



RJ SCOTT

KIAN

THE FIRE TRILOGY
BOOK I

KiAΠ

BOOK I OF THE FIRE TRILOGY

RJ SCOTT

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DEDICATION

This is Gayle's story.
Gayle, who makes me reach way higher than
I would ever think to reach on my own.
Thank you.

Also for Dad
Mum was right, he would be proud.

CHAPTER 1

"Kian, you can't do this." Darach was beside himself. One hand twisted into his hair, the other reached instinctively to grab his best friend's long, dark coat, although Kian knew there was no actual way Darach could reach through his shield of green Fire. "Please! You can't go."

"Goodbye, Darach," Kian replied sadly, the heat of the green around him almost at the Tipping Edge, the point of no return. He didn't actually want to leave Darach; if he'd had his way, he would have stayed and grown old by his best friend's side. From the first day they'd met, they had been friends and companions. All the way through to the last day of the Learning, and on into adulthood, they had remained together.

Leaving Darach was the hardest thing he had ever had to do. There was no other way. He, and only he, could sort the mess out— the only one willing to clear up what had happened and put things aright.

"No! Wait for me!" Darach screamed the words so they could be heard over the flames. "Just... please, Kian. Wait two more days!"

Kian shook his head; it wasn't possible to wait. He had borne his own Fire when he turned twenty-one only a

few days before today. Darach lagged behind him. Younger than Kian by exactly two weeks, still fourteen nights away from reaching twenty-one and receiving his own Fire, and a different man for the lack of it.

"I have to do this today. Darach, you know I must stop the fire thief, the *Danio chwiwgi*." Kian had explained so many times, but he knew Darach had never really accepted what Kian had to do. Now Darach stood just outside the Fire ring, his hand extended, pleading for Kian to stay, and Kian had to harden his heart. Darach feared for him and what lay beyond the Gate. It was written in stark detail on his face. Kian didn't really have to say a word; Samhain in the other world was the night when the skeletal barrier that hid their space from the human eyes would be at its thinnest. The morning had just crept across the horizon, but here, and on the other side of the Gate, just as the walls began to thin, Samhain Morn opened the way for Kian.

He needed to prepare for the night and must find his Hunter. Underneath all of that, Kian knew two things. Samhain constituted the "when": he, Kian, the "who."

Last Samhain, the *Danio chwiwgi*, the Shifter, had used stolen Fire to force himself into the other world—the very Fire that the *Danio chwiwgi* had thieved from Kian's uncle, tricked from him, taken by means both devious and

foul. The Fire was also his uncle's life. It lay at and protected the core of him and had been torn by a compelling spell so ancient no one in the Council had known of it, nor had any way of counteracting it. The magiking had sealed Kian's uncle's fate instantly. Without the Fire, a man became a shell. His uncle died a broken man only two moons after the Fire had been pulled from him. The *Danio chwiwgi* had murdered the only man remaining of Kian's blood then used the Fire to run to the other world, escaping justice, living a life in another place.

"This is just for vengeance. You know this is wrong, Kian!" Darach shouted, but Kian saw the face of the boy he called brother starting to fade into the green as surely as day darkened and became night. The magik had begun; the heat and spark of the burning pricked his skin. He looked down at his fingers and saw the hum of energy around him as he added the last of the words he knew by heart... *cymerwch fi yno gyda'r hedfan o dân... cymerwch fi yno gyda'r hedfan o dân...*

The next step would be his last in this place, and it would take him to the other world, where revenge waited, where the *Danio chwiwgi* hid amongst men. Where, if his destiny ascribed to him as a mere babe could be believed, he would meet the other half of his soul. The one spoken of in poems and stories. A brave man who would complete

Kian

RJ Scott

him and share his Fire.

His Hunter.

CHAPTER 2

Regan Campbell nursed his first and final whisky, just as he had been doing for the last twenty minutes. Most of those had been occupied in watching the young woman he had eyes on wend her way from her table to the back room. He knew exactly what happened in the back room through the black door marked *Private*. He doubted, at the same time, that anyone else would suspect anything other than drugs or illicit sex or something of that ilk, if they even bothered to wonder in the first place. Sometimes it was very difficult to isolate the ones he hunted from those who had more average vices. Tonight was no different. The day before Halloween and it seemed that every crazy within a ten block radius of Murphy's Bar had congregated there with him, the crowd ebbing and surging to the bar, the noise levels almost intolerable.

He had already sized up and dismissed two low-level targets. Sycophants, mere newborns that sidled, whined, and pulled at the woman who appeared all big city grace and style. The woman herself? Now she looked different. Icy blonde and slim, in black pants and a white loose shirt, she occupied the center of attention, and she played the crowd well. The two with her had risen to follow as she stood, but a single flick of the wrist commanded and

they obeyed, sitting obediently. They looked young, the mid-twenties that the victims always were, and they would be easy to take out. She, on the other hand, could possibly cause him to break a sweat. He didn't like that and didn't want to ruin his third shirt of the day getting covered, literally, in blood and shit, so he had to move quickly and efficiently. He waited for her to come back out, taking a single sip of the drink that burned his throat as it slid down.

"You here in town long?" Regan chanced a quick glance at the owner of the deep voice. Tall, dark, and handsome with a semi-vacant expression— just the way he usually liked them, head to toe in cowboy, which he guessed he should expect in the back end of Bumfuck, Montana.

"Nope," he said firmly, turning his attention back to his whisky and his careful watch on the movements of his target. The sound of the door opening, synchronized with the huff from the guy who stood next to him and clearly wanted in his pants. Regan reacted to the first and ignored the second. He imperceptibly straightened his spine, curling up from disinterested to ready in seconds. No one else watched her, or her pals, so no one else saw anything amiss. They were simply a couple plus one who sat and drank beer. They didn't look different and didn't stand out, but Regan knew exactly what lay under their everyday

outward appearance.

Death. He knew how to deal with death. His father had shown him; the skill had been passed down through the generations. Experience showed him the words to use, the actions to carry out, to render the Nameless non-existent. He hadn't chosen his vocation; it had chosen him. A trust fund passed down to him meant he could focus on the job without worry or distraction.

The Nameless were always weaker when they had just fed, and he knew that is what she had been doing. He caught her expression as she passed. She had a dazed look, a high, and he reacted almost before his subconscious alerted him. Throwing down a ten on the bar with casual thanks, he slid off of the stool, shrugging his jacket back into place and sliding his hands into deep pockets.

"Hey, gorgeous." He interrupted her walk back to the table, moving bodily into her way. She looked at him, eyes unfocused, and blinked, then smiled; it was so easy to distract them when they were high.

"Nice." The word meant nothing to him. The Nameless always seemed to find him nice, or sexy, or gorgeous, or fuckable. Whatever. Their interest lowered their defenses, which meant that, at the end of the day, Regan got the job done.

"Wanna?" So smooth, so easy to get her to turn and

go back to the room she had just left, the sycophants scrambling to follow their mistress as he hoped they would—it made his job easier. The main room heaved with bodies. No one would register him slipping through the crowd to the door marked *Private*, much less see him entering and then closing that same door as a barrier to what he was doing. Disregarding the presence of the other two, she draped herself over him, grinding herself against his thigh, already rubbing herself to another high. He didn't even look at the rest of the room, or the two who stood at the door. He had this situation, and her, under control.

Regan had had a call from a town seventy miles south, so he wanted to end this hunt efficiently and quietly. Waiting for the next feeding cycle at the end of another three hours wasn't an option, and to be honest, the barman outside had been starting to look a little pissed. If there was anything Regan knew how to do well, it was to stay inconspicuous and off radar. He wanted to be remembered as the guy in the jeans and jacket who drank his whisky and paid his bills, not as the creepy guy who didn't drink anything and stared a lot.

He needed to move now, and he slipped the razor sharp, blessed silver knife into her side more quickly than she could react. Her plush mouth formed a surprised O, but she made no sound as the knife twisted into her bloodless

body. Instant death claimed her too quickly to allow conscious thought on her part. She blinked once as the holy poison took her from this world to the next; then she slumped to the floor as if asleep. The two creatures with her paled; without her they were nothing, and agitation built between them like a heavy cloak, pulling them down and away. They fidgeted at the door and muttered incoherently for a few seconds, and then finally, their empty bodies fell to the floor next to her. They seemed, for all intents and purposes, to be sleeping, or at the very least, drunk and passed out, but Regan knew they had drawn their last breath. The symbiotic connection they had to the ice bitch had been severed, and the very essence of them had drained as a result of the loss of connection to their host.

With a flick of his wrist, he cleaned the knife on his coat and slipped it back in his pocket. He turned slowly to check out the room fully. If there was anything left in here alive he needed to find it. The Nameless clearly had a victim that they were using, and he needed to assess how far gone that human was. See if there was any chance of survival.

The victim lay curled on her side, facing the door, pale, but bearing absolutely no visible sign of cuts and bruises. It was always this way; the Nameless ones never physically scarred their victims. They didn't feed on blood

or skin. Regan assumed they somehow altered human chemistry, changing their victims even as they fed. He poked at the unconscious form with a booted foot, and she made no sound, nor did she move. He could see that her open lifeless eyes were already tinged with red. He had been too late. She was a newborn, half unchanged, and half changed. The Nameless had done its worst, and he had no choice. She hadn't lost her humanity enough to die with the ice blond, but her bloodshot eyes showed that she was too far gone to be pulled back. He withdrew the knife from his pocket, sliding the blade across her throat, ending her dual existence completely and efficiently. He sent a quick prayer over her body to whoever listened, and then he cast the words his father had taught him.

"Anfona baci chan whence daethoch. Bod cerddedig a adfer na hychwaneg."

Even as he said the words, foreign to his own ears even now, he translated them in his mind: *I send you back from whence you came. Begone and return no more.* The words seemed to have more meaning when he translated them into his own language.

A shimmer of light. A depression in the tension in the room. Then nothing. All four beings thrust away from this world, to where he didn't know or care. He was way beyond thinking about where the Nameless actually went.

He slipped back out into the main bar. In an instant, he'd merged with and become part of the crowd, and in minutes, he stepped outside into the frigid air. Within five, he'd begun his drive away from the small town.

He needed sleep.

CHAPTER 3

Kian crossed very close to where he had wanted to be, the green of his Fire diminishing and leaving him standing in the dark on the side of the mountain that formed the root of the Gate. A vista of trees and pathways lay before him. The journey itself had been as easy as walking from one room to the next. He just wished with every fiber of his being that his heart felt the ease his body did. Duty had made him leave his best friend behind. He'd had no choice, but the separation hurt nevertheless.

Cold air, the promise of snow in its scent, swirled around him, and he set out to find the cabin that promised warmth. It wasn't far, and hesitating, he looked around him slowly as he stood on the front step of the place that had been the other world's version of his home. He spent a few minutes soaking up the cold and the sensation of unease that pervaded his bones.

Nothing about the small neat cabin suggested he had anything to fear. Half a mile into thick woods, the rustic home bore runes and carvings not visible to the naked eye, protecting his kind for many centuries from the other-worlders that may have hunted them. The wards that wrapped the aged wood and heavy stone were cast in Fire tinged with the green of his family— both familiar and a

warning at the same time.

