



## **Bloodlines 3: Apocalypse**

Book 3 in the Bloodlines series

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Published 2010

ISBN 978-1-59578-698-2

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Manufactured in the United States of America

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## **Blurb**

The Apocalypse has begun. The maniacally evil Dominica has become corporeal and her threats are being horribly realized. Armed with a wealth of knowledge of the dark arts, Dominica will use every supernatural means at her disposal to kill any pureblood shape-shifter in existence. There is no one powerful enough to stop her. Not even the prophesied Triumvirate.

The destined Triad, Allontra, Khaelen, and Dharean, must bond and work as a single powerful unit to stop Dominica. But amid this war, both love and jealousy bloom. Can the Triumvirate come together in time to save the pureblood shifters? Or will the rivalry of the two alpha males for their destined mate cost them all their lives?

## Chapter One

Allantra's heart beat so wildly her breathing became hitched. She kept up with Khaelen's long stride with little difficulty. She drank in every detail about the woman in his arms. Long dirty hair swayed in tune to Khaelen's gait as he carried her mother out of the compound. She was disgusted by the state her mother was in. Dominica was so cold and cruel. She'd kept her mother chained up like a wild animal. There was not a mark on her emaciated body, but Allantra knew that Dominica could torture through the mind.

Allantra had experienced a mind trip with Dominica for a short time. Her mother, on the other hand, had been in the vampire's clutches for a very long time. Allantra's breathing hitched again as she thought about the long hours, days, even years of mental agony her mother had suffered. And her pulse was so very weak. Taraema; that was her mother's name. It came to her whisper soft, as if it were waiting for the day to be released.

"Why can't you just do that thing where you teleport—"

"She is too weak. I do not want to risk the energy pull, no matter how small," Khaelen said gently, turning his hazel eyes on her without missing a step. "I have a vehicle we can use."

Allantra shook her head, breaking the momentary eye contact. It could have been her guilt, but she could have sworn she saw a faint accusatory look in his eyes. Further, not only could she barely make out Dharean's footsteps behind her, but she sure as hell also could feel the holes the wizard was burning in her back. Dharean carried Minn, who was weak but awake. Masque carried both of Minn's boys, one small body slung over each shoulder. Allantra's head snapped in Taraema's direction when the tormented woman let out a small moan.

Instinctively Allantra reached a hand out, brushed it against the dry, hot forehead of her mother. She wasn't even sweaty anymore; that was not good for a shifter. Allantra wished with everything within her that her mother would just have enough energy to hold on until they could safely tend to her.

A small spark of blinding light burst behind her eyes. It was so quick; Allantra didn't have time to feel the pain of it. The spark seemed to travel the length of her arm down to the hand that was brushing her mother's forehead. Allantra's eyes widened as her mother's back arched suddenly, then her whole body relaxed just as quickly. Khaelen looked down at the slight burden he carried, then at Allantra.

"What was that?" he asked, curiosity painting his face.

"I—I don't know," Allantra stammered. "Is she all right?"

"She's better." Dharean's voice carried from behind. He stopped first, setting Minn down gingerly before he passed his hands over Taraema's unconscious body. "What were you thinking as you touched her, *flammulae*?"

Allantra ignored the blatant use of the first pet name he had called her upon their meeting. It was a male making a power play. Dharean wanted to exert his claim to her through familiarity. Allantra was not in the mood for a testosterone war. "I was just wishing that she would have enough energy to hold on until we can tend to her." Allantra sniffed. Saying out loud the possibility that she could lose something so precious as a

mother again was alarming.

"It's just as I thought. You are a synergist, remember, little one. You have the power to transfer energy to anyone or anything you choose. Because you are not yet in control, your power reacts with emotion." Dharean smiled at her, his gray eyes reassuring her.

"You did well."

Allantra let out a breath of relief. "Okay. So Khaelen, where is this vehicle? We have to get out of here. No telling what Dominica is up to and I don't want to be caught in the enemy's camp." The words were out before she realized their origin. Khaelen had said something very similar to her.

"You remind me of what a fast learner you are." Khaelen looked at her with a smile in his eyes. "Just a little further down this back road. I keep a car hidden now; I do not fully trust the Elder Council."

"Wait!" Dharean growled. "You send Allantra on a mission on the word of a Council you yourself do not fully trust? You ask us to come here and—"

"I did not send Allantra anywhere," Khaelen growled back. "If you knew her as I do you would have known that. With gain comes risk. Allantra and I have risked a great deal to ensure the survival and fair treatment of *your* people. The least you can do is be willing to risk your own neck as well!"

"I risk much, vampire." Dharean took a small step closer, letting his gray eyes bleed to small dark funnels. "You see, I have come despite my distrust of your kind. It just strikes me as amusing that even among yourselves, you do not trust one another!"

"Are you saying everyone within your clan is trustworthy?" Khaelen shot back.

"Enough!" Allantra shrieked, stepping in between the two alpha males, and soon to both be her mates. "Stay focused. Right now I would really appreciate if the two of you could focus on my mother right now."

Both males had the nerve to look contrite. Khaelen nodded his head regally in apology; Dharean a step behind did the same. Allantra took a deep breath. "Now, Khaelen, unless you have a bus hidden here somewhere, I don't think we can all fit in one car."

"I have no intention of getting into a metal death box." Masque spoke for the first time since they walked out of the building with the hidden dungeon. "I can travel in my totem form."

"Neither do I," Minn piped in, taking her brother's stance on the situation. "I am strong enough to travel in my totem form as well. As for you"—she pointed to Khaelen—"I will not apologize for feeling the way I do about your ilk. However, I judged you too quickly and for that I ask forgiveness. But you must know I watch you carefully."

Allantra had to keep from snickering. It was the most backward apology and *thank you for saving me* she had ever heard. "Fine, then the two boys can ride with Khaelen, Taraema, and myself," Allantra stated. "We need to keep moving."

"We are here," Khaelen replied. "Just a few more yards ahead."

"But I don't see the vehicle." Allantra peered around.

"I believe that is the point." Khaelen whispered something softly, then a medium-sized four-door vehicle appeared. "Hurry."

Masque carried the unconscious boys to the vehicle. As soon as they were settled in the backseat next to Taraema he shifted into his raptor form and waited in a tall tree. Minn shifted too and Allantra couldn't help but let out a giggle. Minn's totem form was a

badger. It certainly fit the woman.

*I will go in my totem form as well. My people do not like machines.*

“That’s fine. Just stay close,” Allantra said out loud to Dharean, again without thinking whether she was revealing too much to Khaelen too soon. He was now aware, if not before, of just how bonded she and Dharean were. Khaelen stiffened at her words. She had managed to hurt him once more. Truth of the matter was, she knew there would be a lot more hurt feelings and heated arguments before this triumvirate thing got worked out. Until then she had to focus on the matter at hand.

After double-checking to make sure Minn’s boys and Taraema were secured tightly in the backseat, Allantra found her way to the front seat. Khaelen was already seated. As soon as she belted in, Dharean rapped on the window. She refused to give Khaelen a glance that would betray the guilt that instinctively impregnated itself into her soul. She pushed the button that let down the window.

“I trust your plasma-deficient friend will keep in mind we are following him.” Allantra winced at his provocative words. “I hope he understands if anything should happen to you in this death box, I will not hesitate to end his parasitic life.” Then he leaned in quickly, taking a kiss from Allantra. Without giving Khaelen so much as a glance, he stepped back from the car and shifted into his jaguar form.

“I’m going to kill him,” Khaelen stated.

## Chapter Two

Khaelen had had enough of the arrogant wizard. His mind was already activating the door handle when Allantra's soft hand gripped over his. "Please, Khaelen, don't do this," she begged. A woman's moan wafted from the backseat of the car, and Khaelen realized he had nearly lost control of his anger. He would do well in the future not to let the wizard bait him so. Khaelen settled back into his seat and nodded.

"I hope that pussy can keep up," he said caustically, eyeing the panther through Allantra's window. Dharean sat lazily on his haunches, licking his paw. Even in animal form the wizard was a pain in the ass.

Khaelen drove in silence, the wizard's scent still coming off Allantra in waves. "I know you are angry with me," she said at last. Khaelen said nothing. He felt betrayed and he was hurt. She had lain with another. "There is so much you need to understand." Her voice was pleading.

"I well understand the attraction between adults and what ultimately ensues."

"This is different."

"Unless I am mistaken, shifters fuck the same way as nearly everything else." He pulled his hand from under hers, choosing instead to put both hands on the wheel. "But I don't think I am mistaken." He cut her a glance, making sure she got his meaning. She looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

"I can't do this right now, Khaelen."

"Nor am I asking you to." Khaelen kept his gaze in the rearview mirror. As much as he wanted to speed away and lose the jaguar, he kept the badger in mind. They could not travel as fast. As far as the other shifter was concerned, he cared even less for the raptor.

"I owe you an explanation; just give me this moment. I found my mother, Khaelen; all this time I thought she was dead. Can you imagine what Dominica must have put her through? What about my father? Do you think he is alive somewhere as well?" Her voice begged for some kind of hope. But Khaelen was nothing else if not honest and straightforward.

"There was another set of chains next to hers, Allantra. It smelled of a shifter and death. If your father was alive I believe he is dead by now, otherwise Dominica wouldn't have needed Minn and the boys."

Allantra nodded her head at last in agreement. "You are right. I just hoped..." She balled her hands in her lap. "But I have Mother. It's more that I had yesterday."

"Yes, Allantra, you have family now. You have ancestors. You are no longer alone in this world."

"I stopped being alone when I met you, Khaelen."

Khaelen wanted to believe her words. He wanted to believe that perhaps she'd only had a small indiscretion with the wizard. But he instinctively knew it was no small thing at all. They were connected. He knew a full-bonded mating when he saw one. And though he told himself that he would let her go, he knew that would not happen. He had wanted her when he'd first seen her and he still wanted her. All he had to do was get her away from the wizard. Khaelen was not one to step down from a challenge.

After they made it to the compound, he left sleeping arrangements to Allantra. He

kept his mind focused on the shifter Taraema. He gave her the most comfortable room and insisted that Minn rest before she tried to tend to the injured woman. The plump woman had fussed, but after seeing her boys put to bed she had settled down for a nap as well. Khaelen gave Taraema something to help her rest peacefully. He ignored the wizard altogether. The raptor was out gathering herbs for Taraema's recovery.

An hour after leaving Taraema to sleep in peace Khaelen went to his own room, his mind weary with emotional unease. He needed to sleep as well; the sun would be coming up soon. Just as he prepared himself for his day's slumber, someone tapped at his door. Somehow, he knew who it was before he opened the door. Allantra stood there with her hands clasped at her back.

"Allantra."

"Can we talk? Mother is sleeping and Minn insisted on sleeping in the same room with the missing princess." A wry smile tugged at her lips.

"In case you have forgotten, Allantra, it is near time for my slumber. It will have to wait. I couldn't talk to you even if I wanted to." Khaelen was happy to see that she had showered and washed most of the wizard's scent from her body.

"Do you want to talk to me, Khaelen?" She sounded like a small child begging forgiveness.

"Yes, eventually we will need to have this out, but now is not a good time."

Allantra reached out to him and touched his shoulder. He felt heat enter his body in a sharp jolt. The effect of the rising sun on his body had disappeared. "I thought that maybe since I really wanted to talk to you, that I could do the same for you as I did for Mother."

Khaelen looked more closely at Allantra, noting that she indeed was not the same woman who had left him weeks earlier. She had a purpose now, a destiny, a responsibility. A wizard as her lover. He stepped back from the door and allowed her entrance.

"Thank you," she responded.

Khaelen tried to appear nonchalant by still preparing for his slumber. But she was too near and he wanted her. He'd wanted to hold her for so long. How long did he dream of making love to her again under the moon? He had missed her sharp tongue and her hardheaded demeanor. But now that she was finally here, the only thing he could do was keep his distance. She wasn't his to want anymore.

"This is hard for me too, Khaelen."

Those words alone sent him into a rage. He looked into her eyes, wanting to make sure she understood that this couldn't be nearly as hard for her as it was for him. "You cannot possibly fathom how this situation has affected me. I worried about you. I dreamed of your return. I saw a future for us. But I was foolish. You belong to another now, one of your people. A vampire Full Caste is not the same as a True Blood; isn't that right, Allantra?"

"You think I am with Dharean because we are of the same race?"

"I think you are with who you want to be with, young one." Khaelen didn't want to fight; he wanted to make love to her. He wanted to ask her about the change in her appearance. He wanted her to share everything with him. He wanted what he could not have.

"You're partly right. I'm with him because I want to be and because he was meant for me, just as much as you are."

Khaelen squinted at her and shook his head. "You think to somehow convince me to share you with that True Blood? When I mate, Allantra, it is for life, with one woman!"

"I am that one woman," Allantra cried. "It is the prophecy."

"Prophecy?"

"There is a prophecy, Khaelen. You are in it, as are Dharean and I. We are all meant to be bound together."

Her words were so ludicrous it took a moment for them to sink in. He burst into genuine laughter. "You truly believe that I would share my woman with another. You say this is destined?" Khaelen went into another round of laughter. "Tell me, young one, who convinced you of this?"

"It's true, Khaelen. I will prove it to you. Together we all form the Triumvirate that defeats Dominica. If you—"

"I have heard enough," Khaelen interrupted. "Perhaps you should check on your mother now." Khaelen could hear the hardness in his own voice.

"Khaelen, please, just list—"

"Good night, Allantra." He turned his back to her, dismissing her.

After a few seconds he heard the soft slide of his door close. Khaelen let out a breath of air. Prophecy indeed! Somehow the wizard had convinced her of this. With renewed energy running through his body, Khaelen guessed he had at least an hour before the sun was fully up. He teleported out of the house and shifted into his wolf form. A good wild run would do him good.

He would lose himself momentarily in his wolf form, finding a temporary peace within. Keeping an ever-watchful eye on the progress of the sun, he enjoyed the brief respite. His sensitive nose picked up a wild scent. The hackles on his neck rose as he eyed his surroundings with great caution.

The jaguar disengaged itself from the shadows near a clump of brush. It growled, low and threatening. Khaelen responded in kind. If the wizard wanted to play, he was certainly in the mood.

### Chapter Three

The two deadly predators circled one another. Though the jaguar was clearly bigger, the wolf matched him for cunning. Power emanated from both beings. The wolf, outdone in animal form, shifted into his vampire form. The True Blood followed suit.

"Are we to do this here and now?" Khaelen's inquiry was casual, though every sense was on alert.

"As much as I would love to tear your throat out, bloodsucker, it would harm the cause."

"The cause?" Khaelen pretended to look disinterested. He could feel the sun begin its climb in the sky. Though Allantra had given him energy, the sun could still burn him.

"You forget part of my reason was to come here and save Minn and the pups. I am also here because of Allantra and the prophecy," Dharean stated, crossing his powerful, tattooed arms across his chest.

"Ah, the source of her disillusionment." Khaelen chuckled in sarcasm.

"She has told you about the prophecy?"

"She has told me nonsense about the three of us being destined to share a life."

"It is not nonsense. This prophecy has been among my people longer than I have been alive, perhaps even longer than you have been alive, old one. You are more than just some vampire, aren't you? You are Full Caste. That is rare indeed."

"You are a powerful shaman, but I detect darkness in you. Your markings"—Khaelen pointed to Dharean's tattoos—"I recognize some of those; they are used by practitioners of the dark arts. You must be a *Noir Brujo*."

"You are far more educated than I ever would have guessed," Dharean said, new respect in his tone. "Yes, I practice the dark arts. I have been responsible for the protection of my people from yours. I do not apologize for doing what has been necessary."

"Glad to rise one level higher than you had placed me."

"I still do not think much of your people, bloodsucker, nor you, for that matter. Allantra speaks the truth. We are all connected and it is best if you accepted it. That vampire we ran into gave off quite a bit of power once she was corporeal again."

"Dominica is probably the main source of our troubles right now," Khaelen agreed. The sun had risen dangerously high and Khaelen was now beginning to feel his skin grow warm. "But we will continue this at another time, True Blood. It seems I have an enemy more powerful than you. The sun will not be tamed by anyone. Until next time." Khaelen didn't wait for the True Blood to answer him. He teleported straight to his room, where he found Allantra naked, draped seductively across his bed.

"What do you think you're doing?" he barked out, instantly hard as he gazed upon her.

"You and I need to get things in order. I'm here to fully bond with you. I want you, Khaelen; I have never stopped thinking about you."

Khaelen watched as the headstrong Allantra he knew leaned back on propped elbows and parted her long slim legs. Khaelen did what any self-respecting man who had been egregiously wronged did. He fell victim to the call of the siren.

Her scent traveled into his very soul. Every cell in his body remembered her and hungered for her. With a thought he stripped his clothing away. He moved so quickly she gasped as he crawled on the bed toward her, pausing only long enough to kiss her ankle. Khaelen traced his tongue across her thigh and across the sides of her knees. He watched her as her head fell back, clearly enjoying his touch. *His* touch, not the shifter's. Khaelen paused in his ministrations, willing her to look him in the eye. Slowly she raised her head, a questioning look on her face. Khaelen rewet his tongue slowly, sensuously. She squirmed as she watched him lick at her inner thigh. He came so close to the junction of her thighs she moved her hips to get him where she wanted him, but he merely nipped at the other thigh, tormenting her.

She groaned at the disappointment of not getting her way; she moaned at the sensations he was causing her. Then slowly he tongued his way to her feverish core. He lapped at her, relishing the taste of her once again. She was so wild. How could she even propose to him that they bind with a third? She belonged to him. Khaelen allowed himself to get lost in the moment. He could deal with reality later.

Her fingers grazed his scalp in a hypnotic massage as she kept him firmly against her. He teased the hardened nub until he heard her gasp in pleasure. When she could no longer keep herself propped up she fell back, but as she did so she closed her thighs on either side of his head, trying to keep him locked in place. But Khaelen, like Allantra, could never be caged. He pulled her legs down while still feasting; she clawed at the blood red sheets as the orgasm overtook her.

Without waiting for the orgasm to subside, he plunged inside of her. Loved the feel of her walls as she pulsed madly around his cock. When the tremors began to die down, he moved inside her in long, slow strokes.

"Is that what you wanted, young one? To be fully mated to a vampire?" he asked as he slowly pushed in and out of her.

"Yes, Khaelen, it—it is what I want," she managed, entwining her legs with his.

"Do you know what you must do to fully mate with a vampire, Allantra?"

"No," came the short, breathy answer.

"We must exchange blood; you must take mine and I must take yours."

Allantra didn't answer; she raked her nails down his back with enough force to cause deep furrows in his skin, though he could barely feel them. His teeth burst forth and he sank them deep into her neck. Her pure blood rushed right to his head, immediately causing a drunken effect. He drank deeply of her, while not once stopping his cock from pumping in and out of her. Finally he closed the wound, then bit her on the shoulder. She cried out from the sudden bite. But not from pain; he felt her walls convulse tighter around him, even suctioning him deeper as he drew life from her.

Khaelen pulled back his canines and closed the wound on her shoulder as well. He gazed into her face, making sure he had not taken too much. To his surprise, she had lengthened her teeth to puncture his skin. He lowered his neck to hers and felt the teeth pierce his neck; she made small sounds as she exchanged blood. Truly, there was nothing more erotic to a vampire than the exchange of blood. Her small mouth on his neck was his undoing as he felt his blood being drawn into her mouth. The eroticism was too much and they both tumbled into a whirlwind of an orgasm.

Heat struck him as a blinding light pulsed from every pore in her body. He held her tightly as his seed poured into her. She held him just as tight as the light washed over

them. It felt as if tiny bolts of energy were making their way into every crevice of his body. Loud crackling rent the air as if it were storming right there in his bedroom. Then, deathly silence. Nothing but heavy breathing could be heard.

“What happened?” Allantra finally squeaked out, her body completely limp under his as Khaelen rolled onto his side, careful not to overwhelm her with his weight.

Khaelen was at a loss. He knew what had been happening up until the light came. The energy. It felt like the energy Allantra had transferred into him earlier, magnified a thousand times.

“A thousand times? A little dramatic, wouldn’t you say?” Allantra commented. Khaelen stilled. He had not said that out loud. *Can you hear me?* He directed the thought to her.

“Of course I can.”

*You do realize I am not speaking out loud?*

“That’s silly. I can hear you loud and clear.”

*Allantra, look at me.* Khaelen waited until she leaned across his chest and looked into his face. *Notice my mouth is not moving.*

Allantra jerked up. “We’re fully bonded!” Her face lit up in pure joy. “I had no idea it worked so quickly with vampires.”

Khaelen sat up as well. “It’s not supposed to. It usually takes a few days and even then a little at a time before we can read each other’s thoughts.”

“I don’t understand. With Dharean it took a little time before I could home in on his thoughts. Why so fast with you?”

Before Khaelen could speculate the door to his room opened and in stepped Dharean. “My guess is, because we are all linked now, the process has been given a power boost by the synergist. By the way, *flammulae*, I would appreciate in the future if you didn’t give me a complete visual along with emotions when fucking your vampire.”

## Chapter Four

Dominica crashed hard to the stone floor of her personal room in the Elder Council chambers. A yelp escaped her lips; it had been too long since she felt anything, let alone pain. Weakly she stood and looked around. Hatred seeped from her soul. She hated this room, had hated it for so very long, but there was nowhere else to go. Until now. Ignoring her fatigue, she went to the hidden chamber where she kept her darkest amulets and tools of power. There was no more time for dreams. The day had arrived.

She was a reckoning unto herself. She would give only a few of the Elders a chance to join her in wiping out every shifter who walked about. She had seen him. Him. The shifter who had betrayed her first. She'd thought him long dead. Apparently his treachery knew no bounds. He had managed to convince her he no longer existed. But she would make sure she personally killed Masque. Death alone would be too easy and quick.

She put the items in a bag and looked about. Hunger ate at her. She had not feasted in almost a hundred years. It had been far too long. Her canines elongated at the very thought of feasting. She mentally called to the first guard she could make contact with. A quarter guard hurried to his death. As soon as he came through the door, the lightest spark of surprise lit his otherwise dull eyes. But it was too late. He had already entered the den of the lioness. She pounced upon him quickly, tearing out the jugular and greedily gulping at the human blood that gushed forth.

Dominica bled him dry, though her hunger was not satiated, only held at bay for the moment. As she used the uniform of the guard to clean the blood off herself, a wonderful thought went through her mind: a mother True Blood and her sons. They had to have come from somewhere. There had to be more hidden in the Savage Outlands. She would need more shifters if she were to turn the Elders who supported her campaign corporeal. A plan began to form. A beautiful, wicked plan.

Dominica mentally called to the quarter guards again and waited for their arrival. The human blood coursing through her veins was a pleasure she had not experienced in quite a long time. When two more guards entered her chambers, she feasted again, then threw the bodies in one neat pile in a corner of the room. At last the guard she had been waiting for appeared.

His gaze traveled to the pile of corpses in the corner. He shook slightly as he took in Dominica's physical form. He dropped to his knees and bowed until his head touched the floor.

It was a shame all beings didn't follow his lead.

"I need answers, servant, and it is you and only you who can appease my curiosity," she purred while elegantly dropping to her knees. The feeling of the cold floor was a sensation she had not expected. Truly it had been too long.

Now fully satiated from the blood of the guards, she felt her power slowly returning and amplifying. Almost lovingly she placed her hands on either side of the bowing guard's head and closed her eyes. "Tell me what I need to know. Show me where you found the mother and the pups," she whispered, encouraging the memories she needed to surface.

The guard began to shake and moan softly as Dominica pulled the memories

viciously, not caring if she was ripping his mind apart. She huffed in disgust as she had to work through the mind control spell she had woven herself. It was good work, she had to admit. Eventually she came upon what she was looking for.

She pushed the guard away, his life already forgotten as he slumped to the floor, now a body with a brain consistency equal to mud. Hope burst in her dark heart. There had been a village of them. A whole village of those nasty vile shifters, just waiting to die by her hand. The way to the village had been muddled at best in the guard's brain. She would have to find the village with the little information she had gathered.

Though power charged through her veins, she knew from instinct alone that the sun had risen. She was still no match against the sun. But there was a way around even the natural elements. With a thought she made the heavy tome she kept locked away appear at her feet. If that shifter wizard could have tattoos to protect him, there had to be something she could conjure to give her protection from the sun.

\* \* \* \*

Masque circled the compound steadfastly. He didn't trust the vampire any more than the *Noir Brujo*. After delivering the herbs Minn had requested, he had taken it upon himself to look after his leader and his family. The raptor kept a sharp eye as the sun came up. He took the time to hunt and think.

How long had it been since he'd seen Dominica? She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on, and now the most evil. He'd certainly had a hand in that. It sickened him to think that he had put into motion the wheels of the prophecy. For he had betrayed her after she had risked everything to be with him.

His betrayal had been accidental as much as it had been a way to protect her. His parents had been very powerful and demanded to meet the mate he was destined to be with forever. He'd refused, but they'd had a shaman see into his future. The shaman had told Masque and his parents that he and his mate would never live a life of happiness. She only saw blood and death. The shamans were never wrong.

Masque and Dominica had vowed to each other to defy their parents and their people to be together. But Masque saw no reason to doom his love's future. He never came for her as he'd promised. He could only imagine the shame she must have gone through. She called to him through their blood bond. He refused to answer. He could feel her heart breaking. He answered her once and only once. *Go on with your life, Dominica. I am not your destined mate.* He'd only wanted her to live her life and forget about him. He wanted her to be happy. Eventually she no longer called to him. She could not track him down as long as he did not use magic. All this time he thought she had mated with someone else. It was not lost upon him that, had he used magic, she could have tracked him down and wiped out the whole village. What had he done?

It now occurred to Masque that what the shaman had seen was the prophecy being fulfilled. They indeed had been mates that were destined never to be together. He had loved Dominica. At the time he'd thought he was saving her future. But now she had killed too many. Committed too many heinous acts to be forgiven. But he could stop her. He circled the compound again; he would stop her even if it meant killing the only woman he had ever loved.

Masque landed high up in a branch and reached for his *Noir Brujo*. He came up against a wall of pure anger. His first impulse was to go to his leader's side. But a second

thought prevented him from doing so. The *Brujo* had to fight some battles alone. It was only natural for there to be a battle between him and the vampire. Masque shook his head at the thought. To share one's mate with another was quite a thing to get used to.

The three of them needed to form the Triumvirate on their own. He had other things to tend to, most notably Dominica. It was not lost on him that he was supporting the very people who would kill his mate. How does one take a stand on such an issue? He'd had a hand in what she'd become; yet his people needed to survive.

For the first time in many years he concentrated on opening the blood link he had ignored. There was a slight feeling of dizziness as his mind searched to connect to the one that matched his. Finally he could feel the darkness in her mind.

*You dare to use the blood link?* Her tone dripped with acid.

*Dominica, where are you?*

*I am everywhere. I am your death. Are you seeking me out to die?*

*I cannot allow you to take more lives, especially my people.*

*You are not my mate, nor my keeper. You are merely the insect that will be smashed under the weight of my power.* Dominica laughed bitterly.

*Your revenge is with me.*

*That is where we agree, shifter. It is my destiny to wipe the earth of you vermin.*

Masque sighed as the sadness swirled in his heart. There really was no way around this. He would have to kill her. *You will die*, he said at last.

*Perhaps.* Dominica laughed sweetly. *Tell me this, blood mate. Do you think you can catch me and kill me before I wipe out your village?*

If possible, the blood stilled in Masque's veins.

*Ah, I see I have your attention, blood mate. Yes, I know there are more of you, and I know where. Even now while you rest in the trees, I travel fast toward your people.*

*Not possible; it is daylight.* Masque felt the blood in his veins turn to shards of ice. She knew exactly where he was, though he had not used any magic.

*Do you think it is only your wizard who knows dark magic?*

Masque felt the quiet in his surroundings. He cocked his head wildly, trying to find the aberration. A gust of wind blew violently enough to knock him from his perch; as he tried to right himself in the air, the wind came again, slamming him in the thick bark of a tree. Pain ripped through him as one of his wings contorted in an unnatural angle. He fell heavily to the ground, shifting his form.

He landed with a thud to the ground. His arm was broken, and the back of his head had a nasty gash. He opened his eyes slowly to see the apparition of Dominica's face hovering above him. *I know much magic. I am more powerful than you can conceive, little birdie. Catch me if you can.* Then the apparition was gone.

The vampires' compound was not far; Masque ran as fast as he could to the house, cradling his broken arm while it healed. She was powerful. Even from far away she wielded magic like he had never seen. He ignored the sharp stones under his bare feet as he mentally yelled out a warning to his *Noir Brujo*.

