



# KISS OF DARKNESS

LORIBELLE HUNT





Kiss of Darkness  
By Loribelle Hunt

Winter, a hybrid, has spent her life at war. A group of humans who are part demon, the hybrids, along with the lupines and nightwalkers, have dedicated their lives to defeating demons and protecting humanity. Yet, despite their united cause, the three groups share an uneasy alliance.

When hybrid military compounds come under attack from demon insurgents, Winter has no choice but to turn to the lupines and nightwalkers for assistance. It's a partnership based on necessity and she has no intention of letting down her guard with either group.

Marcus, the nightwalker Lord, has other plans. The immediate attraction between him and Winter promises a passion he can't ignore. To claim her as his own, he'll not only have to fight the demons who seem hell-bent on destroying her, but her own misconceptions about him and the nightwalker race. It's a battle he refuses to lose.

Dear Reader,

A new year always brings with it a sense of expectation and promise (and maybe a vague sense of guilt). Expectation because we don't know what the year will bring exactly, but promise because we always hope it will be good things. The guilt is due to all of the New Year's resolutions we make with such good intentions.

This year, Carina Press is making a New Year's resolution we know we won't have any reason to feel guilty about: we're going to bring our readers a year of fantastic editorial and diverse genre content. So far, our plans for 2011 include staff and author appearances at reader-focused conferences such as the RT Booklovers Convention in April, where we'll be offering up goodies, appearing on panels, giving workshops and hosting a few fun activities for readers. We're also cooking up several genre-specific release weeks, during which we'll highlight individual genres. So far we have plans for steampunk week and unusual fantasy week. Readers will have access to free reads, discounts, contests and more as part of our week-long promotions!

But even when we're not doing special promotions, we're still offering something special to our readers in the form of the stories authors are delivering to Carina Press that we're passing on to you. From sweet

romance to sexy, and military science fiction to fairy-tale fantasy, from mysteries to romantic suspense, we're proud to be offering a wide variety of genres and tales of escapism to our customers in this new year. Every week is a new adventure, and we want to bring our readers along on the journey. Be daring, be brave and try something new with Carina Press in 2011!

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to [generalinquiries@carinapress.com](mailto:generalinquiries@carinapress.com). You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!  
~Angela James

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# Dedication

Many people were instrumental in making this book happen. Those who read it and gave great advice that I can only hope to reciprocate at a future date are Georgia Woods, Dana Belfry, Dayna Hart, Crystal Jordan, Jennifer Leeland and my mother. My lovely editor Charlotte Herscher was instrumental in making it all come together. Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not also thank my husband and kids. They've done their own laundry, cooked their own dinner, and could maybe identify me in a lineup. Many thanks to you all.

# Prologue

*1955, Somewhere in the Southeastern United States*

When they took the blindfold off, she squinted in the sudden glare and looked around. This Hollywood B movie setting was where she was to join her soul with a demon's? It looked more like an unfinished basement than a cave, large and mostly empty with moisture-slick walls, floors smooth under her bare feet, like poured concrete. Her thin robe didn't do anything to protect her against the chilly air. It might look benign, but the place gave her a serious case of the creeps.

Fixtures with bare bulbs were bolted to the walls, exposed wire stringing from one to the other. The cave smelled musty from disuse and abandonment. Someone flipped a switch and some of the lights went off, dimming the cavern. That was more like it, but still nothing like what she'd expected. After all when you agreed to merge souls with a demon you expected shadows and fire and glowing red eyes.

She shivered, but it wasn't from the temperature. Despite its ordinary appearance she swore she could feel the hundreds of feet of earth over her head pressing into her. The place felt menacing. Evil. And she didn't have to guess why.

Her gaze fell on the big old-fashioned well in the center of the cavern. It was the source of unborn

demon souls the Order used to merge with. She could just see over the rim into a black chasm. So black she swore she could feel the very devil coming from it. A shiver of panic rushed up her spine at the prospect of what lay ahead, but she pushed it into the deep recesses of her mind and reminded herself why she was here. The now familiar rage returned. She welcomed it, let it fill the empty places in her heart and soul.

The choice had been easy really. Demons killed her husband. If she hadn't seen them with her own eyes she never would have believed they existed. He'd fought them long enough for her to escape, and his death left her with a bone-deep fury. She would do *anything* for vengeance. These people had been tracking the demons. Instead they had found and protected her. Sheltered her. Shown her the path to retribution. Survival was just an added bonus. But more than that, she owed them her life and her sanity. It was a debt she would repay.

Others began to enter and take their places until finally, nine people circled her and started chanting in Latin. She hadn't asked too many questions about the source of the ceremony. Sometime during the Crusades a desert mystic had passed on the knowledge to knights. They'd been using it to fight demons ever since. The words had been translated for her, but in this moment she couldn't remember what they were. Something about sacrifice and endangering her soul and a vow to protect humanity. And then there was the second part. Calling the demon soul from that well. Drawing it with the scent of her blood to create the

merge. The chorus of voices started low and built to a crescendo, ending in an abrupt spooky silence. Benjamin, their leader, lifted a black-handled dagger from the box at his feet and offered it to her on the palms of his hands.

“Do you willingly join your soul with the demon to fight the greater evil?” he asked.

In a surreal mockery of a marriage ceremony she made her response firm. “I do.”

Lifting the blade from his hands, she quickly slashed it along her left palm before fear could change her mind. The cut stung, but that small discomfort was nothing compared to the fire that seared through her veins as the demon made its presence known. The sensation was excruciating and she fell to her knees with a cry, biting her tongue hard enough to bleed to stop the sound from escaping her throat. If the screams started, she feared they’d never stop.

Agony.

Torture.

She’d been told to expect it.

The telling was nothing like the reality.

Her insides felt like they were boiling, her skin like it was melting off. She pried open her eyes, desperately afraid of what she might see but even more scared not to know. Everything was washed in a film of red. Her hands, the floor, the hems of the robes around her. After what could have been seconds or hours, the pain ebbed and she looked up to see the faces surrounding her, embarrassed to have shown such weakness in front of her new family. There was no censure on anyone’s face, however. She swallowed



bile and blood, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

On trembling legs, she stood and watched as they removed the daggers from their own belts and approached her one by one. Benjamin drew the knife along his right hand until blood welled up and she did the same. He took her hand in a firm grasp. The line progressed until the process was repeated with each member present. Each bonded to the other by blood and purpose.

Once finished, the acrid tang of blood filled the air. Her new demon half sniffed at it, wanted to gorge on it. Acting on pure instinct, she forced it into an impregnable cage in her mind, a battle won after a bitter struggle and she imagined slamming iron doors shut on its scream of rage. This was definitely going to take some getting used to. When she was breathing normally again she lifted her head to see her new family stretched in a semicircle before her.

Benjamin stepped forward.

“Welcome to the Order of Templar,” he said.

The initiation was over. It was time to get to work.

# Chapter One

## *Present Day*

Twilight.

Her favorite part of the day. That last peaceful bit of daylight before the bogeymen came out. Funny how the edge of the day had been awakening the memory of her merging ceremony so often of late. Or maybe it wasn't.

She hadn't balked when the Order had made the offer to become one of them. Yes it meant a part of her would become evil, but someone had to stand against the darkness. If it was the only way, she'd take it. Someone had to.

The merge made her stronger. Faster. Gave her supernatural powers. Long life. Theoretically she was immortal, but unless she had a bonded mate she would eventually give in to the evil invading her soul and her own people would be forced to hunt her down. Kill her. It had all been explained with great care before she'd joined. She'd had decades before she needed to worry about that though and in the beginning when David's loss was a fresh, raw wound that was fine. The thought of another man touching her had made her skin crawl.

But now, sixty years later, Winter Bennett was running out of options and was having a hell of a time concealing that fact. It wouldn't be much longer before

her demon half took over and her own people would be forced to exterminate her.

*No.* It was a denial born of steel-tested determination. She would never allow that to happen. When it was too late, she'd end it herself. Once the idea would have saddened her. But she was so tired, and a quickly repressed voice admitted, lonely that the end didn't seem like such a bad idea.

"Captain."

She ignored the call of her old friend Gia Drake, one of her lieutenants and best friends, and concentrated on the encroaching night, on stilling the beast that lived inside her, that lately threatened to consume her. The demon refused to be denied and she refused to surrender to it. For the moment at least, they were at an impasse.

"Winter." A soft voice, a softer hand coming to rest on her shoulder as the other woman came to join her at the glass doors.

Her lips twisted in the slightest smile as she turned to face Gia. She and Dupree Jackson were her oldest and most trusted friends. They'd been created in the same year and should all be feeling the same stress. But Winter saw no strain, no tension on her old friend's face and knew there was only one possible explanation why.

"Who is he?"

The only way to save the hybrid soul was to bond it with someone else. Someone purer. Someone not reborn of evil the way those in the Order were. There were always exceptions of course. Very occasionally two hybrids managed to bond together. It was as if the

two human halves of their souls created something stronger, almost superhuman. Gia was the child of such a pairing. She'd grown up in the Order, understood the risks inherent in merging with a demon better than most and had taken it anyway. Now she frowned and shook her head. Denial was bright in her eyes.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

Winter laughed. She had to be kidding. The change in her was plain to see. "Oh come on."

"You know I haven't bonded with anyone. I'd have to ask for your permission to do it."

Not every couple was allowed to make the blood oath. Mistakes had been made in the past. Usually when the human half of the equation wasn't mentally strong enough.

"You'd get it." No questions asked. No hesitation. Winter had seen too many good people fall to deny her best friend the opportunity to be spared a brutal end. Not to mention sparing herself the burden of delivering it.

"It's just an affair. A diversion to take the edge off." Coffee cups rattled on the desk. Winter waited while Gia got her telekinetic power back under control. She hid her curiosity about the emotional reaction to a simple question and response. Pushing wouldn't get her answers, however. Gia would tell her when she was ready.

"Sure it is." Winter let a teasing note enter her voice, and kept her expression light as she examined her friend. Hid the worry for all of them—herself, Gia and Dupree—that was so often there in the past few

years, as they'd aged without bonding. Interesting. She wasn't imagining it. Gia really was at ease, her struggle with the demon less evident than it had been mere weeks ago. But there was no bond. Which meant...what exactly?

"Are you hunting tonight?" Gia asked and Winter let her change the subject. It was a mystery she'd solve in due time.

"Later," she answered. "I think I'll go see if Mitchell is up for a sparring match first."

Gia opened her mouth to express her opinion on that, but Winter had heard it over and over again. She wasn't interested in a repeat. No one approved of her close association with the alpha lupine, which was pretty hypocritical since several of their order had mated with lupines. It was okay for the regular rank and file but not a captain? That just didn't seem right. Shaking her head, she slipped out the sliding glass door before her lieutenant could get started. Rank had some privileges.

She closed the door behind her with a final-sounding *click* and paused at the edge of the concrete slab patio. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back and inhaled deeply. Listened as the forest went quiet around her when she intruded upon it. She smelled pine, gardenia, and after a moment the crickets resumed their loud cacophony. When they did, she stepped out onto the short lawn and used her demon speed to enter the wood line.