By his reckoning, it was early morning, and exhaustion stole over him. He pivoted to check out the area close to the cabin. There were no signs of disturbance, simply tracks of animals that crossed the snow in front of it, but thankfully, no curious people.

Once he had confirmed with his five senses that the area was secure, he cast a quick search about him. The casting was nothing major, just enough to gauge any emotions that had left imprints on the fabric of the space around him. Violence appeared absent, and he sensed no echoes of danger or death. The only thing he could feel was the sensation of being watched, and he would have been stupid not to have expected that. He wasn't stupid; the *Danio chwiwgi* would be aware of his crossing over, and woodland creatures would be curious as to what manner of wanderer a new visitor might be.

Finally, with all as it should be outside, Kian opened the door to his new home. He leaned against the doorjamb, suddenly and completely overwhelmed by the darkness within and the memories he needed to push to the back of his mind. He had work to do, and it wasn't going to get done by standing and staring. A single thought and Fire started in the grate, at first his green then, as tinder and wood caught, turning to the oranges and reds of a sunset.

The flames provided enough light for him to swing around in a circle to check on each corner. Nothing had been touched, the wooden furniture solid and steady, the rustic interior matching the outside. There was a small kitchen area, little more than a stove and a sink, with a few cupboards over it. Could it be possible that there was something edible in one of them? He wasn't exactly hungry, but he hadn't eaten in days; nerves at what he had to do, of the choices he had to make, making him nauseous. He really needed to eat if he wanted to keep his energy levels high enough to defeat the *Danio* and send it back. He rummaged in cupboards seeing nothing but space, and dampening down the hope that any stray other-worlder had left anything edible if they had entered the cabin to sleep. Instead, his only option would be to eat the *flailting* that he had packed from his own kitchen, a dry cracker that traveled well but that tasted like dried nothing. Fed, if it could be described as that, he drew water through the old system attached to the well, waiting until it ran clear and cupping his hands under the flow. The taste of it was heaven, crystal clear mountain water that swam with minerals, ice-sharp on his tongue.

Meditation came next, incantations and chants that slipped, effortlessly and poetically, from his tongue, exercises that kept him mentally aware and agile. The exact

words he needed to use to defeat the *Danio* were already there, each syllable carved into his thoughts with exacting precision. They were the words his uncle had written for him, only days before the connection he had with the *Danio* had turned to murder. His uncle had trusted the feckless, unprincipled creature who had taken the appearance of a man with looks and attitude that pleased his uncle; and he had paid for it with his life. Kian would not make that same mistake.

He drew his long coat around him and lay back on the small bed in the corner, the Fire a comforting reminder of home. The thoughts he usually shared with Darach back at home, the connection that they had, had been severed. As cleanly and precisely as if a medic's knife had done the work as soon as the Fire magik took him away. Kian felt the loss keenly, and he lost himself in thoughts of Darach, who would be receiving the Fire in two days at his birth celebration and who would be bereft without Kian there. Kian's eyes began to sting, and his throat was thick with emotion, his head so empty without Darach's thoughts interwoven with his.

"I miss you, brother."

CHAPTER 4

Regan ordered one of everything, an easy order, and the waitress hovered, clearly hoping for a big tip before he left.

"You're a fine young man," his mom had told him the day he left home. "You'll have them all falling over themselves to have you."

"Who needs anyone else when I have you, Momma?" he had replied to her words; her eyes had been filled with laughter and sorrow in equal measures.

"God speed, Regan." She had turned from him then and shut the door, hiding her grief at his going at only sixteen, starting out on the path that he had decided would be his life. He knew what she thought —she had made it very clear— but it didn't change his mind. He had a whole damn world to explore.

That included small cafés that served breakfast all day, with waitresses who knew everything and short order cooks who cooked the food he adored. This one sat on the outskirts of Enner Falls, a small town in the foothills of Wolf Mountain, the peak of the Gallatin National Forest. The diner had the quickest service he had seen in months; and in the space of ten minutes, he had a plate placed in front of him piled high with bacon and pancakes. Regan

dug in, knowing that the rest of his meal was on the way.

He had traced little more than rumors to end up in Enner Falls, and here he was, on All Hallows Eve, under a full moon, wondering what the hell he was going to find. He expected more than the average crazy to come out and play. At Halloween it was difficult to pull out the real threat from the sugar-high hype. His research had led him initially to the town across the valley. That had been last night and the blond in the bar. There had been ten unexplained disappearances in this area over the last year. Given the proximity to the Nameless he had dispatched last night, he would normally have ascribed the disappearances to that case. He would have decided that he had dealt with the Nameless responsible and moved out of state. That is what he did: destroy the threat, send them on, and move on himself, staying below the radar.

Call it instinct, call it self preservation, but something made Regan stop in Enner Falls. He had survived much based on his instinct; it had never led him astray before.

Halfway through his bacon, which incidentally was the sweetest yet saltiest bacon he had ever tasted, the door opened, a blast of frigid air swirling into the warm inside. Regan looked up. That same instinct that made him stop in Enner Falls had him categorizing every newcomer,

analyzing seating, and being very aware of each vehicle in the lot outside. Everyone so far, from police officer to teacher, had passed by him and nothing about them flagged his concerns. The new arrival though? He was a different story.

The stranger was tall, with short platinum blond hair, windblown and tousled and falling in disarray around a young elfin face. He didn't fit, in his long black coat, not in this diner full of men in jeans and plaid shirts, and every red warning light Regan had inside him switched on full. Deliberately, Regan placed his knife and fork to the side of his plate. He chewed his mouthful of bacon and swallowed before slipping his hand under the table to close around the knife he had on his lap under his jacket. Details about this stranger screamed *wrong* in his gut, and Regan was a master at following his gut feelings.

The new arrival cast his gaze around the diner, resting briefly on Regan, offering the other man a chance to see a flash of green in intensely colored eyes. Green Eyes couldn't be any more than twenty and was clearly some kind of model wannabee, or an actor, maybe. Whatever he was, he stuck out like a sore thumb in his black duster and dark pants. The long coat seemed to be leather, but not rigid cowhide. It was supple, molding against the man like a second skin and then flowing out to just above knee

length. He was an impossibly pretty man and being him was clearly not the way to avoid people checking him out. Still, he didn't seem uncomfortable as the hum of casual conversation dropped and everyone just stared; he simply looked back at everyone who looked at him. Regan tensed as that impossibly green gaze swept back towards him and stopped. The other man blinked steadily and offered a small smile, but Regan wasn't in the mood for smiling. The smell of a possible hunt tickled his nostrils.

Green Eyes wasn't a Nameless. Regan knew the signs for one of those bastards, from the vacant expression to the predatory, sexual gaze. But he wasn't normal either.

Regan pushed his chair back a few inches, giving himself room to move should he need to, as the other man ordered water and some breakfast. He was ready to act, analyzing the distance between a potential kill and a subsequent run to his car. It wasn't far, but he wondered how he was going to be getting out of this one without people recognizing him as *that guy who killed the man in the long black coat*.

The unfamiliar man moved to his corner of the diner. He stopped dead center in front of Regan. A moment of charged silence followed as his eyes focused intently on Regan and he frowned.

"Regan Campbell?" The words were softly spoken,

and there was an air of uncertainty around the stranger; the question in his words screamed that he wasn't entirely convinced of his assumption.

"Who's asking?" Regan was very cautious with his words, his fingers flexing and tightening around the handle of his blade. The other man tilted his head questioningly, and then flicked a glance towards the empty bench across from Regan. *Can I sit down or not?* Regan said nothing. Evidently the stranger took this as a tacit invitation to sit down, folding six foot of lean male and long black coat into the booth opposite. He placed the water in front of him and extended a hand in greeting.

"Kian ap Rhys," the stranger offered simply in a lyrically accented and soft voice. Then he waited. Regan didn't immediately take the hand; he tried not to touch any Nameless before he killed them, his reaction a mix between self-preservation and distaste. He suddenly wasn't certain he didn't have something like a Nameless sitting opposite him. It was an impasse. Regan didn't want to shake his hand, and this Kian guy was evidently not getting the hint. Close up, Regan could see that Kian's eyes were not just green, but an intriguing mix of greens and silver flecks, bright *right in your face* jade and mesmerizing sea green. There was something there, in those sea and starlight eyes, something akin to innocence or trust. Abruptly compelled

to respond, Regan found himself extending his hand. He wasn't one to play games, and clearly this Kian guy knew his name, so there was no point in either of them pretending he didn't.

They touched, Kian's grasp firm, and Regan felt startled at the connection there in the warmth of the other man's grip. He sensed a certain peace wash over him and, unnerved, he released his hold and sat back. His fingers tingled with the spark of electricity that had passed between them, and he closed his hand into a loose fist, trying to ignore his treacherously hardening dick. What the hell was going on that his body was pushing through the flight or fight he usually focused on?

"I need your help, or rather, I think we need each other's help. I don't know yet," Kian offered firmly.

Regan narrowed his eyes. He didn't leave trails; no one knew who he was, or what he did, so how the hell did Mr Actor/Model here think he could be of any help?

"You want to explain what the hell you mean?" *Cut to the chase is the best way.*

"I know some things about the ones you call Nameless. I could give you some ideas of how to track them." Regan tried to hide the combination of shock and disbelief that shot through him, way behind his schooled expression of *I don't care*. This guy not only knew *him*, but

he knew about the creatures Regan hunted? Something was seriously wrong here, and immediate instinctive barriers sprang into place. Defense. Avoidance. Get the fuck away.

Disgruntled, he didn't even answer, simply swallowed the remainder of his coffee in two gulps and stood, grabbing at the jacket and ensuring the knife remained hidden. He didn't even say goodbye. He just left, without a word, nothing to indicate he had been there except the money he placed on the counter. *Kian whatever* didn't follow, and it was only as Regan drove out of the town that he realized he was shivering. Well, that was a new one—he wasn't even cold. Pure emotion coursed through him, concern and distrust and the faint shivering of fear.

He didn't know who the hell that stranger could be, but he added another emotion to the list of things he was feeling after he had touched him. Craving. *Stupid*. Desire was unwelcome baggage on his back. Okay, it had been at least two months since he had seen anything like action, but, fuck, there was no way he was lusting for a man he had met perhaps ten minutes ago. He palmed his dick which was half hard at the memory of those striking eyes and that soft hair. Shit, since when were blond twink models his kind of thing?

Firmly dismissing his own body's interest, he

ruthlessly pushed down the tension in him. He needed to hole up for the day, before dark took hold of the town, and he could return to hunt the Nameless he had been tracking. He followed battered wooden signs for *The Falls* that he assumed gave Enner Falls its name; and they took him down a short but convoluted graveled road out of town and away up towards the base of Wolf Peak.

CHAPTER 5

Finally, Regan pulled off of the road and parked the Jeep behind trees in a small roadside picnic area that had been closed for the winter. Anyone passing would not be able to see him and feel compelled to stop and ask if he needed help or was lost. He checked the time. The sun hung at least an hour off noon, and he sighed. Waiting around in this job was sometimes close to soul destroying, but was a necessity for success in everything he did.