## Chapter Five

“You have entered my private quarters unannounced and most assuredly uninvited.” Khaelen rose from the bed, dressing with but a fleeting thought. “I have opened my home to you, but you push my hospitality too far.” His canines began to descend as his anger permeated the room.

“Allantra belongs to me as well, vampire. It is well you do not forget that. It stands to reason wherever she is, gives me the right to be there as well.” Dharean, his eyes black and funneling, looked at the naked Allantra in his enemy’s bed.

Allantra rose, oblivious to her nakedness. “Allow me to correct you, Dharean,” she said carefully; her anger appeared to rival Dharean’s and his own. “I belong to no one; truth be told, both of you belong to me. You know better than I do that this had to happen. My mother is lying in a bed near death because of what that bitch Dominica did to her. In case either one of you forget, she is corporeal now and she means everyone in existence ill will. I will not twiddle my thumbs and cater to egos because we don’t have that kind of time. There is no telling what she is doing while we stand here arguing about something that had to come to pass anyway!”

In a huff, she turned, gathering the red sheets about her like a toga. She marched right past the two men and paused at the door. “I hope the two of you get whatever male ego shit out of the way and start to focus. If either of you should need me, I will be with my mother.”

The door slid closed quietly after Allantra’s stormy exit. The two men faced one another in stony silence. It was Dharean who attacked first; his hands, partially shifted into deadly hooked claws, went for the vampire’s throat. Khaelen, moving in a quick blur, deftly avoiding the attack; he retaliated by inflicting long, deep ravines in the shifter’s back. The shifter pivoted quickly, growling in anger.

A whispered word from the wizard and Khaelen was viciously thrown against a wall; the impact was great enough for him to lose his bearings for just a moment. Dharean gave him no room for recovery as he pounced on him. Khaelen’s scent on Allantra seemed to have further enraged the wizard. He took one long, hooked claw and tried to pierce the vampire’s heart.

A bloodcurdling roar rang out as the claw missed its target but still penetrated his chest deeply. Khaelen ignored the searing pain as he drew back his fist and struck Dharean across the face, this time sending the shifter reeling back so fast, he crashed into and broke one of the posts on the solid wooden bed. Dharean landed with a very audible thump against the wall and slid to the floor.

Injured but still very much empowered by their anger and egos, both males stood and launched themselves at the other; their powerful bodies crashed together in the middle of the room. Khaelen, his head partially shifted in his wolf form, bit deeply into the shoulder of the shifter. Likewise, Dharean had changed into his jaguar form and then returned the favor. Both men slashed and clawed and bit at the other, systematically destroying the bedroom. Blood sprayed the walls, and it was increasingly difficult to tell who was bleeding more, for they both were bathed in blood.

It was the frantic call from Masque that drew Dharean's attention. He pushed the vampire away and retreated far enough to listen to the call of his friend, keeping a wary eye on the vampire.

*She is heading for the clan, Masque imparted.*

*How do you know this, friend? What is wrong?*

*She has injured me, but I will heal.*

Dharean was stunned. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had ever been skillful enough to best his most prized warrior. *How can that be?*

*She caught me unaware, Brujo. Her power is great and I fear it grows steadily. We must pursue her before she reaches the clan.*

*She came to the compound?*

*No, she can wield power over a great distance, it would seem.*

*Come to me, Masque, I wish to learn more.*

Dharean looked at the battered vampire and knew he must look just as bad. He took in the blood and damage and, for the first time in his life, he felt ashamed of his actions. "I hope this encounter has gotten any hostilities out of our system for now. The female vampire has attacked my best warrior. Allantra was correct in assuming she was growing more and more powerful."

Khaelen made his way to the side of the bed and sat. He looked down at his wounds. "I fear we both have behaved rather childishly. We lost sight of our goal."

"Women can do that to a man," Dharean agreed with a wry smile.

"Agreed, and Allantra is just not any woman." It was Khaelen's turn to smile.

"She is right, however. We must form this Triumvirate to defeat this female vampire. It is a prophecy that has been with us for a long time. This is our last chance as a people to survive."

"I am not proud of the legacy of my people. They have wronged you and yours and I aim to make things right. Allantra and I entered this fight knowing the chances of winning are slim. If this is what is required, then both of us will have to find a way to make this work."

Dharean nodded in agreement at the tenuous peace. "Masque will be here with more information soon. I believe we should both clean up and get this room in order before Allantra returns. Her anger can be quite—"

"Say no more." Khaelen chuckled, rising. "I am more than acquainted with her anger."

\* \* \* \*

Freshly showered and now feeling suddenly shy, Allantra entered the bedroom of her mother. Her mother. The word just seemed to echo in her head. She had a mother. Tiptoeing quietly, she approached the bed to find her mother's eyes already open.

"She sleeps that way," Minn murmured, rising out a chair in the corner of the room. "I think the princess is afraid even in her slumber."

Allantra felt a lump rise in her throat. She couldn't begin to imagine whatever torture her mother had gone through for so many years. She reached a hand out tentatively and stroked the dull locks of long hair splayed on the pillow. "She is safe now. We must get her to understand that."

"Allantra, none of us is safe at the moment," Minn replied. Allantra opened her

mouth to tell Minn that was simply not true, but Minn rushed on. “That black-hearted vampire is out there with a goal to destroy us and she has the power to do it. Until we can stop her, we have no right trying to convince the lost princess that she is safe.”

“It is true, Minn, because I will make it true. I have not risked so much to fail now.”

“Your passion and dedication are admirable; however, you must understand that life is not always as you wish it.”

“I have two of the most powerful men I’ve ever known by my side. We can do this,” Allantra insisted, drawing her hand away from her mother for fear of zapping her unintentionally with her rising anger.

“And you believe those two preening males will work together side by side, while sharing your bed?” Minn barked a laugh.

“What’s wrong with you, Minn? I expected more faith from you than this. They both will do what is necessary no matter the cost to their egos. I know them both and I certainly wouldn’t be pursuing this if I didn’t believe we could win this.” Allantra looked at the plump woman and saw the remnants of a smile tease the corner of her lips.

“I didn’t mean to anger you. I had to be sure of your confidence. You do understand that you are in charge here, not those two. You will have to control them and keep the peace. They are men after all, and will always be in competition for your favors. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if they were off somewhere beating the bloody hell out of each other.” Minn laughed at the thought.

“You might be right about that. I left them alone with each other in a volatile mood. I am hoping that they get whatever it is out of their system. I have this feeling inside that...”

“What?” Minn walked around the bed and put her arm around Allantra’s shoulders. “Don’t discount whatever you feel. As a synergist you can tap into all sorts of energy.”

When Allantra felt she was far away enough from her sleeping mother she began to confide in Minn. “I can’t explain it.” Allantra twisted her hands, trying to find the words. “Something is going to happen, and I believe the most obvious choice is not the best one.”

“Well, well, well. You have your work cut out for you. There’s a price to pay for having two good-looking men in your bed.” Minn winked at her then rubbed her back in comfort. “You will know what to do, and if you have any trouble getting anyone to line up and follow your lead, I’ve been known to have an unconventional but effective way of getting people to do what I want.”

“Thank you, Minn. Now if you don’t mind, I would like to visit with my mother alone for a while.”

“Well, of course you do.” Minn gave her a hug and silently left the room.

Allantra pulled the chair Minn had been sitting in beside her mother’s bed and sat. So much pain had to be bottled up inside of her. Shyly at first, she touched her mother’s hand, then held it in her own. She sent small pulses of energy to her mother, being careful not to overload her.

After some time, Allantra thought it might be a good idea to check on the men. She stood and leaned over to kiss her mother on the forehead when her mother’s hand changed position and clamped around her wrist. “Oh,” Allantra exclaimed in surprise. She looked into her mother’s eyes to see if she was awake. The grip tightened and began to grow painful. Allantra tried to wiggle free from the hold, but Taraema held on tighter.

“Mother, wake up,” Allantra said, fear and dread making her voice rise.

“I’m afraid your mother isn’t available right now, you little bitch.” The voice of Dominica poured from her mother’s mouth.

## Chapter Six

Allantra stared in horror as her mother's lips transformed into a hideous sneer. "You see, I can get to her and to you anytime I want."

"Get out of her," Allantra demanded, finally breaking the grip around her wrist but being careful not to hurt her mother.

"I'll leave when I am done." The body of Taraema pulled itself into a sitting position. "Besides, the thought of being inside the mind of this shifter is revolting to say the least, but it is necessary."

"What do you want?"

"Your blood, Khaelen's, and that bastard Masque. All of you will die, you know; it is merely a question of when."

"Say what you need to and get the hell out of my mother's mind!"

Taraema squinted at Allantra then began to laugh, a hideous low laugh. "You're all just animals, you know, with the ability to appear human. You're lower than vampires and always will be. Accept this and avoid the unnecessary death of your clan. A live shifter is of more use to me than a dead one."

"I will not bow down to you or anyone else for that matter. You are wasting your breath and your time."

"Am I?" came the sinister reply.

"You knew I would never give up that easily so why..." Allantra trailed off as something began to click into place. "You're buying time, but for what?" she whispered to herself.

"Did you know once I enter a person's mind, it is hard for them to keep me out?" Dominica said conversationally. "You're different because you're bonded with that wizard and his mind protects yours. Let's see—" Taraema's fingers began to count off. "I've been, quite obviously, in this bitch's mind that I occupy now." A finger went up. "There's your father but he died. Shame too, he set my plans back; I'll never forgive him for that." She tsked as another finger went up.

Allantra wanted to run and yell to everyone. But that was too obviously a first gut reaction. As painful as it was to stand here and listen to the maniac rant, there was something to be learned here. "And you know those two bastard pups, but I didn't have enough time to make a permanent connection because they passed out from fright—good breeding there." Dominica snorted as two more fingers went up. "Masque can keep me out if he wants, but I'll fix that soon." Another finger went up. "I am forgetting someone; who?" She tapped the side of her head, pretending to be perplexed. "Tell me, dear, what is the name of that rather plump shifter?"

Allantra had to keep reminding herself that it wasn't her mother saying these things. The brown eyes staring at her with such menace were not her mother's. Allantra, full of anger and will, grabbed her mother's wrists and prayed that it would work. She sent pulses into her mother's mind with the sole purpose of incinerating the dark energy that resided there. Her mother screamed, Dominica's voice echoed, and then her mother slumped down into the pillows, breathing heavily.

"Mother?" Allantra spoke quietly, afraid that Dominica still resided and had caused

her mother great damage.

“Keep, keep,” Taraema began, barely audible. “Keep her away from me.” She looked at Allantra pleadingly. “Don’t let her get to me again.”

Tears welled up in Allantra’s eyes. “I won’t, Mother, I will find a way,” she assured her.

The door to the bedroom burst open and Dharean and Khaelen entered, worry etched on their faces.

“We heard screams. Are you two all right?”

“Minn, go check on Minn!” Allantra yelled.

\* \* \* \*

Minn was found standing over her two sleeping boys, a pair of scissors gripped in her hand. Tears were rolling down her cheeks as her arm was held poised, still as a statue’s, ready to strike the life out of her boys.

“Minn.” Dharean spoke softly so as not to startle her. “Step away from the pups.”

Minn’s head cocked quickly to one side upon hearing Dharean’s voice. “I’ve been trying to, *Brujo*.” She wept. “But I can’t move. Something’s wrong with me and I have been using every ounce of my magic to counter it.”

“It’s Dominica,” Khaelen replied, keeping his voice neutral as well. “She’s controlling you.”

“How do I stop her? Her voice is in my head and she won’t let me move until I—” Minn began the downward deadly arc, aiming for the heart of the nearest child.

With his wizard speed Dharean plowed into Minn, knocking her to the floor and shoving the air from her lungs. The scissors clattered loudly to the floor. Minn lay sprawled and gasping for breath; she looked at Dharean, who held out a hand to help her up.

“I can’t believe I almost...”

“You didn’t,” Dharean interjected. “Your mother’s instinct overrode her dark command long enough for help to come. You did well, Minn.” He spoke soothingly, still extending his hand. Reluctantly she allowed herself to be helped up.

“Everyone now to Taraema’s room,” Khaelen ordered sharply as Masque arrived. Without pausing to see who would obey, Khaelen was gone, already no doubt waiting for them.

Khaelen began once everyone had assembled. The boys had been made a pallet on the floor in a corner. “She’s systematically attacking us. Right now we need to access our weaknesses and cover them. She’s not wasting any time; we can’t either.”

“Does that mean she will come after the three of us next?” Allantra asked, perched on the side of her mother’s bed. “We aren’t ready yet. I’m not ready.” The last was said with just a hint of despair.

“First things first,” Dharean began. “We have to secure ourselves before any training can be safely done. I don’t think she can get to us three because of the mind link. My body and mind are warded against dark magic; therefore, by extension, so are the two of you.” He nodded in Khaelen and Allantra’s direction.

“She’s more powerful than we realized,” Masque added quietly, moving his broken arm slightly to check on the healing process. “And she is very clever. She has already managed to stop us from following her before we even started.”

“Explain, brother,” Minn demanded, looking with longing at her boys, too afraid to approach them.

Masque walked to the middle of the room to make sure everyone could clearly hear him. He did not like repeating himself. Patience was not always a virtue of his. “She’s going after the clan, we could have easily guessed that, she didn’t need to tell me that but she did. Why? She wanted to show she is not afraid of us. Any of us.” He looked pointedly at the soon-to-be Triumvirate. “She wanted to demonstrate her power hoping to shake us, and she has. But it is the last reason that makes her very clever.”

“She is forcing us to second-guess everything we do. And everyone. We have to take the time to protect ourselves from what little power she has shown us,” Khaelen added.

“Exactly.” Dharean jumped in. “I will have to tattoo every one of you that has been touched by her mind to keep her at bay. This will take time. She knows this.”

“Fine.” Allantra stood. “I want to know everything she said to you, Masque, and what she did. You too, Minn. We need to keep tabs on what she’s capable of doing so far. Ancestors help me, I am sure we are only touching the tip of the iceberg of her capabilities.”

“What will you require for this ‘tattooing’?” Khaelen directed this to Dharean.

“Just basic materials, but you and I will talk as you help me prepare. There is something we must discuss.” Dharean headed for the door.

“The two of you wait,” Allantra said sharply, focusing a keen eye on the both of them. Both men looked at each other and then faced Allantra. “I know the both of you heal fast so I am guessing what you truly did to each other is much worse than the lingering injuries I see. I know this is hard for both of you, but I hope whatever happened between the two of you will temporarily feed the testosterone monster.”

“You’re right.” Khaelen smiled at Dharean. “She does get that little tic in her jaw when she’s angry.”

“Well, don’t underestimate the way her hands are tightly fisted at her sides; you pointed that one out. I have to say I didn’t notice it at first until now,” Dharean replied.

“Oh no.” Allantra pointed a finger at both of them. “*This* type of sexist bonding will not be permitted. Get that into your beastly heads right now.”

“There’s the name-calling you mentioned earlier,” Dharean noted while he and Khaelen resumed walking toward the door.

“We should hurry; you know how she likes to throw things,” Khaelen said with a hint of humor.

“Don’t you just hate their ilk sometimes?” Minn laughed as the men walked out. Masque snorted and walked over to the boys, looking them over carefully.

“Oh, like you wouldn’t believe,” Allantra responded, giving in to the smile. “Just what I need, those two ganging up on me.”

“Yes, well, I am quite sure you wouldn’t mind a certain kind of ganging up on you from those two,” Minn said with a devilish smirk.

Allantra ignored the off-color joke and headed back to her mother’s side. “Minn, I would like my mother to get tattooed first, if you don’t mind.”

Minn got up and sat on the other side of Taraema’s bed. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. I want my boys to go next.”

“I don’t know if everything Dominica said can be trusted but she said that she wasn’t in the mind of your boys long enough to make a permanent connection.”

“And you believe that?” Minn looked incredulous.

“Well, think about it. Your mind is much stronger than your boys’. Why didn’t she take over their minds? It certainly would have been easier.”

“You have a point, but I don’t trust the blood whore.”

“I tell you what, while we wait for Khaelen and Dharean to appear, why don’t you and Masque tell me exactly what happened when you were attacked.”

\* \* \* \*

“What is it you want to talk about?” Khaelen asked as he led Dharean deeper into the bowels of his home.

“There is a lot more you need to know about this prophecy.”

“Such as?”

“The prophecy itself, to start.”

“I’m listening.”

Dharean paused before he began:

*“Touched by evil that flows and ebbs*

*The Ancients cower from its web*

*The Scion comes from enemy land*

*A harbinger for change at hand*

*Mated first to an enemy that’s not*

*Mated second to a wizard’s lot*

*The three shall form the weapon to be*

*The catalyst of death to the enemy*

*If one should falter from the path*

*T’would bring down destiny’s final wrath*

*The enemies’ stronghold shall reinforce*

*Survival of the Ancients shall end its course.”*

Khaelen remained quiet while he ran the verses through his head. Most of it was easily understood; other parts had to be interpreted. Yet there was the one question...

“You are fully mated to her as am I. Correct?” Khaelen asked. Dharean nodded in agreement. They approached the heavy door, behind which Khaelen kept the most ancient of books, tools, and paraphernalia in his collection. “According to the prophecy, we are the formed weapon then, yes?”

“No,” was Dharean’s short answer. Khaelen looked at him with slight puzzlement.

“Explain. If we are fully mated to her, what remains to be done? Her training?”

Dharean turned to fully face Khaelen. “We separately are mated to her, yes, and that was the first step. However, for us to form the Triumvirate, we all have to bond together.”

“And how do we do that?” Khaelen asked with deep interest.

“We must all mate and fully bond in one bed,” Dharean deadpanned.

## Chapter Seven

Khaelen's hand froze on the handle of the door. He felt the prickly fingers of jealousy run its nails down his back. He looked at the shifter, questioning his sanity. Surely he said that in jest? "You mean a threesome?" Khaelen cleared his throat; the word "threesome" barely wanted to come out.

"Yes, we must—" The shifter paused and took a deep breath. Khaelen was willing to bet anything that it was just as hard on Dharean, the thought of sharing Allantra. It was one thing knowing she'd mated separately; it was quite another watching it and participating. "Mate with her in the same manner in which we fully mated with her separately, only this time, we must include each other."

Khaelen pushed the heavy door open and went into the dark room. Not a word was said as he flicked on the dim lights. Without hearing the shifter, he knew the man was behind him, in as much turmoil as he about what had to be done.

Khaelen extended a hand in invitation for Dharean to sit in one of the two thronelike black chairs, a black table standing between them. They sat across from one another in total silence.

Khaelen broke the silence first. "Are you sure that—"

"I am very sure this is the way." Dharean rested his elbow on the armrest as he leaned his head onto his fist.

"Is there no—"

"There is not a more effective way."

"Are you saying that I would have to exchange blood with you as well?" Khaelen looked at Dharean in stunned disbelief.

"Yes; it would be the only way to connect to me through the mind. I have bonded with her through mind, body, and spirit."

Khaelen snorted in disapproval. "You are telling me after I exchange blood with you that all of us mate and I am supposed to do what with you?"

"Connect to my mind as our bodies mate with Allantra as one. Our spirits will bond naturally."

"I am in no way comfortable with this," Khaelen stated, getting up. He began to pace slowly.

"I wouldn't be comfortable if you were," Dharean responded.

Khaelen stopped his pacing to look at the shifter. Then he felt the low chuckle erupt from his throat. Dharean grinned. Both men found themselves enjoying a much-needed laugh. Khaelen sat down again. "I know my people have wronged yours and many others. I feel it is within my power and duty to right it. Odd, you know. I was willing to lose life and limb to accomplish this task. Yet the thought of sharing Allantra with another man in the same bed gives me great pause."

"You are not alone in this," Dharean confessed. "For as long as I remember I have been the *Noir Brujo* for my people. The only one willing and strong enough to do what was necessary to protect them. Yet much like you I pause at this seemingly small task."

"What are we to do then?"

"What is necessary," Dharean responded.

“Is Allantra aware of what must be done?”

“Not fully aware, no. But I felt it would be better if you and I dealt with this and came to her as a united front. This is just as hard on her, perhaps harder. She cares for us both. I know this. It must be difficult watching us trying to tear each other apart.”

“I did not think about it from that point of view,” Khaelen mused. “I just assumed she had adjusted to the fact that she had two lovers.”

“We are more than just her lovers, vampire. We are her mates. *Her* mates. Therefore, her needs will always come before ours. We must keep this in mind in the future.”

“It would probably help if you stopped calling me vampire.”

“Have you ever called me by name?”

Khaelen gave him a sheepish grin. “To date my memory cannot boast of calling you Dharean once. All right then, Dharean; consider this a first step. The next step for us is to scour these tomes and find what we need to protect the people that aid us in this fight.”

With a grunt Dharean stood as Khaelen stood. Both alpha males walked around the table and clasped the other’s forearm in the ancient handshake of brothers in arms. “Let us begin,” Dharean said.

\* \* \* \*

Allantra stood next to window, looking out without actually seeing. Her mind was so smothered in thoughts, the raptor circling in the sky was barely registering. Masque was not the only one worried. For the millionth time she turned her gaze inside the room where the others slept. Minn curled up in a far corner of the room; she still did not trust herself with her boys. Taraema, pale but looking much healthier than how they’d found her, was resting—sort of. She spoke in her sleep, calling out to Pase.

Allantra couldn’t remember her father clearly; it had been so long since she’d seen him. Still she felt the loss. She could not remember his face, but she remembered the feeling of love when she thought of him. Her mother obviously did as well. Taraema shifted in the bed again; for the first time in a long time she was trying to sleep in a bed. She sensed the deep mourning within her mother, and the pain and trauma from her captivity. Dominica had a lot to answer for.

She came to her mother and smoothed the long hair from her face and sent her warm bursts of energy. She was getting better at this. Her power had to be controlled through more than just emotions, however. Allantra sighed as she sat lightly upon the bed.

The responsibility was dawning on her. She was the center of all of this. If she couldn’t control her newfound gifts, she wouldn’t be able to help Dharean and Khaelen defeat that poor excuse for a blood leech. She needed training and she needed to be good, quickly. Dominica had started her onslaught immediately; they’d barely had time to breathe. A small, niggling doubt came into her mind: what if she couldn’t do this? What if she couldn’t learn what she needed to in time? Allantra shook her head, trying to disengage the thoughts from her mind. She had to do this. Her people had been trampled on long enough.

The small snick of a door opening drew her gaze. Two tall figures entered the room. Her men. They both carried objects in their hands that were very familiar to her.

“Is your mother doing better?” Khaelen asked, setting the small objects on the night table as he leaned down and placed a kiss close to the stone on her forehead.

“I hope so. I’ve been giving her gentle pushes of energy to help her recovery. You

two have a plan?" She nodded toward the table.

"Yes." Dharean stepped forward. "We will start with the lost princess first. It would be a good idea if you kept the energy flowing. This is a painful process, Allantra, and there is no way around it. We can only hope the trauma won't..."

"Won't what?" Allantra asked in alarm.

Khaelen sat next to her and rested his hand upon her thigh. "Cause her to go insane. Your mother's sanity is already weak. While her physical body was not beaten, her mind was. Unfortunately, her mind will probably not be able to tell the difference. It could cause a lot of damage."

Allantra looked to the two men. "No, I can't risk that. She's been through too much already. There has to be another way."

"I'm sorry, *flammulae*. Applying these symbols to protect against dark magic has to be done very specifically. There are prices to pay for something so important. If we don't do this, Dominica will keep at her until she makes her lose her mind anyway. Our way, though painful, will benefit her in the end," Dharean assured her. *Trust us*, came the thought in unison from the two men. She guessed they didn't know they were thinking exactly alike.

Allantra did not miss the word "us." She looked to Khaelen, then to Dharean. "Can't I wake her up first and tell her what we're about to do?"

Dharean shook his head. "She is already asleep. It would be best if I pushed her deeper into sleep and get this over with. Telling her would probably cause anxiety and I would not be able to put her in a deeper sleep without hurting her mentally."

"We were hoping you could try to connect to her on the dream spectrum. Keep her occupied so she is not aware of what is going on." Khaelen squeezed her leg. "You can do this. Take this opportunity to get to know your mother."

"I can put you to sleep so you can reach her." Dharean gave her a small smile of comfort.

Allantra took a deep breath and nodded. "Let's do this."

## Chapter Eight

“Mother?” Allantra said the word a little bit shyly as she approached the stream where her mother sat languidly, running her fingers in the cool water. At the sound of Allantra’s voice, the woman turned, her long hair catching and claiming the last of the sunlight as its own. Her beautiful, ageless face broke out into a smile.

“Allantra, is that you?” Taraema beamed as she stood. “How did you get here?” She came to Allantra, her arms outstretched in welcome. Allantra accepted the embrace greedily, closing her eyes at the very real feel of her mother.

“Dharean brought me to you.” Allantra smiled as she reluctantly pulled back from her mother’s embrace. Together they walked to the stream. “I wanted to talk to you. There’s so much I want to know,” Allantra said carefully. She had to keep the conversation away from more sensitive subjects.

“He’s quite a catch.” Taraema winked at her. “Now where do I know him from?” Taraema seemed to ponder the question. Anxious, Allantra changed the subject.

“He’s from the old clans. But we can talk men later. Mother, tell me about you. What are some things that you like to do?”

“Oh Allantra, it seems as if an eternity has passed.” Taraema looked confused. “Sometimes when I’m here, I can’t remember a lot. I don’t really know where we are. Where are we, daughter?”

“It’s a safe place.” Allantra smiled though her heart was breaking. Dharean had weaved this dream place into both of their subconscious minds while he worked the very painful markings upon Taraema’s skin. “Just relax, Mother, it’s just you and I. Now answer my question. Tell me about yourself; what were you like as a little girl?”

A slow grin sprouted on Taraema’s face. “I used to be quite a handful,” she said confidentially. “My mother had quite a time disciplining me. I always liked the outdoors and I liked being in my totem form.”

“What was your totem form? No, let me guess, a wolf. No, a hawk.”

Taraema laughed. “No, actually I am a fox.” She flicked back a long curl. “Mother thought I was much too conspicuous.” She frowned; her attention seemed to waver. “I don’t feel so well.”

Allantra sensed that maybe the pain was beginning to tap into Taraema’s subconscious. Dharean was wary about putting her too deeply under. He was afraid she might not want to return to the real world. “How did you meet my father?”

Eyes so much like her own began to space out in memory. “I met him in a forest. You know, one of those times I snuck away from home to run wild. A storm sprang up out of nowhere and I found shelter in an abandoned den. I’d fallen asleep waiting for the rain to cease when something nudged me. When I opened my eyes, there was your father. He wasn’t the biggest bear in the world, but to a fox, any bear is big.” Taraema laughed at the memory. Allantra found herself giggling.

“I looked into the eyes of that bear, determined to stand him down no matter what. That’s when I noticed his eyes. They were the kindest eyes I’d ever seen.” Taraema threw a small pebble into the pond. “We became inseparable after that. It wasn’t too long after we mated for life that we had you, Allantra.”

“Was I a good child?” Allantra asked, sounding very childlike.

“You were shaping up to be quite a handful. Your mouth was very smart. In fact, I remember Za’rae saying it would take more than one mate to handle you.” Taraema let out a short, soft laugh.

Allantra froze. Her mother knew Za’rae. Hell, Za’rae had known her as a child. Why hadn’t she mentioned that? “Za’rae?”

“Yes, she was a very old shifter even when I was young. One of the true originals and very powerful. Everyone of royal blood brought their children to her so their future could be blessed.”

“Did she bless me? Did she say anything, I don’t know ... weird?” Allantra fished.

“She blessed you, of course. But that ancient shifter, she often spoke of things no one understood. She often talked of binding your powers to protect you. I had no idea what she was talking about but she was insistent. My mother said to humor her as long as she didn’t hurt you.” Taraema shrugged. “She never would say what she thought these powers would be. I don’t think even she knew. But she did perform some ritual and then nothing else was spoken about it. At least not until...”

Taraema’s voice faltered again. She looked around her. “Come to think of it, I don’t know this place. It’s nice, but I don’t remember coming here.” She stood slowly. “Something’s not right.” She cocked her head to the side like a bird. “I know you, daughter, from the dream plane. But my dreams were never like this.” She looked at Allantra. “Za’rae warned me before I left for the Civil Lands. You were lost, I remember.” Her voice began to rise.

“Mother, let’s talk about something else then,” Allantra said desperately.

