though her heart pounded so loudly the Lady of the Hammer could probably hear it in the silence hanging over the house and she could barely breathe around the knot of fear in her chest.

"Yes. I know this is the right thing to do."

"You know your Gift isn't like any other." Nortia continued to hold her in place with her intent gaze. "This isn't merely agreeing to take your mother's place in the *boschetta*. You need to be absolutely positive. Downloading centuries of memories and the bulk of your mother's powers could cause your brain to overload if you're not fully committed."

Tira nodded for what had to be the hundredth time. She knew all of this. For years her mom had been preparing her for this moment.

The Gift of *praenuntio* was different from all other Goddess Gifts in the fact that it was cumulative. When Tira accepted the mantle of *praenuntio*, she agreed to accept the collective memories of the *boschetta* back to ancient times. Though she may never have need to use them, Tira would have access to almost three thousand years of thoughts, emotions and memories of the *streghe* who had come before.

Those memories would be stored in her brain, as they were in her mom's, until she had need of them or she passed them on to the next generation.

She'd also accept a huge portion of her mom's ability with the transfer of memory because it could be done no other way.

Tira knew all the pros and the cons. She'd been debating them for years and her fear had always won out over her sense of duty.

But these past few hours with Nic and Duke had made her realize she'd let that fear dictate her life for too long. She'd been weak. If she'd been stronger, she could have spent the last several years living her life with the men she loved instead of living only half a life without them while waiting for Nic's death.

Weak and stupid.

She could have saved her mother some of the anguish of the past year, slowly losing her mind to the visions.

No more.

"I know everything, Lady. And I'm ready. Now."

Nortia didn't hesitate. "Kotev, Margie," she called to the *streghe* waiting in the front room. "Let's do this."

* * * * *

"Kaine, gods damn it, shift!"

Duke had his hand over the wound on Kaine's stomach as it pumped blood through his fingers.

"No." Kaine shook her head as she lay on the porch where she'd fallen after John's gun had gone off. "Can't."

"Yes, you fucking can! I'm ordering you to do it now. Right now!"

Behind him, Duke heard the labored breathing of the *eteri* who Nic held with one arm around his neck restricting his breathing and using his other hand to crush the guy's wrists together.

Duke didn't care if Nic killed the fucker.

If Kaine died, he'd tear the guy limb from limb.

Her pain-filled brown eyes slid to where Nic stood with the *eteri*.

A minute ago, Nic had jumped the guy from behind but Kaine had tipped off John to the imminent attack.

Duke had reached for the gun, the gun had gone off...and Kaine had cried out in pain.

"Kaine, you're going to die if you don't shift."

Once more she looked at the *eteri* and Duke automatically followed her gaze. The guy continued to struggle against Nic's hold, his eyes glued to Kaine. To the wound in her stomach.

"Medic," he finally breathed the word, "I'm a medic. Let me—"

"Shut the fuck up," Nic growled in the guy's ear. "She doesn't need any more of your help."

No, Kaine needed to shift. The change would knit her body back together. But she was holding back and Duke finally realized why. Greek fucking tragedy.

"Shit, Kaine, I promise. I promise he won't remember. We'll wipe his memories clean."

The *eteri* wouldn't remember what she was. Duke instinctively knew that was the reason she was holding back. She didn't want the guy to see her shift.

And she was willing to die for it.

Well, Duke wasn't willing to give her up. He'd promise her anything. He refused to lose the woman who'd become more than a partner. She was the sister he'd never had. Sarcastic and bitterly funny when she wasn't quiet and thoughtful, Kaine had to listen. She had to obey.

"You swear?" she finally said, her eyes wide and filled with so much agony.

"On my pelt, I swear. He won't remember. Just do it."

After another glance at the *eteri*, still struggling against Nic's hold, she rolled into a ball and let the magic take her.

As he moved away to give her room, Duke heard the *eteri* gasp, though probably not his last. If Kaine didn't make it, Nic would make sure he didn't breathe too many more.

Though most *lucani* considered it bad manners, Duke watched as Kaine called forth her pelt. He didn't look away until she lay, panting, on the porch. No wound marred her fur and Duke finally released the breath he'd been holding.

Standing on her paws, she shook her entire body from snout to tail then sat back on her haunches, staring at Duke.

"No pain? Everything okay?" he asked.

He knew if she was in her skin, she'd give him a smart-ass salute and when he turned his back, she'd probably give him the finger. Now she settled for baring her teeth at him.

But he could tell even that was halfhearted. And the reason for that stood behind him struggling for breath in Nic's hold.

Rising, Duke stepped forward, his hand shooting out to grab the *eteri's* throat. Nic released him a split second before Duke made contact. With his hand on his neck, Duke walked him back against the wall of the house and held him there, pinned like a bug under a microscope.

The guy's wide, dilated eyes were the only sign that he was freaked out. Definitely Special Ops, Duke thought before getting down to business. "We're done screwing around. Tell us everything or I will kill you."

* * * * *

Tira had expected the pain.

Agonizing, as if she'd plugged her fingers into a live electrical socket.

Her body jolted against Margie, who held her tight in her arms to keep her upright. Her hands tightened around Kotev's. The eldest member of the *boschetta* and the most powerful, Kotev possessed magic that allowed for the absence of Tira's mom, serving as a conduit for the information to be passed.

The pain seemed to last forever but just as abruptly as it started, it stopped, cut off as if by a switch.

Distantly she heard Nortia tell Margie to step away though Kotev continued to hold her hands. The connection grounded her in some way she couldn't explain. As if the seventy-year-old with short, steel-gray hair and a body a forty-year-old would envy eased the throbbing pain remaining in her head.

It actually felt as if someone had taken a crowbar, pried open her head and dumped a million tiny little men with jackhammers in her skull.

And each of those jackhammers implanted a memory. Or twenty.

Bits and pieces of memories flashed through her head with each millisecond. People and places she'd never seen, languages she didn't understand, smells, thoughts, sounds...

"Breathe, Tira. You need to breathe or you're going to pass out."

Nortia's voice somehow made it through the cacophony in her head and she took a deep breath, gulping in much-needed air.

"Now open your eyes," Nortia continued. "You need to focus on something that isn't in your head. All that information needs to settle and you need to let it."

The effort it took to open her eyes was tremendous, like prying off the lid to a box that'd been nailed and glued shut.

With a strength she never would have thought she had, she opened her eyes.

Everything was blurry for seconds but she fought through that, focusing on the large, dark blob directly in front of her.

She blinked and the visions tried to pull her back under. Crimson blood flowed, almost the same color as the licks of flame licking at the feet of the woman on the stake.

No. Blessed Goddess, let me focus.

She fought them off, fought to keep from falling back under the horrified, fascinated spell of voyeurism.

The blob reappeared, slowly, slowly forming into the body.

Suddenly, it moved and she blinked, startled.

“Cat.” Nortia’s quiet voice held a sharp note that cut into her head like a knife. “Don’t move.”

The blob froze and, little by little, Cat came into focus. Panting like she’d just run a five-minute mile, Tira stared hard at the familiar features of Margie’s daughter.

“Tira, can you hear me?” Nortia asked.

She kept staring at Cat, afraid to move her head and risk even more of a headache. “Yes, Lady.”

“Good.” Nortia sighed, the soft sound the only indication the goddess had been at all worried about this process. “Now I’m going to take your hand and lead you over to the sofa.”

Nortia wrapped her hand around Tira’s and Tira registered the warmth of the goddess’ skin, a second before the vision hit.

Unlike her visions before, she felt disconnected from this one, as if she were watching it on a TV screen instead of experiencing it in person.

But there was no mistaking the images.