Why the Nameless fed at night was a mystery none of his ancestors had ever managed to solve, but, as a result, the dark was as much his hiding place as theirs. Why they only fed on adults and not children was another enigma. On Halloween, it was something he was grateful for. He shuddered to think of what Halloween Eve would become if the Nameless fed on the young. It would be a horror movie.

Boredom and, strangely, irritation had him pulling a folder of papers out of the Jeep and stomping over to a small circular clearing that smelled of autumn, the leaves on the ground a tumble of gold and red. Snow had filtered through the straggly canopy of bare branches and pine trees to leave a dusting on the wooden tables in the picnic area by the falls. It made for a comfortable, if slightly damp,

carpet to sit on, and he settled at a table. The constant roar of the waterfall curtain was a welcome friend. Intel needed to be rechecked, his blade had to be sharpened, and he desperately needed to find his center after his brush with the strange guy in the diner. He spread the papers, a mix of his own notes and newspaper reports, on a piece of plastic bag from the Jeep.

People had been disappearing all along the base of Wolf Mountain, starting about ten months before and, for some reason, peaking each month at the full moon. Of course, rumors of a werewolf abounded, but that was as ridiculous as blaming it on vampires, because neither of them actually existed. All the signs pointed to a Nameless infestation, and tonight, All Hallows Eve, the next full moon on the chart, he needed to clear them out.

"See, I really need to talk to you." The voice was crisp and slightly accented.

He sprang to his feet, his knife in his hand, adrenaline sparking in his body, to face the man who he had last seen in the diner, Kian, his arms crossed and a patient expression on his face. Regan looked past him. He couldn't see a car. He would have heard a car even over the noise of the falling water. Fuck, he should have heard footsteps or something. How the hell could he call himself a Hunter? Then the thought came to him. How exactly had

Kian managed to catch up to him, some six miles out of town in the space of a few minutes?

"What the fuck?" To be honest, that was the most coherent response Regan could manage, facing the man who had somehow achieved the impossible— tracked him down, caught him, and then surprised him.

"My name is Kian ap Rhys," the stranger introduced himself again, "I know who you are, Regan Campbell. I know you hunt these things that kill. As your father did before you and his father did before him—"

Regan didn't want to hear the whole *great-grandfather* crap timeline and stopped Kian with a raised hand. A strange fear curled inside him as he listened to the movie set reject's words. He twisted the knife in his hands, the intricate scrolled words on the hilt sparking, gripped it tighter, and took one step towards the tall slim stranger. His lips thinned as Kian held his ground and seemed not at all disturbed by Regan's aggressive step forward.

"You clearly know who *I* am." Regan had two questions and he needed answers now. "How do you know and why the hell would you want to know?"

"The how is easy. My family has known of your family for many years. The why... well, I think that is much harder to explain." Kian stopped, shaking his head and sighing, and Regan grew irritated at the silence

"I'm listening," he prompted impatiently.

"I have my own reasons for being here. I have something I need to do, and I only have one night to do it in."

"That doesn't answer the question. Could you be any more cryptic? How the hell does what you need connect with what I do?"

"I need you. You need me."

"I kill the Nameless fine on my own. I don't want, or need, someone else."

"There is another." Kian looked uncomfortable, worrying his lower lip with his teeth, before crossing to the nearest tree and sliding down the trunk to sit cross legged at its base. He'd turned his back to Regan as he walked over, an action that caused Regan to relax, by just the merest fraction, his tight hold on the knife. He abruptly felt like he should do the same as Kian so he crossed to the next tree over, close enough to Kian to talk. He rested a hand on the rough bark, then used it to lever himself down, stretching his legs in front of him. The concessions he made to the Hunter inside him were basic: his knife remained in his hand and he maintained a hyper awareness of his surroundings. He didn't understand why he had bothered to give Kian the time of day; but he had, and it felt inexplicably safe to do so.

"Go on."

"My uncle died ten months ago, but he had been dying slowly for a year, since the night you call All Hallows Eve. He was... hurt...by someone on that night, and something was taken from him, a necessity for him to live. Without it, he became lost to us all."

"Okay, stop there." Regan held up a hand, the hand with the knife in it, pushing threat into his voice. "Start again and, this time, leave out the mysterious bullshit mumbo jumbo."

CHAPTER 6

Kian didn't know what to say. Regan deserved the truth if there was any expectation of getting his help with the *Danio*. He needed the other half of him, his bonded mate, if there was any hope of having the strength to take back his uncle's Fire. So, it was essential to start explaining this, in detail, with reasons why they had to half-bond and why Regan had to join Kian in his quest. Instead, he blurted out the one thing that was guaranteed to drive Regan away in a matter of seconds.

"We are destined to be bonded mates." *Gods*. Why did he say that? Now Regan would just consign him to the Crazy pile.

Regan didn't move. Not one muscle. He just stared, and Kian dropped his gaze uncomfortably under the steady scrutiny of deep brown eyes. He looked up again. Those eyes held a myriad of emotions, including disbelief, if Kian read that right. It didn't help that the longer Regan sat still the more Kian could take his fill, memorizing the face and features of his bond-mate, and more confusion filtered into his brain.

Regan was the diametric opposite of himself, shorter where he was tall, dark-haired where he was blond, settled and focused where he sparked inside with intensity

and the need to move.

On the day of Kian ap Rhys's birth, the Council had told his father of the destiny that awaited his son. His father had mocked the seers. *No son of mine will cross to the other world and blend with a man.* Destiny had a nasty habit of biting when you weren't looking though, as evidenced by the fact that he now sat opposite the very man he had been promised to so long before.

He sensed the movement even as energy coiled inside Regan, and the knife moved through the air towards him, Regan uncurling and following in a millisecond. The Fire was there in that same instant, a barrier of emerald and sea green that blocked the knife and the man with an impenetrable wall, thrusting both back until Regan, knife by his side, was thrown bodily away from Kian. *Gods.*

Pushing the Fire away, Kian scrambled over to Regan, who lay unmoving, his eyes open, staring up at the canopy of trees.

"Regan, I'm sorry, are you—" Kian touched his intended mate, wincing at the spark of energy that still coursed through him.

"What. The. Fuck?" Regan bit out, his entire body trembling, and his eyes turned to face Kian.

"Can you sit?" Kian needed to get Regan up and breathing correctly. The Fire had hit him dead on; Kian

knew a lesser man, a man not his mate, would have been struck dead. Regan grumbled his annoyance as he allowed Kian to help him up, and Kian was never happier to hear the threats that Regan muttered under his breath.

Coherency proved he was alive.

"What just happened?" Regan spat out as he slid, using the nearest tree as a leaning post, slumping against the rough bark and drawing his knees up to rest his hands on.

"The Fire. I have no control. When the Fire thinks I am being threatened, it just—" Kian's voice trailed off, and instead, he shook a hand in a gesture that he hoped Regan would see as a combination of apology and explanation.

"Fire." Regan's voice remained steady, but Kian could see past that to the man beneath, the man who had a healthy amount of fear swirling inside him. Kian shuffled the few feet towards his mate and sat cross legged to one side. Feeling more nervous than he thought he would at exposing this part of him, he held out a hand. As natural as breathing, he allowed a small amount of Fire to travel inside of him to light a small flame in his palm.

"We call it Fire; it is the source of our magiking."

"Magik?" Regan ran an unsteady hand through his short spiky hair, gripping at it, like that would help him understand.

"I am not from your world, Regan Campbell." To his credit, Regan didn't move or run screaming to the hills.

"I'm shocked." Regan's voice held a derisive quality, sarcasm layered over fact.

"To us, this," Kian waved expansively at the forest around them, "is what we call the other world, and we watch you as much as we can manage. My world is..." Kian had practiced these words so many times, but still they felt like ash in his mouth. "I guess the easiest way to explain is that it is parallel to this world, a phase step away from your time and place. It is this place, but it is a shared space."

Regan still listened, and he wasn't stopping Kian. That was a good sign. Right?

"In my world, when a man reaches his twenty-first year of life, he is gifted with his Fire, his mark of maturity, for want of a better word. This Fire remains with him until the day he passes on. If a man was ever to lose his Fire before his natural span of years is crossed, he dies, Fireless and too soon. That is what happened to my uncle, but he didn't just lose his Fire. It was magiked from him by a *Danio chwiwgi*." Kian emphasized the sound of the letters, Dan-yo-shogi.

"A *Danio chwiwgi*?" Regan had clearly focused on the bad guy in the wash of confusing explanation, which

was definitely a good sign.

"It is a beautiful world, Regan, my world. Full of magik. Peaceful. For every bright place though, there are those that are equally dark. The *Danio* is a remnant of a much older time, before the Council brought peace." He moved closer, now only inches from touching Regan with his fingers, craving that contact. It was almost impossible to be this near to his mate and not to take him into his arms. In his world, they would have bonded already.

"Go on," Regan pushed, and Kian realized he had stopped and just stared at Regan's mouth. He shook his head to clear it. He couldn't let the mating pull him away from what he needed to do. He needed to focus. Concentrate on telling his story, no matter how much distraction the need to mate caused.

"Last Samhain, the *Danio* tricked my uncle, magiked his Fire away from him, left him dying, and used the stolen Fire to cross to this world."

"My world?" Regan closed his eyes briefly, and then opened them, determination in his expression. "This *Danio* thing is in my world? For what purpose?"

Kian shook his head. "He had been doomed to die in my world. He was a prisoner; he escaped and came here. But his energy would be low. Cut off from my world his false Fire could not," he searched for the word on the tip of

his tongue, "recharge. Tonight though, when the connection is strong between this world and mine, he will be able to draw power and then he will have enough magik to control."

"To control what exactly?"

Kian shook his head slowly. "That's the problem. The Fire he stole was not his. He wasn't born to use and care for it. Once he recharges, his attention will shift between the wild Fire inside him and the lure of energy and life force in the world —your world— around him. He'll be unpredictable malice with a weapon that is controlling him as much as he's controlling it." Until he'd said the words aloud, Kian had refused to consider the rampaging danger the *Danio* posed. Once spoken, he had no choice.

Regan spoke stiffly, keeping his emotions at bay. "Okay." He blinked steadily, staring at Kian. "So you are here, with your magik, and you can take him out, go home, end of story. What do you need me for?"

"You are my bonded mate."

"Yeah, so you said, alongside all the other crap you have been laying on me. What does that mean exactly?"

Kian winced. He could see Regan was skeptical. Perhaps going back to the beginning would be a good thing?

"In my world, at birth, you are bonded with another.

Sometimes who you are to be bonded with is obvious and can be your choice. Sometimes there seems to be no choice at all. My father was told I would be bonded with a Hunter not of our world. That Hunter is you."

Regan snorted his disbelief, and Kian felt physical pain snap inside him. He needed to make Regan see.

"The *Danio* and I, tonight at midnight, we will have equal Fire. There is nothing I can do to stop him. We would just stand behind identical barriers. However, with you at my side—"

"What? You want me to throw my knife at it? Yeah, 'cause that went so well last time." Regan rubbed at his elbow and grimaced. Kian felt shame run through him, for the hurt to Regan had been of his making.