“No.” She trained her eyes on Allantra. “Pase is dead. I remember this now. I love you, daughter, but I do not know you. Wait—” She closed her eyes. “Yes, my bear is dead; that vampire killed him.” Her eyes flew open. “Oh by the gods, I remember; you saved me but she was here.” Taraema pointed to her head. “She was here for many years. She was here recently.” Tears began to flow. “Are you here? Are you torturing me still?”

“Mother, please, calm down. I am not Dominica; I am your daughter.”

“Why are you here? Why are we here in this place?” Panic set in her mother’s voice and Allantra knew the moment Taraema doubled over in pain she was waking up.

“Mother, you can’t wake up, stay with me. I’m trying to help you. Trying to protect you.”

“My daughter promised me that Dominica would never get inside my head again. And yet here you are.”

“Mother, no, it’s me, Allantra,” she cried. “Please don’t wake up. There’s nothing but pain if you wake up.”

“I can’t do this anymore, you bitch!” she spat. “I can’t have you playing around in my mind. This is cruel, but that’s just like you, isn’t it? I will fight you. I will wake up and get you out of me somehow!”

“Please don’t do that. Dharean is working hard to give you the markings so that Dominica can no longer possess you. But it’s painful, Mother. That’s why I’m here. I don’t want you to feel that pain. Please trust me,” Allantra begged.

Her mother’s beautiful eyes looked upon her with raw distrust. She shook her head in denial. “I’ve been fighting so long. So very long, please just leave me alone.” She sank to her knees, her shoulders caving forward as she wept. “I just want to rest. I want my

daughter safe.”

“I am safe, Mother. Let me take care of you. Please let me take care of you.” Allontra bent down and hugged her mother. It all felt so very real, but in a sense, it *was* real.

*I am almost done, flammulae. I sense she is waking.*

Allontra breathed a sigh of relief at Dharean’s words. “Please just rest now, Mother, it’s almost over.” She cooed softly in her mother’s ear. Her mother went deathly still.

“Mother?” Allontra said softly.

When Taraema didn’t respond a cold hand raked down her back. “Mother.” She spoke more insistently. Still there was no response. She broke the hug, lifted her mother’s chin, and stared in horror at her tear-streaked face. “Mother, I know you’re in there. Please, listen to me. Come back.”

Taraema’s eyes remained dull and seemingly lifeless despite Allontra’s pleas. Her mother had undoubtedly snapped. “Fight this, you’re too close,” Allontra rasped out in desperation. “Mother, dammit, you can hear me!” she screamed, shaking her mother’s puppetlike frame.

Terror taunted her at the thought that her mother’s mind was now hiding. She dragged her mother’s body to the river and splashed the cool water in her face. “Wake up, dammit! Come back to me!” she screamed frantically. This was her greatest fear, and now it was becoming a sickening reality, even in the dream plane.

*Dharean, she cried out, my mother is gone. Help me!*

*I will awaken you.*

As soon as her eyes ripped open, Allontra turned to the woman beside her on the bed. Taraema’s eyes were open and staring at the ceiling without blinking. “No,” Allontra said in denial. She sat up, shook her mother again. “Dharean, bring her out of this.”

A strong hand gripped one shoulder, then the other. Surprised, she turned to see both Khaelen and Dharean looking down at her with such sadness in their eyes. “No, I’m not giving up on her. I can’t.”

“I cannot reach her because of the darkness in me. She is in a place in which I have no power—her own mind.”

“What?” Allontra tried to absorb his words.

“The markings are done. No one can enter her mind unless she allows it.”

“Are you saying in trying to protect her, I’ve prevented us from helping her?” She could barely get the question out as she stared at the freshly tattooed markings on her mother’s shoulders.

“Life is sometimes ironic in this way. The good news is, Dominica cannot torture her any longer,” Khaelen offered in way of comfort.

“Look at her, Khaelen, she’s a vegetable, how is that good news?” Allontra felt an expression of disgust erupt on her face.

“You are angry and well you should be. You are not responsible for what happened here. Dominica is. She is the one who put your mother in this fragile state. I would need time to study this and find a way around it, but as it stands we do not have the time,” Dharean said firmly.

“Khaelen gave Minn her tattoos. Now we must tend to more pressing matters.” Dharean gave her a strange look. It was worry upon his face; Allontra had never seen worry on this man’s face before.

“What is more pressing at the moment, please tell me?” Allontra couldn’t help the

nasty tone to her voice. Her mother was lost to her and these two were sweeping it under the rug like it didn't matter.

"Masque was scouting. While we were engaged in the markings he has warned me. Though I do not know if it's enough of a warning," Dharean said heavily.

"What is it now?" Allantra didn't know if she could handle another episode.

"They are but a little over an hour away," Khaelen interjected.

"Who?" Allantra stood, eyeing the two males.

"Them," Dharean replied, standing directly in front of her, then he bent down enough to press his forehead to hers.

Allantra's head reeled at the images Dharean shared with her. Just as quickly as it began, it ended. Allantra stumbled, the backs of her knees hitting the rim of the bed. Shock ran like blood through her veins. "We're not ready," she whispered.

"That is not all, *flammulae*," Dharean said, stepping close to her again.

"There is still the matter of us becoming a true triumvirate if we have even the smallest hope of coming out of this alive." Khaelen grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him. His other hand was on Dharean's shoulder. "Perhaps this isn't the best of times. But it is time you knew the whole truth." Then Khaelen teleported them all into another room.

## Chapter Nine

"Is this some sort of joke?" Allantra crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one leg. "Right now we're about to be under attack by ... what are those things anyway?"

"Dwarf daemons," Dharean supplied.

"Dwarf daemons?" Allantra snickered. "What the hell is a Dwarf daemon?"

"Dominica is using very ancient dark arts. The Dwarf daemons were a race that served the higher caste demons. In small numbers they can be annoying," Dharean answered.

"Annoying like, swat a mosquito annoying?"

"More like spreading small pox, possessing children, poisoning livestock." Khaelen let out a breath. "In large numbers, they have wiped out cities with plagues and murder. Caused pregnant women to have stillborn babies for the rest of their lives, rape the lands of all vegetation."

"If we lock the doors, eventually they'll either go away or one of you could come up with something to kill them."

"They can only return home when their assignment is complete. They will be relentless."

"Okay, how do we kill them?"

Dharean and Khaelen looked at each other.

"What aren't you telling me? Look, we don't have time for this. Have you seen my mother? I want to get this shit over with and help her get better. Now what am I missing?"

"These aren't normal Dwarf daemons. They have been marked."

"Khaelen, stop giving me info in pieces, just say it."

"Dominica has marked them, which means nothing we come up with will affect them. More than likely their orders have been to kill everyone in sight, starting with this house. They have to be killed individually. Pierced through the eyes."

Allantra's mouth hung open. "Have you any idea how many of those things there are?" Neither man answered her. No magic could be used against them. There were thousands of those things heading their way. There was no way they could kill every one of those things individually. It would take days, trapping them in the compound. By that time, Dominica would have more than likely found the remaining True Bloods. "That clever bitch!" she spat out loud.

"Exactly." Dharean stood in front of her. "I do believe with your help we could kill them individually."

"Tell me how."

Dharean looked at Khaelen, and Allantra got the feeling they both knew something that she did not. "It's kind of difficult but I'll explain it as best I can. Masque can see them from the sky; I can see them by connecting to Masque."

"Okay, following you so far."

"If I'm connected to you, you could see them as well. You could pierce their eyes with pure light."

"But I thought you said no magic could kill them?"

“It’s not magic, little one,” Khaelen supplied. “It’s power, pure, simple, and natural. With Masque pulling your power one way to kill them, I would have to be connected to the two of you as well to help burn their bodies. If we don’t burn them their remains will poison the ground and eventually the water supply.”

“Let me see if I have this.” Allantra pursed her lips in concentration as she began to pace. “Masque from his aerial view could help us take more of them out using my synergy powers with Dharean directing it, of course. Khaelen and Dharean will burn them before they can poison the environment.” Allantra paused, lining her thoughts in order. “So that would mean the two of you would have to be connected to me, and Dharean, you will have to be connected to Masque for that to happen. Did I get that right?”

“That’s about right,” Dharean answered. “Don’t worry about me. Masque is used to connecting to me; it won’t require a large part of my concentration. You, Allantra, would have to divide your attention between giving power to me and Khaelen. He will need it; there are a lot of them to defeat.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. I’m not that good at controlling my power yet.”

“With Khaelen and myself connected to you, we could help you with that.”

“I suppose since I’m fully mated to you both, we are technically the Triumvirate now, right?” Allantra waited for a response and when she got none from either male, suspicion bloomed in full. “What don’t I know?”

“We are not as yet a Triumvirate.” Khaelen slowly began to approach her.

“Therefore I cannot fight by your side in the light of day.”

“There is no other way.” Dharean began to close in on her.

“What’s going on here?” Allantra swallowed as her senses flared not in alarm, but curiously enough, in desire.

“While it’s true that you are fully mated to us separately...” Dharean began.

“...We are not fully mated as a Triumvirate. All of us need to stand together to win,” Khaelen finished, clasping her hand, and tugged her backward to the large bed. Dharean was in front of her, almost seeming to herd her. “We need to finish this, little one.” Khaelen murmured this last into her ear.

“It is time, *flammulae*.”

“Finish what? Time for what?” Her heart sped as the males managed to get her to the bed, one on either side of her. They stared down at her, only breaking their stare long enough to glance at each other. An agreement of some kind seemed to pass between them. They looked at her then and spoke in unison.

“All three of us fully mating.”

Allantra took a second to digest the words of her two mates. Surely they were not suggesting...? Her unasked question was answered when Khaelen lightly nipped her on the shoulder. Instantly goose bumps appeared as his tongue swirled along her skin only to nip her again. She closed her eyes at the sensation. Her eyes immediately flew open as Dharean lightly caressed her through her pants at the junction of her thighs. Gently the pads of his fingers rubbed against her. She shivered from dual sensations.

What were they up to? A fog of arousal began to cloud her mind as she tried to figure out why two strong-willed males suddenly seemed in accord with seducing her together. Khaelen’s hand gripped her bottom, pulling her close enough to feel his erection pulsing just beneath their clothing. “Let us love you,” Khaelen whispered in her ear as his

fingers trailed up her arm. "Let us give you pleasure," Dharean pleaded before his lips claimed hers.

Allantra moaned, unsure of what exactly was going on, but too aroused to stop it. She was vaguely aware that her clothes seemed to melt away. Dharean had used magic to unclothe them all, for now she could feel Khaelen's naked erection nestled between the cheeks of her backside. It was nothing but male heat surrounding her, touching her, their hard bodies pressed at her front and back making her lose her breath. Dharean broke the kiss, and stared into her eyes. "This is the last step, *flammulae*. We must bond this way for the Triumvirate to be complete."

Allantra swallowed; no had one mentioned this until now. Yet the idea was not unappealing. It certainly explained why the two of them were suddenly in agreement. "I do this for you, little one." Khaelen's voice wrapped around her from behind. "There must be no weak link. If you wish us to stop, we will."

"I—" Allantra faltered as Dharean tweaked her nipple; her head fell back as his mouth closed around it. "I want this," she finally breathed, arching her back as Khaelen began to slide his penis back and forth along her already moist folds. All three tumbled onto the large bed. Limbs seemed to tangle as they landed. Khaelen's large hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her on top of him, her back to his front. She could feel his erection pulsing between her legs.

"Put me inside of you," he ordered, his voice husky. Allantra lifted her bottom enough so that Khaelen's arousal, lightly coated with her moisture, was now at her puckered opening. Khaelen slid his hand between them and gathered more of her juices, making her anal opening slick. "I want inside," he commanded as she lowered herself onto his erection slowly. The thick mushroom head invaded her. She closed her eyes as he demanded entrance. The foreign thickness was momentarily uncomfortable as inch by inch he seated himself inside of her. Then Dharean's hot mouth was at her breast, sucking lightly, then becoming more urgent.

Dharean's hand roamed over her belly as he suckled her breast. His hungry mouth traveled to the other breast, making her mindless with desire. She could feel Khaelen snug inside of her to the hilt. Dharean lifted his head, his mouth still on her breast, his hand nudging her legs apart. Beneath her she could feel Khaelen's legs part as well so that Dharean could fit between their legs.

Every nerve in her body tingled with desire and anticipation. She could feel the light sheen of sweat on her lovers as their bodies piled onto hers. Dharean's mouth traveled to one side of her neck as Khaelen nibbled sensuously on her ear on the other side. Dharean's velvet-like head was now at the entrance of her channel. With one push he was inside of her, causing her gasp out loud. "Relax," Dharean urged in her ear. "Enjoy," Khaelen's husky voice teased her.

Khaelen gripped her hips as he pulled out as much as he could; Dharean pulled out slowly as well. Then Khaelen stroked the inside of her ass, and as he pulled back, Dharean surged in her other entrance. Allantra almost choked on her own cry of pleasure. The men developed a rhythm. One pushed inside of her as the other stroked out. Her body seemed to burn from the inside out as desire enveloped her. Their mouths nibbled at her ear and neck. It was hard to focus; she felt like one giant nerve on overload. Their rhythm picked up and Allantra reached one hand down to grab Khaelen's strong muscled thigh. Her other hand reached up and around, gripped Dharean's steel-like bottom as he

pumped into her.

She felt her orgasm on the brink. Just when she thought she would topple over, both men pulled out of her. “No—what?” Confusion and frustration claimed her as they repositioned her on her knees on the bed. This time Dharean was at her back with Khaelen taking up his new position in the front. Khaelen nudged her legs apart, and she fell back against Dharean. Her legs felt weak and rubbery; she was so near climax she would do anything for release. “Please,” she pleaded, her own hand reaching down to rub her clitoris. Khaelen grabbed her hand, securely pinning it to one hip. Dharean took hold of the other one, bringing it just slightly behind her other hip and held it in place.

Allantra stared at her vampire in awe. He never seemed as beautiful as he did now. Even now with his fangs elongated, he looked feral, dangerous, and sexy. *And what of me?* Dharean’s voice whispered in her head.

*You are beautiful as well,* Allantra responded, squirming as both men placed their thick penises at her now slippery openings. “Please,” she repeated. In unison, they both pushed inside of her. Each held her securely in place as they pumped into her. Both shape-shifter and vampire slammed into her without mercy. Her breasts bounced from the force; the firm cheeks of her ass bounced in response to their frenzied desire.

Every sense was tuned in to her two lovers. The musky male scent of her lovers permeated the air. The hard, sweat-soaked bodies rubbed against hers. Khaelen’s mouth seized hers, then his tongue swirled in her mouth. He would pull back to give her a chance to catch her breath, then Dharean would turn her head to the side, taking her breath all over again. Their tastes mingled until she could no longer tell the difference between them.

Allantra’s orgasm threatened to consume her again as the men fucked her. She could feel their cocks swell and knew they too were on the brink of coming. The tempo picked up, leaving her senseless. Her body felt like gelatin as the men, *her* men, filled her with their cocks repeatedly.

Her orgasm could be held back no longer. Allantra’s whole body seemed to spasm as the pleasure hit her. Her body shook uncontrollably as wave after wave slammed into her. She heard two hoarse roars as Khaelen and Dharean released themselves inside of her. All bodies stiffened, except the hips of the two men as they jerked in time to the spurts of seed that erupted from their cocks. Allantra’s could feel her scream of release bubbling up, but was cut short by the two sets of fangs that sank into her neck. It was as if they were somewhere far off. The sounds of her blood being taken tickled her ears. Both men fed from her, and instantly her desire flared anew.

She closed her eyes, feeling the power build inside her. Allantra tried to control it but to no avail. The power seduced them all. The men, already hard again, retracting their fangs, began to pound into her. Sweat poured from their bodies. Her wrists were released and her head fell forward onto Khaelen’s shoulder as she laid her hands on his hips. Her head bobbed as his thrusts became more powerful. Dharean gripped her shoulder, pushing himself deeper inside of her with every stroke. The sensations were too much and Allantra orgasmed again, dragging the men with her. The room exploded in a blaze of white light, and all three occupants fell unconscious onto the bed.

The first thing she noted when she awoke were the warm bodies that encased her. Every cell in her body seemed to be alive and tingling with power. Low groans from the two males signaled that they too were now awake. With conscious thought came

memory. Every detail of what the three of them shared immediately came into focus.

A hand on her thigh was roughly pushed away. "The bonding is over. Get your hands off of her," Khaelen growled.

"You forget quickly, night dweller, she is mine as well."

"This was necessary only for the task at hand. This is my house, my woman. You and your people are but guests here until this is over."

Allantra groaned as the testosterone flew about the room. She tried to disentangle herself from the men, but they each managed to pull her back onto the bed. In seconds she was being pulled in two directions. They were acting like idiots!

"He is the idiot!" Dharean and Khaelen bellowed unanimously.

Allantra burst into laughter as the two men stared at each other dumbfounded. "Well, boys," Allantra began, deciding to scoot down the bed between them, "I would say whatever we did seemed to have linked you two together." She slid down the rest of the way and stood, looking at the two of them staring intently at each other. "In case you're wondering, there's nothing wrong with two healthy naked guys being in bed together." She turned then, knowing each man would bolt out of the bed as if on fire.

"The vampire and I are not linked together. We are linked to you."

"Apparently it is how the Triumvirate functions." Khaelen gave an uncharacteristic snort.

"In other words, I am the main point in this group thing, right?" Allantra asked sweetly with her hands on her hips. Both men nodded. "Good. Then right now, the fighting stops. I know this is hard for you two. But right now we have those daemon things bearing down on us. Surely this little boy spat can wait until later?"

"I do not like to be spoken to with such disrespect, Allantra."

"I hate to agree with the shifter, but he is right. We are your mates and should be treated with the ultimate respect."

"Think of that the next time the two of you are pulling on me like taffy. I'm not property. Now, these daemons, run it by me again how we're supposed to kill them without magic."

## Chapter Ten

Dominica frantically searched for the right crystal. For the last hour she had been trying to pinpoint where the sudden burst of power had transpired. She stomped over to the map; holding on to the cord, she let the crystal hang freely. Still it did nothing. Dammit! She flung the crystal across the room and closed her eyes. They were planning something. That mangy bitch shifter, the wizard, and her good-for-nothing bloodmate ... She closed her thoughts about Masque. He was of no consequence. He should have died years ago.

Eyes still closed, she concentrated. *OgBlud, what's happening?* Dominica waited to hear from the Dwarf daemon prince. After several moments, she could feel his touch in her mind. Dominica shivered; she hated the dirty mongrel. He dared think he was near her equal. *She* had summoned *him*. That gave her power over him, whether he was a prince or not.

*Dominica.*

*You will address me as Mistress Dominica.* There was a slight pause before the prince responded.

*Mistress Dominica.* It was practically growled in her mind. *What can I do for you?*

*How close are you to the Executioner's estate?*

*Very close. In moments we will overwhelm them.*

*Did you feel the source of power earlier?*

*Yes.*

*From where did it come, OgBlud?* Dominica balled her fists in frustration. She hated talking to simple creatures.

*It came from—*

Dominica waited for him to finish the sentence. *OgBlud?* She waited and she received no answer. Dominica howled in anger.

\*

*Concentrate!* Dharean snapped. Allontra could feel the sweat pouring down her back. The smell of burned Dwarf daemon was not pleasant. She wrinkled her nose, trying not to gag on the smell of burned rotting flesh. All around her she could hear them growling, trying to get at them. The stone on her forehead was warm and comforting against her skin. She could do this.

Allontra heeded the command and concentrated as she felt the power faltering. She stood on the roof of Khaelen's home, connected to both men, who each took a post on the roof on each end of the house. They both needed to go down in the mob of daemons; she needed to provide them with the energy. How could they ask this of her knowing how inexperienced she was?

Claws raked the side of the house as the daemons tried to get at them. With Masque on air duty, none could slip past. But Allontra couldn't help but worry that maybe they had forgotten something. A small window perhaps? A hidden door? Dharean had assured her that Masque was very observant and nothing would get past him. But unease still trickled down her spine. Even with Minn guarding the boys and her mother, she still had a horrible feeling that somehow, something was overlooked.

\*

*OgBlud!* Dominica attempted yet again to touch the mind of her minion. She paced to the mirror in the corner of the room. Midnight black bangs drew attention to the large, equally dark eyes. Her straight hair hung just above ivory shoulders. Stark red lips smirked back at her. How many kisses had Masque trailed along her neck? For just a second she allowed her memory to surface when they both had been happy, when she had been foolish. Never again! Though her first attempt to wipe out the shifters had failed, she had certainly come close enough to annihilating the vile race. This time she would not fail.

The wizard could prove to be a bit troublesome. The vampire, well, who knew better the weaknesses of a vampire than another vampire? And that stupid street whore Allantra was more than a pain in the ass. She could be dealt with easily enough. The shifters will fall this time.

*OgBlud!* She tried contact again.

*Mistress Dominica.*

Dominica breathed a small sigh of relief. *What's going on? I've been trying to get in touch with you.*

*Something unforeseen. Our numbers are being decimated.*

*How? There are more of you than those infidels.*

*See, Mistress Dominica, see.*

Dominica followed OgBlud's line of vision mentally. Her eyes widened in surprise at the multitude of burned daemons strewn along the ground. As the prince daemon looked around, Dominica saw the three of them on the roof. Though she couldn't quite make out exactly what was happening, a sickening realization settled into her stomach. They were working as a team. A triad. The Triumvirate. *Look to the sky*, she ordered the prince. The prince did as directed and she spotted Masque. In his natural form, no doubt somehow connected to the three of them. "How clever," she murmured to herself.

She used the eyes of the daemon, and had to admire the work of her blood mate. Nothing got past him. She instructed the prince to scour the grounds in the nearby woods. They were clever but she was sure she would find a flaw. She could feel the instinct in the prince to refuse her command but he had no choice. After a few minutes, she saw it.

*Clear that area of debris.*

OgBlud growled low but did as he was told. Oh yes, a vampire always had an avenue of escape and Dominica had just found Khaelen's. *OgBlud, gather a few of your daemons. I have an opening for you.*

\*

*Do you see that?* Allantra asked Dharean.

*Be at ease, flammulae. Perhaps they are retreating.*

The knot in Allantra's stomach coiled tighter. Something wasn't right. A small section of the daemons had broken off and were retreating to the woods. Maybe Dharean was right. Maybe she was being overly cautious. After all, she had two strong men by her side.

*What is worrying you, little one?* Khaelen's voice had a calmness that belied the violence.

*I'm being silly.*

*About?*

*A section of the daemons broke off into the woods. Dharean thinks perhaps they are retreating. She waited for Khaelen to reassure her. A moment of silence passed. Khaelen?*

*In which direction did they go?*

*East.*

*Damn!*

*What is it?* Her heart flared in alarm. Now she didn't think she was being paranoid.

*It's the secret entrance. They've found it!*

It was then that Allantra remembered the entrance she and Khaelen had used after their encounter with the Elder Council. It would be a matter of moments before Minn was overwhelmed. Her mother was in a coma and the boys were too young to fight.

*Dharean!*

*I heard!* Before he even finished answering her, he had changed into his jaguar form and, with a bloodcurdling growl, leapt off the roof of the building and onto the writhing mass of daemons below.

*Dharean!* Allantra called out to him telepathically. Her heart stopped as the jaguar seemed to have been swallowed by the daemons. She could hear him growling below, but could not see the glossy black fur.

*Show-off.* Khaelen's voice entered her mind, bringing with it a wave of calm. *He will be fine, young one. He is merely posturing.*

*They will kill him.*

*Is he not protected from their magic by those markings?*

Allantra thought about it for a second. Still, worry clouded her mind until she saw the jaguar pounce out of the maggot-like crowd of daemons. They may not be able to use magic on him, but they could still inflict wounds. They pulled and clawed at him, some of them astride his body, and Allantra knew they were causing him great pain.

*Then heal him.*

*What?*

*Heal his wounds; send him the energy he needs to heal.*

*I haven't conquered this pow—*

*Stop whining. Do it. You've done it before.*

*I am not whining.*

*You are too. While you resist what I tell you, your shifter is being mauled.* Khaelen nodded his head in the direction the jaguar was still trying to go. His progress was slowing as the wounds became too numerous. *Would you let me suffer as well?* She looked around frantically as Khaelen teleported off the roof and into the mass below. Now they were both in the thick of it and it was up to her to provide them with the power they needed to kill the daemons.

She could do this. So much depended on her, and her ability to control her new power. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the screeches from the daemons below, the stench of supernatural flesh, and the howl of the jaguar as he fought. She couldn't bear to think of what could possibly be happening to Khaelen. The stone was heated against her skin. All she had to do was concentrate. If she could give power by accident, surely she could do it on purpose.

The power slowly surged through her body. She could feel every molecule heat up. Allantra visualized the link between Dharean, Khaelen, and herself and directed the

building heat toward them. Immediately she began to feel a cooling effect as the power left her body. It began to build and build as she pulled the power from around her. Her breathing increased as wave after wave of energy was harvested.

Allantra tried to slow it down, but couldn't stop it. Flammulae, *it is too much!* Dharean's voice traveled down the link. *You must control it; I cannot handle this quantity of power.* Khaelen's voice seemed strained. She had to stop the harvesting; she could hurt the very people she was trying to help.

Her breathing sped up even more from the strain of trying to control the power. There was one thing she could do successfully: she shut down the link between herself and her mates. She could feel them trying to tear down the barrier she put up. It wouldn't be long before they were able to do so. She had to find a way to stop the rivulets of energy. Her body shook from the strain. It felt as if the energy wanted to tear her body apart. Hot light pierced her from the inside. Allantra screamed as the power won out, shutting down her brain.

## Chapter Eleven

The silence became a blanket of eeriness, only usurped by the slew of dead bodies. Burned bodies littered the ground around him. Khaelen looked around with nothing short of awe. Not one creature took a breath. All were dead. In one fell swoop the daemons had shaken violently, then fallen to the ground. It was then upon closer inspection he noticed the state of the bodies.

Each body seemed to be shriveled, as if all the moisture had been siphoned out. He dropped the body of the daemon of which he had been about to snap the neck. A sick feeling went through him. He reached out to Allantra. When she didn't respond, he teleported to the roof of the compound.

She lay still upon the roof. A wisp of smoke trailed from her nose. His heart slammed inside of his chest as he rushed to her.

*Allantra.* He gently picked her up and cradled her in his arms. *Allantra.* Perhaps he had pushed her too far, too fast. He reached out to her again and still he met with silence. Khaelen fought back the rage that consumed him. This war between the shifters and the vampires caused too much pain, too much death.

*I'm not dead.* Allantra's sarcastic reply cut into his thoughts. A wave of relief went through him as he detected the rise and fall of her chest. *Seriously? You were already counting me for dead?* Her eyes popped open, and Khaelen could do nothing but kiss her. The taste of her caused his desire to rise. The relief that she was alive further ignited it. She responded to him immediately and he couldn't help a smug feeling from surfacing. She was his. At that thought, Allantra gently broke the kiss.

"I belong to both of you." She struggled to sit up.

"Take a moment to rest. You don't know what damage you might have caused yourself."

"I'm fine, just feeling a little well-done on the inside."

"We must find the shifter."

"You know his name, Khaelen. Oh my God! The daemons." Allantra managed to wrestle herself from his hold and stood. He was by her side quickly as she looked down at the makeshift graveyard. "What happened?" She turned inquisitive eyes to him.

"You."

"Me?"

"I believe so. I can only guess that since you gathered energy from the atmosphere around you, that you literally pulled the energy from the bodies of these Dwarf daemons."

"No, that can't be. I can only divert power to you and Dharean. This doesn't make sense."

"You lost control. Naturally, the shifter and I were protected as your mates. I believe the overload of power came from these creatures as you depleted them."

"We have to find Dharean."

"Come." Khaelen held out his hand and teleported to the entrance of the hidden escape route. Burned lifeless bodies also littered the path inside the house. Khaelen had to admit to himself that he was more than a little disturbed by what Allantra was capable of.

If she didn't learn to control her power, she could not only hurt herself but innocents as well.

What if there were more than daemons about? She could have killed other shifters, humans even. As much as he hated the idea, he and the shifter would have to work together quickly to train Allantra. He thought briefly about the mating that bonded them together. It had been hard, watching Dharean give pleasure to Allantra. How he would handle sharing Allantra was beyond him. But right now the Triumvirate was about more than just him. They would have plenty of time later to figure things out.

As they got deeper into the house the growl of the jaguar could be heard. Allantra looked at him for just a second before she broke into a run. Khaelen was beside her, keeping a sharp eye for any hidden dangers.