Once she would have delayed, would have taken the time to explore and enjoy the night. Those days were over. The joy long gone from them. In her effort

to control the demon she'd reduced her life to nothing more than duty and hunting.

She'd left the house prepared. Her long pale hair, the distinguishing trait that marked her, hung in a thick braid down her back. She smiled, fondly remembering earlier years. After merging, her light brown hair had slowly bleached out to nearly white and Benjamin, her first squad leader, had started calling her Winter. She rarely thought of herself by the name she was christened with anymore.

The good memories were tainted with the weariness of the present, however. Those times were so much simpler. She'd just been a soldier. Her old mentor had just been a lieutenant. Now she ran a quadrant and Ben was regional commander.

Forcing the memories away, she did a mental inventory and checklist. She was dressed in the solid black most of the Order wore with no insignia or sign of her rank. Her knives were strapped to thigh holsters and the insufferable cell phone was on her belt. There were spare blades tucked down the sides of her knee-high boots. She was as prepared as anyone could be.

Most of the demon hybrids also carried guns. She was proficient with everything in their arsenal, but she didn't care for them. Preferred the death she dealt to be a little more up close and personal. Some thought she had a death wish of her own. They were wrong, but she never bothered to correct anyone. Besides how could she explain that she used the horror of what she was capable of as a reminder to be ever vigilant with the demon? She snorted at the partial truth, the self-

deception. Because, hell, there was an undeniable adrenalin rush involved and it was addicting.

She was going to feed that craving.

Winter was careful to keep her mental shields in place so that none of her thoughts, none of her plans could possibly leak to Gia or Dupree. They'd had a strong connection from the beginning, the three of them, and all the years in between had only made it stronger. She hadn't been completely forthcoming about her intentions when she'd set out from the compound. The rule was no one hunted alone. An unofficial law she'd broken years ago and continued to break, but would never allow any of her people to get away with. Before she could begin that part of the night however, she needed to check in on the other compounds she was responsible for. She'd moved up the ranks faster than most and now controlled the northeast quadrant of the Camden. She'd grown up here, in middle Georgia, but it didn't resemble the small town of her youth anymore.

Normally she'd teleport to make her nightly rounds, at least to the outer reaches, but tonight she was too restless. The demon was too hungry. It wasn't particular about what kind of blood she spilled either. They merged with demons so they'd have the strength to fight the others, the real demons. But the soul that shared hers was nothing but instinct. No thought. No reasoning. And it was growing in power, becoming harder and harder for her to control.

She needed to burn off some of the excess energy, a task that was getting more difficult by the day. She set off into the woods. After checking up on her squad

leaders, she'd swing by Mitchell's. A good fight always helped tame the beast. Sex would be an excellent alternative, but she couldn't even remember the last time she'd met a man she was interested in who was also strong enough to take her on. She needed an alpha, dominant type, but didn't know many who could share control of a relationship. Everyone else she eventually reduced to tears.

The narrow path she followed switched back down the side of a hill. She didn't pay much attention to her surroundings until the forest went eerily silent and she knew she was no longer alone. Then she smelled them, the rank sulfur scent no demon could completely hide heavy in the formerly sweet air. When she came around the last corner into a clearing, three demons waited. They glowed orangish-red under the full moon, short pointed horns announced their low status as much as the fact they hadn't bothered, or more likely hadn't been able, to disguise themselves as human. But despite their status and limited abilities, they were three mature demons. Dangerous. Probably deadly if she took them on by herself. If she followed procedure, she would teleport far enough away for safety and wait for backup to arrive.

She never even considered following the rules.

Drawing her knives, she rushed them. All training, strategy, caution was forgotten. She let her control of the demon half of her soul slip. Felt, even shared, the euphoria that filled it at the thought of battle, of bloodshed and carnage. Winter let the rage at finding three of the enemy in her territory take over her actions.



Just as she expected, they gathered close to each other with just enough room between them to fight. Lesser demons didn't have enough brain power for strategy. They depended on brute strength and bloodlust. She used her superior speed and agility to whirl through the clump, slashing out with her blade as she went. The first fell dead before she was through.

Then she smelled the blood. Not the viscous black stuff demons oozed, but hot and tangy and human. Hers. One of them had managed to slice the back of her leg with the razor-sharp edge of the triangle tip on its tail. It burned. Rage nearly blinded her and she fought against it, forcing her demon half to submit so that she could think as the other two began to circle her.

Her mind was slowing, her movements already growing sluggish. Shit. The tip of the demon's tail was poisonous. How had she forgotten that? Eventually her body would fight it off, but she'd be left defenseless for days first. She concentrated on her home, tried to fix the image in her mind, but it was too late to teleport, her abilities already too dulled.

She'd fucked up. Royally. She'd walked into a trap, that much was obvious now. Her death would leave her people open and exposed. Too much of her energy was directed at fighting the poison to try to send a message to Gia with telepathy. She whispered a prayer begging forgiveness then mentally grounded herself in the here and now. She might not walk out alive, but she'd take at least one more with her. As if sensing her body's losing battle against their poison, the demons moved closer and she gripped her knives.

They split apart, one approaching from the front while the other moved to her left. She twisted her head as much as she dared to watch, tried to keep an eye on both of them. When he moved beyond her field of vision she lunged forward, using the last of her strength to thrust a knife at the heart of the demon before her. She had the satisfaction of feeling it crunch through his ribs and hit home before her legs gave out. Falling to her knees, she caught herself on her palms, waiting for the blow and bracing herself. She refused to die facedown in the dirt.

A thump came from behind her but she didn't feel it. She found the energy to twist her body, fell more than sat down on her ass. The sight before her was confusing. Her synapses just refused to work anymore.

## Chapter Two

Marcus Black, Lord of the nightwalkers, left the council meeting more exasperated than angry. He waved his twin, Luke, away and set off into the woods by himself. It'd be easier to just teleport home but the walk would work off his irritation. The councilors, a hidebound group of crotchety old men in his opinion, didn't believe the recent increase in demon activity was anything to worry about. They were much more concerned with the increasing numbers of hybrids and lupines in the area. Idiots, all of them. At least those forces were growing to meet the threat.

Distracted and edgy, he veered off on a path he seldom used. It would lead him home by a longer route and skim by hybrid territory in the process. He couldn't say what urged him, what drove him in that direction, but he didn't fight it.

He'd reached the point closest to hybrid lands when he felt it. A void, like a pocket of nothingness in the air, his mind picked up. Demons. He followed it off the path, deeper into the woods, and then he smelled it. The unmistakable stench of a demon, like hell itself.

Then another scent reached his nostrils, sweet and alluring. Curious, he let his senses expand to gather data as he tracked the demons. His mind brushed against hers, then returned, intrigued. A hybrid female. She was so agitated that she didn't notice his entrance into her mind. What he found there infuriated him.

His contact with hybrids was limited to the yearly meeting of the Alliance. The hybrid representative at those meetings was Benjamin, their regional commander. The lands he was now trespassing in, however, belonged to a quadrant leader he'd never met. He'd heard the leader was a woman, but hadn't paid enough attention to say for sure. He didn't approve of women becoming soldiers in the war with the demons. But hell, he had enough problems with his own people without borrowing someone else's.

This foolish woman had engaged three demons on her own, however. He couldn't walk away and leave her to her own devices and certain death. It went against everything in his nature and when he realized one of the demons had poisoned her he hurried forward. His blood pumped with the need to fight, to defend. Instincts finely honed over centuries and an excitement that never faded.

The clearing was blessedly close. Two demons were down, but the third stood over her, a curved wicked-looking blade in one hand. Without thinking, Marcus drew his throwing knives and let one fly. It hit home with a thud and the demon fell. It was over much too quickly, left him feeling disappointed and cheated. He needed a good brawl. It took a few minutes to slow his heart and mind, to shake the rest of the too-short fight from his skin.

Then he got his first good look at the woman. The hybrid he'd rushed to rescue. She looked more like a maiden in a tower than a half-demon warrior. Her pale blond hair was in a single braid that almost reached her waist. Long tendrils had come free to frame her face.

He had an irrational urge to touch it, wanted to know what it would feel like. Was it as smooth and silky as he imagined? Her features were delicate, a loveliness at odds with the strength and independence in her mind. At odds with the *power* of her mind. This was no ordinary hybrid.

Her stunned expression looked like an invitation. He wished it was in reaction to him, but he was in her mind, felt the poison moving swiftly through her system. She was helpless and for a brief moment he entertained taking advantage of it. His body was hard and throbbing in half a second. It was such a barbaric thought, such a primitive reaction, that it jolted him. He examined his reaction and then her mind, and came to one unavoidable conclusion.

He had to have her. In every way imaginable and then a few new ones. But it wouldn't be tonight or even next week. It would take weeks for her to heal from the demon poison and just as long to learn to trust him, but she would. Then he would make her his.

## Chapter Three

The demon was dead, and the most beautiful man Winter had ever seen was standing over him with a knife in one hand. He was tall, broad-shouldered and sleekly muscled, with midnight black hair just brushing his shoulders. He noticed her and seemed to glide forward. Smooth. Measured. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Nightwalker.

Soul eater.

Something like the vampires of myth, but subsisting on psychic energy instead of blood. He shouldn't be on her land. Shouldn't be rushing to her rescue. It was barely more acceptable than running into three demons in her own damned woods. He crouched before her and reached a finger out to trace the line of her jaw. If she'd had enough muscle control left, she would have flinched from the touch. Angry glacial blue eyes met hers.

"You've been poisoned."

She jerked a nod. "Be fine." The poison had reached her chest. Soon her vocal cords would stop functioning. "Few days. Sleep."

"You can't stay out here to recover."

She nodded again—it was too much effort to speak—and tried to stand. Her legs wouldn't cooperate and she almost groaned out loud. She'd have to call Gia and Dupree for help and risk the lecture. She

moved her hand to her belt but her fingers wouldn't grip, wouldn't pop the cell phone free of its case or key the emergency button on the side.

The nightwalker snarled then bent to scoop her up. He lifted her as if she was weightless. She would have protested if she could speak, would have struggled if her body would obey her. It wasn't wise to show this much weakness to him. Walkers weren't the enemy, but they weren't exactly friends either. They were simply part of an uneasy and relatively new alliance between the three supernatural races. They tended to keep their distance from hybrids like herself and the other part of the triumvirate, the lupines.

Legend said once the nightwalkers and lupines had been one race, and the disagreements that had originally divided them eons ago still held sway. It was a story she'd never been interested in hearing before, but now she wondered what truth was behind it. Some people refused to let go of the past. And when those people damned near lived forever? Well, they knew how to nurture a grudge.

She knew plenty of lupines, knew how they were a threat, knew who could be trusted. But the standoffish nightwalkers were a mystery. She only knew rumors and so she had no idea how much danger, if any, she was really in.