When she blinked again, they were gone and Nortia stood before her, an unusually worried expression on her beautiful features.

“Tira, what—”

“Margie, I need to talk to Dan. Right away.”

Chapter Twelve

"The woman who kidnapped you has your sister. Why the fuck didn't you say that when you woke up?"

Nic scrubbed a hand through his hair as he paced John Simmons' sparse front room.

The guy lived like a Spartan. Only a couch, TV and coffee table sat in the front room. There was no dining table, no kitchen table. In one of the bedrooms, there was a bed and a chest. In the other, piles of boxes. And a locked chest Nic knew held weapons. He could smell the metal and gunpowder.

John sat on the couch, his gaze taking in everything. He watched Nic pace for a while then he stared at Duke, silent and hulking against the wall.

But his gaze always came back to Kaine at the front window. He stared at her as if he was dissecting her and Nic knew it made her crazy because she liked this *eteri*. She wanted him, Nic could smell it on her and that was such a shock in and of itself that Nic tried not think about it. Kaine, who had so many reasons to hate *eteri*, had fallen for one.

And the guy couldn't stop staring at her as if she were a freak in the carnival. Even when he would only talk about his sister.

"I need you to release me so I can go get my sister."

"And how do you know where to look?"

John looked him straight in the eyes. "Because I overheard the man who took her out of the cell next to mine tell someone on the phone where to meet him."

"How do you know they weren't just jacking your chain?"

"Because he didn't say it loud enough to hear. I read his lips."

Handy trick. "Tell us where and we'll retrieve her." Duke's voice sounded like a feral dog's growl but the guy did nothing more than stare at Nic steadily.

"No." John's voice held absolutely no inflection. "You have to take me with you."

Nic sighed. "Look, man, we don't have time to argue. And frankly, we don't want to worry about you shooting us in the back the first chance you get. We'll retrieve your sister. I know you don't think you have any reason to trust us but we're not the bad guys here."

"Then exactly *what* are you?"

John's gaze arrowed back to Kaine, standing next to the window, staring out at the dark night.

When they'd dragged John back into the house after he'd accidentally shot her and she had changed to save her life, John had told her where she could find a pair of

sweatpants that might fit her and another sweatshirt. The old one had disintegrated when she'd used her magic.

"We'll be your worst nightmare if you don't help us out here."

Nic rolled his eyes at Duke's hard-assed comment. "Look, ignore Mr. Happy for the moment. You're military, right? Special Ops? So are we. You have my word as a soldier that we'll do everything we can to retrieve your sister and that we'll return her to you. We want the bitch who took her. She's ours."

John looked him straight in the eyes. "Then I guess you better stop talking so we can leave."

Nic looked at Duke, who made his thoughts clear without moving a muscle. Then he looked at Kaine, who turned to him with dead-cold eyes.

"I know where he parked his car. Bring him and let's get this done so we can wipe him. The sooner the better."

* * * * *

"You're sure this is the right place?"

From their vantage point of a secluded parking lot overlooking a desolate-looking industrial park, Tira eyed the equally dilapidated warehouse just over the Reading city line. Only a mile or so from Albright College and the Hampton Park neighborhood, the cluster of buildings looked, for all intents and purposes, deserted.

Nodding, she turned to face Kyle. "Yes, I recognize the building and the symbol on the sign from the vision."

"And you're sure she's in there?"

Kyle's tone held the slightest hint of doubt and she knew she couldn't fault him for it. Previously, her Gift had worked only through touch. Today, she'd only needed one look into Nortia's eyes to trigger a vision.

"Yes, she is. Look, Kyle, I understand why you have doubts. But I'm not wrong. Whoever's behind the kidnappings is in that building."

After another few seconds of staring into her eyes, Kyle nodded and looked into the rearview at Dan.

"You sure about this?"

Dan made a rude noise that had Tira turning just in time to see him give Kyle the finger. "Don't make me hurt you, asshole."

Kyle's expression never changed. "Hey, man. It's been a while since you've been out in the field, I just want to—"

"You just want to yank my chain. Fuck off."

Kyle's mouth curved in a hard-edged grin. "True, but you know Margie'll have my ass in a sling if anything happens to you. And Cat would cry and I hate to see Cat cry."

Dan snorted. "And Tam will be all over mine if you get so much as a scratch so don't fuck around. Let's get this done."

Kyle's smile lightened until he looked almost approachable. The man was a tattooed bad-ass who looked like the assassin he was. But when he smiled, like he was now at Dan or whenever he looked at his mate, Tira saw his true nature. Indomitable but compassionate to the core. A man you wanted at your back.

Nic and Duke would do anything for Kyle, that's the kind of loyalty he commanded. Hell, they practically worshipped him.

She completely understood.

Dan shrugged out of his coat and pulled his shirt over his head, shedding his clothes in preparation for changing.

When he was naked, he got out of Kyle's Wrangler and headed for the small patch of scraggly grass closest to the car. She glanced back at Kyle when Dan knelt on the snow-covered ground.

Kyle's smile had disappeared. "I want you to seriously reconsider going in there with us, Tira. Stay here and let Dan and I clean house first. Then we'll come back for you."

She shook her head. "That's not what I saw. I have to go in with you. There's something I have to do."

"But you don't know what it is."

She shook her head again, feeling like a broken record because they'd been over this three times already. "I still have to be in there. I'm afraid if I'm not, something will happen to you and Dan. And either of your mates can take me in a fight."

Kyle didn't even crack a smile at her attempt to lighten the mood. He didn't say anything for several seconds, just stared at her. Finally he sighed. "You stick to me like glue. If I tell you to run, you run and you don't stop. If something happens to Dan and me, just keep running. Go to Sal's. If you don't think you can make it there, head for Lacey's bar on Eleventh Street. Teodoro de Feo will keep you safe until Nic and Duke can get you."

She nodded, gathering her fast-fading courage. The adrenaline rush from the transfer of power had started to wear off and fear was creeping in.

For so long she'd been a coward. Before, she'd had no idea how to manage the fear so she'd let it control her.

No more.

Dan's wolf issued a short, guttural growl from beside the car and she jumped, startled, but forced herself to open the door and get out.

Her legs shook and she practically had to lock her knees so she wouldn't fall. Dan butted his head against her legs and she automatically reached down to stroke a hand along his back.

“Deep breath, Tira,” Kyle said as he came up beside her. “It’s okay to be afraid. Just don’t freeze, don’t let it control you. You need to be able to function. Use the fear to stay alert.”

She nodded. She could do this. She had to do this.

She had backed her best friend Nica a few months ago when Nica had approached the *boschetta* about making changes, about making the *streghe* an integral, useful part of the Etruscan community.

About using their powers to benefit their community and not just the *boschetta*.

Now it was time to put her money where her mouth was. She needed to use her power for more than just forecasting crops and the gender of babies.

She wanted to be useful. To save lives. Especially the two most precious to her.

As she took a deep breath, Dan picked up the leash he’d laid on the ground before changing and sat on the ground in front of Tira with it. She smiled at the honor Dan was giving her, of handing over his leash. Although largely a symbolic gesture, since *lucani* leashes were designed to break apart from the collar with the right amount of force, it was one no Etruscan took lightly.

She fastened the thin strip of leather around his neck then hooked the leash to it.

When she stood, Kyle held out his arm to her. “Okay, hon. Take my arm and we’re gonna go for a walk. Just like any other couple out late at night with their fat old dog.”

Dan turned to bare his teeth and growl but Kyle just smiled, a sight that would make grown men turn and run the other way.

“Yeah, yeah, I injured your pride. Suck it up. I want to be inside that building in ten minutes.”

* * * * *

“Well, shit. Looks like we’re not the first to the party.”