As they got closer to the scene, his hackles rose. The jaguar was now transformed back into the shifter. Still he crouched low, an almost animal-like growl emitting from him. He then saw what the shifter growled at. Barely seen because of the shadows were the shades of the Elder Council. Though in no danger of being hurt by the shifter, something about him kept them at bay.

"Vampire, are these not the shades of your Elder Council?"

"They are." Khaelen ignored the contempt in the question.

"They betray us. I found them here when I found the daemons had breached the escape route."

"We warned you of the Dwarf prince before he attacked you," a wispy voice said cautiously.

"A Dwarf prince poses no harm to me," Dharean spat. "I think they betray us, Allantra. They come here with the daemons. Perhaps it was their plan to gather our blood as we lay dying."

"We came here to ensure your victory. Your victory frees us. We gain nothing from aligning ourselves with Dominica," a strong voice defended.

"I know the state you are in; you can control the will of others." Dharean practically hissed. "Perhaps you come here in an attempt to control our will from this end, ensuring Dominica's victory."

"Nonsense!" the shade responded. "While it is true we have no love lost for your kind, Allantra has more than proven that you can be trusted more than Dominica. She would leave us in our present state and have total control."

"Ah, I see." Dharean smirked.

"Elder Council, to whom are we speaking? How many of you are on our side?" Khaelen came closer as he spoke, trying to count the shadows as they flitted about.

"Before that question is answered, who is this shifter? He is most powerful. His tattoos repel us."

"I am Dharean, *Noir Brujo*. Next in line to be the True Blood Leader." Dharean's voice rang with pride. "My tattoos repel the effects of dark magic."

"So what Dominica has spoken of is true. She says that your mission is to eradicate the Vampyre." The voice dropped an octave as suspicion laced his words.

"You've spoken to Dominica since she has become corporeal?" Khaelen asked.

"Yes."

"She tells you half the truth. A great prophecy foretells of this day when the shifters shall rise again. The aim here, Elder Council, is the same as before. To reconstruct the

government so that it is fair to all. A representative of each majority people. The lesser beings will have a human to represent their needs. And a human shall sit on the council in representation of their people. Are we still in agreement with that?"

"We have lost some of our numbers to Dominica, though going by the last meeting that should not come as a great surprise to you."

"No, it does not. How many have defected to her side?" Khaelen frowned. Dominica alone was formidable. Having ancient Elders on her side was definitely a turn for the worse.

"Out of twelve, seven have defected," an Elder responded. "She promised them she had the means to bring them back to their former glory."

"I am curious." Allantra spoke up. "Why did you all not accept her offer?"

"Because as we said before, it is time for a change. We no longer have a taste for bloodshed. Too long we have been shut off from the world. We have no desire to go from one prison to another. Which is what it will be like, with Dominica ruling over us. There is much you don't know."

"Fine, let us go inside; we shall discuss the matters at hand." Khaelen held out a hand in welcome to the Council.

"I will dispose of the bodies of the daemons. Masque and I will do a sweep. Please refrain from meeting until we are done." Dharean looked pointedly at Khaelen as he walked over to Allantra and kissed her solidly on the mouth. "I will see you soon, *flammulae*," he whispered, loud enough for Khaelen to hear.

Allantra tried to quell the irritation and desire that flared inside of her. Soon her mates would have to talk and work things out. She couldn't possibly deal with a lifetime of sparring male egos.

\* \* \* \*

"What is it, old friend?" Dharean asked as Masque fell in step alongside him. The last of the bodies were burned. The area told of no battle just hours ago. The sun was setting on the horizon, turning the sky an almost blood red. Dharean felt it was a harbinger of what was to come.

"My estranged mate. I cannot believe she has caused all this death." Masque sighed. "I hold a large part of the responsibility. For I spurned her when I should have loved her and stayed by her side."

"I am not one to give comfort. But I will tell you this. I agree your actions were not the wisest. You made a mistake. However, Dominica made choices. She chose to harm people, who had done her none. In that it is solely her responsibility. You cannot change your past, no more than I can change mine. What you can do is make right what you can."

"How do I make right for a sin such as this?" Masque shook his head.

"You have to figure that out. We must hurry. The vampires are waiting. It would seem we have something to learn. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"If they have agreed to help us, they serve us no purpose if they are shades. Yes, I will help reverse the spell, but I tell you now. I will not hesitate to kill one should they turn."

"I would expect no less, old friend. Let us hurry."

\* \* \* \*

Four True Bloods eyed each other carefully. Dharean, Masque, Minn, and Allantra stood in a circle, surrounding the five shades. The unspoken question was clear. Was each of them sure? There was no going back once they brought the vampires back to their original forms. Dharean held the athame and sliced across his forearm. Immediately the fresh cut erupted blood. He passed it around until every shifter had done the same. Dharean took a deep breath and began.

*Beings of water, air, fire, and clay  
That which is here, but nay  
We give to you, the break to your binds,  
For Four True Bloods are of a like mind  
Drinker of life, Night Dweller, Vampyre  
Connect the elements and form them here*

Allantra swallowed and paused, as it was her turn to fling her blood into the circle of vampire shades. Her people had been killed and tortured by these very blood drinkers. And in a cruel twist of fate, she must give her blood to save them.

*Flammulae ... came the soft coaxing. I know this is hard, but it must be done. We all have lost much to these creatures. But as it stands we will need them.*

*They took my family away from me, Dharean.*

*They killed our people, and made them cower from life. They made me what I am to protect them. But we must show them why we are a noble race.*

*Young one, is something wrong? Khaelen's gentle probing wrapped her in warmth. She is hesitant. But I will handle this, vampire. She is not yours to handle alone.*

*You cannot possibly understand. You are Vampyre; what have you lost to these blood drinkers? Your blood drinkers?*

*Stop it, both of you!*

Allantra flung her blood among the others. The moment her blood hit the circle a large crackle rent the air. Smoke began to swirl around the vampires. Their voices began to rise in pitch as the smoke turned darker and darker. The warm air began to cool as energy was pulled from the air.

"What's happening?" Allantra asked, rubbing her arms to warm them up. Immediately both men rushed to her side, each trying to encircle her waist to bring her warmth. It ended up with her between two hard male bodies imprisoning her in place.

"They are forming," Dharean answered as he peered closely and began to chant under his breath. Allantra could barely make out the words before she felt herself being pushed back by Khaelen, making Dharean lose his hold on her as well.

Right before her eyes the two men began to circle one another. Masque stiffened and observed the two men but said nothing. Between the chaos from the newly forming vampires and the two alpha males suddenly locked into battle gazes, Allantra couldn't help but wonder what she'd missed.

"What you missed is a betrayal," Khaelen snarled.

"Betrayal?" Allantra looked at the two men in confusion.

"You say betrayal, I say insurance," Dharean bit out in reply.

"Meaning what?" Allantra tried to step between the two men, but they changed their stance, effectively negating her move.

“Meaning he has freed us from our prisons. But should we betray you, we will be confined to the Realm of Krases.” They all turned to the sound of the voice. Five vampires, stark naked, stood and observed them. Minn’s mouth hung open as she stared at the particularly handsome, well-endowed male. His blond hair fell to his waist in a sheet of perfection. Every muscle in his body was defined under pale skin. “I am Claudium, leader of the Council of Elders.”

## Chapter Twelve

"I had no idea blood drinkers could look like this." Minn whistled appreciatively as Claudium stepped forward, his arm outstretched in greeting to Dharean and Khaelen. Masque threw her a dark look. Both men in turn grasped Claudium about the forearm.

"Let me introduce you to your allies. These are the Rare Breed, Braelius and Draelius." Two men behind Claudium stepped forward. Both men had raven hair that framed chiseled jaws. But it was their eyes that made Allantra take an unconscious step back. For each had one blood red eye and one onyx-colored eye. Their eyes were trained on her in unveiled interest.

"Ah, the Rare Breed." Dharean drawled as his hand went to the small of Allantra's back, giving the slightest push forward. *Give them no quarter. Show no fear.* "I have read of this kind. Together they are a force to be reckoned with; separate they are near helpless as a human babe." The twins stiffened as they turned their attention to Dharean.

"I assure you, wizard, apart they have talents of their own." He indicated the one female vampire to step forward. Her dark hair was wound tight in a severe bun at the nape of her neck. She looked like a living doll, with her perfect petite form and bee-stung lips. "This is Mariel. She is the youngest of all the Council members."

"I would like to go on record as saying I do not believe in your cause. Vampires are superior to all beings. I only aid you because unfortunately Dominica has gone insane, and you are the lesser of the two evils."

"Thank you, Mariel," Khaelen said smoothly. "But it would seem your centuries-old curse as a Shade negates that fact. If vampire were indeed superior, how could you have been forced into such a state?" Khaelen gave her a smile. "Who do we have here, Claudium?" Khaelen nodded toward the large vampire who had not moved once. His eyes merely darted around without him so much as turning his neck.

Claudium took a deep breath before he turned to look at the last vampire. "This is Armin. He is—special to the Council." At the mention of his name, Armin looked at Claudium much like a dog would look at his master when wanting approval for something. The leader gave a small nod and Armin rushed to his side and dropped to his feet so that he sat on his haunches. "Armin was bred artificially."

"You mean you were trying to make some sort of super vampire?" Allantra looked at the almost childlike giant in shock. His hair was a mixture of blond and brown, and mussed about his head. Khaelen growled low at Claudium's confession.

"So there is nothing that vampires won't do for power." Dharean tsked.

"After Armin, we did not continue the experimentation."

"I'm betting because you were unable to," Minn interjected.

"You would be correct. That is when the Mass Execution took place."

"What is he capable of?" Masque's quiet question echoed in the room. "If I am expected to fight alongside such a creature, then I would like to know what he is and is not capable of."

"You will be given full disclosure of each of our capabilities, as we expect the same in return from you. Meanwhile, I think it imperative that we discuss Dominica's plans." Claudium scratched Armin's head. Allantra winced in pain.

“What is it, *flammulae*?” Dharean whispered. He looked at her, then Khaelen. “Ah, through the vampire’s and my senses you can feel their hunger beating at you. Their thirst is great. It has been a long time since their last feeding.”

Dharean addressed the vampires again. “Come. I will take you to a feeding ground. I am afraid from this point out it will be only animals. In the future, as we will discuss, feedings from humans will be by their permission only.” Mariel hissed. “This is not negotiable.” Khaelen’s piercing stare made the point as Mariel relaxed her aggressive stance. “Follow me.” In seconds, the vampires were gone.

\* \* \* \*

They sat in an eclectic group around the room. The vampires, now fully clothed and fed, seemed slightly more at ease. The twins stood side by side with one facing the room, the other looking out the window. Dharean couldn’t help but surmise that they were quite literally watching the other’s back. His gaze landed on Claudium, who sat with one leg crossed, his arm resting on the sofa, his thumb under his chin, no doubt studying and sizing them all up. Armin sat at his feet, still as stone, not really looking at anyone or anything, just staring off into nothing. Mariel chose to sit by the fire. Her hands were outstretched and her eyes were closed in obvious pleasure from the heat of the fire. Dharean knew their senses had been deprived for a very long time.

Then his gaze fell upon Allantra, who sat on the other end of the sofa. Her gaze darted from vampire to vampire to shifter. He could feel her nervousness. Khaelen, on the other hand, looked upon the other vampires with cool regard from his post by the only other window in the room. Minn and Masque sat on opposite sides of the room. Minn’s fervent glances at Claudium were getting under Masque’s emotionless facade. It would have been amusing had there not been more pressing matters.

“First of all, we all are aware we have little time. This female vampire has wasted no time in executing her plans.”

Allantra raised her hand immediately. “Yes, *flammulae*?” Dharean knew his endearment rankled Khaelen; the vampire would just have to get used to it.

“What is Krases?” The moment the question was uttered from her lips, the tension in the room escalated tenfold. “Okay, then it must be something bad.”

Khaelen walked over to Allantra, stopping behind the sofa as he laid his hand upon her shoulder in an intimate fashion. Dharean could feel his irritation rise. *Perhaps you, Dharean, should get used to it as well.* “Young one, it is a Hell realm. Once entered, there is no escaping. It is filled with the most vile, murderous creatures to be found. It is the place even demons fear to be sent.”

“And you cursed them to there?” Allantra’s eyes were not accusing, only curious.

“We cannot fight with traitors at our backs. None of these night dwellers have anything to worry about if they are not traitors,” Dharean replied. Mariel snickered but said nothing as she continued to warm her hands. “Only if they commit a traitorous act will the spell be activated. Now we need to address more pressing issues.”

“Where do we begin?” Minn asked.

“At the most obvious.” Claudium spoke up. “There are more vampires in this room than shifters.”

“And you point that out for what reason?” Dharean squinted at the leader.

“Meaning most of your newly acquired force cannot go out in the light of day. It will

be just that soon. I have no doubt that Dominica has somehow found a way around that for herself. But where does that leave us?"

"There is a way around it, I am sure."

"For you, yes, Khaelen. No doubt your alliance with these magically powerful shifters has aided you, but what of the rest of us?" Claudium looked pointedly at Khaelen. "Perhaps there is something in your blood you could share?" Claudium's smile was empty of humor. "We did not agree to this, fighting handicapped."

"I know of a way; this is not an issue." Dharean interrupted the exchange. The tension between the two Full Caste vampires was palpable. "We need details about Dominica's plans."

Claudium looked around the room. Each vampire looked at him, and with the slightest of nods, agreed upon something. Dharean could only guess they were reluctant to give up their leverage so soon. But one side had to give first, and unfortunately, at the moment, the vampires needed the shifters more than the shifters needed them.

"She plans to attack in less than two days. As we speak she is marching human foot soldiers into the Savage Outlands, looking for your Tribal Lands. Kynn, I believe."

"That's her big plan?" Minn whooped. "We can take care of humans."

"No," Claudium said simply, his eyes flashing to Minn. It took only a second to see the fleeting sexual interest in his eyes as he watched her. "She uses them as dogs. Wearing them down, making them find any traps laid out. Their loss means nothing. Once they have cleared the way, the second wave goes in."

"And pray tell, what is that?" Khaelen drawled, though Dharean could tell he was more interested than he pretended.

"She raided every ancient dark arts book the Council collected. She has at her disposal creatures so cleverly murderous they make those troll demons look like an ant nuisance. But they are only the second *land* wave."

"Land?" Allantra's eyes were wide circles of worry.

"It's the third wave that causes the real concern." Claudium paused. "She plans to resurrect griffins and dragons in an air attack."

"We're expected to go up against dragons and griffins?" Allantra laughed incredulously. Claudium continued as if she hadn't spoken.

"Dominica intends to leave nothing to chance. She wants all shifters dead. Do you have magic against that, *Noir Brujo*?" Claudium smirked at Dharean.

"You would be surprised at what I am capable of. I suggest we prevent her from reaching the second wave." Dharean almost sneered. "Now tell me what is it that the five of you bring to the table?"

"I believe it is your turn to inform us. What is it with the three of you? I sense a power I have never encountered before." His gaze rested on Allantra. "And I believe she is the source of it."

Khaelen put his other hand on Allantra in a protective stance. Dharean instinctively moved across the room as well. "Ah, I see, protecting the queen bee." Claudium smiled and held up his hands in surrender. "It would be foolish of me to betray you. I entered this in good faith and I shall remain that way." Dharean did not pause as he sat between Claudium and Allantra, turning his body so that it shielded hers from the vampire.

"We are a Triumvirate."

Dharean waited for Claudium's reaction. The vampire looked at him without

blinking, then turned to Khaelen. He burst out laughing. "So you two are destined to fuck the same woman for the rest of your lives?" The other vampires chuckled, except Armin, who seemed confused. "That is quite a fate." He wiped the corners of his eyes. "So tell me, what is the rare power that brings this particular threesome together?"

"I am a synergist," Allantra answered. There was no mistaking the attitude in her voice.

Instantly, the other vampires grew quiet. Nothing could be heard in the room except the crackling of the fire. "Not even in my lifetime have I ever met a synergist," Claudium said in awe as he leaned forward to get a better look at Allantra.

"That changes," one twin began, "many things," the other finished as they switched positions.

"We have chosen our side well." Mariel opened her eyes in approval.

"She must be protected," one twin began, "at all costs," the other finished.

"I agree," Claudium murmured, deep in thought.

"We will see to her protection," Khaelen interjected.

"We have many talents here." Claudium stood. "Let me introduce you to the force the vampire brings to this war.

"Draelius and Braelius, could you please give these kind folks a quick demonstration?" One twin turned so now they were both facing the room. Claudium motioned for Armin to stand, who seemed to do so rather reluctantly. Claudium gave the twins a sharp nod, and within a second Armin was snatched up from the floor. Allantra gasped as one twin threw out his hand in a stopping motion. Armin was thrown violently across the room. Before the poor creature could stand and gather his senses, the twins were on him in a blur. Allantra blinked and the twins were standing as before: one with his back to the room, the other facing it, neither interested in the situation any more. Armin lay in a bloody pulp. His skin was raw, and large welts crossed the surface.

"The twins can move just about anything telekinetically. I have no idea which possesses the acid or which has the ability to simply open cuts at will on the skin. They move faster than any vampire recorded. Separately they are twice as strong as any vampire. They both have mastered every fighting form possible. There is not a weapon they cannot wield." Armin whimpered at Claudium's feet. "Don't worry about Armin; he will be completely healed in minutes."

"That was cruel, Claudium." Seething, Allantra looked at the large vampire healing before her eyes.

"But necessary. Mariel?"

Mariel stood slowly while she eyed her surroundings. She backed up against the stone fireplace, and simply disappeared.

"I see her," Dharean said triumphantly. Mariel faded into sight again, an annoyed expression on her face. "It is not because of your lack of talent. My eyes can see what is supposed to be hidden." Mariel's gaze flicked to his tattooed arm.

"That is a very useful talent," Khaelen drawled. "But what of this beast?"

"Armin heals very quickly, as you can see. So far he has not been able to be poisoned, taken down by gunfire, decapitated—"

"That's despicable!" Minn said sharply.

"He was an experiment, keep in mind. It was not I who made him. It was in fact Dominica. He has withstood just about every means of killing. He cannot be drowned nor

suffocated. Fortunately for him, the effect of the sun was never tested. When I learned of his existence I began to care for him.”

“So what we have here is a useless resilient ball of flesh,” Dharean said in disgust. “Can he not fight?”

“He does not know how. Remember, wizard, shortly after he was made, the Execution happened. There was not time. When I procured him, that time was spent making him feel safe, and earning his trust.”

“Nice show of trust.” Allontra snickered.

“He agreed to the demonstration as I promised it would be swift.”

“And what of you, Claudium?” Dharean challenged.

Claudium hesitated. “Never in my life have I ever seen let alone met a synergist. Her existence astounds me. For her power mirrors mine.”

“I don’t understand.” Allontra looked at Khaelen and Dharean. “He is a synergist as well?”

“No, young one,” Khaelen answered. “Mirrors reflect the same but opposite. In other words, if you are a synergist he would be considered an antagonist.”

“You give power. He absorbs it,” Dharean said through clenched teeth.

## Chapter Thirteen

"It is quite clear now why he is leader," Minn observed. Every shifter in the room and Khaelen looked at Claudium a tad differently. Allantra couldn't help but wonder what was the extent of the vampire's power.

"I know what all of you are thinking." Claudium's dark gaze encompassed everyone. "First of all, let me assure you there are limits to my power, just as there are limits to this rare shifter." He nodded slightly in Allantra's direction. "The effect is temporary as is hers. Everyone in here has a special talent, plus perhaps one they choose to keep hidden."

"Yes, but with our talents we haven't enslaved others," Dharean reminded him gruffly.

"True, and I do regret those actions. A century of torture tends to make one think about the actions that got him there. I think it fair that now my fellow Council members get a briefing of what all of you are capable of. Like you, we don't want to fight side by side with those who we have no knowledge of their capabilities."

"I'll go first," Minn piped in. "I am called Minn; I have no real special talent. I can shift in several forms, and can perform a few simple spells. Nothing extraordinary, but I will tell you this, Claudium: I will fight tooth and nail, literally, to free my people." Minn ended in a small harrumph.

"You are wrong, my plump beauty. Ferocity is a talent and a lure." Claudium's eyes flashed and for just a second Minn looked as if she might throw herself on him. Masque cleared his throat rather noisily, breaking the momentary connection.

"I am Masque. Brother and *protector* to Minn and her pups. I too shift as Minn does."

"Tell them." Dharean looked at Masque.

"It is not relevant," Masque replied.

"It *is* relevant. Masque, we need all the help we can get. We are few, against hundreds, maybe thousands."

Allantra stared at the two men who she had no doubt had been arguing mentally. Try as she might to tap into their path, Dharean kept her firmly out. Instinct told her they were arguing about Dominica. Minn had told her that Masque used to be a great wizard. He could have even given Dharean a run for his money. But suddenly he stopped practicing and no one knew why, until now. The argument apparently ended as Masque took a deep breath before he spoke.

"I also have engaged in the black arts, many years ago. But time, I fear, has left nothing but rust. I do not trust using magic."

"It is like the humans say, riding a bike. You will be fine, friend; we need you," Dharean assured him. Masque didn't move a muscle, and didn't respond. Clearly he wasn't happy, but then, thought Allantra, join the freaking club. Even now her thoughts were with her mother. Wondering how she was doing. When this was all over and if they were indeed lucky enough to survive, she would find a way to fix her mother. There had to be a way. She couldn't lose her mother like this. Not twice.

"You all know me as the Executioner; I am sure you are more than aware of what I'm capable of."

“Not so fast.” Claudium held up a finger. “The Council in fact is not aware of what you’re capable of. I’m sure you figured that out from Wulf.”

“Fine, Claudium, we’ll clear the air then. It was not lost on me the means in which he tried to apprehend me. They were weapons designed and approved of by the Council.”

“It was a precaution. Surely now you can understand our vulnerable position.”

“You were never vulnerable. Not when the shifters came demanding an equal government, and certainly not to me. You were greedy for power and wanted to retain it at all costs. I will divulge, Council leader. I can do a few spells as well. I can shift as well but am not nearly as talented as the company we keep.”

“Why do I feel you are leaving something out, Executioner?”

Khaelen stared at the man he was being forced to trust. Yes, Claudium had been cooperative, but only to free himself as a Shade. It would not be wise to tell the other vampire he could also make himself human for a short span of time. “There is nothing else, Claudium. After all, I am not nearly as old as you; what other talents could I possibly possess?”

“What indeed?” Claudium smiled an empty smile, before turning in Allantra’s direction. “You hold the most curiosity for me.” As soon as his attention focused on her, all the other vampires in the room zeroed in on her as well. Allantra felt like a bug under a microscope. “Just how powerful are you?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but my power is newly acquired. I am still learning—”

“What!” Mariel screeched, taking a step forward. “We have put our lives on the line for a novice synergist?” She plopped on the fireplace ledge. “We have chosen wrong. Dominica will have her way with all of us.”

“You will cease this talk, Mariel, or I will destroy you myself!” Claudium roared. His cool composure was gone, replaced by the rage of a powerful vampire. He moved quickly, his eyes blazing as he grabbed Mariel by the shoulders and pulled her up so that her feet no longer touched the floor. “You promised fealty. If I see you falter in your promise I will kill you, no questions asked. Is that understood?”

Claudium let Mariel sag to the ledge before he turned to face the room again. His eyes were blazing red, and in spite of herself Allantra shivered. He was definitely not one to be trifled with. His handsome, cool appearance hid a rather formidable opponent. “I am truly regretful of that. But if any of us are to make it out alive, our attitudes must remain positive and in accord.” He smiled at Allantra; this time the smile seemed genuinely remorseful. “I apologize for her rudeness; it will not happen again. I understand we were all at one point or another, a novice. You have been put in a difficult situation. You have been given the power but not the skill. It is most unfortunate. If I can be of any service, please do not hesitate.” He bowed slightly to Allantra.

“That is the job for Khaelen and myself, Claudium, but thank you.”

“Well then, that brings me to you, Dharean. Your presence cannot help but be felt. You are truly powerful. A Black Wizard, no less.”

“I have not the time to tell you of my abilities. But rest assured I am the best at what I do. Dominica will be a challenge. I have not yet faced a challenge I have not conquered.” At those words, his gaze shifted to Allantra. “And enjoyed doing so.”

Allantra bristled at his words. She knew he was purposely baiting her and Khaelen. Dharean couldn’t help it. Conflict was all he’d ever known. It was what he was best at. But she was not conquered. Not even a little bit. Of course, right now she was at a

disadvantage, but soon enough she would master her own power. Most definitely she would have to show both of *her* men who was really in charge.

*Did you hear that, vampire?*

*I most certainly heard the nonsense.*

*It would seem she is in need of a lesson.*

*I agree.*

Allantra couldn't help but shiver at their words. Images were projected in her mind, making her lick her lips in anticipation.

Dharean once again addressed the group. "I suggest we take a rest. Dominica has already slowed us down with those daemon trolls. We will be of no use if we start out already fatigued. I will need time to produce the serum that will allow the lot of you to walk in the daytime hours." Dharean took Allantra by the hand and began to lead her out of the room.

"Meanwhile, please feel free to make yourselves comfortable in my home. The East Wing is not available for your use. They are our private quarters. I will see you all in a few hours," Khaelen announced, then caught up with Dharean and Allantra in long, quick strides. "You didn't think I'd let you leave without me, did you, wizard?"

"One can hope."

"She is mine as well. I was hoping for time alone with my mate."

"She is my mate as well."

They all stood in the long hall as the two men stared each other down. It was exactly the confrontation she had wanted to avoid. "This is ridiculous. We have to come up with some sort of workable—"

"A few hours are all I ask," Khaelen said reasonably, though his body showed the tension his words did not."

"We only have a few hours before we are marching into battle. What of the time that I want?"

"Guys please, I'm not some blow-up doll to be passed—"

"Perhaps we should settle this with a flip of a coin," Khaelen suggested, pulling a gold coin from his pocket.

"I don't trust your coin, vampire. Perhaps some sort of challenge—"

"That's it!" Allantra screamed, flinging her arms out in frustration. Dharean and Khaelen were knocked back against the wall behind them. Allantra yelped in surprise from her display of power but quickly recovered. The two men looked at her in shock. "I didn't mean to do that." She sniffed. "But you two are being asses. In case you have forgotten, I am the cornerstone in this Triumvirate. I am also the only female; you know, the one with the vagina. So I have a say in who has a few hours with me. Now, just so you two know, earlier was er—well, nice, but I have to tell you I expected a lot more, well—bang."

Khaelen and Dharean looked insulted but Allantra went on. "Now I have graded you on a curve, knowing we were under a time constraint, so I'm willing to give you both a do-over. So as soon as you two can pick your delectable asses and your pride off the floor, meet me in the shower." Allantra walked off with legs like jelly. She felt both men trying to break down her mental barriers but she held firm. Maybe she pushed them too far. She didn't care. They needed to be taught some manners and a lesson.

Allantra did as she promised, quickly stripping off her clothing and stepping into the

warm shower. The water felt delicious against her skin and she began to relax. That is, until both men were suddenly on either side of her, stark naked. Khaelen bared his teeth in a snarl, and Dharean growled deep in his chest. Both men looked at her with such desire; fear almost made her bolt from the shower. Almost...

## Chapter Fourteen

Allantra was gently guided by Dharean to lean against Khaelen's chest. Even in the warm shower, the heat of his skin surprised her. *It would seem that being linked to beings of natural warmth has its pleasant side effects.* Khaelen's words slid effortlessly into her mind. Dharean's mouth closed around one erect nipple while Khaelen gently kneaded the other one. Allantra gasped at the wondrous feel of two hard male bodies making a sandwich of her.

Hot kisses were placed down her body. Dharean went lower and lower, and Allantra's belly contracted in anticipation. Suddenly a searing pain followed by intense pleasure radiated on the side of her neck as Khaelen fed from her. Her skin tingled as he drew blood forth. His tongue swirled around the pinpricks, then to her shoulder. His hands traveled slowly down her belly to her hips, to the apex of her thighs.

Allantra let Khaelen take the full brunt of her weight as she lost herself in the pleasure of her two mates. Khaelen's long, tapered fingers urged her to spread her legs and she complied. She could feel Dharean's hot breath on her thighs. But she kept her eyes closed, loving the sensations even more that way.

Khaelen parted her nether lips, leaving her widely exposed. It took but a second before Dharean licked her slit from one end to the other. Her body shook as his tongue played around her clit. Khaelen began to whisper in her ear, sending goose bumps down her arm despite the warm shower.