The walker cradled her close and stepped into the woods, striding briskly back to the trail she'd come from. The paralytic poison had completely taken over and she was limp in his arms. Defenseless. Her control of her mind's shields was also failing, but she only felt a moment of unease. She should have been alarmed.

Not too long ago he probably would have killed her on sight. Maybe the odd sense of safety was a side effect of the drug because her brain finally reengaged, tried to voice a demand that he release her. Her thinking seemed to be fine, but her ability to speak was frozen along with everything else. She fought to regain control of her body, fear rising like gorge in her throat.

*Shh. I'm only taking you home.*

Shit shit shit. Like hybrids, nightwalkers had varying mental powers. Wouldn't she be unlucky enough to end up powerless with one of the walkers strong enough to get past what was left of her mental walls? She was a strong telepath, a gift from her demon, and it was rare for anyone to get into her head without invitation. Circumstances were far from optimal though.

She turned her mind inward, examined what was left of her shields and cringed at the damage. They were more like swiss cheese than the solid wall of protection they should be and she hastily tried to repair them. The damaged shields wouldn't just leave her defenseless with him. There were other strong telepaths among the hybrids and walkers.

She worked furiously to fix the breaks, ignoring the twinge of guilt she felt for not trusting all of her own people, all the while seething at herself. She should never have lost control, never have engaged three demons by herself. Now she was more vulnerable than any hybrid, than any human. He could wipe her mind clean if he wanted to. Anyone else could strike out at her.

*Stupid, Winter, she fumed. Really stupid.*



*Yes, it was.* Disapproval and anger were heavy in the male voice invading her mind. *What the hell were you thinking?*

She ignored him. Refused to attempt to justify her actions to a stranger. A nightwalker. She hadn't been thinking at all. It was an amateur mistake and she knew it, but none of his business. Didn't change the fact she knew she'd screwed up. She should have teleported out, should have at least called for assistance before she attacked.

She'd love to pretend it was anger and her slipping control over her demon that had led to her rashness, but she forced herself to be brutally honest. She was bored, tired of the same old crap day after day, looking for a good fight, looking for something. Anything new and different, anything that would banish the sameness from her life. There was no telling how dearly she would pay for that yearning if he decided not to honor the peace between them.

*Now you're insulting me.* There was a low menacing growl inside her head. She must be losing her mind because it didn't scare her at all. Instead she experienced a surge of satisfaction that even incapacitated she could get under his skin. She was tempted to taunt him further. The reaction made no sense and she blamed it on the poison, focused on getting away from him.

*Put me down. I have a phone to call for help.* It rankled, but if she were at someone's mercy she'd prefer it be Gia or Dupree. Them she trusted. She sensed disappointment from him over her lack of faith.

Why would he expect her to trust him? She didn't ask and he didn't offer any explanations.

*We're almost there. There are people waiting.*

She only wondered where *there* was for a moment. Of course he knew where he was going. He was in her head. Just then he broke through the tree line into the small yard at the back of the compound, the one she'd only recently departed from. Gia and Dupree were speaking quietly on the patio, froze for only half a second before both leaping forward. They might have attacked if not for the nightwalker's loud snarl.

"What happened?" Dupree demanded.

"Demon poison," came the curt reply.

And it was taking over. She couldn't respond to their questions. She felt herself slipping into the long slow slide of unconsciousness. Her eyes closed against her mind's command to pay attention.

"We've got her now."

She felt a sweep of skin, knew Dupree was reaching for her. The nightwalker's fingers convulsed around her, holding on for a second that seemed to stretch to minutes before finally letting her go. His mind brushed hers again but she wasn't sure later if she'd imagined his whispered words or not. *Until later, Winter.* Then there was nothing but silence.

She didn't even get his name.

## Chapter Four

Winter slept for a week and spent another few days frail as the human she once was. The weakness was at varying times frustrating, infuriating and depressing, but a few weeks later she was physically one hundred percent again. Unfortunately, she was in more danger than ever of losing herself to the demon half of her soul. She spent hours sparring with Mitchell, the alpha who was the current leader of the lupines, trying to burn off the extra energy, her lieutenants tagging along half the time whether she ordered them away or not. She'd finally given up trying. She struggled less when they stuck together, but even that was just a stopgap measure. Her time was running out.

She'd been looking for a replacement for weeks. Gia and Dupree, who insisted on staying as single as she did, were not viable options. Without a bonded mate, they were at as much risk of losing control of the demon as she was. She had a couple of candidates, but every time she considered approaching one of them, every time she turned over the pros and cons of each individual, a pissed-off nightwalker made himself known in her mind. It was like he'd put a tripwire in her subconscious that alerted him every time she considered her grim future. And like clockwork...

*You have a long and excellent future ahead of you.* Even though she was expecting him to show up in her head, she froze for half a second, actually forgot where

she was. He didn't sound angry tonight. His voice was smooth and sinful as dark chocolate. Just as decadent. Just as pleasurable. His anger she could take. But this sexy man who stoked a raging fire of need in her and then left her wanting was another matter.

A set of wolf claws scraped her skin an inch below her jugular. "Jesus, Winter. Pay attention," Dupree muttered.

"That would be easier to do if I didn't have the peanut gallery giving me advice every five seconds," she snapped back.

*That goes for you, too. Get out of my head.*

*Oh, but I have a right to be here, baby.*

"It'd be easier if you sucked it up and just got laid," Mitchell mumbled.

That did it. They could both go to hell. She ignored the amused laughter in her head and snarled, circling the large blue exercise mat again.

Good advice. Advice she'd love to take, except every time she made up her mind to take up Mitchell's offer of a tumble between the sheets or find someone else equally as willing, the nightwalker's face filled her vision. His voice whispered in her head that she was his, that her body belonged to him. She couldn't begin to guess why she heeded his warnings. She'd never been good at following orders or giving in to coercion, but no matter how much she tried to talk herself around it she obeyed his.

It pissed her off.

She was left with only one way to appease her demon, only one way to burn off the extra energy that raged in her body as it grew in power. She hunted with

Dupree or Gia, that lesson had finally sunk in at least, then she came here, to the lupine den and fought Mitchell. On the lucky nights, she expended enough energy to go home and collapse into bed for a few hours of dreamless sleep. On the unlucky nights, she dreamed and *he* haunted her. Tormented her.

Dream walking was a rare gift among hybrids. Gia was the only one she knew, but of course the nightwalkers would have some with the same abilities. And of course the one vexing her would have that power.

It was bad enough he had unhindered access to her waking mind, but to be a dream walker also? To be able to enter her dreams or pull her into his? It was hell. She woke from those nights drenched in sweat, sexual need a deep ache in her. She didn't know why he was doing this to her, but hoped like hell he was suffering as much as she was. Because she was slowly losing her everlovin' mind.

She ducked Mitchell's fist just in time and was pleased when she managed to trip him as she whirled around. He hit the mat with an *oomph* and rolled to his back, but he was grinning when he looked up and met her gaze. They were both panting; they'd been at it for hours, and she leaned over, gripping her knees for support as she met his gaze with a rueful one of her own. She was winded, but nowhere near tired enough to seek her bed yet. As if sensing the direction of her thoughts, his eyes changed, turned rounder, the irises going almost golden with heat. The nightwalker was still in her mind, a growl his only warning, and with a

sigh she shook her head, wishing she could take Mitchell up on his unvoiced offer.

“Still no, huh?” He leveraged himself up on one elbow before climbing to his feet. He looked at the clock hanging on the opposite wall of the den’s large gym. “Run then?”

Nodding, she left the room and jogged down the corridor to the stairs that led up and out of the main part of the den. On the landing at the top she twisted the knob on the only door and pushed it open, stepping into the large house that served as a front for the pack. Mitchell had changed form before he followed and the sleek wolf pushed by her, waited at the front door for her to open it and join him. Dupree and Gia brought up the rear.

“Y’all go home.” Before either one could protest she added firmly, “I’ll be there soon.”

They’d been with her for over sixty years and she loved them both dearly, but God help her, they were suffocating her. If she didn’t get some space soon, she knew she’d lash out. Judging by Gia’s expression, she understood and she nodded once, then blinked away in the next instant. Winter turned to meet Dupree’s glare and hardened her resolve. Friends were great, but she was his superior. And she’d had her fill of best intentions.

“Don’t make me make it an order.”

He heaved a put-upon sigh, but left without speaking. Mitchell was waiting silently for her and they turned together, the wolf and the woman, and ran into the woods. On the path they were forced to go single file and she followed him. He set a grueling

pace, a flat-out run, easily clearing any obstacles in the path with the long stride and leaping abilities of his wolf. A human wouldn't have been able to keep up, neither would most hybrids, but she'd always seemed to have just a little bit *more* than the rest. More strength, more speed, more cunning. More power. It was why she'd risen so fast in the ranks.

She almost tripped over a log and turned her focus to the run, to the waning night. With her demon-enhanced vision the obstacles were easy to avoid if she was paying attention to what was in front of her. She forced all the worries from her mind. Her fate and Gia's and Dupree's. The people in her quadrant she was responsible for. That damned nightwalker.

The forest was quiet, the only sound filling the early morning her labored breathing, the crunch of her boots over dead leaves and dried sticks. A transitory peace settled over her.

They ran until the sky began to lighten, until a deep stitch took root in her side. Despite knowing she should call a halt, she kept running. Kept pushing. Soon she would feel the nightwalker pacing in her mind again, caged in some secret place only he knew of.

She'd tried several times to find his access to her mind to block it with no success. He maintained a sort of general presence in her head. He mostly left her alone during the night, but as soon as the sun rose, he was there, the way he couldn't be during the day. She hoped he would leave her alone this morning, that he wouldn't promise decadent erotic things he refused to follow through on. But she wasn't holding her breath.

He seemed to revel in bringing her to a fevered pitch, always leaving her unfulfilled.

The invasions had been brief at first. She'd been able to repel him, to close her mind off to him. She knew now that was only because he'd allowed it. Apparently his first unguarded trip into her mind had left a path open she couldn't close. He took full advantage of it. If his goal was to drive her crazy faster than the demon was, he was succeeding beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

She was getting distracted again and jerked at the sound of crashing in the trees ahead of her, leaping over the boar that barreled across the path just in time. She should have felt its presence long before she heard it. It was time to call it quits. Her mind kept wandering and exhaustion finally began to slow her down.

The second time she tripped, Mitchell turned in the direction of his den. She should have stopped and teleported home, but she wasn't quite ready to isolate herself, to leave herself open to the nightwalker. And maybe Mitchell had finally discovered who the nightwalker was. She'd sensed he'd wanted to talk earlier but had held back because Gia and Dupree were with her.

His lope slowed as they wended their way back into his territory eventually ending at the house. She slowed to a walk when they reached the yard, hand holding her side, and let him run ahead. She looked up at the place. More a mansion really. It was three stories, brick, with big wrap-around porches on every level and stairs crisscrossing the back. Beautiful but so



different from the drab military-style compound she called home.