Duke pulled in next to Kyle’s black Jeep, shaking his head, as Nic opened the door and jumped out.

“How the hell did he find out—

“*Vaffanculo*. He’s got Tira with him.”

The fear in Nic’s tone bit into Duke’s gut like a dull blade, even as her scent finally hit him. It twisted and tore and did a whole hell of a lot of damage.

“We’ve got to get down there now,” Nic said as he started to rip off clothes. “Something’s up. Tira must’ve had a vision—”

“No, she didn’t,” Duke said as his brain tried to work the problem. “She couldn’t.”

Nic paused for a brief second as that realization hit him. Then he moved faster.

Behind him, he heard Kaine swear under her breath as she too climbed out of the Jeep. “It’s definitely her scent. And Dan’s too. Don’t go off half-cocked here, Nic.”

Duke practically felt the control Nic had to exert to force himself to stop tearing at his clothes and stand half nude in the freezing-cold night. "I'm not, but if Kyle and Dan are in there, then you know something's going down and we need to get in there too."

Duke nodded, started to undress then stopped, with a glance into the backseat at the *eteri* John. The guy watched everything, saw everything. If the guy was *lucani*, he'd make a damn good *speculator*, a spy.

As it was...

"Kaine, you and Nic recon, I want details in ten. *Eteri*, you and I are gonna go the hard way. Down the hill. Don't fall and try not to make too much noise."

The guy opened his mouth to say something but it never came out. Kaine and Nic had started their change. His mouth hung open like it should have a hook in it. His mouth snapped shut after a few long seconds but his eyes narrowed into slits, watching every move Kaine made.

"Hey, *eteri*. It's not polite to stare. You may get your hand bitten off."

Blinking hard, John dragged his gaze away to meet Duke's. "What the hell are you people?"

Duke had a string of curse words ready to fly off his tongue but with what he considered a supreme effort, he managed to bite them back. The guy hadn't yanked their chain about the address. If Dan and Kyle were here too, something had to be going on.

"You know what we are. You've seen it with your own eyes. But we're not monsters. We're not mindless animals and we don't take shit from anyone. We promised we'd help get your sister. We will. But Nic and I have someone we care about down there too. If she gets hurt..." He couldn't even bear to think about it. What the hell had Kyle been thinking to bring her here?

Duke threw open the door and unfolded himself from the seat then flipped it forward so John could get out.

When John stood next to him, Duke waited until the guy looked into his eyes. "If anything happens to her, get your sister and get the hell out because it'll be bloody and it'll be nasty."

John paused before nodding once. "Understood."

A flash of movement caught Duke's eye and he turned to see Nic's and Kaine's wolves run for cover of the trees on the hill leading down to the industrial park.

John turned to watch them as well. His sharp gaze followed them even through the trees.

Smart guy. Very smart guy. Hopefully smart enough to keep himself safe.

Because Duke had only one objective in mind – get Tira out unharmed.

* * * * *

Tira felt the strength of the power hit her as soon as they got within twenty yards of the building.

It made her skin crawl and the fear she'd so far kept at bay made a rousing return.

"Kyle," she whispered as softly as she could, knowing he'd be able to hear her. "Do you—"

"Yeah."

Then he made a slashing motion across his throat that she figured meant shut up. No problem. She could barely breathe as it was.

Whoever or whatever was in this building, it wasn't good. But she didn't exactly sense evil either, which didn't mean anything because she wasn't sure she'd ever been in the presence of true evil.

Even the man who'd kidnapped her months ago hadn't felt evil. Just stressed and under enormous pressure.

While the sense of wrongness was strongest at the rear of the building, they slunk around to the front where the feeling was weakest.

Dan's wolf sat by the front entrance, staring up at the security camera mounted above the door. The little red light blinked as it swept the opposite side of the building from where they approached.

Kyle motioned her back around the corner and they slipped out of sight as the camera made its way back around.

After a few seconds, Kyle stuck his head around the corner again then strode up to the door, pulling something out of his pants pocket as he went.

Following behind him, she watched him pick the lock on the front door in under thirty seconds. As Kyle turned the knob and pushed open the door, Dan slipped through first as she and Kyle waited. When Dan returned, they followed him into what appeared to be the reception area for a business.

With Dan leading the way, they hurried through the building, winding through several office spaces connected by halls and doors. All looked deserted, cubicles with no chairs, no computers.

She tried to make as little noise as possible. Kyle and Dan made no sound at all. They were ghosts.

Hell, people outside probably heard her heavy breathing.

And each step they took brought them closer to that unnerving sense of wrongness.

After a few minutes, she could barely get her feet to move because her skin crawled and she shook from head to toe. Then Kyle held up his hand in a fist, which she assumed meant stop because he did as well.

Dan had gone ahead to the next door, an industrial steel contraption that looked different than anything they'd encountered already. She could barely make out his form as he sifted through the shadows.

She couldn't believe no one had confronted them yet or that they hadn't seen or heard anyone. She'd seen no cameras or security devices but that didn't there weren't any.

Kyle cocked his head to the side, as if listening to something. Something she couldn't hear.

Closing her eyes, she used her *arus* to sense the world around her instead of her traditional five senses.

The vision hit out of nowhere, disjointed images assaulting her mind. She wasn't sure how long the vision lasted. It could only have lasted seconds because Kyle remained in position in front of her.

The vision stole her breath, punching into her stomach. She opened her mouth to warn Kyle and Dan.

And the door flew open.

* * * * *

Nic heard the sounds of battle ahead and took off down the hall.

His only thought was Tira. If anything happened to her...

He poured on the speed, sensed Kaine pull up beside him. Duke and the *eteri* raced after them but he and Kaine soon left them behind.

Gunshots rang out, only a few. Then the sound of hand-to-hand fighting and the fierce snarls of a wolf.

Nic paid no attention to his surroundings. He didn't sense anyone but his companions around him so he concentrated on reaching the fight.

There, the door just ahead...

His first instinct was to barrel into the room and find Tira. Protect Tira.

He didn't care what happened to him.

He pulled up short, just before he hit the door.

No, wait, that wasn't true. Gods damn it, he did care. He wanted to live through this. He wanted to spend his life with Tira and Duke. Wanted what he'd told himself he couldn't have because he'd be dead.

Yeah, well, fuck that.

People changed their fate every day. They took a right when they could've taken a left. Maybe if they'd taken the left, they would've been hit by a bus. Who really knew?

And if he took the turn that led to the bus, well, then at least he would get Tira the hell out safely before it crushed the life out of him.

Beside him, he heard a soft huff. Kaine, staring at him with her head cocked to the side, questions in her eyes.

With his paw, he motioned for her to follow him through then he stuck his head into the room.

What he saw made him snarl in fear and anger and he leaped into the fray.

* * * * *

Taking cover beneath an industrial-sized metal desk, Tira ignored Dan and Kyle and the battle they fought against the six men in the room.

Gunshots rang out but neither Kyle nor Dan seemed to be hurt so she kept her eyes on the red-haired woman who watched the fight from behind her men with no outward sign of fear. Or concern. Or any emotion at all.

It was like she was watching a TV show she wasn't particularly interested in.

Tira had no idea if the woman had seen her or if she didn't even care that she was under attack.

However, she did keep looking behind her at a long, black box. It reminded Tira of a coffin, though she knew there were vents on the sides. And a girl in the box. The girl she'd seen in her vision.

Tira had to get the girl out of the box. Everything depended on her getting the girl out of the box.

She stuck her head around the side of the desk, plotting her course, forcing back the fear that wanted her to stay hidden and safe under the desk.

Safe wouldn't get her what she wanted.

On her hands and knees, she crawled to the next desk, then the next. She was fairly certain no one had seen her or, if they had, they paid no attention to her.