*I can smell your arousal, young one. Your heart beats like that of a baby bird, among predators.*

*Aren't I?*

*Indeed. But we mean to only prey upon your body, your desire.*

*He is correct.* Dharean's voice cut into the mental path. *We mean to take every ounce of your willpower, little bird.* Dharean's mouth somehow closed around the small bud and began to draw upon it. *You taste of warm honey.*

*I too would like to taste of my mate.*

Allantra couldn't think. The men shifted positions until Khaelen was now on his knees before her, his face buried between her thighs. Dharean's fingers somehow managed to work her slick juice backward to her puckered hole. Just as Khaelen's tongue began to spear in and out of her, Dharean slid one finger into the tight rear opening. Allantra's eyes flew open.

Dharean's finger pulled out. He then managed to get two fingers inside of her as Khaelen's tongue pulled out. Her desire began to boil as she moved her hips, forcing Khaelen's tongue deeper inside. The satisfaction building demanded instant gratification, but it would seem her mates would deny her this.

Dharean removed his fingers, and in a move that was well synchronized, the mates turned her around so that her bottom was now in direct line with Khaelen's cock and her mouth hovered right in front of Dharean's impressively beautiful erection. The water from the shower almost felt cool against her skin, as she felt like she was burning from the inside out.

Without needing any coaxing, Allantra's mouth closed around the thick head just as

Khaelen's smooth, long cock slammed into her. With Dharean's arousal in her mouth, she could only let out a muffled gasp. Her fingers gripped his steely bottom as she suckled him. Growls rent the air as both men took their pleasure from her body.

Greedily she sucked at the ample erection, meanwhile loving the feel of Khaelen's root slamming her from behind. His fingers clasped her hips as he pumped into her. Allantra pushed back against Khaelen and at the same time let her lips almost release Dharean's cock, only to take it deeper down her throat as she pushed forward. The three of them worked out the most erotic rhythm against the sound of their moans and the water falling from the shower.

*I want to taste both of you. Together,* Allantra told her mates. There was a slight pause in the rhythm. *As you wish,* they answered in unison. It seemed at her request both men swelled even bigger. She could taste little droplets of Dharean's sweet, salty seed and knew any moment he would come. Khaelen's pumping became more insistent and she knew he too was near.

Swiftly both men pulled out her mouth and slick channel. Almost roughly she was pushed down on her knees. Looking up, Allantra couldn't help but admire the two pulsing cocks that were aimed directly at her face. She tilted her head back as both men stroked their arousals looking down at her open mouth. Allantra licked her lips in anticipation. Both men nearly erupted at the same time when she did that. Long spirals of ribbon jutted out of their cocks and into her mouth, on her face. Their growls of pleasure echoed off the wall and ended in a subtle waning of satisfaction.

The taste of both men was intoxicating. She swallowed as much of the salty mixture as she could. She felt on fire. She needed release, she thought as she stroked the thighs of both men. Somehow Dharean's erection was growing again. A quick glance at Khaelen showed the same phenomenon. *It is you, flammulae. You give us energy, remember?*

It had never occurred to her that her power could be used in this manner. Allantra was pulled to a standing position. Dharean had her against the wall and began to fuck her madly. Her head swam with desire as she closed her eyes in pleasure. Dharean pulled out of her and then Khaelen began to fuck her. To Allantra's delight both men took turns fucking her one after the other, until she couldn't tell whose cock was whose. Just as she was about to come, she felt both of their mouths between her thighs licking and sucking. One of them slid fingers into her from behind as the other slid his fingers into her soaked channel. She didn't stand a chance as her orgasm rocked her very foundation.

Colors swam before her eyes as her body spasmed in orgasmic bliss. It was hard to breathe around the waves of ecstasy. She began to slump and one of the men caught her. The shower turned off and she felt herself being carried to the bed.

"It would seem we wore our mate out." Dharean chuckled.

"Yes, it does seem that way," Allantra heard Khaelen respond before sleep overtook her.

\* \* \* \*

Allantra paused outside the door and steeled herself for the stares. Everyone was in attendance save her. When she had awakened Khaelen and Dharean were gone. She was fully dressed and the sun was shining brightly in their bedroom. Her cheeks flushed at the memory of what had put her out so effectively. Indeed, she had asked for it and her men had responded.

She'd stopped to visit her mother, who was still in a deep sleep. Allantra worried that her mother would never wake up. Taraema's mind had collapsed and there was no way she or Dharean could reach her. Despite her mother's state, Allantra had told her mother everything that was going on. Maybe she heard her daughter, maybe she didn't. But on the off chance that she could hear Allantra, she wanted to give her mother a reason, hope, to come back to her.

But now as she stood outside the room, she knew they would all stare at her. Hell, she was mated to two virile men. What exactly did they expect from her? She pushed the door open and, as predicted, all eyes turned to her. Everyone was seated at the table in the darkened room and apparently in the middle of a heated discussion.

"What's going on?" She hoped her voice sounded as nonchalant as she intended.

"We are at odds as to who should try out the serum," Claudium supplied.

"I think it should be the Executioner," Mariel piped in.

"For the last time, Mariel," Khaelen responded in a tired voice, "through my mate I am protected from the sun. It would make no difference if I took the serum. I am not a good test subject."

"And just how are you protected?" Mariel asked suspiciously.

"Allantra supplies him the energy he needs. As long as he feeds, the sun cannot deplete energy from his body. That is how vampires die. The sun feeds upon their limited energy they get from blood. Can we now retire this idea, Mariel?" Dharean gave her a pointed stare.

"I suggested they use Armin," Minn said as she stretched.

"Minn!" Allantra stared at the shifter.

"It just makes sense. He will recover faster if it doesn't work."

"The beauty makes sense. I will instruct Armin to take the serum." Claudium had the slightest smile on his face as he looked at Minn. Minn actually blushed.

"Don't you have pups to look after?" Masque asked tonelessly.

Minn stood up in a huff, giving Masque a look of disapproval. "They are probably awake now. Allantra, I will look in on the princess." She left the room, but not before giving Claudium a responding half smile.

Claudium stood and picked up one of the small vials of serum and walked it over to Armin. He whispered in the vampire's ear. Slowly Armin shook his head and Claudium clapped him on the back. He popped the cork from the vial and handed it to Armin, who downed the contents in one swallow. The large vampire stood and teleported out of the room.

"If this works, we leave immediately," Claudium said thoughtfully as he began to pace the room.

"It will work," Dharean said with confidence. He appeared slightly annoyed at the connotation of *if*.

The minutes began to tick by and Allantra could see Claudium getting edgy. The twins stood as if ready to spring into battle at any moment. Masque also took on a defensive stance. If the first death was a vampire, it didn't bode well for them. Not that a shifter death would be any better. They needed to learn to trust each other if they had a chance in hell of winning. Just as Claudium spun around, his eyes angry, Armin popped into the room with a large goofy smile and sunflower in hand. Claudium breathed a sigh of relief. "Everyone, prepare yourselves. Today we begin our foray into battle."

## Chapter Fifteen

“How sure are you that this will work?” Allantra adjusted the stone on her forehead for the millionth time. When Khaelen and the other vampires had suggested they all teleport for at least half the journey, she had been skeptical. True, it would save an enormous amount of time. Not to mention that it would make the journey easier for her mother. With Masque already long gone and being used as a guide, it sounded like a good plan ... She looked down at her sleeping mother, who had been secured to a comfortable pallet. She just didn’t want to risk Taraema any more than she had to.

Minn was in the hall, lightly scolding the boys for whatever transgression they had done. Something about setting a small fire, marshmallows, and the den. Khaelen rested his hands on her shoulders and forced her to look him in the eyes. “If I didn’t think this could be done, I would not attempt it. Dominica has a vast start on us. If we take this journey on foot it will wear us down, and we will come into the fight already fatigued.” Allantra knew he was right. Not to mention it would give Dominica time to wreak more havoc while they trudged through the dense forest.

“You have to promise me that my mother will not be harmed.”

“You have both of our word on it, *flammulae*.” Dharean walked up to them with a strained smile on his face. He was a powerful wizard, but he was no god. He had done much these last hours to protect their small band of resistance. Every vampire had been given a tattoo to warn them should the serum wear off before expected. It would give them enough time to hopefully seek shelter. He mixed another batch of the serum for backup. Dharean didn’t want to risk overdosing the vampires; if necessary, it was better to dose them again after the first application wore off. “Khaelen is a vampire of enormous talent. Did I not trust him to do this, I would not allow it.”

Khaelen let out a short grunt, but said nothing. Allantra was grateful he did not rise to Dharean’s bait. But she knew it would not be long before Khaelen would strike back. “Thank you. I’m ready.” Each of her mates gave her a warm hug.

*I will see you soon, young one.*

*Stay close, flammulae.*

*Be careful, mates. I love you both.*

Both men paused and looked at her. In sync, they bowed before her. Using his wizard speed, Dharean was gone.

Draelius and Braelius insisted on teleporting Allantra. Claudium, not surprisingly, volunteered to teleport Minn with Armin tagging along, since he was afraid to teleport himself. Mariel, begrudgingly, was assigned the pups. She held each of their hands as if they were vile creatures, but she said nothing. Khaelen knelt beside Taraema’s pallet and placed one hand on the pallet and one on her forehead.

With Masque feeding images and information to Dharean, their path was plotted. When vampires teleported, others could follow their path within a small window of time. The Council would follow Khaelen, who in turn was linked to Dharean through Allantra. The plan was to go quickly, teleporting from point to point to ensure safety. Once they reached the edges of the land of Kynn, they went on foot. For neither Masque nor Dharean could detect magical traps from the air, not going at wizard’s speed. The rest of

the journey would have to be taken slowly and with much care.

\* \* \* \*

“So these are the Tribal Lands.” Claudium looked at the expanse of forest before him. “These are the lands we could never find.” His voice was filled with wonderment.

“We counted on you believing you were above going into such rough lands.”

“We sent the humans in our stead,” Claudium replied.

“And in turn I killed them, so there would be no trace.” Dharean walked over to Allantra’s side. “We do what is necessary to survive.”

“How are you feeling?” Claudium addressed the Council. Each vampire gave the slightest nod indicating he or she was doing well. “The wizard has done well. Rest for a moment while we decide our next course.” Claudium expectantly looked at Allantra, Dharean, and Khaelen.

“I will be but a moment,” Allantra stated as she knelt next to her mother. “How is she doing?” she whispered, half-afraid to wake her mother.

“I noticed she has begun talking. I do not understand what she says. Perhaps they are just the ramblings of a tired mind.” Khaelen gave Allantra’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “Dharean and I will converse with Claudium. Stay here as long as you need. Remember you can hear us anytime you wish.” Khaelen tapped the side of his head then walked away.

Allantra looked into her mother’s beautiful face. Her heart swelled in frustration. If only she knew what was going on in her mother’s mind. If only she could recall more memories of her childhood with this woman. She laid her forehead against her mother’s and closed her eyes in silent prayer.

*The fire drowns those who doubt.*

Allantra sat up quickly as the words softly entered her mind. She looked around in confusion. Draelius and Braelius were too far away to have uttered the words. Minn was speaking quietly to her boys and the rest of the vampires had been summoned over by their leader. Everyone was occupied and nowhere near her. Where had the words come from? She looked down at her mother as an idea formed. Taking a deep breath, she laid her head against her mother’s again.

This time she could feel the stone warm between them. *The fire drowns those who doubt.* Allantra lifted her head dejectedly. Her mother’s sanity was long gone. In Taraema’s mind everything was confusion. She would not come back to her. Allantra felt a tear slip. At least she was here to see, and touch. She would make sure that Dharean would not give up on her mother. He had to find some way of reaching Taraema.

Allantra traced the tattoo that Dharean had given her mother in order to keep Dominica out of her mind. In effect, it had shut them out as well. Allantra tuned her mind in to those of her mates. It had been decided Masque would remain in the air keeping vigil while Dharean would start the procession and the Blood Twins would pull up the rear. Everyone was to stay alert. When Minn came over to check on her mother, Allantra walked over to the cluster of fighters.

“You look upset,” Dharean observed as she approached.

“I’m fine.”

“The wizard is right; something is bothering you,” Khaelen chimed in.

“You mean besides the apocalypse?” Allantra said cynically.

Both men looked at her a moment, then let the matter drop. "I leave you in the hands of the vampire. Be careful, Allantra. Despite the vast amount of talent assembled here, you are still the key to our victory."

"I will be careful." Allantra smiled as she wrapped her arms around her mate and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You be careful as well. We are all equally important in this battle." Khaelen snorted inelegantly behind her, and she chose to ignore him. "I love you," she whispered. She turned to Khaelen. "I love you as well."

"Surely I get a better show of affection than that from my mate." Dharean leered at her and still somehow managed to throw Khaelen a smug look. Dharean pulled her close and pressed his lips hungrily against hers. In mere seconds Allantra was lost as his tongue swept inside her mouth. Aggressively he kissed her and she responded as he sucked erotically on her tongue, sending waves of desire down her spine. "I love the way you desire me, *flammulae*," he said huskily as he broke the kiss. "Your arousal tempts me to take you to the ground and pound hard into you until you scream for me."

Khaelen pulled them apart roughly and coiled his arm possessively around Allantra's waist. "It is best we started." His words were hard as he squinted at the shifter.

"My mate and I have already started. Surely you can smell her need of me."

"Dharean, stop it," Allantra chastised him. "But Khaelen is right; we need to get going."

"As you wish." Dharean bowed low before her then was gone. Allantra put her mental defenses up when she felt the light push from Khaelen. She knew what he wanted to know: if she somehow favored the True Blood over him. Allantra, however, was wise enough to know she would have to remain forever guarded on her feelings. She loved them equally and it was important that one didn't think he was less than the other.

In silence they began the journey. Claudium was in the lead following the tracks Dharean had purposely left. Minn and Khaelen carried the pallet with Taraema, followed by Allantra and Mariel. Armin seemed taken with the pups and walked hand in hand with the boys. The Blood Twins brought up the rear. Allantra got a feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was wrong, out of place. She could feel it. As she looked at the others, a look of unease was on their faces as well.

Up ahead she could see Dharean was no longer far ahead; he had stopped and seemed to be sniffing the air. Masque had landed beside him. The small band now gathered together as the air became thick with tension.

"What is it?" Khaelen asked as he and Minn set down the pallet.

"I cannot place it." Dharean shook his head. "But Kynn is different. Has somehow been altered. She is not at peace."

"Dominica," Claudium stated.

"I agree, but I know not what she has wrought only that it is hidden, and deadly."

"Perhaps we should keep moving." Mariel huffed derisively.

"I think that unwise. Give me time to figure this out."

"We don't have time for that." Mariel pushed her way forward. "Anyone who wants to stop wasting time, follow me." Mariel stomped forward about thirty yards before a loud crackle echoed across the land.

Walls of flame shot up from fissures in the ground like giant waves in the ocean. It rolled in upon itself and crashed down. The force of it shook the ground. Liquid fire rushed forward, sweeping the land in its heat and destruction. Everyone stood frozen in

shock at the sight. It swept toward them at an alarming rate. Mariel screamed as the fire pooled around her feet.

## Chapter Sixteen

Dharean stared in shock as the fire raced toward them. The ground rumbled and the air reverberated with the snap of the flames. The fire raced around them, and then Dharean realized they were encased in a field of flames. The fire seemed to fill up an invisible bowl, a bowl they were at the bottom of. The liquid inferno began to creep around their feet. But then Dharean shook his head and looked at it again. He could see nothing but water pouring forth.

The female vampire screamed again as the fire climbed around her ankles. She beat frantically at the flames. The others began to do the same. The Blood Twins each had a hand on Allontra's shoulders and tried to teleport out. In mere seconds Dharean watched as they were bounced back against the force field, splashing into the flames that were fast filling up their bowl prison.

Allontra landed on her backside and one of the Blood Twins immediately helped her to her feet. Dharean stared down at the fire, his brow furrowed in thought. He couldn't be touched by such magic. His thought process was cut short by the piercing screams of the vampire called Mariel.

"Stop!" he called to her, trying to still her panic. But he was too late. As she beat at the flames her screams became louder. Her panic blossomed in full and then she was gone. Her body imploded and a scattering of black dust floated into the almost lavalike liquid. It was mind magic. If your mind believed it, it became real. "It's not real!" Dharean roared, but his voice was drowned out by the roar of the flames as the wall of liquid fire continued to spew forth from the ground.

Minn and Khaelen held the pallet above their heads as they both looked around for a safe place to set Taraema. Dharean glanced up, saw Masque circle in the sky.

*Brother, it is mind magic. What you see isn't real.*

*I see nothing, wizard. My mate's magic does not affect me.*

*I must warn them somehow.*

*Use your mate, wizard. Remember, she can increase your power.*

Dharean smirked. How could he not have thought of that? He called his mate.

*Allontra.*

*We're going to die here.*

*It isn't real.*

*Are you crazy? Do you not see the fire?*

*Mind magic. I need you to help me make the others understand what they see isn't real.*

*What can I do?*

Dharean could hear the fear in her voice. Fear that was barely concealed below the surface of her forced bravery. He sent gentle waves of reassurance to her. If she wasn't calm, she would only send more panic to the others.

*I will connect to your vampire, who will connect to the others. Masque will connect to Minn and the pups. Trust me, flammulae, and let me calm you.* He could see her relax her shoulders and close her eyes. Dharean took a deep breath and with his wizard eyes he focused on the water erupting from the ground. Allontra's gentle touch on his mind began

to amplify the image.

"It's just water," breathed Minn in relief as she and Khaelen began to lower the pallet, giving their arms a much-needed rest.

"Indeed." Claudium squinted at the water as he knelt down and scooped up a handful of it. "Water or no, we have a casualty." The others shook their heads at their foolishness. "For now on let this be a lesson to everyone. We do not rush headfirst into anything. We must trust the people on our team." Claudium stood then, giving Dharean a nod of appreciation. "Had Mariel trusted this man, she would still be alive."

"We are sorry for the loss," Khaelen offered.

Claudium shook his head in regret. "We must keep moving. This was meant to slow us down and it has."

"That is not all it was meant for," Masque declared as he landed, shifting into his human form. "It was a show of power. She will only grow stronger. We must stop her before she reaches her full peak of power."

"How far to the hidden caverns in which your people are hiding?"

Dharean shifted uncomfortably. The alliance was new at best, and revealing exactly where his people hid did not sit well with him. "It is not far. The spell should be broken. Let us make haste." Dharean took his place at the lead, and he motioned for Masque to take his place in the sky. Masque obliged quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Khaelen quietly observed the vampires as they rested a moment. They had to be careful of Taraema. The lost princess meant the world to Allantra and he would do anything he could to ensure her safety and viability. His gaze drifted to the wizard who hovered constantly around Allantra like a blanket. Khaelen snarled under his breath as the wizard stroked her arm while she talked quietly to her mother.

The wizard had to be stopped. Khaelen snarled again under his breath, knowing there would be no getting rid of the other mate. Allantra was right. They all had to learn to get along. Khaelen pulled the tie from his hair and raked his hand through it, agitated. Share or no, Allantra was *his*. Had been his, first. No sooner had the thought surfaced that the wizard looked at him with his peculiar gray eyes as if he'd read his mind. Not this time. Khaelen was sure to block his thoughts from both Allantra and the *Noir Brujo*.

Allantra rose from her crouching position by her mother and seemed a bit puzzled. Dharean had risen with her and said something so low even Khaelen's vampire hearing couldn't pick it up. Khaelen no longer felt like he wanted to be the civilized one. He needed time with his woman alone. Khaelen strode over to the two of them, took Allantra by the hand, and kept walking. She was so shocked she could only sputter a protest or two before she fell in step.

He stopped under a large tree, far enough away from the others but close enough to still keep a watchful eye should something happen.

"What's going on?" Allantra's mouth was quirked up in a half smile.

"I simply needed to be alone with you, little one. Is that wrong?" He encircled her tiny waist and pulled her closer. "I've had no chance to just be with you. Make love to you, just us two." He let the words hang in the air.

"It's been an adjustment for all of us." She stepped into his embrace and rested her head against his chest. "If you're asking me if it will always be just us three, I don't think

so. We will work it out so that each of you has time alone with me. To be honest, I don't think I could survive sex with the two of you every time."

Khaelen didn't know if he should smile or be angry. Time alone with her sounded like heaven. But vying for her time alone only reminded him she would never be his and his alone. Allantra tilted her face up to him, and he couldn't resist the call of her lips. The moment his mouth took hers, every fiber in his being came alive. His cock was instantly hard as she molded her petite body against his. Her tongue danced sensually in his mouth. He spun her around and pinned her mercilessly against the tree, giving her no quarter for retreat.

His hands roamed her slight curves, reveling in the suppleness of her flesh, the toned lean muscles under smooth skin. Her breathing became just as ragged as his. Khaelen reveled in the fact, that even with the wizard around, he still affected her so strongly.

"We should keep moving." Dharean's words were like cold water on a raging fire.

Slowly he let his tongue swirl into the sweet depths of her mouth a moment longer before he broke the embrace. He could feel the jealousy coming off the wizard in bolts. Good. "I agree. But I need to feed first." He then took the time to eye the wizard.

"Allantra is the only one I wish to take nourishment from. It helps with our bonding."

"Ah." The wizard smiled though it didn't reach his eyes. "Like fucking helps our bonding. I quite understand."

"That's enough, both of you." Allantra's voice cut in sharply.

"I will tell the vampires to feed, then we will move on," Khaelen bit out as every cell in his body urged him to wrap his hands around the wizard and choke the ever-shifting life out of him. "Then I will feed." Khaelen mentally contacted Claudium and delivered the message. "Now if you will excuse us, this is a private matter. Sometimes things can get heated."

Dharean paused before he responded. "I will confer with Masque. Just make sure your blood drinkers are ready to leave." Khaelen, smirking, watched him leave.

"That was uncalled for," Allantra chastised.

"Quite the contrary; that and more." Khaelen settled his hand at the back of her neck and gently urged her to tilt her head slightly. Just the scent of her alone drove him crazy. As her pulse sped up at his touch, the fragrance of her blood wafted around him like a fine mist. Instantly he was hard again. "I won't take much," he whispered as his teeth lengthened.

As his teeth sank into her neck, she moaned. Her body shook with arousal as he drew from her. She ground her pelvis against him as he suckled from her neck. "So sweet. So very sweet," he murmured. After he closed the two tiny punctures he looked down at her. Her brow was furrowed though her eyes were still heavy-lidded with arousal.

"What is wrong?"

"You reminded me of something my mother said earlier."

"What was it?"

"She said the oddest thing. *Friends should provide what sour beasts should not.*"

Suddenly the vampires popped in. Claudium had Armin in his arms and set him on the ground. The vampire's eyes were rolled to the back of his head; a trail of blood flowed from his mouth. Claudium looked up at Khaelen. "He was feeding, and then he screamed and fell to the ground. I think he's been poisoned." Claudium looked to be right, as Armin began to violently jerk, then suddenly stilled.

## Chapter Seventeen

Khaelen rushed to the vampire's side and leaned in carefully, inhaling the scent of the blood that dribbled out of his mouth. "It's tainted," Khaelen declared. "Call to the others." He directed this to Claudium. In seconds, the Blood Twins appeared, each with a grip on a massive boar. "Let it go," he ordered. The Blood Twins looked at each other before they reluctantly let go of their prize.

"I believe Dominica has somehow poisoned the wildlife in Kynn," Khaelen sighed, studying the boar as it rumbled away.

"How can that be? The animals seem fine," Allantra said as she knelt down to check on Taraema.

"I've seen this spell before," Dharean offered. "The intent isn't to kill the animal; it's intended to kill whatever dines upon it."

"Long ago in human wars, they poisoned the rivers and lakes. Their opponents quickly fell without nourishment," Khaelen looked at the vampires. "Who knows better the need for feeding than a vampire?"

"Just when I thought she couldn't be any more of a bitch," Allantra muttered.

"She means for us to starve," Claudium wiped the blood from Armin's mouth.

"Or worse," Khaelen said softly as he looked down at Armin.

"I don't understand," Allantra looked to Dharean and Khaelen. "What could be worse?"

"We turn on the shifters," Khaelen looked at each vampire. "Dominica knows that when a vampire does not feed, he becomes feral and dangerous. She is counting on the shifters not wanting us to feed from them. Thereby eventually we turn on each other."

"Allantra will not be fed upon," Dharean agreed with a nod.

Masque transformed smoothly from raptor to man, landing gracefully next to Dharean. He remained quiet, but Khaelen did not doubt he knew what was going on via the wizard. "For once I agree with you," Masque said. "But the fact remains, the shifters have to make a decision."

"You mean allow them to feed from us?" Dharean shook his head. "I cannot allow that from my people."

"It's not just your decision," Minn piped in for the first time. She disengaged herself from the pups and stepped front and center. "We need everyone here. We have already lost one of our number, too many when we have so few. I am volunteering. I will feed our comrades. As we debate this, that vampire dies." She pointed to Armin.

"Armin will recover soon; do not worry about him," Claudium looked down at the vampire who in all other circumstances would have been mistaken for dead.

Masque squinted at his sister, who stared right back at him. She turned and stood in front of Claudium. "I offer you my blood for nourishment. Will you accept?" Claudium looked at Minn for several heartbeats before he spoke.

"What of you, Minn? If I take nourishment from you, if any of us take nourishment from you, how will you replenish yourselves if you cannot eat the wildlife as well?"

"Shifters can go days, even a week between meals. Plus I am betting we can eat the meat. Dominica knows the makeup of a vampire, not a shifter," Dharean answered. "Our

blood is rich, but it is ever-changing because of our ability to shift. Whereas a vampire's blood is made up of whatever it feeds upon."

All gazes momentarily shifted to Armin as the vampire began to slowly and awkwardly rise. He looked at them all with a curious expression on his face. Allantra smiled at him and he almost seemed to blush. Minn wiped the drying blood from his mouth in a motherly fashion, relief evident in her face.

"Well, vampire? Do you not accept?" There was no mistaking the invitation in Minn's voice. Claudium smiled slightly before gathering Minn in his arms. Slowly his head descended to her graciously exposed neck. Khaelen turned away, feeling the anger pouring from Minn's brother. Indeed he'd be a fool if he didn't feel the sexual tension between the two.

"Very well, then." Dharean grunted at Minn's decisive if not slightly irritating actions. "Masque, you will feed Armin. I will feed the Blood Twins."

\* \* \* \*

Dominica looked around with hopeful glee. Human servants, or what was left of them, littered the ground. The smell of blood billowed in the air, causing a bloodlust in Dominica she hadn't experienced in over a hundred years. A mindless servant happened by and Dominica snatched him quickly, plunging her elongated canines deep into his neck. The sound of the blood pumping from his veins and into her greedy mouth overrode his cries of pain. When she was done, she let his body slump to the ground.

It was never good to plan on an empty stomach.

Dominica closed her eyes and sighed almost peacefully. She'd given those traitorous vampires and their vile pets enough to deal with. The wizard had been clever indeed, setting so many traps. But she wouldn't be stopped. Couldn't be. The traps told her one thing and one thing only. She was definitely on the right path. All she had to do was find the remainder of those dirty mistakes of nature and eradicate the species forever.

She'd had a change of plans. Those of the Council who agreed to align with her could stay as they were. There was only room for one ruler. Her.

Dominica hummed to herself as she planned. She would be in charge of everything and everyone. She didn't need anyone else. Masque's face came to mind. Quickly she squelched it. She wished she could see to his death personally.

Once the shifters, all of them, were dead she would quiet all talk of integrating a government. There will be no merging of species. She would be all the Civilized Lands needed to keep order. They did manage to best her Dwarf prince. No matter; she had other things up her proverbial sleeve. Dominica willed a worn book into her hands, and began to carefully turn the pages. Ah, just what she needed. The smile widened on her corrupt, beautiful face as she considered who would be the next sacrifice.

\* \* \* \*

*Little one.*

*Khaelen, what's wrong?*

*There is something we need to discuss.*

*What?*

*Your mother.*

*I don't understand.*

*Get the wizard. We all need to talk.*

Khaelen waited until Allantra and Dharean were at a cluster of half-dead bushes, away from the others. It wouldn't do to get any of them into a panic until they could sort things out.

"What is it, vampire?" Dharean sounded bored, but Khaelen could tell he was more than a little curious.

Khaelen ignored him. "Sweetheart, I need you to tell *Dharean* what you confided in me." One of them had to give a little. The last thing Khaelen wanted to do was fight with the wizard the rest of his life. Though he knew the fact that Allantra had confided in him and not the shifter would sting the shifter just a little bit. A little. Khaelen hoped so.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You told me something your mother said just before the incident with the vampires."