She approached the outside stairs and climbed, unsure if it was physical or mental weariness that slowed her steps. At the top, she walked around to the front and found the French doors leading into his suite open. Stepping inside, she turned and closed them, staring out at the sun as it crested the horizon. She was drained, her body sore after hours of use, but the demon's lust still raged through her. Lust for power, blood, sex. It didn't matter what she fed it as long as she fed it, and the damned thing reared its ugly head and made sure she knew it didn't feel appeased.

The easiest way to do that would be to turn around and attack Mitchell. To draw blood or screw him wouldn't make much difference to the demon, but it did to her. What was left of her anyway.

"Winter."

It was a shame, too. She swiveled to face the sexy, and very naked, alpha lupine stretched across his couch. Their brief affair ended years ago and she wondered how she'd feel if she gave in to temptation and jumped him. For old time's sake if nothing else. But Mitchell's pursuit had been more habit than desire for years. If she were going to take another man into her bed before the end, it would be born of desire not ennui. The idea left her cold and shaking her head. She turned back to the windows, tilted her face back as the sun's warm rays shone through the glass and heated her skin.

She didn't have to wonder. She knew. There was a craving in her she couldn't name, but also couldn't

deny. A craving for a nightwalker that somehow went beyond sex.

Hearing Mitchell move, she watched his reflection in the glass as he stood and reached for a pair of jeans. When she'd come in, he'd still been in wolf form but he'd shifted quickly. The better to tease her with an offer he knew she would refuse. Now he dressed silently and padded over to join her, staring at the world outside.

"How long?"

They'd been good friends a long time, part of the beginning of the uneasy truce that linked the three long-lived races together. Hers was the first ending, the first hybrid degeneration he'd seen so close at hand. She shrugged, not wanting to further worry him, but also as unwilling to give up the secrets of her race as he was his own.

"A year maybe." There was no way she'd survive another year, but he didn't need to know that.

"You have to mate," he growled.

She turned to face him, refusing to feel any sadness, any remorse. She'd had a good long fight, couldn't have asked for better. Most of it had been exhilarating, fun. Even joyful.

"There isn't anyone for me. Mitchell, we can talk about this forever. It won't change anything."

"It doesn't work the same way for you, Winter." He put his hands on her shoulders, shook her once. "Not like us and the nightwalkers. There's no destiny involved for you. You can take anyone for a mate."

Could she? That's what everyone believed, but she wasn't so sure. Even if it was true, she had no

intention of tying someone to her permanently unless she was in love and loved wildly in return. Was that too much to ask? Maybe. Probably. She hadn't met anyone in the last sixty years who appealed to her like that. Whenever she thought she might be close, memories of David intruded. She didn't anticipate meeting anyone in the next few weeks who could change that.

Mitchell huffed his exasperation, released her and stalked across the room. He didn't understand her reticence to do something that would save her. She didn't either really, except that it just didn't *feel* right.

*What's wrong?*

The damned nightwalker was back. Maybe if she ignored him, he'd go away. Yeah right.

"There has to be a way," Mitchell muttered, still pacing the room.

"There's not. Unless my one and only true love suddenly shows up."

He threw his hands up in the air. "Great. Sarcasm's gonna help. Burying your head in the sand is not the answer."

*Winter?*

Shit. Couldn't he just leave her alone? Ignoring the small voice in her head that whispered she didn't really want that, she took a deep breath and answered, hoping to get rid of him long enough to find out if Mitchell had discovered the nightwalker's identity.

*I'm fine. Go away.*

Did she speak out loud? She must have. Mitchell stopped moving and cocked an eyebrow, mouthing *is*

*that him?* She felt the presence back away, but not withdraw. He was eavesdropping.

“Did you find out who he is yet?”

She didn’t bother keeping the snarl from her voice. In the first couple of weeks after the nightwalker had saved her in the woods, she’d tried to find out who he was. He refused to answer her question telepathically and she got more desperate, more obsessed with each refusal. When Gia and Dupree started to question her keen interest in the nightwalker, wondering if he’d somehow gained control of her mind, she’d stopped their search and asked Mitchell to take over. So far he hadn’t had any better luck. But this time a bright, feral grin flashed across his face and her stomach knotted into a hard ball. He’d found something.

“Well?”

“His name is Marcus.”

“And?”

Mitchell shrugged. “The guy’s a mystery. He may be the nightwalker Lord. He may just be a soldier.”

“If he was the nightwalker Lord, wouldn’t you know him?” He hadn’t been holding out on her, had he?

“I haven’t been to an Alliance meeting yet, remember?”

It was a gentle reminder. He must have sensed her suspicion. And he was right, she should have remembered. Alliance meetings were held once a year usually, and Mitchell had only become alpha a half year ago. Only race leaders and their immediate seconds attended those meetings. Before the power shift that had put him in charge, he hadn’t been

invited. He went on without missing a beat. If she had any sense she'd go straight to Benjamin, her commander. He'd know who the Lord was. But she didn't have much sense when it came to the nightwalker. She'd handle him in her own way, without running to her boss for help.

"The only thing everyone I talked to agreed on was he lives like a monk. He hasn't been linked with a woman in over a century."

She arched an eyebrow. So this Marcus was tormenting her because he was sexually frustrated? She found it hard to believe. He was so sensual. Not just his looks, but in the way he moved, the arrogant power of his mind, the whispered dark offerings in the middle of the day when she was trying to sleep. He was not the kind of man who'd be alone except by choice. And she was the one he'd turned all that magnetism on? Her heart started to race and the ever-present demon lifted its head, sniffed the air looking for the threat. She struggled to force it into a box in the corner of her mind, though she knew it wouldn't stay quiet for very long.

"Do we know where he lives?"

In a fit of pique, she'd demanded they meet a few weeks ago. She figured if he wasn't going to leave her alone, he could at least relieve the tension that was a permanent strum through her body. He'd helped cause it after all, but he refused, claimed she wasn't ready yet. What the hell was that about? She couldn't get much more ready.

Mitchell shrugged. "If he is the nightwalker Lord, you know where his mansion is."

“Fuck,” she muttered. She did know where the nightwalker Lord’s house was reputed to be, but even she couldn’t get through that kind of security. She would have to track him down somewhere outside of it. Give him a piece of her mind. And then some. Being so sexually wound up was not helping in her fight against the demon. She refused to acknowledge she might have an ulterior motive. So what if she wanted a taste of what he promised but held back? Her phone beeped a new message before she could get derailed with that train of thought. She glanced at the window, groaned and almost ignored it when she saw it was from Dupree, her mother hen. But duty couldn’t be ignored. She opened the message.

## Chapter Five

The message couldn't be right. She went cold, temporarily frozen, and stared at the screen.

*Commander's compound attacked. We'll meet you there.*

Benjamin's place. The commander's compound was the chapterhouse for the Order in this region. It was passed from commander to commander, the great stone house generally considered the safest of all the hybrids' compounds. Its protections were substantial. An attack on it would be massively stupid, an invitation to get slaughtered, and the demons were a lot of things, but not suicidal.

"I have to go," she told Mitchell and opened the door. She'd teleport closer to Benjamin's mansion from the patio; she needed a breath of fresh air first. He tilted his head to one side, curiosity clear on his face, but he didn't question her. He would have known by the way she shut down that the message had to do with the Order. They didn't interfere in each other's business that way. Inter-species friendship only went so far.

Stepping over the threshold, she pulled the door shut and, closing her eyes, took a deep breath. The morning sun was warm on her face, the air filled with the smells of early summer. Pine. Gardenias and honeysuckle. She fixed the position in her mind, imagined the area where she wanted to land, the road,

the trees, the wall blocking sight of the mansion from the road. Then she pushed herself outward, willed herself there. It was disorienting, moving through space, and she felt the usual loss of equilibrium until her feet were on solid ground again and she opened her eyes.

Winter stood on the road in front of the wall. She sensed life inside and, after a quick probe, realized the scientists and technicians from their private lab were already on the scene. The gates hung open, and even from the outside she could smell the blood, the death that permeated the grounds and house. Steeling herself, dread dogging her heels, she moved forward, eyes unbelieving as her gaze swept the lawn.

Everything else was forgotten in the horror she saw. There were...pieces of people, people she knew, people she *cared* about scattered across the drive and lawn. Her last meal heaved in her stomach and she stomped on the urge to rush to the bushes at her side and vomit. This wasn't the place for that weakness. There would be time enough later.

She felt the nightwalker—no, Marcus—brush against her mind and put up the strongest mental block she could build, feeding it with her rage. She couldn't be sure if his withdrawal was voluntary or if she'd actually succeeded with the shield, and it didn't matter. Part of her talent was being able to project feelings and no one needed to share this rage. The shield would be enough protection if her control over that gift slipped.

She picked her way through the carnage and around the technicians busy mapping the scene. The door opened as she reached the steps and Dupree stepped



out. Anger rushed through her. She shook as she spoke, the rage making her voice guttural.

“What the hell happened here?”

## Chapter Six

When Dupree had received the call from a shaky junior soldier, he hadn't believed the news. An attack on the commander's compound? It was suicide. An act of complete desperation or utter stupidity. He figured he'd arrive to discover a couple of demons had attacked someone outside the wall. He shared Winter's fury. He was just better at hiding it. Rage was easy to deal with, but the other emotion made him even more dangerous than usual. The feeling in his chest when he saw the destruction could only be described as terror.

If Kara was one of the dead here, he knew he would lose all control. He'd go on a murderous spree of retribution, finding and killing every demon he could lay his hands on. There would be no coming back from that kind of rage. Where the hell was she?

"Dupree?" Winter brought him back from the edge without even realizing it. His name on her lips was a demand for attention, calling him back from the edge of insanity. Probably she and Gia were the only two people in the world who could. Well, except for Kara maybe, but lately she tested his control more than helped it.

He stepped aside to allow her into the house. "We don't know yet."

He'd done a quick search of the house on his arrival, looking for Kara, and in her absence something to kill. Then he'd notified the scientists who worked in

the Order's local lab before calling Winter. She didn't realize it yet, but he suspected in Ben's absence the Order Council would make her the new regional commander. She would probably raise hell about the promotion, but she'd get over it quick enough.

"It looks like there are no survivors," he told her without missing a beat even though a part of him screamed in denial. "Had to be demons, but if it was, not one of them was killed. Not here at least."

She was scowling and he understood why. For no one to get off a killing shot, or reach for a blade, the demons would had to have launched a coordinated, massive attack. In the sixty years since he'd joined the Order he'd never heard of them operating that way. It didn't make sense, but it couldn't have happened any other way.

That led him to one inescapable conclusion, but he could see she hadn't reached it yet. Someone had organized the demons. Someone with inside information on the Order. Instead of pointing it out, he led her into the house, trying to contain his rage and desperation and feeling it push at the walls in his mind for release.

Where the fuck was Kara?

He went back to the room he'd been searching before Winter's arrival. The dining room. He was careful not to disturb anything, not to touch any of the blood splatters or brain matter flung around the room, but checked every body part, every face that was recognizable for anyone he knew. For her. Winter followed him in, sized it all up in a glance. He felt her mind flaring out, gathering information.