"As one with you," he continued, "I would be stronger and could push him back through to the other side, where the Council will be waiting to deal with him."

"So what you need is for me to be at your side, bonded, when we find this... *Danio*."

"Not bonded. No." Instantly, he had to clarify what he wanted from Regan. They couldn't bond; to do so would be the end for him. To be separated from a bonded mate would mean he would start to die from the moment of separation. There were no winners in this. They would have to fight the *Danio chwiwgi* without bonding; Kian could

just pull enough of Regan's *self* to defeat the traveler from his world. Hell, if they bonded and then Regan left Kian bereft of connection, Kian's magik would slowly fade until the Fire deserted him. He would die.

Regan didn't need to know everything that was in his head, Kian reminded himself firmly. As long as he kept Regan safe, he could die at least partially fulfilled. Of paramount importance, though, they couldn't bond. They had to fight the Fire stealer as two-not-yet-one.

"Okay, but I stand next to you. Right?"

"Amongst other things," Kian hedged with a half smile.

"Then you will go back home, end of story." Regan looked half hopeful, and that same pain that had started inside of Kian surged to a new level. What did Regan want to hear? Should Kian tell him he could never go home? The *Danio chwiwgi* was only half in this world and half in the other, not fully at strength in either place, only the lunar cycle giving him any energy to use. If Regan was next to him, then the being would be defeated by their joined strength and sent back and the Gate between the two worlds would close. Kian would remain fully in Regan's world. He had broken ancient rules to come through to this world. To go back would be to face certain death as punishment.

"Yes," he finally replied. "End of story."

"This sounds like something you are making up as you go along."

"I wish I was."

"Tell me how you got from the diner to here without a car." If Regan wanted to know, Kian had to show him; it wasn't easily explained. He muttered the Traveling Words, and the Fire pulled him from one position to another. In less than an eye's blink, he stood on the other side of Regan.

Regan narrowed his eyes, but other than that, he just stared. Kian couldn't make out what the other man was feeling. It unnerved him.

CHAPTER 7

Regan felt awkward, annoyed, distrustful, and any one of a number of other emotions that bit and snapped inside him. Whoever this guy was he was stupid if he thought Regan would fall for one of his parlor tricks or for any of his wild narratives. For the stories, Regan was convinced, were nothing more than the result of a fanciful imagination. He was as experienced as the next person in children's tales; his mom told them to him often enough—of a land that was a side-step away from this one, a place where nothing was as it seemed, and was as far from normal as it could possibly be.

"Fairy tales," he muttered, pushing against the tree and stumbling to his feet. Kian moved to help him, but he waved him away. "Enough with the touching," he ordered, and waited until the head rush dissipated.

"I'm sorry." Thing is Kian really did sound sorry, and just a tiny bit anxious.

"You say we don't have to bond. That is a good thing, but what effect would it have on me, this bonding, if we had to?"

"It changes from person to person."

"Good answer. Vague, but good."

"No, I mean... Gods, I wish I could say."

"Try."

"Like an addiction. A temporary addiction."

"You go, I wean off of the bond, and that is the end of it?"

"Yes." He could lie really well, but even Regan could see through that one. He chose to ignore it. He needed to get his head into Hunter space, and that meant going back over the intel he'd gathered.

"I followed signs for a Nameless. Guess you would tell me that everything I found was due to this *Danio* being." He shuffled the papers together, casting his eye down the summary list he had been working on.

"Can I see?" Regan didn't argue, just passed the papers and leaned back against the car, waiting for Kian's take on the evidence.

"Disappearances, murder, it could well be the *Danio chwiwgi*."

"What do we need to look for to pin this thing down?"

"What do you mean? Signs? Or Sigils maybe?"

"Whatever it takes to locate the thing."

"Oh." Kian looked surprised. "We don't need any of that. I know exactly where he will be. He'll be at the Gate."

"There's a gate?" Clearly there was a gate. Why should he be shocked at that?

"Well, a thinner part in the fabric between this world and my world."

Regan huffed and reached out for the research, thrusting it all in a battered backpack and throwing the bag in the trunk of the car.

"Take me there," he commanded briskly, brushing past Kian and climbing into the car, looking back to see if Kian moved. "Get in."

CHAPTER 8

Regan drove. The Gate Road snaked its convoluted way higher up Wolf Peak until they were just short of the tree line. The old 4x4 handled most of the journey okay, but in a very bone shaking manner. The area was isolated, and the trees were a dense wall on each side of the gravel path that was only a little wider than his Jeep. Finally the pathway widened to a small yard and a squat cabin whose edges blended in with the surrounding landscape.

The cabin was small, no bigger than two main rooms, Regan thought. It had a porch that wrapped around to each side and offered a place to sit and admire the trees. If you were into admiring trees that was. It was rustic, a little bruised looking, but it was clearly well tended, the small yard to the front neat and the paths wending away from it clean of weeds and bushes.

"Where is the Gate from here?" Regan turned off the engine, facing Kian as the other man muttered something under his breath. Kian ignored him, got out of the car and walked the length of the cabin, "Kian?"

Kian stopped walking, a shy smile on his face.

"We are close to the time between times. It is vital there is protection."

"Protection from the *Danio*?"

"Come inside, and I will answer your questions."

"We need to see the Gate first." Regan was impatient for action, turning in a circle to survey the land as it was about him. He couldn't see anything that resembled a gate, nothing made of stone or wood or metal that they could barricade.

"This is the Gate. The whole area, the mountain, its very core is the Gate." Kian didn't add anything else.

"Please come inside." Regan blinked at this new information. A small log cabin, looking more than a little worse for wear, was part of the way to another world? What the hell?

Kian stopped them both at the threshold, just before the first step, holding out a hand and muttering again. A small flame of green light flickered about his fingers. Regan listened to the words murmured under Kian's breath, discordant noise then soft and treacle-slow sounds, and then stared at the flame dancing on his palm. Finally, Kian stood back, gesturing for Regan to pass into the cabin.

"You can go in now. I have transformed the *difficulty*, the barriers that protect me, to allow you entry."

"I couldn't just walk in before?" Regan was mystified, and took a single footfall forward, the sole of his boot hitting the wood of the step. The sparks that ran up his leg were gone in an instant, but even he couldn't deny he

felt something as he passed over whatever barrier Kian had in place.

"Remember what happened when we first met? The Fire has a way of protecting me; now it recognizes you and is protecting *us*."

Kian moved past him and entered the cabin first. He hesitated momentarily and then simply stepped in, and Regan assumed he needed to follow.

The inside of the cabin was as rustic as the outside. It appeared worn but cared for, with two sofas pulled in front of an unlit grate full of wood. The kitchen was small, but seemingly functional. Said kitchen had the makings of black coffee so, in Regan's opinion, it was more than perfect. Coffee made, Kian showed him the small bedroom and the bathroom which, Regan thanked anyone who would listen, had a flushing toilet and was actually inside.

Following as Kian showed him the rest of the small cabin meant an awful lot of brushing past each other. It was too much for Regan not to feel something, and that only because it had been so long since he last got laid. That explained his hardening dick and the urge to grab Kian and bend him over the first available horizontal surface. The other world man with his quiet way of moving was just so freaking pretty, all blond hair and green eyes, his face almost feminine with high cheekbones and full lips. The

rest of him though was a study in contrasts, a broad chest and a figure slimming to hips that Regan could just imagine holding on to. And the guy's ass, firm, taut, the black material of his pants molded over each incredible inch, lured his imagination and trapped it. Regan blamed the man for removing his coat and leaving him nothing to do but stare so damn hard at the enticing features in front of him. He readjusted his pants and moved as far away as he could.

They sat on opposite corners of one each sofa, and Kian seemed lost in his own thoughts. He had his eyes closed, and his face rested in his hands. Regan stared. He knew he was staring, Kian probably knew he was staring, but that didn't stop him. He didn't think in all his years he had even met anyone as beautiful as Kian. He wasn't even sure where the description came from, but, hell yes. The man was more than just pretty to look at. Those eyes were so green they looked unreal, as if he was wearing color contacts. His hair was fine and silvery blond and feathered about his face. He was coiled tension one moment, and then relaxed humor the next. Regan hated to admit it, but Kian ap Rhys intrigued him.

"Since you are destined to be with a male, I am assuming you like men?" *Like men... fuck... just ask him if he is gay.*

"Like men? Lay with men. Yes," Kian answered.

He realized that his grasp of Regan's language wasn't as strong as it might be.

"Guess that's a good thing. You'd be pretty fucked if you have an arranged marriage to a same sex and all you want is a woman writhing under you."

Kian looked at him sharply, his eyes narrowed, and Regan could almost see the disapproval in the man at what he had just said.

"It is not an arranged union."

"You just said—"

"It is desire and need and lust, and it happens as it happens."

"So you could end up... bonding... with someone not your intended bondee?" Shit, was *bondee* even a word?

"That just doesn't happen, Regan. There is one for each of us, and that one is the only real bond, that one the only *One*." Regan was starting to feel uncomfortable at the intense look in Kian's eyes, the fervent, near religious heat there. He decided to get away from the whole I-am-bonded-to-an-alien-type-magik-person and change the subject. He couldn't think of anything to say, so he decided to try to guide the conversation to more general things. What actually came out of his mouth wasn't quite what he intended, however.

"So what exactly *is* bonding?" he found himself

blurting out. *Great way to change the subject.* Kian narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to one side, a frown of concentration on his smooth features.

"Bonding is the absolute match of one Fire to another, it means two people can almost read each other's thoughts, sense the other's presence, and love them. The lovemaking is, I have heard, amazing."

"Two Fires, not hot fires I assume, but cool to touch fire, in two fairly human bodies. What do they do? Like twist together? Or do you share? What?" Regan still couldn't get his head around this bond. It just sounded painful and intrusive to him.

"The person I ultimately bond with would have some of my spirit, my Fire, and I would have a touch of theirs."

"There is always choice between partners."

"Always."

"So. You don't bond with me, the man who you say is your *intended*, and what happens then?" Regan tried to keep sarcasm out of his voice, but this was all going a bit too far.

"It is a physical matching, a permanence of your spirit in another with an exchange of Fire. I would find another I hope." Kian sounded less intense and more wistful as he sat back in the corner of his sofa with a sigh.

Regan caught on to one part of it.

"Well, this is where we have a problem." Regan held out his hand palm up, and then clicked his fingers, looking over at Kian. "See, thing is, I have no Fire to exchange." There, that was it. Argument over. Kian and this whole bonding business was clearly not his problem if he didn't have Fire. Kian just chuckled low in his throat in response.

"We all have Fire. In your world, it manifests in passion or a skill, or in loyalty or love, but in our world, there is a physical Fire as well as those things."

"We all have Fire?" Regan gave a snort of disbelief, and he leaned forward towards Kian with an awful lot of questions on the tip of his tongue. Kian hesitated. Regan could almost see the gears moving in his brain to explain *this* one.

"When you hunt these things you call Nameless, how do you know where to start tracking? What brought you to me on this day?" Regan looked for the trick in the question. He didn't have Fire, and it wasn't Fire that led him to where the Nameless were hiding. As for being here at this time, well, that was just a damn freaky coincidence.