"And? Oh wait." Deep in thought, she bit her lip. Khaelen couldn't help but watch in fascination. It seemed everything she did lately was sexual, beckoning. "Okay, I didn't tell you this, Khaelen, but she said something before that as well. *The fire drowns those who doubt*. She said that before the fire illusion."

"Most interesting. Especially given the situation. It seemed to be a premonition in riddle form." Dharean looked at Allantra. "What else did she say to you?"

"She said, *Friends should provide what sour beasts should not*."

"Sour beasts, meaning poisoned." Khaelen looked at them both. "I think your mother is somehow connected to Dominica. Perhaps all the years she's been in her mind created some kind of connection that can't be broken."

"Wouldn't that mean that Dominica still has access to my mother's mind?" She turned to Dharean, panicked. "You said the tattoos would keep Dominica out!"

"Calm down, *flammulae*. I believe they have kept Dominica out of her mind, but she still has a connection to Dominica. I don't believe that Dominica is even aware of it." Dharean's voice took on a tone of wonder. "Because of her fragile state of mind, she can only relate what's coming in an almost riddle form. Taraema may not be conscious of what she's doing."

"Will my mother never find peace?" Allantra slumped. Both men flanked her side. "Dominica has done so much to her. Why can't she find peace?"

"That might require Dominica's death." Khaelen stroked the side of her cheek.

"I believe that is our goal here, *flammulae*."

"Think about this, little one. We can use this. Figure out what's coming and prepare." Khaelen turned her face up so that he could look her directly in the eye. "There is a chance that Taraema is aware and is trying to help us."

"You think so?"

"She only talks to you," Dharean pointed out.

"Okay. I will go see Mother and see if she says anything." She stood tall and smiled at them both. "Thank you both. I'll be right back." As she strode away the short distance to the camp both men sized each other up.

"We need to try harder at getting along."

"Speak for yourself, vampire."

"Are you trying to make our mate unhappy? We make her unhappy when we bicker

and fight. It puts her in the middle.” Khaelen waited for the shifter to see reason.

“I agree. I will try harder—Khaelen.”

They shook hands. The sound of Allantra’s pounding footsteps quickly turned their attention.

“I think you might be right.” She looked at her mates, a worry line creasing her forehead where the stone lay snug. “We have to warn the others.”

“What did she say?” the men said in unison.

Allantra paused. “When I got there she was already mumbling this: *nature will try to reclaim what it has nourished*. I think that means—” Before she could finish, the ground opened up and Allantra fell down, down...

## Chapter Eighteen

The roots seemed to claw at her. Deep scratches decorated her arms and legs in a macabre pattern. Allantra tried to reach out and grab something, anything that could stop her descent. Her breath stayed hitched in her throat as her heart throbbed in a staccato rhythm. Snakelike, the roots whipped at her, opening a gash in her cheek. She would have screamed had she not been so busy trying to save her own life.

She could hear Khaelen and Dharean yell to her. They would come after her, and she couldn't allow that. All three of them trapped would be devastating to the cause. She needed to help herself. Hell, there had to be a way she could help herself. She grabbed futilely at the soil that surrounded her like a tomb. She could barely see anything. The faster she fell, the less light there was. She was a shifter and could see well in the dark, but here there was nothing to see.

The sky above became the size of a plate. She couldn't die like this. She was a harbinger, the key in winning a war. She was not fated to die like this. She would not. Allantra closed her eyes and focused. As she plummeted like a boulder in the endless ravine, she had but one goal: to save them all.

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"We have to go after her!" Khaelen yelled, ready to teleport down the massive hole.

"Vampire, think! You have no idea where she is, how fast she's falling. You will kill yourself and be of no service to her," Dharean growled. The men turned in unison at the sound of the other voices.

"The other shifters," Khaelen stated. "I think they're in trouble like Allantra."

"I don't care!" Dharean yelled. "Allantra is all that matters."

"Now it's time you listened. We all need to survive this. You can still feel her as I can. She is still alive, and afraid. We need to save our mate."

Before Dharean could answer dirt showered them as a large root burst through the soil toward the sky. It seemed to search and then ... Dharean stared in shock as it wound around the raptor policing the sky. It dragged him down. Feathers fluttered slowly after the descending root, with the bird as its captive. "Dominica has targeted my people," he said softly in anger.

The ground began to buck and roil. The fissure Allantra fell into began to widen. Several piercing beams of white light emanated out of the mouth. Both men stared in confusion. The root that had dragged Masque into its depths suddenly whipped up, throwing the raptor from its grip. The bird tumbled then righted himself before he hit the ground and rolled wildly at Dharean and Khaelen's feet. The root retracted into the ground.

Then Allantra appeared bathed in the light—no, that wasn't accurate. The light carried her to the surface and set her down gently. The fissure closed with a loud groan. Allantra opened her eyes. "You have to counter the spell," she directed Dharean.

Without missing a beat, Dharean's eyes bled to black funnels. The tattoos on his arms began to pulse as he chanted. Seconds later an eerie quiet settled around them. "Is everyone all right?" Khaelen called out.

"I am well," Masque stated as he changed into his human form. The small but deep

pricks around his torso from the roots were already healing. He pulled out a thorn and flicked it to the ground. "That was a nasty spell."

"I agree." Dharean opened his eyes. The funnels receded slowly. The tattoos stilled against his skin. "Allantra, are you all right?" He and Khaelen reached her at the same time. Each male examined her body. Dharean began to gently caress the areas where she was hurt, speeding along her healing process.

"I'm fine." She smiled weakly. "Dominica isn't playing around, is she?"

"Dominica must be killed," Masque said quietly. Fine lines appeared around his mouth.

"Dominica will be killed," Claudium corrected as he carried Minn to the small cluster. Armin carried the two young pups in each arm. "I for one am tired of being on the receiving end of her shit."

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Allantra noticed Khaelen raised an eyebrow at the Council Elder's words. Claudium set Minn down gently. He brushed a stray hair from her temple before he turned his attention to the others. The Blood Twins popped in to join the cluster as Claudium spoke.

"It is time we establish a plan of action. We need to stop talking and show her what she is dealing with. Each of us in our own right is a force to be reckoned with. She is but one. Powerful, but still one."

"I agree. I am deeply offended and outraged this demon-bitch dares to attack in my homeland. I am guardian here. I am justice," Dharead declared.

"And I am Executioner," Khaelen finished.

"Well, it's about time the lot of you grew some sacs." A familiar voice cackled. Every set of eyes followed the sound of the sandpapered words. Za'rae, cross-legged in her usual fashion, floated in the air.

"Za'rae, as always, a pleasure to see you." Dharean bowed slightly at the waist.

"Za'rae, uh, good to see you are well." Allantra followed Dharean's suit with an awkward bow.

Za'rae waved her hand in the air. "Pshaw." She looked at Allantra. "I know my appearance still makes you uncomfortable. Don't flatter me, girl."

"Za'rae." Minn ran up to the form. "It's good to see you."

Za'rae's harsh features softened when she saw Minn. "Aw, my favorite girl." She sort of smiled. Allantra thought it came off as more of a sick grin. The woman was too surly to show real joy. "So, this is your vampire." Her penetrating gaze settled on Khaelen. "Those two must roll you quite a bit." She laughed. Allantra tried not to blush. "Oh, stop it. Everyone here knows you have not one but two spectacular specimens of cock in your bed. Every girl should be so lucky."

"A pleasure to meet you." Khaelen grinned at the woman. Actually grinned. Allantra was shocked that Khaelen seemed to have found the crude woman likable. Even more shocking, Za'rae blushed. Good gracious. Allantra was going to be sick. "May I ask the purpose of this unexpected but charming visit?"

"The wizard here needs to step things along." She gave Dharean a reprimanding stare. "The people are getting restless and tired of hiding like cowards. They want in this fight. After all, it's their futures at stake as well."

"We are making our way, Za'rae. We've had a little bit of trouble." There was a slight note of irritation to Dharean's voice. Allantra knew it didn't help that Za'rae was a

little sweet on Khaelen. “I’m glad to hear my people are learning that they must help fend for their lives as well.”

“Some of them have fallen victim to a few of that dogface vamp’s shenanigans.”

“How? They’ve reached the hiding place?” Dharean said in alarm.

“You know as well I as do you don’t need to be in front of a person to cause them harm. I believe they were out hunting and simply had no chance. Time grows short. Are you even aware of what goes on in your land?” She addressed the question to the vampires, but her gaze remained on Khaelen.

“We left in a hurry. We really haven’t had time to take stock of the Civil Lands. I was hoping to keep this ensuing war from happening. The plan was to make the change in government go as quietly and smoothly as possible.”

“I’m afraid that is not going to happen, blood drinker. Dominica has several powerful vampires aiding her.”

“Those were the seven I was referring to earlier,” Claudium said with regret.

“Who are you?” Za’rae took in his appearance with apparent approval. Allontra wanted to be sick. Watching a woman a quadrillion years old lust after men was ... unsettling.

“Stop those thoughts, girl!” Za’rae scolded her as if she read Allontra’s mind. “I’m old, not dumb. A beautiful man is a beautiful man,” she said with a cackle. Allontra shivered.

“I am Claudium, leader of the Council of Elders. At least the old Council.”

“Very well. You will have a place on the Council still, mark my words—if you all succeed.”

“What are the vampires up to?” Dharean asked.

“They have been rallying up the resident vampires in the Civilized Lands. The half-breed shifters got wind of it. They are uneasy and angry and I must say rightly so. The humans know it is in their best interest to side with the shifters. The lesser creatures are divided. It would seem the vampires have promised a utopia to those who fight by their side.”

“They will slaughter many, and keep others prisoner to feed on later.”

“You know this of Dominica’s plan?” Allontra asked Claudium.

“Yes, because in the past it is what I would have done.”

“But you’re no longer that person.” Minn laid a comforting hand on Claudium’s shoulder. Za’rae’s sharp gaze noted the interaction. She said nothing but a warmth came to her eyes that Allontra had never seen before.

“Be that as it may.” Za’rae pulled her attention from the pair. “The war has already started in the Civil Lands. Blood pours into the street. Children have been slaughtered and displayed as trophies. Something must be—” Her words were cut short as something caught her eye. This time tears poured from her eyes. “It can’t be.” Her voice cracked as she floated toward Taraema’s pallet. “Taraema.” The name was a rough, broken sob.

“Who is she to you?” Allontra said breathlessly. The ancient leader looked down upon Taraema with such emotion it took Allontra a moment to figure it out.

Za’rae said nothing at first. “You never wondered why I didn’t kill you outright? A shifter with the scent of a vampire on them is reason enough for death. But I knew you were the scion.” She paused. “You wanted to know my secret that day I unlocked your power. Now is the time. I will tell you a part of the prophecy not in the tome.”

## Chapter Nineteen

“And so the lost princess lives,” Za’rae whispered. She looked around the small crowd. Her black eyes took in everyone as if suddenly measuring their worth. “It was such a small part that it was never recorded. I doubted its relevancy but hoped. The moment I discovered your synergetic powers I saw deep in your mind. The lost princess had obviously been visiting you. Like a ghost.” At her last words she looked at Dharean.

“The dreams,” Allantra whispered as the memory of the dreams surfaced.

“What have you kept from me, old one?” Dharean’s voice seemed strained with an emotion Allantra couldn’t quite read. He blocked her access into his mind. She could have insisted, but respected his wish.

“Just as the prophecy told of a scion coming to the Savage Outlands, it mentioned an ally. It was but one line, though it was at the beginning, and many of us doubted its worth in the outcome of the war. Not to mention, no one could decipher its meaning.”

“Tell us now,” Allantra urged, as she went to her mother and gently stroked her forehead.

*“A Royal Spectre lost in mind, will give warning to the blind.”*

“It makes sense. Mother is like a ghost of sorts. Here but not really. But she has been warning us, in a strange way. We’ve only just realized this.”

“Ah, the horrors she must have been through, being captive all these years.” A weak smile flitted about Za’rae’s lips. “But soon like me, she will be free.”

“Don’t you start that,” Minn snapped. “Somewhere some poor girl is frightened out of her mind thinking you’re dead.” Minn sniffed but it lost its effectiveness as the shifter gazed upon the ancient one with tear-rimmed eyes. “I had no idea you could teleport so far.”

“Don’t worry yourself about what I can do, girl.” Za’rae cackled as her onyx eyes trained on Claudium. “Worry about what you can do.”

Minn had the nerve to blush at the implications. The Blood Twins had obviously grown bored of the phenomena that was Za’rae; they snorted at her comment. At that, she turned to them. “You two should have a care, for when this is all over, neither of you will be the same.”

“What does—” Braelius began.

“—she mean?” Draelius finished.

“Who knows.” Minn dismissed the question. “I’m tired and I need sleep.”

“We all do.” Dharean spoke at last.

“We all should retire for the night,” Claudium suggested. “You two keep watch,” he directed the Blood Twins. “Armin, watch the princess and pups.” He looked to Minn, as if waiting for her to protest. When she said nothing, he then excused them both, took Minn by the hand, and disappeared.

“Well, one guess as to what those two will be doing.” Za’rae laughed. A small pop sounded then she was gone.

“I will keep watch by air,” Masque announced stiffly then was gone as well.

“Wow,” was all Allantra could muster as she recovered from Za’rae’s visit. Dharean seemed unusually solemn. “What is it?” she asked softly. Dharean didn’t answer right

away, but she could feel his anguish. "Tell me."

"Now is not the time," Dharean replied.

"Promise to share later?" Allantra rose and approached the Black Wizard. "We are all in this together. We share everything."

"I am aware of this." Dharean smiled weakly as the vampire stepped up behind Allantra. "But this night I do not care. I need you, mate. I will have you as the fates see fit. But I will have you," he said on a growl.

"*We* will have you," Khaelen corrected. "We do not know how this will end. I for one will not go to ground, not knowing the touch and sweet taste of my mate at least once more. Or at the very least as many times as I can this night."

Allantra shivered as awareness coursed through her. She could feel the need of both men pulsating in the air. By the gods, she could now *smell* their desire for her. Everything was mingling now. Their thoughts. Their traits. Their power. Their desire. They left the pups and her mother to Armin and sought a place of their own.

\* \* \* \*

Dharean lay on the cool ground, not caring about the light wetness of the grass. He beckoned Allantra to him. Her beautiful brown eyes seemed unsure yet excited. On her knees she crawled to him while the vampire patiently waited to see what Dharean had in mind. With his finger crooked he urged her on until she climbed the length of his body and she wrapped her long, lean legs around him. Still he wagged his finger. She edged farther along his body until she straddled his chest.

"Turn around," he ordered. As she did so, he wished their clothing away, so that now her sweet scent wafted uninhibited around him. Her beautiful brown bottom rested against his chest. He pulled her gently by the hips until she now hovered above his face. "I want to taste you." He mumbled the words against her, his tongue already delving inside of her.

The taste of her, as always, made his head spin. His pulse quickened with every stroke of his tongue through her soft sleek folds. She grasped his erection, closing her small hand around it tight. Lightly she began to pump it. Her hips began to rotate in the opposite direction his tongue swirled. Her moans were cut short by the cock Khaelen placed at her lips.

Khaelen, who had also divested himself of his clothing with just a thought, gently thrust his cock toward his lifemate's hot mouth. Her tongue swiped the thin trickle of liquid from the head of his cock. She sucked him into her mouth, first concentrating on just the head, running her tongue under it. As Dharean's tongue penetrated her folds she sucked harder in response on her vampire's cock. Dharean moved her hips back and forth, forcing another wave of desire with the new friction. She moaned on the member in her mouth.

Khaelen firmly held her head in place as he pushed into her mouth and down her throat. With one hand she stroked Dharean's cock; with the other she held Khaelen's full sac, squeezing it gently as she suckled from him. Dharean's tongue fucked her harder and she began to lightly bounce, taking it deeper inside of her. "Shit!" she moaned on a breath. Dharean could tell she began to feel the first waves of her orgasm. He wedged his face between her thighs, catching every drop of her cream as she peaked.

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But Khaelen didn't let up as he pummeled into her mouth, the earthy taste of him familiar and delightful. She slid him out from between her lips, licking the head. Slowly she sucked on the vampire's sac as she stroked the wizard. "Not that way, *flammulae*," Dharean ground out roughly, somehow maneuvering her down. She lost the grip on his erection, but not for long. He manipulated her until she could feel the pulsing heat of him between her thighs. He impaled her. Without warning. Without preamble. She cried out in sheer ecstasy.

He stroked in and out of her at a mad pace. He held her in place as his hips shot up, driving his hard velvet cock deep inside of her. Khaelen pulled out of her mouth and stepped back. All she could do was dig her nails in the wizard's thighs as she bounced. The sound of their flesh meeting echoed around them. Khaelen stroked himself as he watched them. Dharean was sitting up now; his cheek cradled her back as he pulled her down hard and ground his erection deep inside her. He roared as his seed spilled within her.

Dazed, Allantra felt hands grab her by the waist, freeing her from Dharean's still hard member. She could barely stand on her wobbly legs. Dharean stood as well, letting her lean against him for support. She felt his hot semen run down her leg as Khaelen bent her over roughly, the top of her head against Dharean's stomach, arms around his waist.

Khaelen's hand was between her legs, smearing the mixture of her cream and Dharean's seed on the puckered hole of her bottom. "My turn, mate," he announced, bathing his cock between her folds before he gently pushed into the tight hole. Steadily but gently he worked his way inside of her until he was settled at the hilt. Then slowly he stroked in and out of her. "So tight," he muttered as his pace increased. Her arms tightened around Dharean as Khaelen mated with her. "So fucking tight." He moaned again.

Dharean stroked her hair with one hand and tweaked a nipple with the other. Allantra's breathing was coming in spasms as another orgasm began to bubble up. Khaelen reached around and played with the hard nub between her folds. She pushed back against him wildly. Their tempo increased and in between she somehow found Dharean's erection so close to her lips. She let her head slide down a few inches before she began to lick him. She felt his intake of breath at the feel of her tongue.

Fully hard again, now he slid into her mouth. She tasted herself and his cum on his cock. Khaelen stroked inside of her hard, causing Dharean's erection to slide farther down her throat. Happy with this arrangement, she closed her lips tightly around Dharean and let Khaelen set the pace for them all.

Allantra, however, didn't last long as another orgasm erupted, Khaelen fast behind her. He pulled her ass tight against him as he unloaded in her; they both sank to their knees as Dharean slipped out of her mouth. As she looked up to reclaim her prize, Dharean had already taken matters into his own hands. She watched with fascination as he came again. Ribbons of semen jetted out, splashing about her face.

"Open your mouth," he growled and Allantra did, taking the last of his cum into her mouth.

They stayed in place, breathing heavily. No one said a word as they finally made their way to the nearby lake and cleaned themselves. No one commented on the sounds of lovemaking from Minn and Claudium that floated on the night air. The air was heavy with deep thoughts and uncertainty for their futures. Their lives.

The triad lay together under a large tree. Masque, they knew, was somewhere out there patrolling the skies. The Blood Twins policed their perimeter. In the early morn, they would embark on the last leg of their journey and hopefully reach the caverns by nightfall.

Tonight would not be a night of sleep. They would all try to rest, despite the angst. For tomorrow was the beginning of the Apocalypse. And they all knew there was a good chance that not everyone would survive.

## Chapter Twenty

“So today it begins,” Allantra whispered low to her mother. “I want to free you, Mother. After all you have been through I wish you to find peace.” A tear slid down Allantra’s face as she stroked her mother’s hair. She could feel the support from Dharean and Khaelen as they stood several feet away to give her time alone with her mother.

“Love. We must go,” Dharean said softly.

“I know.” Allantra sniffed, trying to remember every feature of her mother’s face.

“Armin will protect her with his life,” Khaelen assured her. “He will come when Claudium calls and bring them all safely to us.

Allantra leaned over and placed a tender kiss on her mother’s forehead. She stood then and took a deep breath. Allantra looked around the small, loose circle of fighters around her. They were all going into battle knowing they could lose their lives. Yet no one faltered. Each had risen early in the morning, a strategy carefully planned out. It was time to go on the offense.

Minn had her two pups in a tight hug, tears streaming down her face. Allantra couldn’t imagine going into a fight knowing she might leave her two children motherless. Minn was a brave woman. The two kids held onto their mother tightly before she urged them to go with Armin.

Masque shook the hand of each of the pups as if they were grown men. They looked up to their uncle with such love and respect it glowed upon their faces. Masque knelt down and whispered something to each boy. Their eyes rounded and their mouths hung open as if to speak. Slowly he nodded his head and the boys clamped their mouths shut. Instead, they threw their small bodies against him as they hugged him. Masque returned the hug with equal ferocity. Allantra wondered what he had said to them.

Her gaze then traveled to the Rare Breed, the Blood Twins. They stood closely, facing each other, not saying a word. Allantra knew they were communicating. Stiffly they bowed to one another, then clasped arms in a warrior’s wish for a good and safe fight.

Claudium found his way to Minn and they stood close without touching, whispering to one another. It would seem life was cruel in so many ways. Minn had found someone in circumstances that didn’t give their attraction to one another much of a chance.

Then Allantra turned to her destined mates.

Khaelen stood proud and tall, his hair tied back at the nape. His dark clothing fit well, and was made to move with him. His hazel eyes looked at her with a softness she never thought she’d see from the Executioner. She smiled at him. Then looked to her other mate.

Dharean let his hair blow freely in the gentle breeze. He wore his traditional shifter garb of nothing but warrior boots and a tiny piece of cloth covering his private parts. A small pouch hung closely at his hips. It amazed her that both men stood exactly the same way. Feet spread apart, arms at their sides, hands coiled in fists. She knew they detested her going into the battle, and yet she was the key. Their key to winning. Without her they had no chance.

She approached them and, standing on the tips of her toes, she placed a kiss lightly

upon their lips. "I will not say good-bye." She fought back the tears that threatened her bravery. "We will win this, because we have to." Both men nodded and said nothing.

She then walked the short distance to Armin. The hulking vampire smiled innocently at her and she smiled back at him almost as if he were a child. But she knew he had great strength. He liked the boys and he would do anything Claudium ordered him to do, which was take care of her mother and the boys.

"Look after them, okay?" She placed a hand upon his shoulder. He nodded as he looked at the ground. "Don't forget if no one comes for you in three days' time, take them to the place Dharean showed you. You will be safe there." He nodded again. "Stay safe." She turned and walked away from the vampire. It was time.

\*

Dharean watched as his mate approached. She had closed her mind to both him and the vampire. He could only imagine the turmoil brewing inside of her.

Armin and the pups carried the cot with Taraema. Slowly he watched as they progressed until they disappeared in a copse of trees.

"She is troubled," the vampire observed next to him. Dharean barely spared the blood drinker a glance. "We must do everything in our power not to upset her further. Remember our truce." The vampire's statement almost sounded like a warning.

Dharean turned to him slightly then, still watching the sway of Allantra's hips as she came closer, and replied, "Do not bait me." He took a deep breath before he continued, his voice low. "We must not falter, you and I." The vampire didn't respond.

Allantra reached them, her face blank of all emotion. Dharean knew she was trying to focus on what was coming and not the emotional upheaval of having to leave her mother. Or even the fact that the very crux of this war landed on her slim, beautiful shoulders.

"I'm ready."

He knew she wasn't. He could still feel the doubt within her. She didn't feel she had enough control over her power and, truth be told, Dharean wasn't sure either. But he trusted her. Trusted with that iron will of hers she would do what was necessary when need be.

Minn, Claudium, Masque, and the twins joined them. Each had a grim but determined look upon his or her face. Dharean could sense Masque was hiding something, but he couldn't figure out what. If they survived this, he would get to the bottom of it.

"Let's go over the plan one more time," Dharean stated.

\*

Khaelen listened intently as they went over the battle plan. Still his mind was on other things. Allantra. She had the look of complete concentration as Dharean went over the plan. Even though she blocked him, he could still feel her fear, her insecurity. And in spite of it all she didn't back down, didn't give up. It was one of the things he loved most about her.

And what if they were victorious? His gaze traveled to the *Noir Brujo*. Could he spend a lifetime sharing the woman he loved? He could never leave her, and he certainly couldn't let the shifter have her. Yes, he would spend his life sharing this woman. His life without her would bring back the cold, the emptiness, the loneliness. It was but a small price to pay.

Khaelen sighed inward. Dominica was powerful, but so were they. It could be done. They would do it. Khaelen stepped forward and begin to fine-tune the details.

\* \* \* \*

Dominica stood at the opening of the caverns, allowing her grin of pleasure to surface. They were here hiding like the spineless slugs that they were. She could feel the entrance was warded with a trap of some sort. It was simple, yet ... there was something about it that made it hard to crack. But she would, and every sniveling creature inside would die by her will.

She turned away from the cave, flipping the pages of her book with a seeming carelessness. This had to end soon. She was tired of playing with these fools. It was time she wiped them out, returned to the Civil Lands, and cleansed it of its foul blood. She snorted at the absurd thought of an integrated Council. That would never happen. Not while she was alive.

“Let’s see,” she muttered to herself. “What shall I send their way to keep them occupied while I work on this ward? She held the book in both hands as she mentally flipped the pages. “Ah.” She sighed with pleasure and stopped the pages from flipping. “Easy enough to do.”

A human lackey interrupted her thoughts. “Mistress, our scouts have seen the vampire rebels and the shifters headed this way.”

“Are you concerned?” Dominica queried, lifting an eyebrow in question. “Because I am not. When I become concerned, then so shall you, human.”

The human remained standing before her, saying nothing, and Dominica let out a huff of annoyance. “Now what?”

“My men and I are wondering when you shall bestow the Eternal Gift upon us. We have marched alongside you for days and you have not mentioned it.”

Dominica bit her lip in anger. Unfortunately she needed the damn humans about as collateral, food and allies until she conquered the Civil Lands. Then she would herd them like the cattle they were to be bred and dined upon. But right now she needed the skin sacks to urge other humans to fight for her cause. Domination of the Civil Lands. She couldn’t have given them a better purpose for their measly lives.

Never would she turn them. They were not worthy and, to be truthful, humans couldn’t be turned. It was a myth propagated by the vampires in order to entice the humans to serve them willingly. A willing slave could be trusted more than a forced one. “You know the rules. Once we are done here I will turn each and every one of you. I need you all to fight by my side. But first you must prove your worth. The gift I wish to bestow cannot be given lightly. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Yes, but if you could just give my men an example. Say, turn me, to show good faith.”

Ah, but here it was, human nature at its best: greed, selfishness. This human didn’t want her to turn him as an act of good faith. He wanted his prize. He wanted to rule over his fellow humans. He was already the walking dead; he just didn’t know it yet. Then an idea came to her. She snapped the book closed and turned her attention fully on the human.

“Go get your men, all of them. You are right; it is time I turned all of you. You would make much better fighters if you were no longer human. Your frail existence

makes you a weakness to me. Go get them; it's time you all got your Eternal Gift from me."

As the human scurried away, Dominica laughed to herself. Indeed, she would give them an Eternal Gift. One that would make them definitely hard to kill.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“What is she doing?” Allontra asked in a low voice as they watched the hundreds of humans gathered around the demented vampire.

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good,” Dharean answered. His tattoos had taken on a disturbing, but familiar, sensation. He concentrated hard, but she was somehow managing to block his probes.

Dharean knelt on all fours and felt the ground. He could feel the impurity deep within. *His* land was being tainted with her evil. He could no longer abide that. Dharean closed his eyes and let his wizard senses take over.

Blood soaked into the ground. An animal bled. A sacrifice. Dharean concentrated on the blood following its path backward into the animal. It was alive, barely. He entered the mind of the beast and took over its senses. Trying to hear and understand what the beast heard.

The wards on his skin began to shift and roil. Indeed, it was a dark ritual. He saw many of the humans already had begun to stumble away from the circle. What was Dominica doing to them? Could he undo her evil? He wondered if he was too late. A roar split from his lips as his hands dove into the soil so powerfully his arms were immediately in the ground up to his elbows.

Allontra jumped from the sudden display of anger. Khaelen put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. The other vampires stood motionless, watching with rapt attention. But Dharean paid no heed to any of them. His anger pulsed in the air.

\*

From his lips words tumbled so fast and intricate it was hard for Allontra to understand him. The air around them began to heat. Just as quickly as the air heated, it cooled. Allontra watched in fascination as the tattoos on Dharean’s arms began to rearrange themselves.

“What’s happening?” Allontra whispered to Khaelen. He said nothing at first as he watched the wizard with grudging admiration.

They watched as power plowed through the earth toward Dominica and her league of humans. In seconds the ground exploded in the center of the cluster.