“She isn’t here,” she said softly behind him and he stiffened. Kara had been with them since she was a child. Like most members of the Order, like him, she came to them the victim of demon violence. Orphaned, just as he had been. It was bad enough he felt this inappropriate attraction for a twenty-four-year-old kid, someone he’d always looked on as a younger sister, but he sure as hell didn’t need the few friends he had commenting on it. Hell, he didn’t want them to even be aware of it. “Wasn’t she going to the beach this weekend with a group of the younger soldiers?”

Dupree met her gaze, keeping his expression neutral as he stalked out of the room and freed his phone from his belt. He’d *known* that, damn it, but the fear had been too overwhelming to think through. He’d seen the blood, the carnage, in the house he’d arranged for her to stay in because it should have been safe, and his mind had snapped.

She answered on the third ring, laughing, and the fact his whole body responded to the sound pissed him off. He barked at her. “Where the fuck are you?”

There was a long pause and he knew she was reining in her infamous temper. He’d had a fit about this trip, couched it as an overprotective older brother, since several of the people tagging along were single males. To satisfy his determination to protect her, he’d deny himself. He would never bond with her, but he’d be damned if he saw her with one of them either. She’d have a normal life, if it was the last thing he did.

“We’re on the way home,” she finally answered, her voice taking on a snide edge he knew he deserved

but that pissed him off anyway. “Don’t worry, Dupree. Another hour or so and I’ll be back behind walls.”

He fought the words clogging his throat, fought the demand of his body and mind—that she come to him for safekeeping *immediately*. “Go to Ingrid’s.”

“Why?” Her voice quivered a bit. She knew there was only one reason he’d order her away from her home and to a quadrant commander’s house where he wasn’t exactly welcome.

“There was an attack here,” he said softly.

“Survivors?”

“None.”

“Are you okay?” No hiding the shake in her voice this time and a part of him sat up and took notice. Accepted her concern as his right.

“I’m fine. We’ll fill everyone in when we know something.”

He cut the connection before she could demand more of him. Before he gave in to it. She had to stay safe and he would make that happen at the expense of everything else, his beliefs, his obligations, if it came down to it.

For now though, the beast inside him settled, knowing the woman who belonged to him was alive and unharmed. He went to work making sure she stayed that way.

## Chapter Seven

Marcus shifted on silk sheets. Even that smooth contact was an irritation to hyperaware and deprived senses. He stood up and glared at the heavy locked shutters, knew attempting sleep would be a frustrating waste of time. Nightfall was hours away and Winter needed him. Not that she'd ever admit it.

He recalled the night they met. At first, his fury had made no sense. What did he care if a hybrid acting stupidly engaged three demons on her own? But the ease with which their minds connected, the way he was drawn back to hers over and over again, not to mention his body's immediate and aching reaction to her, made it clear. She was his mate and she had risked her life with no thought at all. It'd taken him a full week to get control of his rage.

He'd stayed away the past few weeks because he'd known after his time in her unguarded mind that she would resist him if he tried to claim her right away. She didn't believe that as a woman born human she had a destined mate. Hell, he'd had a hard time accepting it himself. As far as he knew, no nightwalker had ever taken a hybrid mate.

It was part of the reason he delayed. He'd searched the records and hadn't found any instance of a mating between hybrid and nightwalker. He couldn't be the first one, however. It was rare, but there were some nightwalkers with human mates, something all hybrids

started out as. How would he have reacted if one of his people asked for permission to mate a hybrid before he met her? He didn't know and that made him uneasy. He thought he'd eventually approve such a union, but it would probably take a long time before he could view the couple without suspicion. How could he expect his people to view her any differently?

While the records didn't help him with those questions they yielded a different kind of fruit. There were hints that feeding from an unbonded hybrid prolonged their lives. But without concrete cases, without experimenting he had no way to know for sure. He'd briefly considered making the offer to her, but discounted it. If that made him an ass, so be it.

She was too independent, too stubborn. She even refused bonding in the way of her people to save her own life. And God help him, she was his. He didn't plan to give her any way out of mating with him and if she discovered a way to control her demon and remain single, she'd take it. The strong-willed iron center of her soul both intrigued and worried him. If she didn't accept him wholly... No, he wouldn't even consider it. Letting her go was not an option.

The primitive core of him, the part that would always be part of the ancient Alukah race despite the rift that had divided the original species into nightwalkers and lupines eons ago, could only be controlled so much during the mating hunt. That part of him wanted to demand, wanted to master her body and soul. It *hungered* for her complete submission.

Things were so much easier in the days when he didn't have to temper that side of himself so much.

The twentieth century had brought many changes. The technology wasn't hard to adjust to. He found it fascinating. Women's liberation was another matter, however.

He'd been born and raised in a time when women were protected and pampered. With time, Winter might accept his desire to spoil her, but he suspected it would be a struggle to protect her for many years to come. She would fight him tooth and nail on that issue.

The plan had been to let her get to know him slowly. He'd expected the ever-present need crawling through him, but hadn't anticipated how bad it would affect her. She tried to hide it, tried to hide it from herself, but he saw it every time he entered her mind. The longer he delayed claiming her, the more unstable she became. She couldn't afford for him to wait any longer, but he was uneasy. Push too hard and she would resist. It was a sure path to disaster. He would likely hurt her. Not physically—she desired him as much as he desired her—but psychologically. A woman like Winter needed to be wooed carefully. He refused to break her spirit.

So he'd stayed away. Thanks to the demon's poison he'd been able to enter her mind unhindered and had used the opportunity to ensure he'd always be able to. Except now she'd somehow managed, after two months of trying, to block him. The sudden lack of contact was a dull throbbing pain.

Closing his eyes, he reached out for her and found the wall she'd erected. He set a mental palm on it. He stroked it, pressed his will against it in random places and realized it wasn't designed just to keep him out. It



was designed to keep *everyone* out. Why would she do that? What would cause her to go to such lengths to protect her mind?

Frowning and growing more concerned, he pulled on a pair of slacks and left his room. He didn't bother turning on any lights as he walked through the dark wood-paneled halls. Even if his vision hadn't been so exceptional, he'd have no trouble finding his way.

He'd lived in the house for close to two hundred years. The humans in the area believed he was just another in a long line of eccentric bachelors. They weren't far off from the truth, but all that was about to change.

As he jogged down two sets of stairs to the ground floor he took note of his surroundings. The house was richly appointed, but it was obvious it was the home of men not women. Would she want to make changes? He'd seen the inside of a couple hybrid compounds. They were drab, utilitarian military-like structures. Did she long for luxury or prefer that stark existence? Since she lived in a building with many people, he assumed she wouldn't take issue with the others in his house. His twin, Luke, lived here as did Kadall, their senior most warrior, and his mate Marelle. There was ample room. It was possible to spend the entire day in residence and not run across any of its occupants.

He entered his office where he poured a glass of scotch and sat behind the big desk. He took a drink and closed his eyes, exploring her new shield again. Why would she shut out everyone? Even her own people.

Eyeing the phone on the corner of the desk, he considered calling the lupine alpha, Mitchell, to see if

he knew what was going on with the hybrids, but discarded the idea. If there was any threat to his claim on Winter, it was Mitchell. He'd seen her affection for the wolf in her mind, her friendship with him. A friendship that was rooted in a past affair. It was difficult to control his jealousy. She'd had a full life before they met; he couldn't begrudge her that. Once they were mated, though, he would put a complete stop to the relationship with the lupine. But it would have to wait. There were bigger concerns to deal with now.

He couldn't get in her mind to read her thoughts, but even with the new shield he could feel her fury and under that a sorrow so deeply buried he doubted she was experiencing it yet. When she came down from the rage it would knock her on her ass.

But why? What did this mean? His people had stayed aloof from the lupines and especially the hybrids for so long they couldn't easily read them. He knew she was close to losing her fight with the demon she'd merged with, of course, knew she had to create a mate bond soon or she'd be lost forever. Whatever she was mixed up in now, he hoped it wasn't enough to snap what was left of her grip on the beast.

He picked up a small square of paper from his desk and fingered the edges, traced the name and numbers written on it. He could call her the mundane way, but his soul rebelled at the idea. She was his. She should be open to him, her mind available to his whenever he reached for her. Angry, he rose and shoved the chair back, pacing around the room as he struggled for control. Damn it.

The shield she'd erected was once again beneath his fingertips. He could batter through it without damaging her mind, but it would be a breach of trust he knew she wouldn't likely forgive anytime soon. He growled his frustration, swung around ready to attack when the door creaked open. Luke slipped through, an easy grin on his face and hands held up in surrender.

"Easy, brother," Luke drawled, walking to the sidebar to pour a drink. "What's got you so riled up?"

Glass in hand, he walked to the red leather couch under the shuttered window and sprawled across it. The picture of indolence was practiced and deceiving. Marcus narrowed his eyes and waited, not at all fooled by his brother's casual pose. He felt Luke's tension, but wasn't sure where it was coming from. Luke lifted the glass in salute before taking a long swig. Marcus waited for him to speak.

He hadn't even realized his brother was in the house. He caught the faint psychic scent of a woman surrounding Luke's aura and wondered why he'd left her, whoever she was. Maybe the woman was starting to cling. Luke wouldn't tolerate that, would quickly end the relationship such as it was. Too bad Marcus didn't have that problem with a certain blonde. He'd pay good money to experience Winter clingy.

"Well?" Luke asked. Marcus shook his head, unwilling to discuss Winter even with his brother.

"If you claim the woman, our little deception will be revealed," Luke said, no inflection in his voice. Luke often took the head of the table at Alliance meetings and though never introduced, outsiders assumed he was the nightwalker Lord. It wasn't the

kind of secret Marcus could keep from his mate, though, and Winter would feel duty bound to share the information with her people.

He hadn't made an effort to conceal his interest in Winter so he shouldn't be surprised Luke picked up on it. After centuries together, they knew each other better than anyone else and usually worked as a flawless team. He turned from the bar and sat behind his desk, wondering what Luke thought of his bringing someone else into the equation. His grip tightened on the glass. Luke was dangerous and unpredictable; he didn't suffer strangers or fools. The corners of his brother's mouth turned up in a bare smile.

"Don't worry, brother. I won't harm your woman." He paused. "Perhaps you'd like to share her."

The growl welled, deep and instinctive in his chest, and he leveled a furious gaze at Luke. His brother laughed in response and lifted his free hand in surrender.

"Or not." He swallowed the last of the whiskey and stood for a refill. "I'm the love-'em-and-leave-'em type anyway, remember?"

Marcus snorted and got a grip on his temper. "One day, Luke, some woman is going to turn your life inside out." Winter had certainly done so to him.

Luke returned to the sofa with a refreshed glass and grinned. "Nope. Not me. Don't want to be tied down." He shuddered. "I don't need that kind of responsibility. Not to mention tedium. One woman forever? I don't think so."

Marcus tipped his glass back, savored the cool slide of the liquid down his throat. "I seem to recall saying the same thing."