"Research." Absolute certainty filled his voice. He damn well researched every inch of paperwork, newspapers, journals, search engines, even blogs now,

which is more than his dad or grandfather ever had access to.

"What about intuition, your instinct? Do you never rely on that?" Kian leaned in towards him, the words calm and quiet.

"I need cold hard facts, I act on them, and I get the job done." Stubbornness laced his voice. Nothing otherworldly helped him to dispatch those bastards with the knife of silver; it was his own training, his own skill. He chose to ignore the paradox of that same down-to-earth training being entwined with the need to use a blessed silver knife carved with centuries old sigils.

"Your Fire is dark red, you know," Kian stated in an incredibly calm, matter-of-fact way. He moved the short distance from his sofa to the other, until he locked his gaze with Regan, and there was little more than a breath between them.

Regan refused to be the first to back down, despite the fact that his dick swelled as he inhaled the scent of fall that seemed to cling to Kian. This was an impossibly difficult situation. He was angry with Kian, bastard, fucking coming here and teasing him with his taut body and his muscled arms, pushing him about this Fire crap. Giving in to any sliver of attraction to this man was not on Regan Campbell's to-do list.

Shit, who was he kidding? Kian's eyes, ocean green, were mesmerizing, and his lips arched in a generous curve on a face that was so damn young. Regan itched to reach out and taste those lips, just once, maybe to bury his fingers into Kian's blond hair, twist them deep and just take his fill. It wouldn't have to move on to anything else; it could just be kissing. Resisting them all the way, he felt his thoughts wondering what Kian would taste like. Would it be the same as the kisses he exchanged with the kids in school when he was younger, innocent and fragrant with stolen beer? Or maybe more like those he shared with Jonah Francis after his first real Hunt, exactly two hours before Jonah was killed? Those kisses had tasted of blood, sweat, and desperation, and the high of winning a battle.

He bet Kian would taste sweet. All soft sighs, smiles and whispered secrets, and a wave of lust passed over him at the thought of this beautiful boy spread out under him. He physically had to restrain himself from just reaching out and taking his fill.

"It's crimson now," Kian observed wryly, closing the small gap and placing a soft kiss to Regan's lips. Nothing more than a slight touch, but it was enough for Regan to chase for more as Kian moved away.

"Crimson?" Regan blinked as his head spun with need.

"When you are aroused, your Fire changes from dark red to a violent sparking crimson." Kian reached out, tracing a path from Regan's knee and up towards his groin, finally settling it on the obvious erection and pressing gently. Regan wanted to end the contact, but lust had every nerve sparking in his body, pleading to touch, and he could not stop.

He closed his eyes, pushing up against Kian's hand. He couldn't think of a more obvious gesture to let Kian know he enjoyed this. In a fluid movement, Kian was up and over him, straddling his lap, and the younger man was just as hard. Part of Regan was irrationally proud that his twenty seven-year-old, beaten-up body was enough to make Kian want to grind down on him. It was like school, hot, fast and fumbling. What the hell was happening? He gripped hard, pushing and moaning need into Kian's mouth, swallowing any replies in heated kisses. If he wasn't careful, he was going to lose it in seconds, and that wasn't on his agenda, but hell, having a lap full of writhing, sucking, licking Kian was sending him too high too fast.

None too gently, he pushed Kian back and away, forcing him to the other sofa, and blanketing him with his own body. The position was his to control; he could slow this down, speed it up, take his fill, and Kian would be the one to lose it. *Watch and learn, Kian. You're going to*

scream my name.

"I won't." Kian smiled into a kiss with a not-wholly-innocent look on his face.

"Won't what?" Regan was trying to make sense of words as Kian's hand slipped up and under his shirt and his nails scraped against sensitized skin.

"You think you are going to be in control, but, Hunter, my Fire burns way hotter than yours." He accentuated every word with a twist of his lithe body until finally they slotted groin to hip and began to rock, each kiss deeper, longer.

Regan could have lain over Kian forever, moving gently, tracing kisses and bites along Kian's smooth jaw, tasting his skin and marking him. His orgasm built inside him. Flashes of color flared behind his eyes, and the need for release became overwhelming.

He heard noise, moans of pleasure, and pleading words. Kian wanted more from him, wanted them to reach completion together, and he was so close. His hand stung, catching on material, wanting skin, but aching with pain at the same time. He edged closer, even as the pain pulled him back. He removed his hand from Kian to look at it, breaking the kiss, wondering what the fuck was going on.

Small flames —scarlet-tipped and emerald green at the base— darted over his fingers. An aura misted over his

skin, and helpless, he just stared, his brain not able to process what he could see. Kian took over, guiding that same hand back to skin and then lower, into his loose pants and around Kian's hardness. Surely the Fire would burn him, but it didn't. It wasn't hot; it was curiously nothing at all, like it had no substance to it. Kian threw his head back in ecstasy as the flames engulfed his sex, and he spilled hot over Regan's hand, his mouth open with noises of completion that sent Regan falling over the edge after him.

CHAPTER 9

"The *Danio chwiwgi* was my uncle's lover," Kian said softly into the post coital hug that Regan wrapped him in. It was darkening in the room, only a few hours until midnight, and Kian wanted Regan to know as much as he could before they faced the *Danio*.

"How did that happen?" Regan asked softly, shifting slightly to support Kian against his chest. It felt good to be held and to feel the red Fire touching him every so often.

"There are stories —myths and legends— in my world the same as here. An incredibly long time ago, there were two distinct peoples in my world." He sighed heavily. This would mean so much to Regan, intrude so clearly into Regan's life, but he had no choice. Before Regan left him, he had to know.

"The usual happened. Some wanted more, and our world split into those with Fire and those without. We called the others the *Eicio*, the ones discarded or thrown out. They had lost their Fire, bargained it away in terrible deals with those that wanted to use them, and inevitably their eyes turned outside our world and to the other world. Your world."

"These *Eicio*. They came to our world?"

"It was before the door was closed, many years ago. My ancestors crossed the divide to find a family who could help them destroy any *Eicio* that had passed through." Kian stopped, wondering if that was enough for Regan to put two and two together.

"My family?" Regan guessed, and Kian buried his face into Regan's neck. "The *Eicio*, these people, these things, they are the Nameless, aren't they?"

Kian nodded and shut his eyes tight, not adding a word until he felt Regan was ready for more.

"Go on," Regan finally prompted, using a finger to push Kian's chin until Kian was eye to eye with him.

"There were some *Eicio* left behind in my world that evolved a limited use of Fire, had magik, and learned to take on any form."

"The *Danio*."

"One of these *Danio* decided the way to the other world, where some of its *Eicio* clan had run, was through my family and its connection to yours. It took a pleasing shape and finagled its way into my uncle's life, becoming his lover, magiking some false fire, and even going so far as to force a bond. The rest you know."

"That is what you meant when you said your family knew mine."

"It is exactly as I said."

"How many *Eicio* are there here? I keep finding them."

"I have no idea how many crossed, but they do not procreate. They are very old beings, and they renew through the Fire."

"Fire? Fuck." Regan shut his eyes tight. "I thought they were feeding off of blood, or emotion or something, but they want this Fire you say we have?"

"Even Fire in its infancy, like yours is, can be powerful to an *Eicio*."

"They change others to be like them, isn't that how they multiply?" Regan remembered even the most recent Hunt with the two guys that just keeled over when the Nameless died.

"They try, but it is difficult for them to sustain another. The *Danio chwiwgi* has learned ways that it wants to bring here, and when it came over at the last Gate opening, it had intentions to turn others, then teach them how to make more of those you call Nameless. The journey weakened it, and it has hidden here— stayed local to the Gate, living off residual power I think. It needs a connection to our world tonight to make it strong. This is where we end it."

"Tell me more about the *Danio chwiwgi* and how we stop it."

* * * *

They traveled a short distance away from the cabin in Regan's Jeep until Kian finally asked him to stop.

"How do you know it will be here?" Regan thought it was a valid question. The trees had thinned slightly as they moved higher up the mountain, but the spot they where they stopped showed no signs to Regan that it was any different from the rest of the forest. Kian simply held out his hand, palm upwards, and Regan inhaled a deep breath at the traces of green showing as veins under Kian's skin. He looked down at his own hand, expecting to see red lines, but there was nothing.

Kian exited the Jeep first, jumping down lightly on the mossy undergrowth, and waited as Regan turned the Jeep around and parked it around the bend in the wide pathway. Once the car was out of harm's reach, and ready for a quick getaway should they need it, Regan joined Kian to stand in the near perfect circular space, pulling the collar of his thick jacket up to protect against the freezing snow that swirled about them

"So this is the Gate?"

"The mountain is the Gate, but the source is here. I can feel it."

"How long do we have?"

Kian shrugged, lifting his gaze to the stars above and then down to the forest floor. "We wait" was all he said.

They didn't have long to wait. As Regan's watch turned to eleven-thirty, a half an hour before midnight, the air around them changed. Static coursed through him, and instinct made him grab at Kian's hand, a curse on his lips as a charge stung him. He looked to their joined hands, the green Fire just a flickering flame dancing across Kian's skin and a faint red building on Regan's fingers. Hell. He wasn't ready and, suddenly, he didn't want Kian in danger.

"Ready?" Kian asked, determination lacing his voice.

"No," Regan replied quickly and then smiled what he hoped was his most reassuring smile.

"Just stay behind me, okay? If it goes wrong..."

"If it goes wrong...?"

Kian shrugged. "Run."

When the *Danio chwiwgi* finally walked into the clearing, it appeared nothing more than a man, a tall thin man with black hair that fell around its face in long straggly lengths. It wasn't frightening, at first, as it stared at them and then began to walk. As it drew closer, Regan focused until he saw half a face, ethereal, its features not entirely

formed, shifting and changing before them.

Why was Kian letting it closer? Shouldn't they be advancing as well? Or retreating? Or doing something? Regan felt a tingle of doubt as to the energy or power of this thing until he felt Kian stiffen.

"You dare to take my uncle's face?"

The *Danio chwiwgi* stopped at the shouted words, not more than six feet from them, his head tilted to one side, the shifting features coalescing into visible features.

"Kee-ann-aprees," it growled in a low voice, lifting a hand that had long unkempt nails. Short simple sparks of ice white emanated from the claw-like tips, and he pointed it directly at Kian. Regan didn't know what to do. He needed to know what to fucking *do*. Kian had temper in him, Regan could feel it, and the green around his lover sparked and sizzled, snapping into the air and extending like sun bursts.

"*Ewyllysi mo anfon 'm bacia ab chan, Rhys,*" it snarled, the other hand coming up to point at Kian.

Shocked, Regan realized the creature spoke in the ancient language of the Hunters, and he was able to understand it as clearly as his own. *You will not send me back.*

"*Anfona baci, Danio chwiwgi.*"

I will send you back, Fire stealer.

Regan knew, in the instant Kian decided, that there was to be no bad guy monologue at this place or time. Kian took the first shot at the monster he needed to defeat. A stream of emerald Fire blasted from him with an answering snap of scarlet from Regan. Regan pulled in closer to Kian and clutched at his arm.