“At last, I believe, a little retribution,” Khaelen finally answered with a smile. No sooner had the words left Khaelen’s mouth than Dharean let loose a battle cry.

“Deal with that bitch!” Dharean yelled. “Everyone, get ready. It’s time.”

\*

Dominica was violently thrown back by the unexpected blast that erupted from the ground. One side of her face was badly burned and skin hung loosely from her cheek. Her humans, not yet fully turned, fell to the ground. Now they were truly dead, unable to be turned, unable to fight in battle. She let out a cry of rage as she saw many of her other flunkies fall like flies around her.

She probed the area and it took but seconds to pick up the powerful signature of the shaman shifter. She could feel the presence of the other vampires. But the one that irritated her more than any other was Masque. She could feel him here, though he blocked her from his mind. The coward!

It was only a small victory for the shifters, indeed. For Dominica had what she needed. She had enough walking dead to keep the small group of rebels at bay while she broke the ward. Then she could kill every remaining pureblood shifter inside down to the smallest babe. There would be no trace of the vile species left, and Masque would be one of the dead.

“Kill them all,” she ordered them through stiff lips. The undead humans all seemed to turn in unison toward the group; then, en masse, they rushed forward.

\*

“Shit.” Claudium uttered the one word for them all.

“I don’t understand. What are they?” Allantra looked at the advancing horde, wondering what she was missing.

“Ah, young one,” Minn said, stretching her limbs as she prepared to fight. Her hands ended in the claws of a badger. “They are an old nuisance. No one has performed this spell in hundreds of years, for it is dangerous to do so. They are the walking dead. Hard to kill, since they are already dead. My advice to you is, if you engage one, take the head from the body, or destroy its brain. If you don’t, they will keep coming, for they feel no pain.”

“And lucky for us,” Khaelen added, “they’re fresh so they have all their reflexes and fighting skills.”

“But they still die—” Braelius began.

“—like a human, no?” Draelius finished.

“Yes.” Claudium smiled as he watched Minn stretch.

“We can handle this,” Masque said quietly, his curved claws twitching in anticipation.

“Word of caution,” Minn said as the inhuman enemies got closer. “Don’t let them bite you. If you do, they will absorb some of your own power and use it against you.”

“This just gets better and better,” Allantra muttered.

“Remember the plan,” Dharean reminded them. “Allantra, Khaelen, we have work to do.”

\*

A thin sheet of power separated them from Dominica. She taunted them from the other side that housed the entrance to the caverns. It had been a long time since Masque had seen his mate. She was still beautiful, but like a snake, very venomous. This is what his betrayal had wrought.

He watched as the three went to a small pocket of trees that protected them from getting ambushed from behind. They were determined to get behind the protective wall. Yes, well he knew the plan, but he had made an addendum that no one else knew about. Not even Dharean. It was time he paid for his betrayal. Masque diverted his attention to the enemy that came his way. His plans for now would have to wait.

\*

“So this is it.” Allantra took a deep breath and tried not to look at the sadistic vampire on the other side trying to figure out a way to get to the shifters. Her once beautiful face scarred and bleeding, she seemed to take no heed of it. She held a book in her hand. The pages flipped madly as she searched for a counter to the ward.

“Little one, you will do well,” Khaelen assured her.

“Just stay focused. Trust Khaelen to keep you safe,” Dharean added as he looked

Khaelen directly in the eye.

*I do not need to tell you—*

*She is my heart. I will keep her safe.*

*Then we understand one another.*

*When it comes to her safety, we always will.*

Dharean nodded in satisfaction as he took Allantra by the hand and led her closer to the transparent wall blocking them. "I know this will require much. Think of our allies and direct your energy to them. I will seek our allies first. I will take from you what I need so do not worry about me. Once I have secured our allies I will join all of you."

Allantra pulled back her shoulders in determination. She could do this. She had to. Allantra kissed them both. "Let's do this. Let's get this asshole." Both men smiled at her.

\*

Khaelen looked to see Masque fighting several of the undead humans on his own. The Blood Twins were fighting several yards away from Masque. "I must jump into the fray." Then he was gone.

Dharean looked at Allantra once more before he closed his eyes and fell to his knees. He concentrated until his spirit left his body and he traveled down deep into the earth. The deeper he went, the blacker it became. He kept his mind focused, trusting every one of his comrades to do their job.

Farther he went into the earth until he came upon hard surface and knew he was on top of the den of the Shadow Demons. He floated down into their nest. At first the feeding demons did not see him. But then a growl softly floated in the air amongst the sounds of bones breaking and screams from people being eaten alive. One demon floated toward him, its eyes glowing in anticipation. "I ssee something sssweet," it whispered as it came closer to Dharean.

\*

Blood poured down his chest. None of it, thankfully, was his. He popped in and out, making sure the undead couldn't surround him and overwhelm him. He was the only thing keeping Dharean and Allantra safe. Allantra supplied them all with the necessary energy to fight so many. Dharean was looking for a way to not only stop Dominica from getting into the caverns, but getting the people out to fight. Neither of them told Allantra of the more dangerous part of the plan. She had much on her shoulders as it was. She didn't need to worry. It was a tricky situation.

The undead kept coming, never stopping until his blade separated their heads from their bodies. He wanted to look around to see how others were faring but the undead gave him no respite. His blade separated two heads at once as he delivered a mighty swing.

\*

Masque bled badly from his shoulder. One of the undead had managed to score him with its sharp nails. Without the ability to teleport like the vampires, he and Minn fought back to back, trying to diminish the amount of undead coming Khaelen's way.

With Allantra feeding them so much energy he'd never felt so alive, so powerful in his life. He would fight until no one but his allies stood victorious. His sharp, curved claws sliced through a skull and he pulled the brain out and threw it to the ground. The body fell seconds later. Masque turned to see three others quickly heading his way.

\*

Claudium and the Blood Twins went into a bloodlust as they fought. How long had it

been since they were allowed to unleash their power?

While it was true Claudium's power was useless against the dead, he knew his fighting skill more than made up for it. At times he was amazed at the almost choreographed violence of the twins. They worked as one. They had to win, though it was so few against so many. But as every warrior knew, the fight wasn't over until the enemy was dead. Claudium swiped the legs out from under an undead. As it hit the ground, Claudium stomped the head into pieces until the brain oozed out almost like a liquid onto the ground. Smiling in satisfaction, he turned to his next opponent.

\*

The strain was getting to her. Never had she experienced such a pull upon her energy. It was hard to focus with Dharean so still in front of her. Was he alive? Did the Shadow Demons somehow find a way to subdue him? What of Khaelen?

They had all agreed a mind link in this phase would prove too distracting, dangerous even. Her mind tried to wander to her mother, and she struggled to keep focused. So many lives here and in the Civil Lands rested on how well she could keep up her end of the struggle. What if she failed?

She could feel her concentration slipping and the energy began to stagger and hiccup. Panic took hold as it seemed she was about to fail them all. Sweat poured down her back and the stone on her forehead seemed heavy. She was losing it! She was failing!

*No!* she screamed in her mind. But the reality of it was different. She doggedly tried to concentrate only to have her mind plagued with panic and insecurity. Her eyes flew open and she knew in that moment she had cut off every one of her team from much needed energy.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Dharean felt the flow of energy began to slacken; then it was gone. If he didn't seal the deal with the Shadow Demons soon, he would be their next meal. Something unreadable crossed the face of the Shadow King. He had been down here long enough trying to persuade the king to send a league of his demons to the surface. They were a suspicious race.

"Are you not aware of what goes on above your domain?" Dharean added a note of surprise to his voice. He knew it would rankle the Shadow King. Dharean shrugged. "You are of no use to me, Shadow King, if you are not in control of your own domain." Dharean turned then, knowing he had to leave as soon as possible.

This spell required much energy and while in the throes of a battle he didn't have time to rest. He needed to get topside as quickly as possible. His heart pounded in sickening worry. Not for himself but for Allantra. What could have happened to her to make her falter? Did their lines fall so quickly? Was she hurt?

"Wait, *Noir Brujo*," the king said, the words ending on a hiss. "Sssomething is troubling me." Its dark, shadowy body floated ominously around Dharean's shadow spirit. "You ssay there is much to feed upon topside."

"There is." Dharean waved the shadow away as if it were a nuisance. He had to go; his energy was draining fast. "See for yourself."

"Why would thisss vampire wage war here? Why not in the Civil Landsss? What iss it you're not telling me, wizard?"

"I've told you all you need to know, Shadow King. Take it or leave it. Since when does it concern a demon the reasons why food is available?" Damn, the king picked a fine time to become curious. Dharean couldn't let on how much they needed the help of the Shadow Demons. The Shadow King would demand much more than he was willing to sacrifice.

He knew the risks of traveling so far underground by spirit. But risks had to be taken to win this war. Risks that were now manifesting itself with horrifying speed. His tattoos protected his corporeal body but not his spirit. He was becoming weaker; when that happened, the demons would be able to devour his spirit. Dharean began to chant the words that would bring his spirit back to his body.

"Wizard." The Shadow King tsK-tsked. An odd sound, given its sibilant voice. "I care not for sssuch thingsss."

Surprised, Dharean stopped midchant and looked at the Shadow King. It dared to approach him closer. So close that Dharean could see its rows of tiny, sharp, bloodstained teeth. If one could label it as such, the thing was smiling. "Then why?"

"To kill time, ass the humanssss ssay. I felt the ssshift in your power the ssame ass you. You will make a tasty dish."

Before Dharean could finish his chant, Shadow Demons descended upon him. Though in spirit form, his mouth was plugged with something vile, and he was wrestled to his knees. The wards upon his skin, imitated from his body, still burned a few of the demons but it wasn't enough to keep them at bay. "Feassst, my children," the Shadow King said in malevolent delight. Dharean howled in pain and rage as teeth savagely bit

into him.

\*

How long had they been trying to keep the undead at bay? There was no telling. Sweat poured like rain down his body. Khaelen kept a wary eye on Allantra and Dharean when he could. But then the beautiful white light around Allantra began to flicker.

As he fought, he watched in curiosity as it flickered again, then the light completely extinguished. The effects were almost immediate and he knew why. Had Allantra lost her ability to send energy during the night, it wouldn't have affected him so. But the sky boasted of the sun's appearance. He felt his reflexes slow as fatigue set in. He looked around and took note of the remaining undead heading his way.

This put the battle at a great disadvantage, for without him, Masque and Minn would fight this end of the perimeter alone. The perimeter that kept the enemy from getting to Dharean and Allantra. But that was not the only disadvantage.

He had not the power to teleport to a safe dark place; more than that, he would never leave in the middle of a battle, even if it would surely cost him his own life. Already he could feel the effects of the coming sun draining him of precious energy. What was wrong with Allantra? Had she somehow been injured? Bespelled by Dominica? Khaelen couldn't begin to guess.

His skin warmed to an uncomfortable degree and his mind searched for the memory from when he had last fed from Allantra. He had been so engrossed with the upcoming battle he had not seen to his proper nourishment. Nourishment that would have seen him through the rising of the sun. Without having fed from Allantra and being directly cut off from her energy supply, Khaelen knew it would be a matter of moments before the sun ended his long life.

And yet he could not make the decision to save his own life. He had committed himself to the battle, to Allantra. As long as he was alive to fight for her life, he would. Khaelen crushed another undead under his foot when a blow hit him from behind, then another. His senses were off and he was too slow to move. The sun made him sluggish. He tried to teleport a safe distance away to gather his wits but to no avail.

He felt greedy hands upon him, then grating, gnawing human teeth tearing at his skin. He fought hard with his remaining strength, but eventually the weight of his attackers was too much and Khaelen found himself being forced to the ground.

\*

The moment Khaelen went under in the sea of undead attackers, Claudium signaled to the Blood Twins he was going to the other vampire's aid. They couldn't afford to lose a single person. With that thought, his eye quickly strayed to Minn where the sexy, luscious shifter fought back to back with her brother. Even spattered in blood she aroused him. He definitely wouldn't want to be on her bad side.

He teleported close to the mass of bodies and began to pull them off Khaelen one by one, crushing their brains through their skulls with the strength of the Elder vampire that he was.

As soon as he saw the bloodied Executioner he grabbed him by the nape and teleported him away from the spot. He landed within feet of the synergist, who stood before them shocked, tears in her eyes. Anger welled up in him as he looked upon her. Yes, she was young and inexperienced, but they all needed her to be strong. "Fix this, or he dies. In fact, we all do." He popped out, taking Khaelen's spot to guard the triad. He

hoped they were worth all the hype. Then he dived back into the fray.

\*

The sight of Khaelen's unmoving, bloodied body brought her out of shock and self-pity. Claudium was right. She needed to fix this. She was the cornerstone to all of this. She could not fail them. She was Allantra, a Low-Ender, expected to do nothing with her life. But she had been given a destiny. Allantra checked the position of the stone and closed her eyes and opened the pathways in her mind.

*Mates. Hear me. Come back to me. I faltered once but will not do so again. Dominica grows tired, but we will not. There is more to us than the destiny before us. I love you, come back to me.*

Over and over Allantra repeated this in her mind. Waiting for a response, something that would tell her she had not lost both of her mates. The energy in her coalesced and poured from her as she thought of them both. Willing the energy to go into them. Then...

*Flammulae, I have business to attend but will join you shortly. I love you as well.*

*Little one, I am here. I would never willingly leave you.*

Joy spread throughout her at the sound of their voices. She kept her concentration even when she heard Khaelen and Dharean rise near her. Dharean began to chant, then she felt coolness upon her skin. She dared open her eyes to see clouds had covered the fresh morning sun.

"We are expecting guests, and they are sensitive to the sunlight," Dharean explained. Allantra gasped at the sight of him, bloodied with small teeth embedded in his skin. She looked to Khaelen, who had not fared any better.

"I could have used a little bit of that earlier," Khaelen grumbled to Dharean.

"What have I done?" she asked out loud. Their numerous bleeding wounds made her cringe with shame. She had done this to them as if she had stricken them with her own hand. Their deaths would have been her fault.

"We are in the midst of a battle, *flammulae*. In battle there is nothing to be sorry for but cowardice. You overcame your fears and that is why we are both here. There are more pressing matters to concern our attention." Dharean ran a reassuring hand warmly down her back.

"Think of it no more. You have done well."

"Fine, for now. But shouldn't you two be helping the others?"

A rumbling sound came from the ground. Small fissures opened and dirt spewed violently out. An eerie, spine-chilling, hissing noise wafted from the fissures.

"Ah, here comes the cavalry," Dharean announced, his gaze glued to the ground. Allantra watched in fascination as dark figures erupted from the openings. They swarmed upon the undead, causing the Blood Twins, Minn, Masque, and Claudium to draw back in stunned surprise.

"Well, it seems now that they are taken care of, we can focus on the real problem," Khaelen drawled as his gaze settled upon Dominica. "Let us tear that she-demon apart."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

She wanted to howl in frustration. Those wretched, bothersome Shadow Demons were wiping out a major part of her plan! Dominica shook it off. They were meant to be sacrificed anyway. She had much bigger designs.

Dominica spun around and looked at the entrance to the caverns. While the others had been busy with her undead, she had made much progress. True, the *Noir Brujo* was a talented one. His ward had been most difficult to break. But break it she would; she had the key now.

Dominica closed her eyes and concentrated. She blocked out the malicious stares from the triad as they tried to figure out how to break her ward. But they wouldn't. They couldn't. Breaking the ward was simple enough; however, none of them would be able to do it. They simply didn't have what it took. And if, miraculously, somehow they did ... She laughed at her own private joke and got back to the matter at hand—killing the remaining shifters that dwelled inside. She was moments from achieving her goal.

Not one shifter would be spared. No shifter to destroy the life of the superior species on the planet. They would finally be eradicated for the vermin that they were. She lifted her hands gracefully as she articulated the words of the spell. Yes, the wizard had been clever. She mimed the words with her hands unweaving the ward's delicate pattern and slowly began to render it useless.

When she opened her eyes she took a deep breath. She looked around and summoned one of the dead bodies of her servants. With a small flick of her wrist she guided the body through the opening. The body entered without resistance. The ward was completely gone. Dominica smiled and turned to the triad as they stared at her. Let them follow her if they dared. It was exactly what she needed. What she wanted. She definitely had a gift for them all. She bowed to them. Then very slowly she waved good-bye to the three and went inside.

\*

"Fuck!" Allantra said the one word they were all thinking. "I hate that bitch." She turned to Khaelen and Dharean. "We have to get to the other side. We have to find a way. They are all sitting there like ducks in a barrel."

Khaelen raised his eyebrow in confusion as he holstered his knife back into the sheath on his ankle. "You know that thing humans say." She threw her hands in the air. "You know what I mean." She turned to Dharean. "Get us in there."

"I'm still trying," Dharean responded through clenched teeth.

"Try harder," Khaelen added, looking at the rest of their party as they approached.

Dharean let out an exasperated breath. "She's good." He walked the perimeter of the wall, looking at it closely. "I'm missing something vital here. It's like this spell is meant to trigger something. But I've never seen this before. I can't be sure."

"How much time do we have before she finds them?" Allantra asked.

"Depends. She could send out a seeking spell to find them easier, which I suspect she will do. However, because the catacombs have many paths, even the spell leading her will slow her down a bit." He cocked his head to the side, thinking. "Worst case she'll find them in about ten minutes."

“That’s unacceptable,” Masque said calmly as he walked up to them. “She could massacre them in less time than that.” He moved toward the wall. Dharean stopped him with a hand to his chest. “Let me go, brother; I have to stop this.”

“Noble indeed, brother, but you are forgetting. This wall is meant to kill anyone who tries to pass through it. You will do no damage as a corpse.” He looked at the others as they gave him incredulous looks. “Despite what happened here you know what I mean. There is a way around this; just give me a moment.”

“What is the problem exactly?” Khaelen asked.

“The ward she used is fairly simple. A pup could conjure this up.”

“Then what is the problem?” Claudium asked as he carefully looked Minn over. Allantra suspected he was looking to see if she’d been injured. She stifled a smile and pretended not to notice.

“I can still feel the trap being active even after I deactivated it,” Dharean answered. “She means to lull us in with a false sense of security. But I know the moment any of us—” Dharean stilled then.

“What is it?” Allantra asked as she caught the tension in Dharean’s demeanor.

“That’s what I was missing.” Dharean swore under his breath.

“You’re going to have to be clearer than that,” Allantra suggested as they all looked at Dharean with a bit of irritation.

“The spell is deactivated. At least part of it is. Only none of us can walk through it.”

“It would make things a lot clearer for the rest of us if you could just tell us what obviously only you know.” Claudium’s voice now took on an edge.

“Any creature could walk through that right now. Except one of us: a being of magic.”

“So the spell can sense our supernatural abilities and kill us. Great. I knew she was evil and a genius, but she never ceases to surprise me.” Claudium snorted. “I should have had her killed when I had the chance.”

“Can I enter from the sky?” Masque asked.

“Can we not—” Braelius began.

“—teleport in?” Draelius finished.

Allantra’s heart sank as Dharean shook his head. “This ward is absolute. I fear trying it will get one of you killed. It has to be some sort of an animal or human. She specifically designed it this way.”

“That bloodsucker turned every human around here into the undead. I’m sure there’s not another around here for miles,” Minn chimed in derisively.

“So, if a human were here what could he do?” Khaelen directed this to Dharean.

“Simply walk through. I’m uneasy about this. If I had more time, I could tear it apart.”

“And all a human would have to do is walk through and deactivate the whole ward?” Khaelen looked at the ward a little more closely.

“I believe so.”

“What are you thinking, Executioner? Do you have a plan?” Claudium peered at him.

“Most certainly,” Khaelen murmured as he stepped closer to the wall.

“You mean to try and walk through that?” Claudium laughed. “It’s suicide.”

“Would you say, Elder, that you’ve shared every one of your abilities with us?”

Khaelen challenged. Allantra watched as Claudium stiffened. “Don’t get offended; I’m not accusing you of anything. Merely pointing out that none of us has been totally forthcoming.”

Khaelen closed his eyes but a moment. Then looking at each of the group, he stepped through the ward. “I believe you all can enter now.” The moment they all stepped through the entrance a solid wall of stone immediately sealed them in.

\*

They were all rats! Dominica looked about in distaste as she walked deeper and deeper into the catacombs. What manner of species would live in an environment such as this if not rodents?

She followed her Seeker, the glowing orb of light, as it led her to her prey. They were cowering from her like the infidels that they were. She would put all of their miserable lives to an end. Except for one. Now that she’d thought it over, death would be too good for *him*. No, she would allow him to live, so that she may punish him for the rest of his life.

She could smell their blood now. Her stomach growled in anticipation of feeding. When had she fed last? It didn’t matter; with all the magic she used she needed to feed frequently. And right now she felt ravenous.

A small pebble skittered her way and she halted and listened. She followed the sound of the uneven raspy breaths. The orb had manifested to locate a group of shifters ... Dominica spotted her prey and slowly approached. She knelt down slowly and smiled. “Well, hello, little one,” she said sweetly to the little girl.

\*

“We will worry about this later.” Dharean felt along the wall. “That vampire is very thorough. It’s another type of barrier that will take me a moment to figure out. Hopefully we don’t have death at our heels when it’s time to leave.”

“There is another way out, I’m sure,” Minn offered.

A faint wave of screams reverberated through the tunnels. “What was that?” Minn asked. Dharean listened a moment before he answered. “A victim of Dominica. We need to pick up the pace.” He started to run, following the sound of the scream.

Allantra ran as fast as she could through the tunnels. The uneven dirt floor, peppered with rocks and holes, made it a bit tricky. She didn’t want to lose the battle because of a sprained ankle. Briefly she wished the dark halls would light up and make it easier to navigate. The orb of light that Dharean produced was better than nothing, but...

Allantra faltered just a bit as the tunnel lit up with a bright light. It was almost blinding. “Turn it down a bit. We still have to follow the Seeker Dominica is using.”

Dharean turned slightly midstride. The smile on his face spoke volumes. He was proud of her. She still couldn’t control her powers, yet at times like these she was glad for whatever luck she could get.

Something lay in their path up ahead. Dharean was leading, with Khaelen close behind. She and Minn were in the middle with Claudium and the Blood Twins pulling up the rear. Masque had taken an alternate route and no one had questioned him.

They all stopped and stared down at the child. She resembled a broken doll that someone had forgotten to put away. Minn wept softly as she knelt next to the child. “This shouldn’t have happened. No child should die this way.”

“No child should die.” Claudium’s voice echoed in the halls. “Let’s keep moving.”

Minn stood and as they looked at the child, Allantra could feel anger well so deep inside her for a moment she wondered if she would lose control.

Dominica had to die.

They continued forward, following the orb. At last they spilled into the heart of the catacombs. The smell of blood hung heavy in the air and Allantra could see bodies crudely sprawled on the dirt floor. A slender figure, her back to them, stood in the midst of the carnage. Dominica had been killing them without mercy.

Dominica turned, obviously sensing their presence. Her damaged cheek gave her an eerie look that spoke of both beauty and death. Her fingers were poised in the air, ready to kill more of the shifters.

"Ah, more to the party!" she exclaimed, and cackled as she focused her attention to them. Allantra had never hated anyone so much in her life. Dharean and Khaelen stepped in front of Allantra, blocking her view of Dominica.

"How sweet, protecting the little slut."

"That's enough, Dominica!"

"Claudium? How amusing to see you've switched sides. You no longer rule me, Council Elder. In fact, now is your chance to see reason. I'll let you live if you fight by my side."

"You will never win this, Dominica. Stop this now."

"Sorry, Elder, but I have other plans."

A blast of fire shot their way but Dharean quickly put up a wall to deflect it. In seconds he returned the fire. "You can do this, little one," Khaelen said as he grabbed her hand and squeezed it. The others fanned out and each began their own personal attack on Dominica.

The Twins moved too fast to see. The evidence of their strikes could be seen on Dominica's torn dress and the blood seeping from the cuts and acid. Allantra wondered why she wasn't healing.

*She's been using a lot of power. It's draining her,* Dharean explained.

*Not fast enough.*

*She is very powerful. We need to weaken her.*

While the others were fighting, Allantra prayed that Minn could lead the other shifters out safely. They were of no use in this fight. Dominica was just too powerful and it was important that they survived. They were the last of their kind.

*Why isn't Claudium draining her power?*

*He is, very slowly. Remember the plan, flammulae. He knows what he is doing. He must be very careful to focus only on her so as not to drain any of us.*

Allantra concentrated, giving Khaelen and Dharean the power they needed to fight Dominica. It seemed no matter what they threw at her she never wavered in her attack. She could see even the Blood Twins were growing weary. Fighting magically took a toll. As synergist, she had to provide energy to them all. Allantra focused on the twins and almost immediately she could see them invigorated. She smiled to herself; she could do this.

*She is weakening, little one, just hold on a little longer.*

Allantra mentally nodded to herself. She could feel the beads of sweat as they skittered down her back. It was almost over, she knew. Sort of. Dharean and Khaelen drew heavily upon her and she could not let them down. The ground rumbled and

something began to break through the dirt floor.

“Hold on, everyone!” Dharean shouted.

They watched in horror as a scaly head surfaced from the ground. Snorting sounds soon followed as the figure arose from the earth. Thin black wings spread and Dominica laughed maniacally. “At last!” She clapped her hands. “I wondered how long it would take to raise you. I couldn’t have done it without you idiots.”

“What is she talking about?” Allantra whispered to Dharean.

“You shifters are so predictable with your primitive brains.” She laughed again, a harsh, jarring sound that set Allantra’s nerves on edge. “I knew you’d find a way to get a human through that ward, shaman. At least in this you didn’t disappoint.”

He shook his head and Allantra knew he was regretting something. “I knew something was odd about that spell.”

“Care to explain and quickly?” Claudium kept his gaze on the surfacing creature.

“It was a trap in many ways. We had to go through that ward to get inside. There was no other way. Only a human could be used to summon this thing, for it would never allow itself to be called by another creature of magic. They consider themselves superior.”

“Then why would it answer to a mere human?” Khaelen asked.

“Because it would require a favor in exchange. Something only a human could give it.”

“And that would be?” Allantra prompted, watching the creature work its way through the soil.

“A willing human female to breed with.” Dharean let out a breath. “By Khaelen walking through it as a human, it activated the summons that Dominica piggybacked onto the ward.”

“She’s crazy, but smart as hell,” Allantra admitted. “But if it doesn’t get its human bride?”

“Right now that’s the least of our problems,” Khaelen shouted.

The dragon burst through the dirt, filling the cave with its bulky, scaly blue body. It turned its large head toward them and Allantra froze in terror as the red serpentine eyes zeroed in on them. It reared its head back and shot forth a stream of fire directly at the group.

It was a hell of a time for Allantra to find out if the Triumvirate had what it took to defeat a dragon.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The dragon, completely free of soil, swished its tail slowly as if sizing them up. Dharean stood still, making sure not to provoke the lethal creature. *Do. Not. Move.* He sent the order to Khaelen and Allantra.

Dominica couldn't have picked a more lethal creature. Highly intelligent, imbued with powerful magic and, to finish it, an aggressively bad disposition. Dharean would have never dreamed of ever facing such a creature. His tattoos itched, as the aura of the beast was dark indeed.

Dharean slowly moved his hands in conjunction with the spell he recited in a low tone. Without looking, he knew the barrier encompassed everyone in the room except Dominica. She had already disappeared, leaving them to their fates with the dragon.

*Go after Minn and the others. Dominica trails them.*

*We can't leave you alone!*

*You have to. This is my fight and my fight alone. There is nothing you or the vampire can do to help me.*

*We are a triad, Dharean. We must stay together.*

*No, flammulae, we must fight together. There is a difference.*

*The wizard is right, little one. We have to help Minn.*

*Do not worry for me. If I need you, I can reach you.* He could still feel the hesitancy in his mate. By all that was him, he loved her. If he ever doubted she cared for him, he had no doubts now.

*If you die, I will kill you!*

Dharean smiled.

*Go, flammulae, and vampire, let no harm befall her.* Dharean made sure he let the threat hang crystal clear.

*She was mine before she was yours,* Khaelen answered on their private path. *I would die before harm comes to her.*

*Very well. I will distract the beast; you teleport her out of here. The others will follow your lead.*

Dharean conjured a large double-headed spear in his hand. The shine from the spears' heads caught the dragon's eye. It roared in anger at the sight of one of the few weapons that could kill it. *See my weapon, dragon,* Dharean said to the creature, knowing it understood. *See your death.* He felt the moment he was alone with the creature as his group teleported out when the dragon was distracted. Dharean conjured a body shield that he then blessed with dark gifts. The moment he let down his protective field, the dragon attacked.