Luke grinned again. "Says the celibate one. There're too many beautiful women out there. How could I limit myself to just one? Someone has to make up for your lack of a sex life." He paused for a drink before continuing softly, "Don't you ever miss the old days?"

Marcus leaned his head back against the chair and lifted an eyebrow. Did he miss the old days? There was a time he'd been a willing participant in his brother's endless string of debauchery. He wasn't sure when it had begun to lose its appeal. Sometime in the last century he'd started thinking about companionship more than sex. He hadn't even missed the sex really.

Not until he'd first seen Winter and he'd almost been flattened by the lust that bowled through him. His eyes slid closed as he conjured her image. Sleek and muscled, she had a classically beautiful face and white blond hair she'd worn in a single long braid the night they'd met. His hands itched to twist in its length and slowly draw her to him. Her incredible mind and killer body were a combination guaranteed to drive him to the brink of insanity. Cursing his body's response to her, he discreetly shifted his sudden erection. Luke noticed his discomfort and laughed.

"You should claim her and get it over with. I don't know why you've waited. You've been prowling around for weeks ready to pounce on everyone who whispers a wrong word. You need to get laid, brother."

Marcus lurched from his chair and stalked to the bar to refill his glass. It was that or punch Luke in the face. He wasn't about to explain to his brother why he held back, that she wasn't ready yet and he was loath to push her too fast too soon. Wasn't about to explain that her feelings were more important to him than relieving the torture in his body, or his fear of hurting her.

Then there was the other thing, the concern he didn't let himself dwell on. He'd always imagined his mate would be another nightwalker, a woman gently bred who would, if not welcome, then at least accept his possessiveness. What he got was far from that and he wasn't sure how to reconcile her warrior spirit with his need to protect her. And he sure as hell wasn't going to discuss it with his reprobate brother.

He returned to his seat, staring coolly at Luke, hoping he would take the order and drop it. "She is not a topic up for discussion."

Luke shrugged one shoulder, looking bored as if it were every day one of them found a mate, but he didn't pursue the conversation. "I got reports from some of the soldiers tonight. It definitely looks like this new demon surge is organized. And the numbers are much higher than we've ever seen." The one-sided shrug again. "We suspected that already."

The increased numbers could be dealt with. He'd just put more soldiers out on patrol and damn the council's stubbornness in refusing to see the rising danger. The organization was disconcerting though.

The Alukah had been created in ancient Samaria by the old gods to fight demons escaping from the

Underworld and protect mankind. In all the centuries since there was no record of the demons working together in any kind of organized fashion. What had changed?

“Increase the patrols. See if we can capture one to question. We need to know who’s behind it to effectively fight them.”

Luke stood to refill his glass. When he turned back to face Marcus, all the ease was gone from his expression. Slowly, he lifted the glass to his lips, took a long drink.

“I don’t think that’s going to be enough. Just increasing the patrols. I think there’s a lot more going on here than we know. They’re going into areas that have always been safe before.” He took another drink. “I killed a couple only two miles from here tonight.”

He held his brother’s gaze a long moment, knew exactly where he was leading the conversation. They’d discussed the possibility after Winter was poisoned. Taking real advantage of the existence of the Alliance. Marcus wasn’t sure if it would work. He counted the mere existence of the association as a minor miracle. Getting them to all work together would fall into the major category.

The hybrids weren’t the issue so much, though his people were definitely suspicious of the humans who’d willingly combined their souls with the souls of demons. No, the real problem would be getting nightwalkers and lupines to work together. The divisions that had split the Alukah into two races were ancient and clouded in myth, but the distrust was still there.

No one had expected the three groups to work together and go on to a mythical happy-ever-after, though surprisingly the hybrids and lupines seemed to hit it off. He'd even heard there were some mixed matings between the two groups.

His people remained standoffish, stuck in an irrelevant past in an ever-changing world, but if the speculation was correct and someone was pulling the strings behind the scenes in the demon world that would have to change.

Marcus could make it work. He was the final and absolute authority in the nightwalker world. The council was nothing more than an advisory board. No one would dare disobey his orders, but the situation might be better handled with a little finesse and solve two of his problems at one time. If the Alliance could be convinced to set up a special force made up of members from all three races, he could maneuver Winter where he wanted her. He smiled and Luke, catching it, arched a questioning eyebrow.

"Call an emergency Alliance meeting for this evening."

"Sure," Luke answered.

Marcus left it in his brother's hands and jogged up the stairs back to his room, determined to get a few hours' sleep. Tonight he'd force Winter to deal with him and get on with forging the bond that should already be firmly in place.



## Chapter Eight

Sighing, Luke rose slowly from the couch feeling every one of his three hundred years. Physically he was the same, young and strong, but mentally he was bored. Tired of the same old existence. The only time that was different these days was when he was fighting or in bed with his newest conquest. Gia. Unfortunately, he was beginning to realize she'd made the conquest, not him.

He frowned, went to the sidebar and, wrapping two fingers around the neck of a whiskey bottle, carried it and his glass upstairs. He set both down on his nightstand and pulled his clothes off, dropping them to the floor as he went into the shower. Turning the knobs to scorching hot, he stepped in and threw his head back as the water sluiced over him.

He put off reaching for the soap. Her scent was still on his skin, her taste still on his tongue. Her essence, the psychic energy all living creatures expended and nightwalkers needed for survival, was still a heady seductive fog in his mind. It wasn't necessary to have sex to feed. He just preferred it and couldn't have resisted if he tried. She was becoming an essential part of his survival. And it was mutual. They'd discovered over the past weeks that when he fed from her, he relieved the stress her demon half put her under. It worked as well for her as taking a bonded mate.

He ducked his head under the water and breathed her name, conjured her image. Tall, sleek curves, impossibly long hair he could easily wrap around his hands. Blue eyes that occasionally went red especially when he played her body like the fine instrument it was as she tried to hold back.

*Gia.* He reached for her but didn't get a response, knew better than to expect one. Where was she? She'd never allowed him access to her mind and while denying what she meant to him, what she was to him, he hadn't insisted. Hadn't believed he was in a position to insist. Tonight he'd discovered differently.

They'd been lounging back in bed, warm and satisfied and just getting started, when her phone rang. It had been daylight by then and he couldn't follow, couldn't order her not to go when she'd curtly answered his question about her destination that there might be trouble at one of their compounds. Without a further word she was gone. He'd been filled with such protective fury it stunned him, left him leaning over, gripping his knees and sucking in big gulps of air until his stomach stopped roiling and his hands quit shaking.

She didn't answer when he called her and her blocks were too good for him to breach. He had every intention of rectifying that situation at the earliest possibility. Frowning, he stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. Except, she was his mate. After having sex with him and letting him feed from her, she shouldn't be able to block him out.

How was that possible? There'd never been a nightwalker hybrid mating so he had nothing to

compare it to. He was pretty sure Marcus wasn't in the same boat; he had access to his woman's mind. Luke snorted and prowled the room some more. Marcus was an idiot. He knew weeks ago the woman was his yet waited to claim her.

Not that Luke had ever been in a big hurry to claim a woman of his own. He hadn't been joking about being the love-'em-and-leave-'em type. Had believed up until a few hours ago Gia would just be another name added to a long list of names.

Why wasn't she feeling the bond? The urge to join with him as he felt with her? Was an ability to turn it off part of the hybrid make-up? He snarled. Like hell. He wanted her, craved her. He was keeping her. The very idea of her being able to resist left him in a cold fury. He vibrated with the knowledge he couldn't seek her out yet. Couldn't shake some sense into her. Stake his claim.

He glared at the clock. Not even noon yet. It would be hours before the sun went down. He could teleport back to their hidden meeting place. It was completely enclosed. Safe. But he knew she wouldn't be there, wouldn't go there unless she was expecting to meet him. They'd made no such arrangements before she'd left him earlier.

The door opened, a whisper of air the only warning and he whirled around ready, wanting to face a serious threat, though he knew better than to expect one inside his home. Marcus leaned against the frame, arms crossed over his chest, and frowned.

"Jesus. Could you dial it down a notch?" Marcus asked.

“What?” More a growl than a question.

Marcus nodded at the far wall and Luke turned to see the undulation, the way his uncontrolled telekinetic power buffeted the walls, pushing them in and out like they had breath of their own. With a deep inhalation he pulled his power back, let it gently seep away instead of battering away with it like he’d been close to doing.

“Bit of a strong reaction to an unusual demon incursion, isn’t it?” Marcus asked casually, but his eyes were anything but. He knew something was up, but Luke wasn’t ready to share yet. He latched on to it as an excuse.

“I’ve lost too many soldiers in the last few months. I don’t like unanswered questions.” He shrugged. He was in charge of their army; all deployment and training was under his command. It was as good an excuse as any.

“If everyone agrees to work together, those answers should be more forthcoming.”

Yeah right. Altruism all the way. “And getting closer to Winter has nothing to do with that plan, eh?”

Marcus smiled, shrugged. “Can’t hurt. Get some sleep. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night.”

He pulled the door shut behind him, leaving Luke thinking Marcus might be on to something. If they could cobble together a task force to investigate the unusual new activity in the area, he might be able to get closer to Gia. And he wanted to be close. Way under the skin close.

## Chapter Nine

“No. Absolutely not.” Shock racing through her like a shot of pure adrenalin, Winter braced her hands on the edge of her desk and leaned closer to the phone’s speaker, wanting to be clear—irrevocably, no-mistakes-possible clear. No fucking way. With her history of ignoring authority how could they possibly promote her? Whose crazy idea was that?

“Sorry, Winter. That’s our decision.”

“Look, Gray.” Gray was the Order’s Grand Master. Their ultimate authority. That didn’t mean she couldn’t protest. She paused, glancing up to meet Gia’s then Dupree’s gaze. She hated to bring up mating but knew it was irresponsible not to. “I merged in fifty-five. I’m not bonded. I’m not sure how long I’ll continue to be...stable.”

Something dark and guilty flickered across Gia’s face before she could hide it, and Winter frowned. It went on her mental *deal with later* list while she waited for the council to respond. There was a brief pause, a murmuring of voices in the background as the council consulted each other. “Then take care of it, Commander. ASAP.”

The line clicked and then there was nothing but dial tone. Shit. Shit shit shit. This was not what she wanted to hear. Making her commander? She did not want that kind of responsibility. And just take care of the

bonding issue? God, the Order Council was as bad as Mitchell.

Yeah people did it. It would take more than two hands to count all the hybrids she knew who'd waited till it was almost too late then bonded with the first person they could get approved. Almost all of them lived to regret it. She wouldn't make the same mistake.

She spun around and walked to the sliding glass doors, stared out at the night, and instead of recalling the merging ceremony that had taken up so many of her early evenings over the recent years, called up the face of a man. It was as if she opened a gate and he moved into her mind, his presence somehow comforting. Reassuring.

*Do you need me?*

Sighing, she pressed her forehead to the glass, wishing the cool pane would flush the sudden heat from her body. She'd kept him away for ten hours but only through sheer force of will and by shutting herself off from everyone else. Even then, she'd been aware he could have got through her shields if he'd really wanted to.