The *Danio chwiwgi* made a sound approximating a shriek of pain. With a casual flick of its hand and a light so white it caused agony to watch, it formed a shield that blocked their assault. As much as Kian pushed, it pushed back. There was no give on either side.

"Kian!" Regan shouted. "What's happening?" He tightened his grip, shielding his face with his free hand from the white of the *Danio chwiwgi*'s Fire.

The being turned slightly at the shout and focused on Regan. He sent a single pulse of Fire directly at Regan's chest, and it wrenched him away from Kian. He tumbled backwards, completely immobile and in pain so deep it hurt his very bones.

Coughing and wheezing, he attempted to push to his feet, but the Fire had become a band of steel across his chest pinning him to the snow. Only his hands remained free to scrabble at the ground. He desperately heaved at the unearthly bonds to get back to Kian, to be part of the Fire the man threw at the *Danio chwiwgi*. Blindly, he willed

every ounce of his energy into his scarlet Fire to help Kian, but none sparked in him. The attack from the *Danio* had utterly diminished it. Even as he watched with morbid fascination as the being's face morphed from one to another, there was no way he could push through.

Kian stumbled back, casting one look over at Regan, his eyes sparking Fire. A contorted grimace marred his face. Their enemy seemed to be gaining in power, lazy in its application, toying with Kian, and allowing him closer. The green and the odd sparks of red that lingered around Kian and the white of the *Danio chwiwgi*'s Fire twisted as one, creating a mess of horror and screaming that encompassed and consumed almost the entire open space.

Regan couldn't see through the colors. He focused on the core of the flames, blinding, startling and rippling now with an entire spectrum of light. If he could distract the *Danio*, then maybe Kian could refocus his Fire and get the edge. Maybe throwing his knife at the being would cause the white Fire to cast back at him, away from Kian. He twisted his hand to grab at the hidden knife. And then it was there, in his free hand. He settled his breathing as much as he could with the red mist filling his eyes and threw his knife into the battle.

Nothing happened. He could have screamed his frustration. The Fire didn't turn on him, and nothing seemed

to be enough to cut them apart.

Then. There.

Just for the barest second, the white hot fiery core towered upward and spread to touch trees and the cabin, surrounding him, pulling scarlet ribbons from his chest. It built in intensity, and the noise was frightening. Then a scream, at first guttural then spiraling up to a piercing intensity, tore through the air. The white of the *Danio* and the green of Kian began to disconnect. Swirling patterns of ice white turned in on themselves, and the green focused and streamed away back to Kian. The screaming didn't stop, and Regan could better see now that it came from the *Danio chwiwgi* and not his lover. Kian lay on the ground curled into the fetal position with his hands protectively over his face.

CHAPTER 10

Regan looked desperately for any sign of movement in Kian, his gaze pivoting from the screaming *Danio* to Kian lifeless in the snow. The green and white sparked and hissed like electric lines in the rain, and Regan winced at the sound, even as his own red flames settled protectively around him. The Fire twisted inside him, and the bonds holding him to the earth loosened and finally released him, leaving him able to half crawl, half stumble towards Kian. He wanted to get close, but a spring green Fire barrier stopped him. Regan cursed the magik that prevented him from helping Kian.

He crab-walked away from the flames of white that had seemingly turned on their master and were devouring the *Danio chwiwgi*. The energy around the faceless being swirled and pulsed, and he could see the thing disappearing before his eyes, piece by piece. In an instant, the light vanished, the energy dissipated, and all that was left was Kian—for all Regan knew, dead—and a space where the *Danio chwiwgi* had been.

Regan couldn't see Kian moving at all. His body lay sprawled in the snow. The *Danio* must have been dispatched back to Kian's world, and all that was left was Kian, dead. A complete and vast weight of loneliness

smothered Regan. He'd never imagined he could feel as lost. Under its immense weight, he staggered to Kian's side. His fear spiraled and then shot away into relief as the other man groaned and pushed himself into a sitting position.

Regan picked up his knife from where it lay in the snow next to Kian. There was blood on it, scarlet and stark, smudging the white blanket that covered the land. Holding out a hand, he helped Kian to his feet, taking Kian's weight as his companion faltered.

"He's gone," Regan offered. He needed sound, no matter how inane, to end the silence under the trees. Kian nodded, pulling himself away from Regan's grip and taking a step back.

"The knife... Thank you," Kian said firmly, and Regan nodded.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"It was a good thing; it separated the Fire."

Regan wiped the blood on his blade into the snow until the silver was clean and then carefully placed it into the hidden pouch inside his coat pocket.

"It's your turn to go now then. I guess you need to go back to your world. We are finished here." Regan didn't pose it as a question. It was a simple and stark statement of fact. He knew Kian was from another place; he couldn't stay.

"I need to gather myself, check the wards. Then I will leave. You can go. There is no more need for you to be here."

Icy dismissal hardened Kian's voice; gone were the pleading for help and the soft thank yous. Typical, Regan thought. Now that the crap was dealt with, he was no longer needed. Same song, different place. He straightened and drew his jacket around him, then turned on his heel and returned to his car. He sensed Kian was not following, and that was just fine.

If something niggled at the back of his mind, or if he suspected the icy demeanor was an affectation on Kian's part, then Regan dismissed the thoughts. What Kian might or might not be feeling wasn't his problem, and he didn't have room for the worry of it.

He rounded a curve in the path, and saw the moon bright against the car windows. Regan finally let out a noisy exhalation. The usual high that came with the kill was missing. Everything was missing. He still felt charged sparks running under his skin, and he looked closely at his hands under the soft night light. He couldn't see the red and the green, but he knew the Fire was there, coiling around his spine and traveling every nerve.

He wondered how long this would last. How long would it be before he felt like Regan again, and not part of

the Kian-Regan Fire symbiosis thing? He should have asked. In fact, he had so many questions, not the least of which could be summed up simply as *what the fuck?*

Determined to have answers, he wheeled and stomped back the way he had come, rounding the curve into the battle clearing, and stopped. Kian wasn't there; it was empty. Just like that, Kian had gone. Sighing, Regan looked down at the snow where the man had stood and then sank into a crouch to look closer, wondering if maybe he could track Kian's exit. There was the mess he had made with the blood on the knife, but past that, brighter blood dotted the snow and then, farther into the trees, evidence of more.

Hell. Had the knife hit Kian? Where had Kian gone? The blood stopped. Kian had obviously done that whole disappearing trick. The cabin, it had to be the cabin. Regan stumble-slipped back to the car, imagining the route they had taken earlier in the evening. The roads layered in snow and ice and landmarks disguised by the white made it harder to find. He hurt physically at the thought of Kian injured; he didn't even begin to analyze what that meant. Urgency pushed him hard, the Jeep bouncing over hidden dips, his spine jarring, and his head smacking the top of the cab more than once.

At last he spotted the turn-off and slewed into it.

His Jeep growled up the hill and down the old lane until he finally skidded to a halt in the cabin's front yard. He fished out his flashlight and checked around the glade. Nothing seemed to be out of order, and muttering a small prayer of hope that the wards would still recognize him, he took a deep breath and stepped onto the wide porch. He only realized he had shut his eyes when he had to open them to see where he was going.

Stupid, as if closing my eyes would stop the green Fire.

The door stood slightly ajar, and he pushed against it gently just in case Kian had fallen through when he'd opened it. A good half an hour had gone by since he'd found the blood in the snow; if Kian was badly wounded, it might already be too late. Grief welled unbidden inside him, and he ruthlessly pushed it back down. This man was a stranger. How could it be that he felt so much despair at the thought of his death?

The interior lay in darkness, not even a fire glowed in the grate, and his flashlight cast eerie cones of illumination against the smooth walls and around the floor. No sign of Kian here, which left only the small bedroom. Cautiously, Regan approached the closed access, wondering what he would find on the other side. Light trickled feebly under the door through the gap where the

wood didn't quite meet, and carefully, he pushed the door open.

The light was bright green, radiating in and around the man sprawled on the bed. Kian still wore his coat, but it had fallen open, revealing the blood high on his chest.

"Kian," Regan called urgently, confusion coming at him from all sides. Kian wasn't supposed to be here on the bed; he was supposed to be victorious, alive, back home. He stopped for a second, gripping the door frame tightly, a sudden weakness washing over him, disorientation making him dizzy. He pushed forward. Emerald Fire sparked wildly around him; and he started when he felt an answering crackle of flame from inside himself. He shut his eyes and thought inward; he saw crimson.

It was the oddest feeling, knowing he had something in him that was connected to the man on the bed. Pulled by a force he didn't understand, he didn't begin to question needing to touch Kian. The crimson flowed from him, greeting the green light that was Kian's Fire. The two joined and spiraled together around the two men. It pulled Regan closer, overcoming his fears and doubts. He felt for a pulse. There was one, faint under the pale skin, though it was thready and almost non-existent. Carefully, he unbuttoned the cotton shirt to assess the damage, the blood sticky on his hands.

His knife had twisted and flattened in flight. The injury high on Kian's chest was both deep and wide. Regan cursed his skill and, at the same time, thanked whoever listened that throwing at random into the fiery chaos had clearly been a good thing. When Regan aimed for the heart, he hit the heart. That would have been game over for Kian. As it was, Kian still bled, but the red spread slowly on his skin. Regan just needed to get Kian conscious so that he could get them to a hospital.

"Kian," he half shouted shaking the other-worlder's shoulder and willing him to open his eyes.

He winced at the slide of the two Fires along each of them, and as Kian's eyes opened and began to focus, Regan saw the bright green was threaded with red. Regan jerked back as words echoed in his head like Kian had spoken the words.

"Not alone. Not alone. Never alone again."

"Re...gan, wha...doin...ere?"

"I came to save your ass," Regan said firmly, forcefully attempting to break the connection as the experienced Hunter took over from the panicked civilian. "Get up. We need to get you to a hospital."

"Can't," Kian breathed, opening his eyes, the intensity in them startling against his pale sweaty skin.

"Yes you can; you need someone to help."

"Just. Too late... already... need... you."

"Need me?" Regan didn't understand.

"The Fire wants... I can't stop. Can you help me?"

Kian's words were slurred, but they'd begun to sound clearer to Regan's ears. *Help him?* He leaned closer, and Kian whispered urgently in his ear, "You need to go. Run."

"I'm not going anywhere." There wasn't a decision to make. Regan wasn't going to let the man die.

"It will make you want to be with me. I can't fight this," Kian half sobbed, his voice laced with fear. His eyes closed. Regan allowed the green and scarlet to push him closer to Kian, let himself be guided, until he was lying side by side with his hand over Kian's heart and his body close.

"Kian?"

Regan didn't understand. Was Kian dying? Was this a last touch? Was the silver in the knife as fatal for him as it was the Nameless? He didn't understand.

"I can't... sorry."

Regan closed his eyes, his head burning with pain. He couldn't help himself. It was entirely out of his control. So he slept. It was a fall into unconsciousness where dreams chased him. He saw so much in these visions, a place mostly the same as his, only different in a few parts. The sky seemed bluer, the grass greener, and the sun was a

bright orb that had melted any snow. A man stood beside him, a man who cast words out into the air like they were fall leaves, magiking a net around himself and Regan. One word was there in the litany, *Darach*, and the face that turned to Regan in his dreams was not one he recognized. It was a face anguished and heavy with grief. *Just lie still*, the man demanded. *Lie still and sleep. Let the Fire heal Kian.* In Regan's dreams, everything was green and red, and he did what *Darach* told him to do.