They must have sensed or known she was no danger to them.

And she wasn't.

At least, not on her own.

By the time she'd crept close enough to the woman to do what she had to do, Kyle and Dan had managed to knock out one of the men.

And the woman's face had taken on a faintly worried expression.

You really don't want to do this. Don't do this. There has to be another way.

Tira took a deep breath.

No, this was it. She *had* to do this.

Forcing her shaking knees to take her weight, she stood, drawing the woman's focus to her.

The woman nodded as if they were acquaintances who'd happened to bump into each other on the street.

"Hello again, Tira."

Thinking “What the fuck” and hoping she wasn’t about to make the worst mistake of her life, Tira took another step closer.

“You have me at a disadvantage. I don’t know your name.”

The redhead rolled her eyes, as if bored with the whole conversation. But her hand lifted to rest on the box protectively. “You don’t need to. I’ll be gone in a few minutes. Your man and his pet are no match for my men. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

“They’re not mine and you’re going to be in for a shock at just how well matched those two men are against your six.” Besides, if her vision was correct, reinforcements would be arriving in minutes and then it would get deadly. “You’re not going to leave. We’re not going to let you kidnap anyone else.”

The woman laughed, cool derision so clear in the sound. “Poor Tira. So pretty but so worthless. You don’t have enough power to be useful to me. Your friend, Nica, she would’ve been useful. Oh, not like my men. They’re much more powerful. Now. But Nica had some measurable skill. And I would have gladly compensated her for her help. But she chose not to join me.”

Tira blinked, her brain trying to wrap itself around what the woman was saying. Saying Nica had measurable skill was like saying the sun threw off a little light and heat.

What did this woman know about the Etruscans and their magic? Did she even know anything at all? What the hell was going on? And what questions should she be asking that wouldn’t give this crazy woman any more information?

She just needed to get close enough to touch her...

“I don’t believe Nica thought you were giving her a choice.”

Tira took a step closer, then another. Almost within touching distance. And since the woman seemed to think Tira was harmless—which she basically was—she didn’t attempt to move away. Her brown gaze watched the fight behind her then came back to connect with Tira’s.

“She would have been well-compensated for her aid.” Something moved through the redhead’s eyes, something that almost looked like grief to Tira. “Which doesn’t matter anymore. I have what I need.”

“What exactly did you need Nica for? If you need help—”

“I don’t need anyone’s help.” The woman looked down her nose at Tira. “Especially not yours.”

Tira’s eyebrows lifted. “Are you so sure about that?”

There. That got her full attention. The woman’s eyes narrowed as she considered Tira’s question then her lips turned up in a mocking grin. “Are you trying to tell me I underestimated you?”

Tira shook her head, taking a small step closer. “No. I’m not trying to tell you anything.”

The other woman shook her head, her gaze returning to the fight, as if she had nothing at all to fear. "What use could you be to me? You're not strong enough to fight. You have no practical magic." The redhead tilted her chin up at Tira's involuntary start. "Yes, I know about magic. I know that you don't have enough for what I need."

"Really? Then you shouldn't mind this."

* * * * *

From what seemed like too far away, Duke saw Nic and Kaine pause at a doorway up the hall.

Duke heard the sounds of fighting and knew he wasn't going to be fast enough to catch Nic before he headed into the fight.

And sure enough, with a snarl, Nic disappeared into the room, Kaine hot on his heels.

Dread hit him in the pit of his stomach. He didn't have Tira's Gift for foresight but he didn't need it to know something was going to go wrong.

Intuition had served Duke well for years. But Nic had long ago forsaken cool rationality for impetuous action.

And Duke was damned if he was going to let it continue. Not now, when it wasn't just Nic's life on the line.

Tira was in that room. He could smell her. Whatever she was about to do scared her but she was determined to do it.

Duke poured on speed, not giving a shit if the *eteri* kept up or not.

Nic and Tira needed him.

Just before he hit the door, Duke stopped and pulled the knife from the concealed sheath in his boot. Then he stuck his head around the corner.

Kyle and Dan had four men pinned down in a corner near the door. They seemed to be holding their own.

Nic and Kaine –

Shit, they were in trouble. A behemoth with a length of chain in his hands stood between the wolves and a woman with red hair and Tira, who had one hand on the other woman's arm.

Without stopping to think, Duke ran for his partners, knowing he was going to be too late as the man swung the chain.

The heavy weight caught Kaine across the chest, flinging her to the side like she was a rag doll. She hit a metal desk so hard the metal actually dented then she fell to the ground with a whimper and lay there unmoving.

Before Duke could move, the *eteri* ran for her, putting himself between her and the behemoth. John managed to get an arm up to cover his face before the other man swung the chain again.

The chain caught John on the biceps, making him flinch in pain but he held his position above Kaine.

At the same time, Nic attacked, teeth bared to bite the guy's leg. Duke knew Nic intended to hamstring the guy but just before his teeth would've sunk in, the guy kicked out with his leg and sent Nic sprawling.

Leaving room for Duke to attack.

His fear for Tira lent strength to a roundhouse that should have, at the very least, made the guy take a couple of steps back.

But when Duke's fist connected with jaw, he felt like he'd hit a block of concrete.

And when the guy hit him back, Duke swore he'd been hit with a sledgehammer.

The guy had power and he wasn't just talking about strength.

Duke smelled it on him, but it was weird. Perverted.

Duke had a second to think *What the fuck?* before the guy pulled back and hit him so hard he fell back a couple of steps.

He rotated his jaw, tasted blood and tried to shake his brain back into place.

Shit, this was bad.

And getting worse, because the guy's second punch knocked Duke into the wall six feet away.

And the world went dark.

* * * * *

Tira never took her eyes off the woman even though she knew Duke, Nic and Kaine were taking a beating behind her.

She had to maintain the connection with this woman, no matter what.

Her vision had made it clear that her life, and Duke's and Nic's, depended on this.

She already knew she wasn't going to like what she saw. Death clung to this woman like a stench. But not one Tira could smell. More like a sensation, an almost tangible force around the woman. Something ate at her internally, something dark.

But Tira was no empath, not like Nica. She didn't sense any illness in the woman.

What she sensed was...

Run. You need to run. Now.

Blessed Goddess, the absolute certainty that she should get as far away as possible from this woman was almost overwhelming. The muscles in her legs jerked and twitched with the impulse.

No. She planted her feet. No more running.

This woman held answers her people needed. And she'd get them.

She had to.

Keeping their gazes locked, she grasped the woman's arm more tightly and stared into cold eyes.

The vision hit her almost immediately.

They both sucked in a breath, the woman's eyes widening in shock as Tira's Gift flowed into her.

Images burst like flares in Tira's head while dark emotions slithered through her veins.

Impotent rage. Overwhelming fear. And a deep grief that colored everything in shades of crimson and black.

Tira couldn't process the information fast enough. She wasn't sure what she was seeing, couldn't make her brain focus on any one picture.

But even as the vision entangled her brain, her gaze remained locked with the other woman's.

Tira saw the woman's realization of what was happening, saw her disbelief and her anger at the violation of her most private thoughts.

It *was* a violation, one she didn't make lightly. But this woman had declared war on Tira's family and friends.

And even though Tira couldn't make sense of the pictures in her head now, she knew she'd be able to later. She'd be able to sort through them when she went into a meditative state.

The woman's secrets would be revealed.

Somehow, the redhead knew this. Or suspected.

Either way, she fought to break Tira's hold on her. She screamed, the high-pitched squeal loud enough to hurt Tira's ears.

Tira tightened her grip to maintain contact as long as she could, taking in the images as fast as she could.