*Winter?*

*I'm fine. Go away.*

The impression of a snort. *Not likely.*

God, that cool retort pissed her off. He messed with her mind, messed with her body without ever laying a finger on her and all the while maintaining that distant, haughty reserve. She'd had enough. The rage, the frustration, the denied and building lust was too much to take. She snapped.

*Fuck you. I'm too busy for this crap right now.*

There was a long silence and, thinking he'd left her in peace for a while, she turned back to her desk to deal with the reality of her new command.

*We'll get to that. Soon enough.*

So he wasn't done. Just freaking great. She could have handled the words, even with the low sexy timbre that promised untold delights, but the stroke she felt up her inner thighs, the little nips that followed made her catch her breath and sit suddenly in her chair. She threw up that block again, the one he shouldn't be able to get around and took a breath of relief only to have it followed by his soft laughter.

He'd found a way through. She'd half expected that. There might even have been a secret wanton side of her that was pleased by it.

"Leave," she mumbled, relieved when her old friends thought she was talking to them and complied, exiting with frowns of concern that spoke better than any silence.

She swiveled the seat around and watched the sun set. The sky bled pink and red as invisible fingers stroked her, petted. The sky went black as her breath grew rapid. Her grip tightened so hard on the fake leather-covered arms of the chair that they cracked. She squeezed her eyes shut, a fine trembling taking over her body as she crested the edge, right on the verge of orgasm. Then he withdrew. He left her wanting, left her *hurting*. Again. She followed the path in her mind back to him.

*Damn you.*

In his pause there was a feeling of anticipation. And something more. Something that almost felt like...triumph.

*You've never sought me out before.*

It surprised her to realize she hadn't, especially on the nights he got her all wound up and left her wanting. Of course, he'd never touched her with phantom fingers before. Always there had been whispered promises, teases, except in the dreams but even in them he never let her find release. And she never initiated contact with him. It was a sign that her control was slipping even more and she tried to shore up her inner defenses.

*Don't, he growled. Don't attempt to block me again.*

She huffed her exasperation. She wasn't allowed to block him out but he was allowed to key her up and deny her satisfaction? Where was the fairness of that? The amazing thing was she'd been complying with his demands. Well, enough of that. She was already good and pissed at the council. He just added to her fury and she was finished acceding to the wishes of autocratic men.

Rising from the desk, she gathered her weapons and strapped them on, purpose and determination moving through her. She glared at the cell phone and almost left it behind. Sighed. It was damned tempting but would be a mistake. The door cracked open and Gia stuck her head through the small opening. Winter met her gaze and barely managed to keep the snarl from her voice.

"What?"



“The nightwalkers have called a meeting of the Alliance.”

Which, if Mitchell’s information was correct, meant Marcus. Did he realize she was about ready to disobey his order of celibacy? Oh, he hadn’t come right out and said it, but he refused to give her what she needed and interfered when her thoughts turned to finding someone willing. Did he realize now that he’d pushed her to a point of desperation? Damn him.

“When?”

“Ten.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Almost nine now. Not much time to prepare. Pacing, she waved Gia in. She had a stack of boxes with her, which she leaned against one book-lined wall. Winter experienced a moment of nostalgia. This had been her office for more than twenty years. Three walls contained packed floor-to-ceiling bookcases, the fourth was a bank of windows and doors. Her desk sat in front of them facing the long conference table Gia used when she wasn’t at the Order’s downtown office. With her promotion to commander, they’d be moving from the compound. Gia, organizational genius as usual, was already on the ball.

Winter didn’t even want to contemplate the nightmare of packing to come. The tedious monotony of it made her antsy. She rolled her eyes. Like she wasn’t already? She was tempted to go straight to Mitchell, for a round of fighting or sex she couldn’t say. A part of her mind cringed at the idea of the second. If she had any sense she’d get some sleep. She’d never been good at doing the sensible thing

though and now she had too many people relying on her to even think of slowing down.

“Has the news gone out yet?”

“Yes, Commander.” Gia couldn’t quite keep the amusement out of her voice and Winter glared at her.

“Not helping.”

“You’re gonna have to get used to it.” Gia shrugged. “I know you don’t believe it right now, but you’re a good choice. The best choice in this region.”

Her responding laugh was short, disbelieving. The new burden left a sour taste in her mouth, an emotional load that felt like a great weight pressing against her back and shoulders. “How do you figure that?”

“You’re respected. Relentless. Compassionate when necessary and brutal the rest of the time. Hell, you regularly spar with a lupine and walk away from it, and it’s not because he’s letting you win.”

She shrugged that last off. It was more an indication of the demon’s strength than hers. Gia was right about one thing though. Winter was relentless. She wouldn’t stop until every demon responsible for the carnage at the old commander’s compound, her old friend’s place, was found and exterminated.

She wasn’t the only one suffocating with his loss, though. Emotions had a specific feel, almost a taste, to a telepath. Sorrow was heavy and bitter in the air, in her mind, and it wasn’t all hers. She brutally squashed the feeling, covered it with indifference. It was a rare talent, being able to influence the emotions of others and Gia narrowed her eyes.

“You shouldn’t mess with people like that. Even in the Order, my feelings are my own.”

Winter agreed, but she shook her head in denial. There was no time for that now, no time for memories or regrets or self-recriminations. There was too much to do and they were running out of time. She took a deep breath, decision made.

“Later. When it’s safe.”

Gia’s expression was not quite mutinous and Winter didn’t need to use her talents to know that her friend was a little pissed at her. What Gia didn’t want to acknowledge was sorrow weighed a person down. Sorrow wasn’t just emotional pain, but physical. Too much was debilitating. Too much could get you killed. Winter took a deep breath, tried to cleanse everything from her mind and heart but determination and vengeance. She was careful to keep it from bleeding into the room, from influencing Gia’s decisions.

She closed her eyes and let the memories wash over her. Just for a moment. Just as a reminder why vengeance was so important. Ben hadn’t just brought her into the Order. He’d brought in Gia and Dupree too. He’d trained them. Watched over them until they could fend for themselves.

Winter understood where Gia’s sorrow came from, but she couldn’t indulge it yet. And that, she knew, was exactly why the council had named her his successor. She had a reputation for being cold, for being able to turn off those dangerous emotions. Unlike the council, she wasn’t so sure that was a vote in her favor. After several moments Gia’s expression smoothed. Her eyes were still sad and disturbed, but she was back in control.

“This sucks.”

“Yeah,” Winter agreed. “It does. But we can’t let our guard down yet.”

“I know.” Gia sent her a sardonic grin. “This is why they picked you.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good thing,” she answered wryly, then poked fun at herself. Really, what else could she do? Let her capacity for coldness, for repressing her feelings bring her down, bring all of them down, or treat it with self-deprecating humor? “Do we want a heartless wench in charge? Seriously?”

Gia burst into laughter and that was all that mattered at the moment. A few seconds of normalcy. A few minutes when their world wasn’t upside down and inside out. Winter laughed with her. But it couldn’t last long and they both knew it. She spoke when the room was quiet again.

“Benjamin’s place needs to be sanitized.” No one needed to see the horror of that place, and any evidence of the hybrids’ or demons’ existence had to be wiped out before it could be sold. “And we’ll need to gather the squad leaders,” Winter said softly.

With a sober nod and an understanding wave of mental affection, Gia sat cross-legged on the end of the long conference table, reached for a notepad and pen, and started a list. Winter was struck by how quickly emotions, the focus of their worries, could change. How quickly personal loss could be pushed aside for the safety of others. At some point over the last few years she’d forgotten that, the reason she’d joined the Order in the first place.

She took her first steady breath since the council put her in charge. The idea, the responsibility, still

terrified her, but she knew she'd have help. Winter felt a ghost of a grin cross her face. If there was a secret to her success, Gia and Dupree were it. He oversaw the quadrant's training and Gia kept up with all the details.

"Let's get a list of candidates to take over the northeast quadrant." Gia and Dupree would stay with her as her seconds in command. "And find out where we stand on recruitment."

Recruitment levels had fallen off dramatically over the last few years. Modern humans were fascinated by the supernatural, but they didn't believe in it until it was staring them in the face. By that point it was usually too late. Gia's next words so closely mirrored her thoughts that she hastily checked her shields and sighed with relief. Still intact.

"With as brazen as the demons have become recently there've been some sightings. We've just been watching those humans, making sure they don't become targets later, but they're a possible pool to pull from."

She nodded. "Get someone on it. Any news from the tech people yet?"

They couldn't go to human authorities, but they'd kept up with new technology as it developed and had their own research teams and labs in each region. The Order provided its own medical care and equipment, and the teams were made up of people who made that happen, but for the next few days they'd serve as a forensics team.

"Nothing yet. Last I heard they were still out there shifting through body parts." Gia grimaced, turning a little green. Winter bit her lip to keep from

commenting. If the circumstances were different, she'd be teasing her old friend. How someone who was as efficient a killer as Gia could be so queasy was beyond Winter. Gia had been ribbed over it for years and quickly changed the subject.

"When the team is done I'll make arrangements to move the archive library. We need to find a more central location." The archive library contained copies of all the Order's histories, dating back to the founding. It was housed at the commander's compound.

"Start looking for one."

By tradition the commander's compound was close to the city with the squad compounds spread out like wheel spokes around it. Under normal circumstances, she'd just take over the old place but that was impossible. It was compromised. Thankfully the Order had deep pockets and they'd be able to buy something appropriate as soon as they found one.

"Anything else?"

Suddenly overwhelmed and exhausted just at the mere thought of everything that had to be done, she leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes while Gia began discussing other members of the Order. Likes, dislikes, strengths, duties. Thank God, Gia was staying with her. Aside from being her best friend, the woman was an expert manager and she remembered everything. Unlike Winter. She would have been a much better choice for commander. Lifting her head, Winter narrowed her eyes.

"Why me? Why not you or Dupree?"

Gia snorted. "Dupree?"

She had a point. Dupree was an exceptional fighter, charming when he wanted to be, but a loner to the bone who often went out of his way to irritate people. Not at all the kind of personality the council wanted in charge.

“Okay not Dupree. What about you?”

Gia blanched. “No way. I’m definitely more sidekick material. I don’t deal with the emotional shit as well and I do not want the responsibility. It’s all yours, babe.”

“I don’t want it either,” she grumbled.

Gia grinned. “You say that now, but if they’d picked one of the others you’d be challenging someone inside a week. You may not want it, but you wouldn’t trust anyone else to do it. And neither would we.”

Damn. She hated to admit it, but as she mentally called up what she knew of the other quadrant leaders she was forced to admit Gia was right. Before she could frame a response, the door opened and Dupree strolled through, shutting it with a soft *click* behind him.

Clasping his hands behind his back, with his feet braced apart, he gave her the heart-stopping grin that made most women fall at his feet. Lucky for her she was immune. Lucky for the rest of them he was hung up on a woman he was more interested in protecting than seducing. Using her telekinetic power, Gia sent the to-do list she’d made floating through the air and Winter caught it, then bent her head to study it. Pressing her lips together as she flipped through the pages. She tuned the other two out and studied the pages in her hand.