Born of the chaos of fear and confusion, the peace Regan felt was absolute.

CHAPTER 11

Kian sat cross legged on the end of the bed, his hair darkened from the shower and pushed back with shivering hands. He had put his jeans back on, but he couldn't do the same with his shirt. It was soaked with blood and even *his* magik couldn't seem to clean it.

He hadn't awakened Regan, who was in a very deep sleep, Kian's blood still woven into his shirt and his arms spread wide over the pillows. The sting of Regan's red Fire tingled in his veins, and Kian dreaded the moment his mate woke. How, by the Gods, was he going to explain what had happened last night? Where did he even start and how the hell was Regan ever going to forgive him?

It would have been better if he had died at the hands of the *Danio chwiwgi* and Regan's knife. That would have been quick and easy. But now— The repercussions of what had happened were unthinkable.

Now they had bonded. Or rather, his Fire had bonded to Regan. It was over for him now.

Kian's Fire had recognized the other half of it in Regan and had literally decided to take what it needed. Kian hadn't wanted to. Even as the Fire joined them, he attempted to fight it. With a frightening inevitability, it had happened simply, between one breath and another, as he

lay injured in the dark. Completely and irreversibly bonded. Even now, when he looked down to his hands and called the Fire to dance on his skin, he was stunned to see the change from green to a fascinating mix of scarlet and viridian. He hadn't been entirely honest with Regan either, and that caused him the most pain now. Bonding was the end of things for him. Once bonded, a man such as Kian was promised for life, and it was the greatest thing that a man or a woman of his place and time could find.

Thing is... How, *by the Gods*, was he going to make that violation right with the Hunter? Maybe Regan didn't have to know? Clearly that was the solution. If Regan knew, and if Kian had to explain what the bonding really meant, not just for Kian, but for Regan— It just didn't bear thinking about.

There was no way he could burden Regan with the knowledge that he was no longer able to leave the Hunter. Regan didn't need to know that the first touch of Regan's Fire had tied Kian to him irrevocably. His mate's Fire was little more than an infant, not enough of a presence for Regan to notice, much less make him die when it guttered and went out. It would take days for it to fully build, and it would take Kian being close and steady for a good long while for a severing of the bond to be as fatal to Regan as it already was to Kian.

They hadn't consummated the union. If they had, new bond and infant fire or not, the effect of any separation would have been fatal to both of them. Grief built inside Kian, and he felt anger there, too; anger that he had been given his mate only to lose him again. Regan was a good man. A brave man. Kian could feel that he was the kind of person he would have chosen for his mate had a choice been offered. Images of what consummation would be like with his Hunter had been a healthy mix of romantic notion and imagined lust. From his childhood, he'd imagined his mate growing tall and strong and waiting for him. To be here now, the residual energy glowing about them, with his mate so close, was more than he should have to bear. Regan leaving was impossible to comprehend. But accept his mate leaving he must.

Kian recognized, the thoughts dull and loathsome in him, that Regan's departure would condemn himself to travel another path, to death. Kian may have survived the battle with the *Danio chwiwgi*, but death due to a slow loss of bonded Fire was a horror equal to being forcefully deprived of his Fire, as his uncle had been. That is what would happen as the connection between him and his mate was severed.

His uncle had called it loneliness, a vast aching emptiness, not having his Fire. Kian remembered every day

that he watched his uncle slowly die. It was a sorrow he wouldn't wish on anyone, and it would be made all the worse because Kian would know that Regan walked the world, but not with him. His fire burned, but not alongside and with Kian's. In time, Regan would forget and his fire would return to what it had been. And Kian would die from the separation and the knowledge that he couldn't join with his mate.

There must be another way. Idly he placed the fingers of one hand on the pulse in his wrist of the other. It would be very easy to take Regan's knife and slice upwards vertically to the elbow. It wouldn't take long to bleed out, and then everything would be over quickly. He wasn't a coward, but to go through losing the Fire, with the darkness and the soulless emptiness, he couldn't even begin to accept that he would let it happen to him.

He was terrified; maybe it didn't have to be Regan's knife. Could it be any knife? Peace started to manifest in the corners of his conscious thoughts. If he did this, then Regan wouldn't be tied, and Kian wouldn't have to suffer a death that dragged out for weeks, for months maybe. Kian realized his thoughts were spiraling out of control. He had to do something before Regan awoke.

Carefully he unwound himself. He'd taken two steps towards the door when Regan's voice, firm, low, urgent,

called to him from the bed.

"What happened?"

Kian turned. That was one hell of a leading question, and one he didn't really know how to answer. He could lie; he could exaggerate. He could even just run, grab a knife, and do what he thought he should.

"Kian?" Regan had pushed himself up to sit. He glanced down at his shirt, dark brown with Kian's blood, and then back at Kian with a puzzled, wary look.

"I'm sorry," was all Kian could think of saying.
*Sorry that I pulled you into this, sorry that I needed you,
sorry that I got hurt— sorry that we bonded when you had
no choice because you would never leave someone to die.*

"Are you okay?" Regan scrambled out of bed and crossed to him, touching his bare chest where the wound had been. "There's nothing here."

"I healed."

"I thought you were dying."

"I was."

"What the fuck, Kian?" Regan's voice held a tone of warning.

"I'm sorry. Really sorry." Kian took a step back, taking himself away from Regan's touch, but Regan refused to cede any ground to him.

"What for? What did you do?"

"You have to believe me." He held his hands out in front of him. "I couldn't help it. My Fire, yours, it took over." He was aware he was coming across as a mad man talking nonsense.

"Kian!"

"We bonded, okay?" Kian spat out, feeling wretched and unable to look Regan in the eyes. "I couldn't stop it, and I am ashamed for that."

Regan took a step back, and Kian chanced a glance at his newly bonded mate, who seemed intent on staring at his hands. Even now, at this moment, when everything was collapsing around him, his body wanted Regan, needed him. He backed away one more step until he was against the closed door. Mere inches of wood separated him from experiencing Regan's disappointment and horror.

"Shit." Regan finally spat out in temper. "All that stuff, about the Fire, and the connection, and giving me a choice in this bonding story... That was all just complete crap?"

"No," Kian held out a hand, "it wasn't me. My body was dying. The Fire was protecting me—"

"By fucking with me!" Regan interrupted with a snarl.

"You weren't supposed to even be here," Kian defended. "I was supposed to be alone." *To die.*

"So now it is my fault for following you? Well, sorry I gave a crap about your wizard ass." Regan was clearly not happy, and Gods, Kian could understand why. The Fire had violated Regan, forced him into a connection he didn't understand.

"It means nothing, Regan. You can leave, and as soon as you decide to leave, the connection is broken." That was all he would say. There was no way he would explain the small issue of consequences to himself.

"Well, okay then, consider this me leaving." Regan opened the door to the bedroom and left, crossing immediately to the front door and just going. Kian watched him walk down the steps and climb into his car, separating them as cleanly as his knife would.

CHAPTER 12

Regan was two days into his self-imposed exile from Kian when the impetus to return to the man who had shaken up his life became too much to bear. At first it had been a small thread of concern. He found himself thinking about green eyes and the taste of the man who, in normal circumstances, he would have fucked and left anyway. Then the niggles became his subconscious suggesting that maybe finding Kian and fucking him would get him out of his system and smooth the ragged edges.

When the suggestions became intention, he was screwed. He smacked his keys into the ignition and pointed the car back to the mountains and the cabin where Kian might still be.

He knew Kian should have gone home the same day he'd driven away. He was fit and well, and there was no place for him in Regan's world of grays and browns. Kian should be in the bright colors of his own space.

Still, Regan knew Kian had remained at the cabin. He wasn't entirely sure how he knew so absolutely that Kian had remained. Snatches of dreams came to him at odd moments. As he drank whisky in the next bar, or sat researching a Nameless in the diner in town, and even as he slept, the insistent push to return to Kian roiled restless

under his conscious. Regan rationalized everything as unfinished business; his body just needed to flush the cravings and the want.

* * * *

He pulled up in the yard and turned off the engine, peering through the windshield to the cabin beyond, wondering how he was going to explain his return to Kian. Something along the lines of *I think we should just fuck and get it over with* would probably not work entirely as he wanted it to.

The door was cracked open, and Regan hovered at the base of the steps, again wondering if the wards had been changed or whether the Fire would let him through.

"Regan." Kian stood in the open doorway, leaning against the frame, his arms folded across his chest. He wore a new shirt, undecorated by blood or tears, and his familiar long coat. His breath formed small puffs of mist in the chilly fall air.

"Can I come in?" Regan looked closer. Kian looked ill, exhausted, his gaze focused firmly on Regan with something akin to fear on his face.

"No."

"No?"

"I changed the wards, you can't come in."

"Kian, we need to talk."

"No."

"Kian?"

"Go away, Regan."

"No," Regan said firmly. Then they just stared at each other, clearly at an impasse. Kian had changed the wards and was not letting him in, and Regan was not going to leave. He thought for a moment, and then extended his hand to where he knew the barrier was, the invisible shield of magik that protected Kian. It was a stupid move. He remembered the pain from the last time he had tangled with Kian's green Fire, but his instinct told him he'd be fine.

"Stop," Kian half shouted, straightening away from the door frame and swaying, his face twisted in pain. Regan didn't stop. The Fire let him through, and in seconds, he was at Kian's side.

Just in time to catch Kian as he fell unconscious to the floor.

Stumbling, he half lifted, half pulled Kian to the nearest sofa and nearly dropped him onto it. What the hell? Kian was so damn pale, exhaustion bruising his eyes, his mouth open and slack, his body limp. When Regan had gone, he had left behind a man who was healed, fully fit and alive. What had happened?

Kian mumbled something, and Regan leaned in to hear *"Go away."* There was no way in hell that was happening. Damn the man! What the fuck? He thought back over what he knew, focused now on the veiled innuendo, the stilted explanation. The only conclusion that he could reach involved Kian's Fire. Shit. Maybe that whole bonding crap meant his Fire had been compromised. He tried to remember. Kian had described incredible pain and depression and loneliness when the Fire left his Uncle. Was that what he was going through now? Had his Fire left? Why? Did that mean the wards around the cabin would let anyone in?

Most importantly, what should he be doing to right things? To bring Kian back.

To bring Kian back. To. Him.

Touching was good, Regan thought frantically. Okay. Touching had healed Kian from the knife wound, and touching he could do. He maneuvered Kian until he sat beside him and then push-pulled the other man to lean on him. Maybe he needed skin on skin? Maybe he needed to mimic the night of the blood, by placing a hand over Kian's heart? Crap, anything was worth a try at this point. Settled, he closed his eyes, pushing his hand under soft cotton and over Kian's heart against the bare skin.