Only when pain exploded in her temples did she release the woman. And as she crumpled to the ground as the world went dark, she had a millisecond to hope she woke again.

* * * * *

Nic howled as Duke hit the wall so hard it splintered the drywall.

And when Duke didn't get up, Nic's first instinct was to attack.

But he knew that wouldn't work. If he wanted to get them all out of here in one piece, he needed to do more than attack. He needed to think.

Behind him, he heard Kaine huff as she shifted and unsteadily pulled herself to her feet. The *eteri* remained in front of her, shielding her from another attack, although the amount of power this guy seemed to have defied logic.

He was big, yes, but he shouldn't have been able to knock out Duke with one hit.

Not without magic. And whatever magic the guy had, it was perverted. That sense of wrongness Nic had felt since entering the building came from this man.

He had unnatural strength so Nic knew he wouldn't be able to overpower him.

But if he could just ...

As if the *eteri* had read his mind, he stepped in front of Kaine, who was still shaking her head and trying to get to her feet.

"Hey, asshole," John taunted, "why not pick on someone your own size?"

The *eteri* drew the guy's attention away from Nic for a few short seconds, just enough to allow him to attack.

He aimed for the guy's left hamstring, opening his jaws then biting down, through thick cotton and into skin until he heard a sickening crunch and the metallic taste of blood.

As the man screeched in rage above him, the *eteri* pulled a knife and went for the throat.

But the guy proved just how strong he really was when he kicked out his leg hard enough to dislodge Nic, who spun across the floor, and twisted away from the *eteri*'s knife so only the tip nicked his skin, drawing a thin bead of blood.

The man didn't stop. He whirled away and headed straight for the woman with Tira. Shaking his head, Nic got to his paws, ignoring his cracked ribs and the ringing in his ears, and pursued the man.

He couldn't be allowed to touch Tira. He had to stop—

Nic leaped just as the man used his fist to hit Tira in the head. With a howl, Nic watched Tira slump to the ground as the man slung the other woman over his shoulder and began to haul ass out of the building.

The *eteri* began to give chase but stopped when he came to a long metal box that looked like a coffin. He flung it open but Nic didn't care what was inside.

He only had eyes for Tira.

Behind him, he heard bones break as Kyle and Dan finished off the remaining men. One short, aborted scream then nothing.

Nic crossed to Tira and nudged her with his snout, letting out a whine of relief when she sighed and her eyes fluttered open.

Pain filled the pretty blue depths but the corners of her mouth tilted up in something approximating a smile.

She didn't speak but she did lift a shaking hand to pet his fur.

"I'm okay," she said. "Just give me a minute. Where's Duke?"

Behind him, he heard Kyle moving then the unmistakable sounds of Dan changing back into his skin.

"Fuck," Dan said to Kyle, his voice barely above a whisper. "We gotta get Duke and Kaine back to Tam and the Doc. Right now."

Shit. Nic turned, his eyes widening as he realized Duke still lay on the ground unmoving and Kaine had slumped next to him.

Duke's skin held a gray tinge Nic knew from personal experience wasn't good. And Kaine... One of Kaine's front legs was definitely broken, and probably a back one as well. Her breath came in shallow gasps and even though Kyle was trying to wake her, she wasn't responding.

Nic forced himself to move away from Tira and shift.

When he'd returned to his own skin, he pulled a woozy Tira into his arms and nearly stumbled to Duke's side.

"Duke—"

He broke off with a gasp as he caught sight of Duke's head wound. There was a noticeable dent in Duke's skull and he didn't think Duke was breathing.

"No!"

His shout startled Tira, who lifted her head from his shoulder and started to cry when she saw Duke.

Nic didn't know what to do. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Duke couldn't die. It was supposed to be him.

As he struggled to hold on to Tira, who seemed determined to get free, he met Kyle's gaze then turned to Dan.

But Dan's attention was snagged on something behind Nic.

Someone brushed by Nic. The *eteri*, holding another woman in his arms. Long dark hair covered her face as the *eteri* hugged her close to his chest. Then he said something in her ear and her head nodded. Obviously she was conscious.

The *eteri* stopped in front of Kyle and didn't say anything, just stared into Kyle's eyes and waited until Kyle held out his arms to take the woman.

Then the *eteri* knelt down to Duke and started chest compressions.

"If we're gonna get him out of here," the *eteri* said, "we need a stretcher. Now. If he doesn't get help soon, I don't think..."

He broke off as Tira started to weep, the sound tearing holes in Nic's gut.

"I'll call Sal," Dan said. "See if he can transport Duke to the house."

"Nic. Nic!"

Nic's head snapped around to face Kyle, his commanding officer's face set in hard lines. He wanted to salute, years of ingrained training kicking in, but he wouldn't release Tira.

"Yes, sir."

"Get some clothes, go get a car and start loading people into it. The *eteri* will stay with Duke."

His arms tightened around Tira but she shook her head, taking a deep breath. "Let me down," she said. Her voice hoarse with tears but not shattered. "We need to get out of here. Go."

Knowing she was right, he went.

Chapter Thirteen

“Tira, you need to get some sleep.”

Nica Donato’s soft voice roused Tira from the fugue state she’d been floating in for...well, she didn’t know how long.

Blinking away the grittiness in her eyes, Tira’s gaze lit on Nic in the chair next to hers. Fast asleep, he had his head pillowed on his crossed arms on the side of the bed. Neither she nor Nic had left Duke’s side in the *lucani* den’s medical ward since Nica had finished healing as much of Duke’s head injury as she could and Tam and the young *lucani* doctor, Dane Dimitriou, had patched the rest.

That had been yesterday. They were still waiting for Duke to wake.

But... Tira had caught the glances between Nica and Tam, the ones when they thought she wasn’t looking. The ones that held fear that Duke wasn’t going to wake.

Tira didn’t remember much of what had happened after the redhead’s goon had clocked her on the head.

She remembered the *eteri* John pumping Duke’s chest until Salvatorus had arrived. The powerful *salbinelli*—his lower body that of a goat, the upper all man—had made John’s eyes widen in shock but he’d never stopped his lifesaving measures until Sal had magically transported Duke back to the den.

She barely remembered their retreat, vaguely knew the *eteri* and Kyle had had a brief argument about returning to the *lucani* den with them. She assumed Kyle had won because John and the woman Tira had heard mentioned was his sister were staying in a pair of rooms on the top floor of the den common building.

John had actually come down to visit Duke last night while Kaine had been there. The young *lucani* tracker hadn’t been able to leave the room fast enough.

And Tira had had her first vision since she’d touched the redhead. Just a short flash of Kaine, her hair slightly longer than it was now and dripping wet, standing outside a window looking in, her eyes dark and shadowed, her face drawn.

Her Gift no longer needed touch to work, a secret she’d told no one.

Not even her mother, who’d arrived only minutes after she, Nic and the rest had stumbled into the den last night. Her mom had grabbed her and hugged her tight, tears in her eyes. But they hadn’t had time to talk about the transfer of power because they hadn’t had two seconds alone together.

Nic had glued himself to her side and neither of them would leave Duke for longer than a bathroom break.

She and her mom would need to have that talk soon. Tira had a shitload of the redhead’s memories to sort through and piece together and no idea how to do it.

And she couldn't tell if the headache that continued to plague her was due to the woman's memories or the transfer of power from her mother —

Nica's warm hand squeezed her shoulder, bringing her out of her thoughts. "You really need to get some rest."

Tira turned her head to smile up at her best friend, who'd left her mates behind on their honeymoon to rush to Duke's aid with Sal's help. Tanner and Jensen were driving back from Florida. "I've tried. I just can't fall asleep. I'm afraid if I do..."