\* \* \* \*

Allantra, Khaelen, Claudium, and the twins arrived at the horrific scene. Several shifters had already died at Dominica's hands. Blood trailed from her lips. She had fed on the shifters as if they were cattle. Now she had Minn in her grips. Two deep puncture wounds scored her neck in a macabre fashion. Their arrival had interrupted Dominica's

feeding. Minn's claws, embedded deep into Dominica's side, didn't seem to faze the maniacal vampire.

"More refreshments." As she spoke, blood spilled from her lips and splattered across Minn's now pale face. "I'd almost forgotten how potent pure shifter blood was." She licked her lips lovingly. "Perhaps I'm being too hasty in killing you all. I'll leave a few of you alive to savor. Maybe start a pureblood farm."

It took a moment for Allantra to figure out what had happened. One minute Claudium was there with them and the next he was gone and Dominica was plastered against the catacomb wall. Her head was grotesquely angled. Dominica began to cough up blood as she laughed.

"I'd forgotten about that particular trick of yours," she said, speaking through a gurgle. But Claudium paid her no heed. He'd moved so fast he'd caught Minn before she hit the ground. Allantra watched, shocked, as he lowered her gently to the floor, whispering in her ear. She'd only thought it was lust between the two, but apparently there was more. "Beware of caring for those creatures, Claudium. They will betray you." Dominica coughed again and more blood spilled over her lips.

Allantra moved to Claudium and Minn. She knelt and placed a hand upon Minn's shoulder. Minn blinked slowly as she tried to focus. "Look at me, Minn," Allantra said softly. "You're going to be fine." Allantra remembered what she'd done for her mother when she wanted her to rest. Allantra concentrated on the injured woman, imagining pouring much needed vital energy into her. In seconds, she could see Minn slowly recovering.

"Thank you," Claudium whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

"It was my pleasure," Allantra murmured, then she turned to Dominica. The twins were before Dominica but somehow they were unable to get to her. "How long will that hold? What did you do to her?"

Claudium did not look up at her; he stroked Minn's hair and began to wipe the blood from her face. "I've broken every bone in her body and used the sharp edges to stick her to the wall. However, I fear that it's not enough. Even as we stand here, she is regaining her power. She has already erected a safety field in front of her."

Allantra was at loss. What did it take this kill this bitch? "Why not drain all of her power now?"

"He has nowhere to transfer it," Khaelen answered. "His body would explode from the sheer magnitude of her power coupled with his own. That is why he can only drain her slowly."

The sound of bones snapping back together began to fill the room, making Allantra sick to her stomach. Dominica slid down the wall as her bones began to reknit, freeing her from the wall. "I have to admit, that was some nasty business, Claudium, but I won't take it personally. If you don't take me killing you personally."

Allantra could feel the bile rise inside of her as Dominica became whole again. It seemed this vampire was unstoppable. "Now as for you two, you're annoying me." Allantra gaped as the Blood Twins were thrown viciously across the room. Dominica ricocheted them around the cavern walls so fast they became a blur.

"We have to help them!" she screamed at Khaelen.

"I'm fine," Minn said to Claudium. "Help the twins." Claudium stood with Minn. Then he gently pushed her to the side so he could have a clear path to Dominica.

Khaelen stood by Claudium's side and brandished a knife from the holster on his ankle. "We have to end this," Khaelen announced. Claudium nodded once, his gaze going over to Minn.

Allantra poured power in the two men. She didn't know if they needed it, but she damn sure wasn't taking a chance. While Dominica was distracted with the twins, Khaelen teleported out and behind her and attempted an attack. He was thrown back against the wall so hard Allantra heard bones crunch.

But then, seemingly out of nowhere, Masque appeared and he picked up the knife that had slipped from Khaelen's grip. He walked right up behind Dominica and thrust forcefully. Allantra could see from the vampire's expression that he had embedded the knife deep inside her. A silent scream emanated from her lips; Allantra thought it was one of the most beautiful things she had seen a quite a while.

"Your fields don't work against your mate," Masque growled in her ear. He twisted the knife, causing it to go deeper.

The twins instantly stopped bouncing off the walls and crashed in a heap to the ground. Claudium raised his hand and Allantra could see a myriad of color being pulled from Dominica's body. At the sounds of steps she saw Dharean enter the chamber, bloodied and most certainly worse for the wear—but alive.

"Khaelen, execute the last part of the plan," Claudium ordered, his voice sounding strained. Allantra began to direct energy his way. "Don't, it will kill me. I can only absorb so much power," said the Council Elder.

Allantra looked to Khaelen, who disappeared. Dharean came to stand by her side.

"I must apologize for what is about to happen. Please understand it was the only solution. It was the only sensible solution." Dharean took her hand and squeezed.

"I don't understand."

"You will," Dharean reassured her.

Seconds later Khaelen, Armin, the pups, and Taraema, still on her makeshift cot, appeared. Dharean looked at her with a pleading look. She looked at Khaelen, who had an identical expression on his face.

"What's going on here? Why did you bring my mother here?"

"There is no such thing as destruction of energy," Dharean explained as Minn came over and stroked the hair of the lost princess. "It's simply transferred from one source to another. When Claudium drains Dominica he can't keep the power. It's too much. It has to go somewhere."

"Dominica has taken much from your mother for many, many years, little one. Don't you think it's time she gives something back?"

"What are you two saying?"

"We're giving her Dominica's powers. The power needs a home, or it will kill Claudium," Dharean clarified.

Allantra looked at her mother, then at Dominica. "Will my mother turn evil?"

"Power is just power. It is the user that determines its nature." Khaelen gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Let Claudium and Dharean do this."

"Do it." Allantra looked at the vampire who had tortured her mother for nearly a lifetime. Dominica had killed her father and nearly wiped out her people. She deserved to give back so much more. "Then I want to kill her when they're done."

Claudium's knees buckled under the strain of the power he pulled from Dominica.

Dharean had Armin and Khaelen pull Taraema's cot closer to Claudium. Dharean looked at Masque, and Allantra knew they communicated on their own path.

Masque pulled the knife from Dominica's back and tossed it to Dharean. When Dominica began to slide to her knees, Masque caught her. To Allantra's surprise, he cradled her in his arms in an almost loving manner. How could he still love such a vile being? Then a thought occurred to her.

"He's holding her, doesn't that mean his power—"

"Yes," Khaelen answered before she finished. "He knew that if it came to this, his magic would be absorbed as well."

"But that's not right. He's done nothing. Tell him to let her go." Allantra wanted to stop the injustice. Why should Masque punish himself for something that was not his fault?

"Masque has his own demons when it comes to Dominica. We've no right to interfere."

It seemed that Dominica was nothing but destruction and death. Allantra watched as Dharean used the bloodied knife to inscribe a symbol in blood over Taraema's heart. Claudium extended an arm toward Taraema; the woman's back bowed from the force of energy that invaded her body.

Tears welled in Allantra's eyes as she saw life being poured into her mother. After what seemed like an eternity, the ebb of power stopped and her mother settled back into a peaceful sleep. Dominica was limp in Masque's arms. Claudium staggered.

"Is the bitch dead?" Minn asked as she went to Claudium's side to help him stand.

"No. She lives still," Masque said quietly as he gazed into her torn face.

"I want to kill her." Allantra stepped forward but stopped when Masque raised his eyes to them.

"I know she has done more damage than even I could possibly know. But I will not allow any of you to kill her. She is my mate and I have failed her once. I will not do so again."

Dharean stood, tension coiled throughout his body. "You mean to go to battle against us, brother?" Dharean's voice was rough. "Is she worth that? You've seen firsthand what she has done. I cannot allow her to live."

"If Allantra went rogue, could you kill her?" Masque asked. "Would you allow anyone else to?" Dharean took a breath. "I betrayed her. I am the cause for her evil and for that I must pay as well."

"What do you propose? We cannot keep her alive; she's too dangerous," Khaelen said. "Her hatred is too great; she will try something else if she lives."

"Krases," Masque said solemnly.

"I can send her there," Dharean agreed.

"No. Us," Masque corrected. "Send us both to Krases."

"No!" Minn screamed. The pups began to sob. "You can't leave us. The pups need you. I need you."

"You will be in good hands, sister." He nodded toward Claudium. "He will look after you and the pups. I have made my decision. Do not waste your time trying to sway me."

"Don't do this," Allantra begged. She turned to Dharean, who had remained silent.

He then began to chant and Allantra recognized some of the words. "You're sending him?" Dharean continued as his hand began to work. A crack sounded and the portal to

Krases opened.

“No!” Allantra and Minn wailed. The pups cried harder.

But Masque stood, holding the limp, unconscious body of Dominica. He walked the short distance and he and Dharean stared at one another. Allantra would have given anything to know what they said. “Good-bye, sister,” he at last said to Minn. He looked to the pups and bade them good-bye as well. “Take care of my brother,” he said to Allantra, then he stepped through the portal and it snapped closed behind him.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

The silence that followed was loud. “Get these two in the other room,” Dharean said as he pointed to the twins. Khaelen said nothing as he lifted one of the twins and Armin lifted the other. The twins were conscious but in a great deal of pain. The vampires followed Dharean in silence. Allantra, not knowing what else to do, followed suit, leaving Claudium and Minn and the pups alone. Her mother for the moment would be fine.

When they entered the room it was covered in bloody symbols. The dragon lay breathing but immobile in the center of the room. Dharean had been busy in here alone. “Lay them on either side of the dragon.”

“What are you doing?” Allantra asked.

“I cannot risk killing this dragon in our realm. Its power will be released and there is no telling where it might end up. It is too much power for one; it seemed a logical choice to divide it between the twins. I trust them.”

With those three simple words, the twins looked up at him in unison. Claudium looked upon him and nodded in approval. Allantra couldn’t help but think about all the history being made on this day. She didn’t think she’d see the day when shifters and vampires looked out for one another.

Dharean went to the dragon and covered his fingertips in its blood. Then he went to each twin and drew a symbol onto their chests as she’d seen him do to her mother. “I need everyone to stay very still. Once the power leaves the dragon it will take a moment to find its new hosts. Don’t confuse it; we need to do this as quickly as possible, as dragon power is very unstable when set free.” After looking about the room and seeming satisfied with things, Dharean began the process.

\* \* \* \*

“What now?” Allantra asked, stroking her mother’s hair as they all sat around a fire. Claudium and Minn sat close to one another. The pups lay near Armin; the small group was lightly snoring. Khaelen and Dharean sat side by side, watching Allantra from across the fire. Her mother still appeared to be sleeping. Allantra couldn’t help but wonder how the power would affect her mother. She knew now that power itself was not evil; it depended on the user. She wondered how her mother would react when she learned where her newfound abilities originated.

As her thoughts shifted to newfound abilities, her gaze strayed over to the Blood Twins. Their eyes were now slivers of red; dragon eyes looked straight at her. It was as if they could see through to her soul.

Just as Khaelen opened his mouth to answer her, the campfire began to sizzle and sparks of color began to spray outward. Everyone stood in alarm. Immediately, Dharean and Khaelen were by her side.

“Settle down,” came the familiar voice, followed by a cackle. Seconds later the image of Za’rae hovered over the flames. “It’s just me. Thought I’d show up with a little style this time.” She laughed again.

The woman was definitely getting to Allantra, who found she was actually happy to see the Ancient. “Za’rae, it’s nice to see you.” Allantra smiled at the image.

Za’rae turned her black gaze to Allantra. “Ah, you actually mean that, shifter. Good to see you lived up to your potential. You had me worried there a bit.” She barely smiled in that eerie way of hers. “Ah yes, I see the changes agree with these two.” She nodded her head in the direction of the Blood Twins. “You two have quite a journey ahead of you. And here’s a word of warning: kill the redhead.”

The Blood Twins looked at Za’rae with a confused scowl. “Ah”—she waved her hand in the air in annoyance—“just trust me on this. You’ll know when the time comes. Now for you two.” She turned her attention to Claudium and Minn. “Well, all I have to say is good luck. You’re going to need it with all those pups.”

“What pups?” Minn squinted at Za’rae. “What are you talking about?”

Za’rae laughed loudly as she stared at the new couple. “I’m sure you can figure it out, Minn.” She sobered as she regarded the shifter. “I will miss you, Minn. You were like a daughter to me. A fussy and annoying one, but a daughter all the same.” Za’rae’s voice took on a sad note as she held Minn’s gaze. “I will miss you dearly.”

“Za’rae, you’re not making sense.” Minn swallowed hard as she looked at the almost transparent figure. “I will see you when I return.” She turned to Dharean. “Dharean, what is she not telling me?”

“I’m sorry, Minn.” Dharean looked into Minn’s eyes, his gaze never wavering. “Za’rae has already joined our ancestors.”

Minn let out a strangled cry as she stepped closer to Za’rae’s apparition. “She’s just projecting.” But even as she said the words, Allantra could hear that doubt laced them. “How? When?” She reached out her fingers, trailed through Za’rae’s mist.

“I finally answered the call after you all left. There was nothing left for me. The wheels had been set in motion. My people no longer needed me. You have a strong leader, and his new queen has proven herself more than worthy. Change is coming to this world and I am old. My time here has passed.”

“But we’ve only just started the fight,” Allantra protested.

“True. But there is nothing more I can do here. It is up to all of you. This old woman must rest now.” She smiled at the sleeping woman. “The lost princess is the link between the past and the present. She will need your love and support when she awakens. Her road back to sanity will be a hard one to tread.”

“We will all help her.” Khaelen wrapped an arm around Allantra’s waist.

“I will help guide her in the use of her new abilities,” Dharean added.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Allantra directed the question to Za’rae.

“What are you talking about, *flammulae*?” Dharean frowned.

“All along. She was the one who bound my powers. Think about it. You said only someone wise enough could do it.”

“Za’rae?” Dharean had a warning in his voice.

“Pshaw! Yes, I knew. I was the one who bound her powers. Her mother came to me when she was a child. I had to protect her until she was ready. Now you know all of my secrets; well, at least the ones that count. Everything has worked out. No sense in trying to lecture me now.” Za’rae looked at them all. “Finish what you’ve started. The past no longer matters, only the future. You all have work to do. Now, can we move on?”

Dharean and Allantra nodded.

“Good. As for you three.” She took a deep breath and sighed loudly. “Even I can’t tell you how to work this out. The only advice I can give is this. Persephone.”

“What?” Allantra wrinkled her brow. But Za’rae continued.

“I must go now.” She raised her thin arm and crooked a finger at Dharean. “Come.” Dharean stepped forward; the flames parted as he reached Za’rae. He went to his knees and bowed his head low. Za’rae smiled at him. It was the first real smile Allantra had ever seen on her unusual face. “I could not have asked for a better son, protégé, or legacy.” At those words, Dharean’s head snapped up in surprise.

“That’s right; they are your people to lead. You must usher them into this new age. You’ve had a rough life, wizard, but it was to prepare you for what was to come. From here on out with your new alliances, you will find happiness and peace. I give you this gift.” She reached out a finger to Dharean’s forehead and seemed to touch him. A thin spark of light passed between them. It was so quick and blinding that Allantra had to shut her eyes. When she opened them again, Za’rae was gone.

“No!” Minn cried out as she stared into the flames.

Dharean rose, leaving the fire as it had once been. “She is gone,” Dharean said quietly. “Do not mourn her for she is somewhere where she has found her peace.”

Minn shook from the force of her sobs. Claudium went to her, wrapped her in his arms. “He will take good care of her as Za’rae has stated,” Dharean observed in a low tone as he turned to the others. “As for Allantra’s question. We go back to the Civil Lands. War has already erupted and we must bring peace to this place.” He looked to Khaelen.

“It is my home.” Khaelen looked around him. “I have to end the bloodshed there. A new government must be established. I made a promise and I will keep it.”

“You should know, Khaelen,” Claudium began as he held Minn, “I have no intention of returning to the Council.” Allantra was just as shocked as Khaelen seemed to be. “I, like that old woman, have had my time. It is time for new blood in government. I will help you restore order but my life now has a stronger purpose. A deeper meaning.” He looked at Minn and smiled.

“Fair enough.” Khaelen nodded.

“My brother and I—” one twin began.

“—will aid you as well,” the other finished.

“Then we have a plan.” Khaelen pulled Allantra close to him. “Your presence on the Council will be much needed.

“I’m afraid she is needed by my side as my queen.” Dharean walked over to snake his arm around Allantra’s waist as well, and pulled her to him.

“She is needed in the Civil Lands. Allantra’s presence as a shifter on the Council will help heal the rifts between the species. She played an integral role. The people will respond to her.” Khaelen’s voice took on a hard note.

“She was the harbinger for my people. They know she also played a vital role in their freedom as well. She is my queen, after all. Queens rule by the sides of kings, do they not?” A slight sneer laced Dharean’s words.

“Uhm, Claudium.” Minn’s husky voice cut in. “Can you get us out of here?”

Claudium smiled, giving Minn a kiss on the head. He nodded toward the Blood Twins, who each scooped up one of Minn’s boys. One twin laid a hand on Armin and the other twin touched Taraema, then the six of them blinked out. Allantra took little notice

of the departure. She knew they were close by. Her anger had quickly risen and boiled over.

“Aren’t you two forgetting something?” She stepped between the two of them. They each regarded her with confused blank expressions. “I’m not a piece of meat,” she blurted when it was clear that neither of the males would get a clue. Still they looked at her as if waiting for her point. “You two are forgetting; both of you belong to *me*. *I* decide where I go and with whom.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest, basking in her victory as both men had the nerve to look indignant.

“Then choose,” Dharean demanded.

“Which of us will you accompany?” Khaelen raised an eyebrow at her.

“Well.” Allantra tapped a finger against her cheek. “A girl has to have an incentive.” She pretended to really think about it. Allantra snapped her fingers as if an idea suddenly came to her. “Whichever one of you pleases me the most will—”

Before she could finish speaking, Allantra found herself encased between two hard bodies.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Everything was a blur. One moment she was between her men and the next she was standing near the river. It was not far from where Dharean's people lived. Momentarily confused, she looked to the two men and noticed each of them wore a small smirk. Damn teleportation was something she would have to get used to.

There was no way Khaelen could have teleported them all here since he'd never been here before. The men were communicating on their own path. A thrill went through Allantra as she realized that they were getting along, becoming friends. They were finally coming to the terms that they had to equally share her.

"I wouldn't go that far, *flammulae*," Dharean drawled, listening in on her thoughts as he slid Khaelen a look.

"He takes a lot of getting used to. However, I find when we work together, we work together well," Khaelen finished. "Like this." He smiled, making her clothes disappear, only to have them reappear in a neat pile mere feet from them.

"Or this." Dharean's beautiful dark gaze zeroed in on her and she felt herself being lifted in the air and set gently in the water. The men, now also sans clothing, strode into the water after her.

Her eyes greedily drank in her men. *Her* men. Dharean, with his intricate tattoos on one arm, strode powerfully toward her. She licked her lips as his thick, muscular thighs made little work of the resistance of the water. His gaze only left her face to scorch her body. Next to him strode Khaelen.

His body, slightly more streamlined but still well muscled, showed pale and beautiful in the dark water. His hazel eyes were trained on her just as intently as Dharean's. He bore no scars, no marks, his lineage not allowing him to scar. He was so beautiful. At the same time the men released their bound hair and the only other thing that was the same about them was the way their thick, erect cocks seemed to point directly at her.

When they reached her she found it hard to breathe. Dharean was at her back, Khaelen to her front. Both men dipped their hands into the warm water and let the water cascade sensually down her body. She closed her eyes and sighed. For the first time in her life, everything was right. Dominica was defeated, her mother would be fine, and the war back in—

*We won't have any of that*, Khaelen chastised.

*We would prefer if you concentrated only on us*, Dharean stated.

*Perhaps we are boring her*. Khaelen's eyebrow arched up.

*I think we can bring her attention back around to us*. Allantra could feel Dharean's amusement.

Khaelen's large hands dipped into the water then began to sensually knead her breasts. His fingers played with her nipples, causing them to harden, then pucker. Khaelen's hot mouth caught one of the nipples and he sucked hard on it.

Dharean's wet hands began to caress her bottom. He urged her legs apart and began to manipulate the puckered entrance that Allantra was beginning to yearn to have filled. One hand reached around front to manipulate her clit.

As soon as he got a rhythm going between her legs, she could feel Khaelen trail

kisses up to her neck. His teeth sank slowly into her flesh, almost causing her legs to buckle at the sensation. His mouth worked at her neck, suckling, licking; she felt as if her skin had bursts of electricity zipping through it.

Her thoughts scattered as the men took all of her senses and turned them into heightened mush. She could feel hard arousals to the front and back of her. Moisture collected at the juncture of her thighs, and she could tell it wasn't just from the water. Her breath came in gasps. She wanted them both so badly. She wanted to feel them both stroking in and out of her. She wanted them to make her scream.

"Ask for it," Dharean rumbled behind her. "Tell us in graphic detail what you want us to do to you."

"I-I—" Allontra began, but faltered as Khaelen returned his mouth to her other nipple and sucked on it. His other hand joined Dharean's and she found it hard to produce a single coherent sentence.

"You have to do better than that, little one." Khaelen teased her, releasing her breast only long enough to switch to the other one. "Let me help you out. Do you want us to fuck you?"

Allontra's words stayed glued in her throat. Dharean pushed himself closer to her so his cock rubbed up the seam of her ass. His hot breath was at her nape and she leaned her head back to rest on his chest. But he was having none of that as his hand left the burning ache between her legs to encircle her throat. His strong hand held it firm but not hard enough to hurt her. "Tell us." His throaty demand coupled with the erotic sensation of him dominating her made her even wetter.

"I want both of your cocks inside of me. I want you both to fuck me hard." Allontra finally gushed the words out. She couldn't take it anymore. She needed them both so badly. She watched in fascination as Khaelen took his arousal in his hand and lifted one of her thighs. He didn't warn her; he just slid almost brutally into her.

Allontra cried out at the pleasure of it. Immediately he stroked in and out of her hard, definitive, and possessive. His hand held her hip firmly in place keeping her balanced, while her other leg dangled helplessly over his arm.

Her mind filled with nothing but the pleasure of his cock. *Where is my other cock?* She sent the thought to Dharean. *Here, love. Here it is,* Dharean answered as he put the mushroom head of his member at her ass and gently worked it in, using Khaelen's strokes to help push her farther and farther onto his cock.

She could feel Dharean's hand tighten around her throat, sending her excitement up another notch. Khaelen claimed her mouth hard. His tongue swept into her mouth, his sweet, spicy taste familiar and welcome. He broke off the kiss abruptly as his desire rose and he began to fuck her harder.

Dharean loosened his hold around her throat and instead urged her head back at an angle, then he too kissed her deeply. His taste was wholly masculine, unique. Allontra pushed her hips back and forth, encouraging each of her mates' cocks deep into her. The water sloshed around them as the three of them kept a frantic pace.

"Talk to us, *flamulae*—"

"Tell us what you want," Khaelen finished.

Were they kidding? They wanted her to form words? Somehow string them together when all she wanted to do was scream in ecstasy. Her passion rose high and she was so close to the precipice. "Give it to me," she cried, trying so hard to make them understand

her.

“But we are.” Khaelen laughed as he drove in deeper and harder, making her small breasts bounce uncontrollably.

“I need—” Allantra was desperate trying to find her release, but knew her mates wouldn’t give it to her unless she begged for it. The tension was coiled in her body. She needed so much. “I need for the both of you”—Allantra swallowed, amazed that she could even string together those few words—“to come.”

Dharean growled in her ear, wolflike. His breath came in short bursts of warm air at her nape as his hands took the same positions as Khaelen, allowing him to penetrate her deeper. She was lost and then both her men lost their control.

Khaelen growled as well, steady and low. They both somehow pressed closer to her until it seemed the strokes became shorter, more intense. The hardness of the two bodies thrilled her as she reached forward with one hand, backward with the other, her nails digging into the male flesh she found.

Then it happened. The energy swirled inside of her and began to build as she came nearer to her peak. She closed her eyes to avoid the blinding light of her power. Her body grew almost intolerably hot to the touch. The men moaned louder and she knew they felt the extra heat in her most sensitive of places.

She knew the energy reached out to them, its tendrils pulling them somehow closer to her, heating them as well. She felt nothing but two steel-hot cocks pummeling inside of her, bringing her to the brink of total unequivocal pleasure.

Her mind was open and free and she could feel theirs were as well. The energy sucked them in so that they now entered each other’s minds so freely. She could feel the pleasure she gave them, felt what it was like to be inside of her, and she knew they could feel what she felt.

The sensations were overwhelming and Allantra felt the first violent shudders of her orgasm as Dharean and Khaelen began to spill their hot seed inside of her. Her body sucked and squeezed their cocks of their liquid as she came. Words, thoughts, abandoned to nothing but the thrill of the pleasure. The men shouted as they came inside of her, then still pounded inside her, her walls slick from Khaelen’s orgasm, her tight entrance from behind slippery from Dharean’s release.

They all stood panting in the water, not able to move as somehow they had bonded even tighter. Allantra couldn’t remember how they ended up on the bank of the river. The soft grass welcomed them all; as her men surrounded her, she curled in tight against them.

This was how she wanted things to be for always. Dharean and Khaelen by her side forever. But she knew that, at least for the immediate future, things couldn’t be that way.

“Don’t think about it,” Khaelen suggested as he lightly stroked her arm.

“I can’t help it. It has to be done.”

“Tomorrow will come soon enough. We can talk then.” Dharean moved closer to her.

“I finally understand what Za’rae meant,” Allantra said quietly.

Dharean snorted. “You can’t always take what she says literally.”

“No, listen. I now remember who Persephone was. She was torn between her mother and her husband. She lived with her mother part of the time and her husband the other.” Allantra waited. Neither man said anything. “Don’t you see? I have to do the same but it

will only be temporary.” Silence still met her. She sat up. She should have known the men wouldn’t agree so easily.

“Think about it. Dharean, you have to help your people rebuild. Khaelen has to go to the Civil Lands. I made a promise to help with that.”

“So you’re leaving me.” Dharean stood quickly, his back to her. He shut his mind to her.

“Don’t you dare!” Allantra stood as well. “I love you. You know that. But I made a promise to help Khaelen rebuild the government in the Civil Lands. Your people need you here. Think about it. Some of them may even want to explore the Civil Lands. Khaelen and I will make sure it’s safe for them.”

Dharean turned and looked at her. Then his gaze slid to Khaelen, who’d sat up and was leaning on his elbow with a smug expression. “So he gets to have you, while I have nothing?”

Allantra closed the distance between them. “In the beginning, yes. But once things are settled, I will return to you.” At that statement, Khaelen jumped up.

“And you would just leave me—again?”

Allantra groaned at his words. This had sounded so much easier in her head.

“Look, you two.” Allantra stepped back so she could eye both males. “I can’t be two places at once. Work with me here. Right now the Civil Lands are at war. That has to be taken care of.” She couldn’t believe they were acting this way.

“Then I will come to the Civil Lands as well,” Dharean declared.

“Wizard, you should stay here and lead your people.” Khaelen looked at him shrewdly. “They need you.”

Dharean shook his head. “They will be fine. The immediate danger of Dominica is over. Claudium and the twins will be going to the Civil Lands as well. The more of us that go, the quicker we can restore order.”

“That’s a great idea.” Then Allantra sobered. “But what of my mother? She needs care.”

“I will teach your mother what she needs to know of her new powers. When she awakens she will want to be around you, Allantra. I think we all should go to the Civil Lands.”

Khaelen let out an impatient breath. “And who, Black Wizard, will guide your people while you are gone?”

“Ah, vampire, they will be fine. As a matter of fact, I will give them the choice to stay or come fight with us. After all, they stand to benefit a lot from this war. Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“Just out of curiosity, what did Za’rae give to you?” Allantra asked, feeling a little sleepy all of a sudden.

“Her gift of seeing into the future. Though I suspect I cannot see my own or any of ours. But it will certainly help when I lead my people. When *we* lead our people.”

She looked at Khaelen, then Dharean, and knew no man would give the other quarter when it came to her. Though she was a little irritated, she was also very flattered. And she was also very loved. The road ahead was still rocky. The two men would be almost unbearable in their quest to dominate the other and have her to himself. But that was fine by her.

Allantra settled down next to Khaelen and extended a hand to Dharean to join them.

Without hesitation he settled down next to her. Allantra smiled to herself. Her mother would be on the mend soon. Dominica was defeated and at last there was a tentative truce between the vampires and the shifters. Change was coming, and she was the harbinger of it all. The smile remained on Allantra's face as sleep began to overtake her as she reclined between her destined mates.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

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

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