* * * *

Kian slipped back to the real world. He knew instinctively that Regan was with him, and he blinked his eyes open. It was too much to know his mate was here, to have the promise of him, and then for it to be taken away again. He didn't think he could be as brave a second time. He had tried so damn hard to meet his end as a man, but the grief and anxiety that consumed him had been much more than he could bear.

"Are you okay?" Regan's voice was sleep-rough and concerned, and Kian eased himself up and away so he could face his mate. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just woke up."

"I didn't mean now. Last night."

"I was just tired."

"You were sick. Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

"Did the bonding... Is your Fire... Shit, did me leaving hurt you?" Regan manhandled him so Kian was astride him, face to face.

"I don't know what to say. What do you want me to say?"

"Tell me the truth. You didn't say me leaving would hurt you. You made me think everything was okay." Kian

dipped his gaze and then took a deep breath. He could hear the accusation in his mate's voice.

"What happened between us is not something that you chose to happen, Re." He needed to get Regan to see that a choice to leave could be made, and that Kian was man enough to deal with it.

"What if I decide it now?" Regan asked carefully, and Kian snorted in disbelief.

"It would just be your stupid hero complex making you feel you had to do something."

"But, what if I told you that the last two days have been empty?" Regan insisted. "That I don't get it, but my heart was cold as ice because I craved to be with you?"

Kian's heart lifted with hope, and then just as quickly, he stilled that hope with the inevitability of what really was going to happen.

"That is just the connection talking," he said firmly. "I told you that the bonding would cause a craving in you. Like a drug addiction. You just had a taste. The longer we are apart, the sooner you get over it." *When I die*. Kian refused to look at Regan directly, knowing that his mate would see any lie.

"The night of the *Danio chwiwgi*, when you were dying," Regan started thoughtfully, "it wasn't any damn craving or connection that made me come here to you. Shit,

Kian, it was just good old-fashioned concern." Kian nodded, suddenly angry with himself at the grief he allowed inside him at that single word, concern. He deliberately pushed back from Regan, still off balance on his lap but at least with braced arms forming a barrier. Regan shifted under him, and Kian cursed the heated lust that climbed inside him.

"Why didn't you just go home, Kian?" That was a question he had expected from Regan but had no ready answer to.

"I will." That was simple enough.

"When?"

"Leave it, Regan." A lie and more than Regan needed to know, but the other man was not letting this alone.

"I'm assuming that they can heal you or at least help you?"

"I couldn't. Gods, I can't."

"What? They couldn't heal you?"

"You're not listening to me. I *couldn't* go home, I *can't* go home." Kian tried to make sense of it for a frowning Regan. "Once we are fully here in your world, we can't go back any more."

"Your ancestors did. The *Danio chwiwgi* did."

"Both times wards were lowered. For my ancestors,

it was an approved Gate, and the *Danio chwiwgi* was sent back by force, dead."

"So they could lower the wards for you."

"Even if they could, they wouldn't. I broke about a hundred laws forcing through. If I go back—" He stopped, not at all motivated to speak. What was the point? He knew there would be punishment should he return. To cross here had broken the most precious of the Twelve Primary Edicts. Without Council approval, transiting between continuums is punishable by death, whatever the reason for the transgression.

Regan cupped his face with both hands and then he rocked his hips and pulled him forward. The touch of him was warm and comforting, and Gods, Kian had felt so cold these last two days. The sudden kiss that Regan placed on his lips was gentle, nothing more than an exchange of breath.

"If you go back?"

"Regan, please."

"Hmm, we'll get you back." Regan's voice was thick with emotion, and Kian went back to denying how much he wanted this man. Until, that was, the very moment when Kian found himself hard and needy and pushing himself down against Regan with very little conscious thought. He felt Regan's sex, as hard as his, meeting the push with a

force of his own, sliding and retreating and deepening the kiss.

Obsession tumbled inside him, and his hands pushed under Regan's shirt, desperate to touch smooth heated skin— just one touch before he died. Regan tilted his head, angled for a deeper kiss, and for a long time, Kian was just happy to lose himself in the caress. With a touch as light as a feather, Regan began tracing a pattern of touch on bare skin, pushing Kian's shirt to one side. Only then did the enormity of what they were doing hit him.

"Wait." Kian pulled back, pushing hard against Regan's chest. They had to stop this. Regan had no decision to make; Kian wouldn't let him.

"Not waiting," Regan breathed the words as he pushed at Kian's hands, "want you, want to be inside you."

"No," he really pushed now, "if you do that —if we join— then withdrawal from addiction will last for your lifetime, and you'll never be rid of it!"

Regan didn't even pause, digging his fingers into Kian's hips and gripping tight. Kian could feel the madness in his mate. It was intoxicating. "Just a taste then," Regan demanded, and Kian recoiled at the words. A taste would never be enough.

"No. You don't want this. There is still time to stop." Kian was rigid in a battle of terror versus absolute

need and want. His stubborn refusal seemed to have had an effect. Regan just stopped. His eyes narrowed, and his tongue darted out to dampen his lips.

"My decision," Regan finally ground out, passion and need coloring his words scarlet and hot.

Those two words broke the very thing that enabled Kian to act nobly. In that instant, Kian stopped pushing. He sprawled as if the strings holding him had snapped and buried his face into Regan's neck. There was no energy left to fight any more. The lust to taste this man and consummate their bonding was just too pure.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, so low that he had hope Regan would never hear the words. His Fire sparked in his spine, tracing lust through his languorous limbs, and the thought of stopping now was more than he could bear.

CHAPTER 13

Regan heard the simply spoken "*I'm sorry*". Hell, Kian had nothing to be sorry for. Regan knew he had made the right choice, knew it even as the quiet words were a soft murmur against his skin.

The last two days had been some kind of special hell, filling him with a need so intense it clouded his thoughts. But, along with that need, a spark of something else had been lit.

Kian fascinated him. He wanted to learn more about the man with the magik, wanted to touch him and experience the Fire. Somehow, without realizing it, he had tipped over from lust and appreciation of a fine ass to wanting to taste and respect and cherish. It was a completely new feeling for him. Being alone had always suited him fine. Casual hookups had kept him sane. This though, this was something very different.

It felt more than right to be with Kian. He wasn't lying when he'd said those words— my decision. It had always been *his* decision to make.

It had startled him when he felt Kian collapse against him, clearly resigning himself to what Regan felt he wanted. Complete submission was not what Regan had ever sought in a partner, but it seemed that was what Kian

believed he wanted.

"Look at me," he ordered as calmly as he could, wincing only a little when Kian raised a fearful, worried gaze to his. This wasn't the man who had defeated his nemesis in the snow, or the brave man who had crossed through the Gate, banishing himself from his own home in the doing. This was not the Kian who was so certain of his reason for being.

Regan took a deep breath, twisting his fingers into Kian's hair, and considered how he should phrase this.

"I promise it isn't because you are bonded to me that I think things should change." Kian looked suddenly doubtful, and it was all Regan could do not to just get on with the physical side of this without stopping to talk. "Don't." Regan wasn't sure if he meant *don't doubt me* or more simply *don't let us stop*. Kian needed to end the worrying about why Regan had made his decision, along with the guilt the warlock seemed to associate with it.

"Don't?"

"There has to be a reason we were supposed to bond," Regan said simply. Kian wrinkled his brow in a frown, and Regan stiffened. This wasn't going well. "Hell, give me some credit for accepting the things I can never truly understand." There was a hint of desperation in his voice, and he tempered it with the dry humor that he often

used. "Who am I to say that some ancient path wasn't mapped out for you and me and that we weren't destined to be together?"

"Are you laughing at me?" Kian asked, and Regan winced at the hurt in the other man's voice. Damn his sense of humor and its ability to appear at the worst of times.

"No, I promise I'm not."

"I'm scared." Kian pushed weakly.

"Of?" Regan had a list in his head, a very earthly list of human responses which were blown away by the next thing Kian said.

"Of you leaving. If we bond and stay together, it will hurt too much for you to leave."

Regan considered the words, looked at Kian thoughtfully, then considered everything he knew of Kian and Kian's world. If his mate couldn't return to his world then he would clearly be staying here, and in seconds, Regan knew there was only one possible answer.

"Kian ap Rhys, who the hell said I was ever leaving you?" When Kian smiled and threw himself into Regan's arms, Regan knew he'd said the right thing.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RJ Scott lives just outside London. She has been writing since age six, when she was made to stay in at lunchtime for an infraction involving cookies and was told to write a story. Two sides of A4 about a trapped princess later, a lover of writing was born. She loves reading anything from thrillers to sci-fi to horror; however, her first real love will always be the world of romance. Her goal is to write stories with a heart of romance, a troubled road to reach happiness, and more than a hint of happily ever after.

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ALSO BY R J SCOTT

Available at **Silver Publishing:**

Oracle

Moments

The Christmas Throwaway

The Heart of Texas (Feb 2011)

Valentine 2525 (Feb 2011)

All the King's Men (March 2011)

Back Home (April 2011)

Available at **Dreamspinner Press:**

Two Plus One

"Ascension" in *A Brush of Wings*

REVEIWS:

Lisa from *Michele n Jeff Reviews* gives 5/5 to ***The Christmas Throwaway***

RJ Scott has created a beautiful and inspirational story that grabs hold of the heart and doesn't let go, even after its final words are read. It is a sweetly sentimental book that cultivates an emotional response and inspires belief that love can prevail under the most improbable of circumstances. The characters are well developed and engaging, and the attraction between Zach and Ben was entirely credible. To use a trite but true cliché, The Christmas Throwaway is simply a feel-good story, a touching and romantic read that embodies the meaning of new beginnings and happy endings.

* * * *

Reviews by Jessewave gives 4.5/5 to ***The Christmas Throwaway***

The Christmas Throwaway touched me, not because Zach was homeless at 17 and had been thrown out of his home by his father one week before Christmas, but his character was so vulnerable and innocent that it would take a much harder heart than mine to resist him. However, this book is a dichotomy. It's so sweet in some parts but quite harsh and realistic in others. Two years after they met the ending was everything I could have hoped for. There *is* sex but it's not at the level that some readers are accustomed to, however I would urge you to read Zach's and Ben's beautiful story. Definitely recommended.

* * * *

Book Wenches give 4.5 to ***Moments***

Although I began reading it looking for a Hollywood train wreck, this novel is much more than that. It is a well-told

story of love, personal growth and redemption that I found to be touching and quite involving. It features well-developed and arresting characters, heartfelt emotion, and a romance that is both intriguing and affecting... I will definitely be seeking out more of Ms. Scott's work in the future.

* * * *

Coffee Time Romance gives four cups to **Oracle**

This is a story that transcends time and space. R. J. Scott paints a wonderful scenario between ancient Greece and modern day as a backdrop for the story. Mystery and suspense keeps you turning the pages. If you are looking for something different to read then this would be a book for you.

* * * *

Lisa from *Michele n Jeff Reviews* gives 4/5 to **Oracle**

Oracle is a story whose roots are planted firmly in Greek Mythology. The characters are drawn from both mythology and the contemporary, and each had an important role to play in the exposition of the plot. Alex and Luke were strong protagonists, and the bond they were fated to share was deeply compelling and authentic. From the introduction to the conclusion, the plot held my attention with a blend of romance, suspense, conflict, and action.