Nica's hand tightened. "Tam said it's a good sign that his vitals remain steady and I sense no further internal damage. But I'm worried about you. You're in so much pain. Let me block some of it."

"It's just a headache."

At least, she hoped it was just a headache and not a precursor to the headaches her mother had dealt with on a daily basis just before the madness had started affecting her daily life. She'd managed to push those thoughts away until now but she didn't know how long that would last.

"Mamma used to help your mom with hers. Come on, Ti. Let me do my job so you can do yours. The *boschetta* is meant to be symbiotic, you know that."

Of course she knew that. It had been drilled into their heads since they were old enough to comprehend language.

The *boschetta* came first. The *streghe* gave their lives in service to the greater good of the *boschetta*. All other concerns came second.

Except Tira wasn't about to put her men second. Like Nica, she was determined to show the old guard of the *streghe* that she could have a life and keep up with her duties in the *boschetta*.

With a sigh, Tira let her cheek rest on Nica's hand for a brief moment. "It's in my temples, a million tiny jackhammers eating away at my brain."

"Good," Nica said. "Now just close your eyes and I'll pull all their plugs."

* * * * *

Duke came out of the darkness slowly.

At least, it felt slow, like he'd been fighting his way out of a heavy sleep for days.

His arms and legs felt weighted, his eyes wouldn't open and he was hungry as all hell.

He took a deep breath, scenting the air around him. Nic and Tira were close. But he wasn't at home. Another sniff and he smelled something sharp, metallic. Antiseptic.

Ah. The den medical ward.

What the hell —

Images began to flicker through his mind, his brain's way of bringing him up to speed. When he got to the part where the behemoth with the chain had flung him into the wall, his eyes finally opened.

Only to find more darkness.

Disoriented, he lay on his back and stared straight ahead. After a few minutes, he began to see variations in the shades of black, then outlines and shapes. Finally his vision cleared and he turned his head in the direction he scented Nic and Tira.

And felt a wave of relief so great, he actually felt lightheaded.

Nic sprawled on a recliner next to the bed, his arms wrapped around Tira, curled on his lap. They both appeared to be sound asleep, though Nic's face was turned away and Tira's was covered by her hair so he couldn't tell.

He wanted to wake them and make sure they were both okay, but then he wasn't sure he didn't want to go back to sleep himself. His eyelids threatened to close again but his mouth felt like it'd been stuffed with cotton. Blessed Goddess, he'd kill for some water.

On the other side of the room, a door opened, spilling pale light into the room, and Duke's head swiveled around to see Tam slip through the door, Kyle directly behind her.

Tam wore a relieved smile and Kyle actually looked happy to see him.

Shit, he must've been nearly dead.

He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. His throat was too dry.

"Shh," Tam whispered. "Don't try to talk. Kyle, get him some water. Duke, look here at me. How many fingers am I holding up?"

As Tam ran through what he figured were standard reawakening-from-a-near-fatal-injury questions, Kyle held a straw to his lips. Duke wanted to gulp down the water but Tam wouldn't let him.

So after a few sips, Duke finally could ask his own questions.

"Is everyone else okay?"

His voice was barely audible to his own ears but Kyle nodded as he sat on the edge of the bed. "Yeah. You're the only one stupid enough to get hurt badly." The twist to Kyle's lips let Duke know he was mostly kidding. "We got the *eteri's* sister too."

"Is Kaine all right?"

Kyle nodded though his expression darkened. "She had a few broken bones but she's fine now."

"And the woman?"

Kyle shook his head. "The goon who put the beat-down on you got her out. We've got one of her men in holding but we're not sure he's going to pull through. The others are dead."

"Do we know who she is yet?"

Kyle shook his head again. "Working on it." Kyle's gaze slipped to the other side of the bed. "Still working on it."

Tam laid a cool palm against his cheek, drawing his attention. "You need some more sleep. As a medical professional, I'm ordering you to."

But he didn't want to sleep. He wanted to talk to Nic and Tira, to make sure they were okay.

"They're fine, Duke." Tam's voice held a calming effect that immediately put him at ease. "They just haven't had any sleep in the past two days you've been lying in this bed. They finally fell asleep a couple of hours ago. I can assure you they'll be here when you wake up again. Go ahead and sleep. You need it."

Tam turned to leave, but Kyle remained standing by his bed. "And they need you. Both of them, though why that smart woman wants to put up with you two yahoos is beyond me."

Even though his head still felt shot full of mind-numbing Novocain, Duke knew what Kyle wasn't saying.

Without a hint of sarcasm, Duke raised his right fist to his left shoulder. A salute for his superior officer.

Kyle actually smiled, a full-out grin, before he shook his head. "Get some more sleep. You must still be out of it."

Which had to be true because when Kyle walked out the door and Duke turned back to Nic and Tira, they were both awake and staring at him.

Tira's wide blue eyes held relieved tears and Nic's smile lit his entire face.

"Are you really feeling okay?" Tira asked as Nic folded the chair back into its upright position and helped Tira to her feet.

She stepped up to the bed and laced her fingers with Duke's outstretched hand. He felt the tremble in hers and tightened his grip, pulling her closer until she sat on the edge of the bed. Nic moved around to the other side, watching Duke for any sign of impending stupidity, like jumping out of bed and attempting to run a marathon.

"I'm tired. My mouth feels like I tried to chew fiberglass and I'm hungry enough to devour a steer. But I'll be fine. Are you okay? Are you *both* okay?"

He watched Tira blink, watched her try to formulate an answer that wouldn't upset him.

His lungs constricted and he felt like a huge weight had been dropped on his chest.

"Duke, breathe. I'm fine. *We're* fine." She grimaced. "I'm sorry, I don't want you to worry. Nothing's wrong."

"Then tell me what the hell's going on."

"Why don't you just show him, Ti?" Nic said. "It'll be easier."

Tira drew in a deep breath and watched Duke's eyes narrow down to slits. She could see he was getting worked up, the not knowing worse, she hoped, than the actual truth.

Because their hands were already linked, the connection only needed her command to begin.

Since she'd accepted her mom's position, she's been testing her new powers in fits and starts. This ability had appeared yesterday, when she'd worked up the courage to touch Nic. She'd wanted—no, she'd *needed*—to hold him so badly, she'd forced herself to brave the vision of his death to take him in her arms. No more fear. She didn't want to spend what time he had left without him in her life.

What she'd seen, or rather, didn't see, when he'd kissed her had nearly made her fall to the floor and weep with relief.

She'd seen nothing of Nic's future. Not his death. Not his funeral. Not Duke's retreat from her. Nothing.

Exactly what happened when she touched Duke.

To say they'd been shocked would be an understatement. The absolute joy she'd felt at that moment must have opened her Gift to Nic and he'd seen her thoughts. He'd caught glimpses of everything she remembered from the past days and he'd even caught bits and pieces of the collective memory she'd gained from her mom.

She still wasn't sure why that had happened but she was fairly certain it had something to do with her love for Nic. The *willingness* she now had to love him.

And since Duke was the other half of her heart, she knew it would work the same with him.

Keeping her eyes on his, she opened her senses, reaching out with them to connect with Duke. She saw his eyes widen, felt his hand tighten around hers then watched as his gaze turned inward.

Watching the memories she carefully chose for him to see. She'd learned a little bit yesterday with Nic about how to control this and she purposefully kept certain images from him. She didn't want Duke to see anything that would upset him.

She only kept the connection open for thirty seconds or so before she shut it down. And waited for what it meant to sink in.

Duke blinked slowly, his eyes refocusing on hers.

"I accepted the mantle of *praenuntio* right after you left with Nic to go find Kaine and the *eteri*. It was the right thing to do. It was the *only* thing I could do. My mom deserves to have her life back. She's earned the right to see if she and my dad can recapture some of what they lost."

Her mom had told her that Marc Daniels was sticking around for a while, to get to know his daughter. And to get to know Su again. If and how they were going to explain their lives and their community to him... Well, they hadn't gotten around to figuring that out yet but Tira was looking forward to getting to know her dad.

She was looking forward to spending time with Nic and Duke even more.

Her mouth began to curve in a smile. “And I believe—and so does my mom—that Nic’s fate changed at the exact second he decided he didn’t want to die. He made a conscious decision to stay with us, to change his ways. I think that altered the outcome of the fight.”

“*Vaffanculo*, Tira. How... When... What...”

Nic snorted but his smile couldn’t be contained. “Damn, you must have hit your head harder than we thought. Try not to think too hard or you’ll hurt yourself.”

Duke flipped him off with his free hand, but the gesture was absentminded as he pulled Tira closer. He needed her closer. “Are you telling me Nic’s not going to die? At least not now?”

She nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Relief rushed through him, making his heart pound even fast than it already was. “I love you, Ti. I— We always have. We’re not easy to live with. I apologize for Nic’s snoring now—”

“Hey, you talk in your sleep, *scassacazzo*.”

“—and I know we’ll have to split our time between our house and yours. But you will always be first in our lives.”

He kept tugging her closer and she let him, her smile widening by the second. When he had her close enough, he reached to lift her onto the bed beside him.

Before he could, Nic had moved to help him, setting her on the bed next to him and keeping his hand on her back as she leaned down to kiss Duke.

Her sweet, soft lips took his breath and he opened his mouth to allow her tongue to flick against his.

Heat rose and blood began to chug through his body. Hell, he wanted her. Wanted to lift her and settle her on his fast-hardening cock even though he knew he probably shouldn’t. Whatever monitors he was hooked up to had started to beep like a metal detector over a stash of gold.

He couldn’t give a flying fuck.

With one hand on her head, he widened his mouth and kissed her harder, deeper.

But she drew away, laughing, and he let her.

“You’re in no shape for that, Varro Ducati. And Tam will—”

As if she’d been conjured, Tam walked through the door. Well, more like ran through the door.

“What’s going on? Why— Oh. Oh, for Christ’s sake, Duke.” Tam stopped in her tracks, shaking her head. “I thought you were having a heart attack.”

Nic started to laugh, doubling over with the effort, and Duke couldn’t help his own smile as Tira blushed and put her hands over her face.

Damn, he couldn’t wait to get the fuck out here and go home with Tira and Nic.

* * * * *

Four days later

“Kaine,” Tira said, “are you really sure you want to be there?”

Nic’s fork froze halfway to his mouth before he forced himself to continue eating breakfast and acting as if he didn’t hear them.

“Yeah, I need to—I just need to see it. To—” Kaine shrugged and lowered her eyes to her own plate as she started to shovel in chocolate chip pancakes.

Tira had made breakfast this morning, saying Duke needed to get his strength back, which was true.

But Nic had noticed how Kaine’s expression had actually lightened when Tira had mentioned chocolate. Kaine had a weakness for it. Tira had remembered and she’d made the pancakes specifically for Kaine.

Tira still hadn’t said anything about living with him and Duke permanently. But when Dr. Dimitriou had released Duke from the med ward yesterday, Tira had returned with them.

She’d slept in their bed last night, between them. No sex, though, because Duke just hadn’t been up to it. The guy had collapsed into bed after dinner and hadn’t woken up yet this morning.

Nic was willing to wait. Just not for long.

And when she did move in, he realized they’d have to be respectful of Kaine.

Because, as Nic had realized, not only would Tira be living with him and Duke, she’d also be moving in with Kaine.

The tomboy tracker had been so much a part of their lives since she, Duke and Nic had joined Kyle as *sicarii*, they’d never considered what bringing another woman into the house would mean. And he’d never considered asking Kaine to move out.

But that had seemed like one huge, fucking bad idea when Nic, Duke and Tira had returned yesterday. Kaine had been as prickly as a rosebush, the tension thick enough to choke a horse.

At first, he’d thought it’d been because of Tira. But last night, when Tira had pulled Kaine into the kitchen with her to cook dinner, Nic knew that wasn’t it. The girls had spent an entire hour huddled together in the kitchen talking about the Goddess only knew what.

No, it was that damn *eteri* staying with his sister at Kyle’s home.

The girl, Evie, who they’d rescued from the crazy woman, had been a mess. Pumped full of drugs and crawling with fucked-up spells that several of the strongest *streghe* from Tira’s *boschetta* had only been able to unravel after a day’s steady work.

The *eteri*, John, refused to leave her side. Not that Nic blamed him. If that was Kaine in that bed, Nic wouldn’t leave either.

But Nic would be happy to see the ass end of the guy when he got the hell out of their lives.

Not only because he didn't belong here but because he fucked with Kaine's head.

Today, the *streghe* planned to wipe John's and his sister Evie's minds of their memories of the Etruscans.

While John and Evie had sustained too much trauma for the *streghe* to wipe away all of the memories of what had happened to them, they could at least conceal their community.

John had agreed to the procedure. Hell, he'd seemed more than happy to put everything he'd learned the past few days behind him.

And he was breaking Kaine's heart. She thought she was in love with the guy. Hell, she'd never said it but Nic wasn't completely clueless. He saw the way she looked at the *eteri* whenever she was in the same room.

The sooner that fucker was gone, the better. He didn't want to see Kaine hurt, but if she needed to see just how badly he wanted to be rid of his memories of the *lucani*, well, then that's what needed to happen.

He was still eating when Kaine finally took her plate to the dishwasher. When she turned for the door, Tira walked with her, speaking softly, calmly, then gave Kaine a hug before she walked out the door.

Tira moved to the front window to watch Kaine walk away and Nic joined her, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder.

"She's a big girl, Ti. She can take care of herself."

"I know. I just..." Tira sighed.

"Just what?"

"Just wish there was something I could do for her. I know what it's like to love someone you think you can't have."

"Well, I'm right here, sweetheart. Duke and I aren't going anywhere. And neither are you."

She turned with raised eyebrows and a slightly haughty look on her face. "Oh really?"

"Yes, really," Duke said.

Tira turned to see Duke standing in the doorway to their bedroom, gloriously naked and erect.

Her mouth dried as she stared at him, letting her gaze travel from his broad shoulders to his wide chest, down his ridged abdomen to his thick cock and strong thighs.

The man was a work of art, so ruggedly masculine he made her want to worship him with her hands and her mouth.

Behind her, she felt Nic press more closely against her, his body leaner but no less masculine. And just as aroused. With his arms around her waist, he nestled his hard cock between the cheeks of her ass, making her blood simmer and her sex contract almost painfully.

She wanted them. Right now. But... "Are you sure you should be out of bed?"

The corner of Duke's mouth twitched up and the heat in his dark eyes burned a little brighter. "Not really. Maybe you should help me back to it."

Blessed Goddess, that's exactly what she wanted to do. It felt like it'd been forever since she'd been held between them and she felt like she was starving for their touch, for the heat of their bodies against hers.

She bit her lip and watched Duke's gaze drop to her mouth as Nic lifted one hand to cup her breast. His fingers tweaked the already tight nipple, sending shock waves of pleasure rippling through her body to her sex.

The air in the room evaporated as Duke watched Nic arouse her to panting ecstasy with nothing more than his hands on her breasts. She couldn't move, didn't want to move except to get closer to Duke.

He was too far away.

As if Nic had read her mind, he nudged her forward until her feet began to move of her own volition. What had seemed a vast divide took only seconds to close and soon she was staring up into Duke's eyes, barely able to breathe. Her hands rose to rest on his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat, the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. Both increased when she kneaded his muscles with the tips of her fingers.

Warm and solid, Duke watched her hands pet along his skin.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

She had to ask again. He'd been so close to death and she didn't think she or Nic would have survived his loss at this point.

Duke nodded, his expression solemn as he reached for the hem of her t-shirt. "The only thing that's going to kill me right now is the fact that you're dressed."

As Duke's hands lifted her shirt over her head, Nic's reached for the waistband of her yoga pants, stripping them down her legs along with her panties.

"You're so damn pretty, Ti." Duke raised a finger to stroke along her cheekbone then down to her chin. "Pretty pink," he brushed the finger down the slope of her breast, "pretty red," to the aching nipple begging to be sucked.

Nic flattened his palms on the outside of her thighs then dragged them up to her hips in a rougher caress. "Soft skin." And around her front until one covered her mound with heavy heat. "Wet. Spread your legs, baby. That's it. Ah, gods damn."

Tira cried out as Duke bent to suck one of her nipples into his mouth as Nic's fingers pressed between her legs, teasing her clit and sliding through her moisture-laden lower lips.

Pleasure, sharp and sweet, swept through her body like a narcotic. Wriggling her ass against Nic's erection, she arched her back, thrusting her breast harder against Duke's mouth.

Her knees went weak but she knew her men would catch her if they buckled.

Hell, they never gave her time to buckle.

With a groan, Duke pulled away from her, giving her nipple one sharp, blindingly erotic nip, then picked her up to carry her the five remaining feet to the bed.

By the time Nic closed the door behind them, Duke had laid her out on the huge bed.

She knew what he wanted, what he expected to happen. For her to lie back and let them devour her.

And maybe another time she would. But she wasn't the same woman who'd been afraid to live her life before.

She was going to take what she wanted.

Waiting until Duke crawled on the bed beside her, she took him by surprise when she sat up and pushed him onto his back instead.

"Since you're the one who almost died, I think you need to take it easy. Don't you think so, Nic?"

She threw a glance over her shoulder at Nic, who stood smiling at her at the edge of the bed. "You know whatever you want is fine with me, babe."

That smile of his made her insides clench with lust and love and she grinned back at him just before she lowered her head to take Duke in her mouth.

With a groan, his hands sank into her hair to hold her to him as she took him deep, the tip nudging at the back of her throat before she pulled back to suck on just the tip.

She loved the taste of him, hot and salty and all male, lost herself in the silky texture and the sounds he made as she worked him.

With his fingers woven through her hair, she felt how much he wanted to control her movements. Instead, he let her torment him. Deep pulls with his entire length in her mouth, slow retreats up the shaft, dragging her teeth lightly along the skin before sucking hard on the tip.

She was so lost in the sensuality of the act that she barely registered the mattress dipping behind her.

When Nic grabbed her hips and thrust his cock deep into her, she gasped at the erotic friction that made her pussy clench tight around him.

"Come on, baby," Nic's voice rasped against her senses, "get him off while I get you off."

His words made her moan, the vibration on Duke's cock making him thrust into her mouth as he groaned.

Rational thought fled as pleasure racked her body. She became a creature only of sensation, filled with sexual energy and excitement and a love so rich, it needed two men to fulfill.

Her men.

She wanted Duke to come, to fill her mouth with his essence. She wanted Nic to fill her pussy with his as she came too.

Beneath her, she felt Duke's big body straining, trembling, holding back. Behind her, Nic thrust heavily, to his own rhythm.

Her sex clenched around his, making Nic swear, his fingers digging into her hips, holding her with bruising power. She sucked Duke harder, one hand dipping between his legs to scratch her nails over his balls.

"Fuck, baby, don't stop." Duke's strangled voice made her pussy throb, which made Nic swear as well.

"Fucking hell, Ti, I'm gonna come. Come with us, baby. Come on."

That was all it took for her body to break, for her orgasm to explode through her body.

She cried out around Duke's cock, sucked him deeper as the ecstasy poured through her.

Nic kept thrusting, prolonging her climax until finally she felt him jerk and throb deep within her body.

With one last pull, she felt Duke pulse in her mouth and spill his own release down her throat.

Frozen together at that moment, she knew complete satisfaction.

And a fast-spreading lethargy.

As Nic slipped from her body, she allowed Duke to slide from her mouth.

Two pairs of hands lifted her, rearranged her on the bed between them. With her head pillowed on Duke's chest and Nic curled around her back, she had no intention of ever letting fear keep her from her men again.

"You're moving in tomorrow." Duke's voice rumbled through his chest and into her ear. "You belong here. Nic, tell her."

"I already did." Nic pressed a kiss to her nape then bit her as well. "I love you, sweetheart. And so does he, even though he might not always say it."

"Hey, I can speak for myself." Duke sounded slightly affronted but mostly amused. "I do love you, Ti. I always have."

"And I love you. Both of you. Always."

Epilogue

Kaine stopped just before the door into the attached rooms where John Simmons and his sister, Evie, had stayed.

Most of the *boschetta* were assembled there. Kaine knew it was going to take their combined skills and energy to pull off the mind wipe on the siblings.

In a few hours, John would wake and not remember her.

Kaine wondered if he wasn't the lucky one.

He probably thought he was.

You really should go. Why do this to yourself?

Because she was an idiot, that's why. A fool who'd fallen for a man who thought she was an animal.

A fool who needed to see him take this last step away from her.

With a deep breath, she moved just far enough into the doorway that she could see him.

He sat on the bed, one strong arm wrapped around his pretty, delicate little sister. He practically dwarfed her. At six foot one and a muscled one-eighty, John was the physical representation of his role in life. A Navy SEAL. Warrior. Protector.

An *eteri* who, before a few days ago, had had no idea there were people like her in the world.

And who didn't want to know.

Damn him.

Her eyes stung and she blinked back tears, furious at her own weakness.

She didn't need a man. Had never wanted one.

Why –

John's eyes narrowed a split second before he looked straight at her.

He had the most beautiful green eyes she'd ever seen. A dark forest green ringed in topaz.

She sucked in a deep breath but couldn't move, caught by his intensity and the sheer sexual draw of the man.

She wanted him. Had since she'd seen him in that holding cell, right before the blast had knocked her, in her wolf body, unconscious.

He'd been the one to carry her out, to save her.

And the first time he'd seen her in her skin, after he'd accidentally shot her, he'd looked at her like she was a monster.

Now she had no idea what he thought.

And she didn't care. She couldn't.

Whirling around, she ran for the door, tearing off clothes as she went. By the time she reached it, she was naked. In the next second, she'd shifted.

She stopped on the porch, shook herself, breathing in the scent of the winter forest all around them.

Trying to erase his scent.

Then she ran.

About the Author

Stephanie Julian is an avid reader who used to have a book-a-day habit. Then she realized she not only wanted to read books but write them too. Romance has always been her first love, the sexier the better. Hot men, strong women and a heaping helping of magic dominate (and she does mean *dominate*) her blazing hot stories.

When she's not writing, she's, well...she's certainly not cleaning. And she only cooks when her guys complain that they're hungry (ain't cereal grand!). Otherwise, she's got her fingers on a keyboard, her butt in a chair and her head in the stars.

Stephanie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by **Stephanie Julian**

Kiss of Moonlight

Magical Seduction 1: Seduced by Magic

Magical Seduction 2: Seduced in Shadow

Magical Seduction 3: Seduced and Ensnared

Magical Seduction 4: Seduced and Enchanted

Magical Seduction 5: Seduced by Chaos

Magical Seduction 6: Seduced by Danger

Magical Seduction 7: Seduced by Two



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com