“Commander.”

She ignored him and focused on the task before her. The original list was followed by names of people Gia thought either needed watching or were possible candidates for Winter’s vacated position. Maybe if she tuned Dupree out, he’d go away. She almost snorted. Yeah right. He was nothing if not persistent.

“Commander. It’s time to go.”



# Chapter Ten

The moon edged over the tree line and the demons he commanded shifted restlessly behind him. They smelled the hot warm blood of the humans behind the wall a mere one hundred feet away. A siren's call. Impossible to resist. He held his hand up, ordering them to wait. There were growls of protest, but none disobeyed.

What remained of his human heart was horrified at his actions, but there wasn't enough of it left to stop him. The demon side was in charge now and it lived for vengeance. For fury. For blood.

He knew they would be preparing dinner inside, that others would be coming back to join in, so he waited, watched them return by twos and threes. When he judged the house full, he signaled to attack.

They broke from the trees in one furious, bloody wave. The half humans inside fought of course, but they were no match for two dozen demons. He raged through with his underlings, leaving blood and gore and body parts behind him, searching for one man in particular.

He found him in the arms room, shakily loading a shotgun. The man looked up when he entered, confusion crossing his face. "What are you doing here? We thought you were dead."

They were the last words he ever spoke.

# Chapter Eleven

Winter sighed. Dupree knew her well and simply waited her out. Duty called. She looked up to catch him exchange a worried look with Gia, but ignored it, frowning as she glanced at the clock. It was way too early to leave. They must have changed the meeting time.

“Well let’s get the show on the road then,” she said, mentally preparing herself to teleport to the Alliance meeting and face Marcus. It would be her first time inside the mysterious compound. She was dying of curiosity. What was so secret no one was ever allowed in except for Alliance meetings? Catching Dupree’s headshake, she paused and arched an eyebrow.

“The nightwalkers insist no one teleport. We have to drive,” he added.

“Why can’t we teleport?” Gia grumbled.

“They didn’t say. I didn’t ask.” Dupree shrugged. “We have no idea what kind of security arrangements they have over there. You wouldn’t want them teleporting into here,” he pointed out.

He was right, but that wasn’t what he was thinking about. She bit back a laugh at the anticipation and glee she saw on Dupree’s face. Normalcy was good. Tall and broad, with skin as black as midnight, he was a valued member of her team, indispensable in a fight and cool under fire. But Dupree behind the wheel of

anything motorized was more than a little scary. If they were driving, he was on his own.

"I think I'll ride with Gia," she teased, catching the other woman's eye.

She grinned in response. "You're not much better."

Winter shrugged. At least if she was behind the wheel, she was in control. As they walked to the huge underground garage, she studied her old friends. They'd all been initiated the same year. She never would have imagined back then she would one day end up a regional leader in the Order, still couldn't believe the council had that much faith in her. She sure as hell didn't. Okay, she was competent. Proficient. She'd studied and practiced, learned and excelled. What did it say about her that she'd made such a good killer?

Not wanting to dwell on it, to confront what she'd become, she turned her gaze to Gia. The three hadn't slept in how long now? Twenty-four hours at least. Gia had squeezed a shower in somewhere and left her midnight hair free, just brushing her hips. She was dressed in their usual uniform of loose black combat pants and boots, a tight black tank top clinging to her torso, with her weapons scattered around her frame. The demon dagger they all wore and assorted knives and handguns.

Lately, the hard look in her eyes had softened somewhat and she was more likely to disappear during her off time. And yet there was no bond between her and her mystery man. Winter had asked about him again since their first conversation, but Gia was being surprisingly close-mouthed on the matter, shrugging it

off as nothing but casual sex. If Winter wasn't in such bad shape, wasn't so close to the edge, she'd let it go. But Gia had found a way to save herself without bonding, and now more than ever, Winter needed that secret. It would have to wait a few hours though, at least until after she'd dealt with the Alliance.

They reached the garage and Winter headed for the 1955 model Thunderbird she refused to give up despite everyone's teasing. It was in mint condition, an apple-red two-seater bought new right off the lot. The last thing she and David had bought together. Gia slid in the passenger side and Dupree headed for his own car, one of the sporty new Mustangs. She had no interest in the new retro cars. They couldn't come close to comparing to the originals. She turned the key and the engine purred. The radio was set to a new channel, and Godsmack blared from the speakers. Somehow, it seemed appropriate. She wouldn't mind having a harsh talking to with God herself.

Backing up, she headed down the long road that isolated the compound and turned toward the highway. Traveling through the woods, the nightwalker Lord's home was only a few miles from hers. Marcus had been so close all this time and she hadn't had a clue. It was irritating. To add insult to injury he was making them drive now. She'd have to go around the wilderness reserve that lay between his estate and her compound. There were no roads in between.

Since it was a warm summer night, she left the hardtop off. Gia leaned back, quiet, and stared out the window. Winter had the impression her eyes were closed behind her dark sunglasses. She wished she

could do the same. It had been a long never-ending day. Fatigue swept through her. She wanted nothing more in that moment than to sleep for two days.

It was going to be a long drive and she didn't have time for an Alliance meeting. The gatherings between the nightwalkers, the lupines and the Order usually took place just once a year, in January, and this one was taking place long before necessary. Why? The nightwalkers had asked for the meeting and given Dupree no explanation for it.

The Alliance only existed because they all shared a common enemy. The nightwalkers and the lupines distrusted, almost hated, each other. There was ancient history there but Winter didn't know the whole of it. No one quite knew what to make of the Order. Some of the hybrids managed to move in the lupine world with ease, accepted mostly because of her friendship with their alpha, Mitchell Grant, and the few mixed mated couples the groups shared. But the nightwalkers remained aloof.

Over the last sixty years she had met only a handful, and those times had been in the heat of battle. Not a lot of opportunity to chat then. And lately there was the invasion of her mind. A pair of flashing blue eyes rose in her memory. Marcus.

She sighed remembering that encounter, using it to strengthen her shields and steel herself against the coming meeting. She saw him so clearly in her mind's eye that she was almost positive he was projecting the image to her. He was too gorgeous, tall and lean with flowing black hair and a chiseled face. It was the eyes

though, those piercing blue eyes, that made her catch her breath.

They swept her from head to toe. Dark. Hungry. Possessive. Her body clenched in response, exhaustion suddenly wiped away, and a smile teased the corners of his mouth. With Old World charm, he bowed at the waist and disappeared from her mind. She gripped trembling hands tight around the steering wheel until her joints popped in protest. She recognized what just happened as a challenge, a gauntlet thrown at her feet to warn her the hunt had officially begun. Resisting Marcus would be difficult and she tried to remember everything they'd learned about him.

His identity had been hard to pin down, but once Mitchell had a name she'd done some digging of her own. Marcus. Whispered to be the most dangerous of the nightwalkers. Rumors about him flourished. The most interesting was that he was their Lord. Or maybe he wasn't and his Lord couldn't control him. They said he never indulged in sex. She almost snorted. A celibate nightwalker? That was too impossible to believe. Rumor was they fed off psychic energy during sex. To abstain would mean to starve, right? So no, she didn't believe that particular rumor.

She scowled. If he was fooling around with another woman while he was so busy teasing her into a ball of need, she was going to kill him. So on second thought, maybe there was a grain of truth to the celibacy rumor. He was really into tormenting her and while he was at it she felt his need, sensed that even as he denied her he denied himself too. *God, why did you throw me into this confusing mess?* He didn't answer and she didn't

expect him to. They weren't exactly on speaking terms.

She forced her mind off Marcus as she turned on to the road leading to the nightwalker Lord's home. As a squad leader, she'd never come to these meetings. She was dreading explaining her ascension, the events leading up to it. She'd blocked him from her mind so much of the day she doubted he knew yet. Mitchell wouldn't have said a word, and Dupree hadn't either when the call from the Alliance was routed from Ben's old number to hers.

Rage and the need for retribution sang through her blood. They were always careful to safeguard their sleeping and living areas. How had the demons discovered Benjamin's compound? How did they kill so many hunters? The techs still didn't have a complete list of who had been at the compound, but since the attack was shortly before breakfast it would have been full. She'd have to work that out later.

She slowed when the Federal-style mansion loomed up before her, following Dupree's car to a parking area off to the side. They left all their weapons in the trunk of the cars, except the trademark obsidian daggers each wore. She narrowed her eyes as they approached; the nightwalkers were searching people at the door. She'd heard enough about these meetings to know that was an unprecedented step.

She recognized Baron, Mitchell's beta, and smelled his outrage. Once cleared he stepped back to greet her while Dupree spread his arms and grinned at the nightwalkers doing the search. Whatever he felt about the intrusion was carefully concealed. She exchanged a

few words with Baron before he nodded and went into the house with Dupree. She and Gia went through the same routine and followed the voices down a long center hall.

It was as elegant on the inside as out, like the understated class of an English manor home. She tried not to gawk, tried to conceal her discomfiture. Thick red-and-gold carpets covered the floor, Persian she'd bet, old and expensive-looking. There was a wide staircase on one side, winding up to the second floor landing, and she caught a glimpse of more stairs rising from there. Two chandeliers lit the huge area. She shook her head. If this was Marcus's house, he was way out of her league.

The meeting was being held in a dining room and they turned left into the doorway. She restrained the impulse to roll her eyes when she entered, and this time it wasn't the décor, just as formal, just as expensive, that elicited a response.

At one end of a long table, sat two nightwalkers. The lupines sat at the opposite end. She walked around the wolf side and sat in the chair in the center, back to the wall facing the door and equal distance from both camps. God forbid she give the appearance of being more closely allied to one group or the other. She was already becoming the politician a regional commander needed to be. What a depressing thought.

Gia sat to her left between Winter and the walkers. Dupree closed the door and sat opposite her. As soon as the door shut, Mitchell leaned forward and caught her eye.

"You doing okay?" he asked.



She nodded. "Just peachy."

Not that she'd tell him if she wasn't. Not here. Trust wasn't a high priority in this crowd. She'd met him again yesterday and worked out a lot of her anger the old-fashioned way. It was their fiercest fight yet, neither of them holding anything back and she had the scratches to prove it. It wasn't what she'd really wanted, needed—screaming sweaty sex—but it was a close second. Leaning with his back against a wall behind his alpha, she noticed Baron watching them closely. To anyone else his pose would have looked casual, bored even, but she caught his concern. He'd been afraid one of them would kill the other and it was a toss-up who the winner would be.

"Where is Benjamin?" a smooth cultured voice interrupted from the other end of the table. So they didn't know. She'd thought Marcus hadn't picked the information out of her head, but was still a little surprised. She wasn't that good at blocking him. Maybe he'd suddenly started respecting her privacy. No, she wasn't buying that. But the only other viable option was he'd kept the information to himself. Why?

She looked up and somehow kept herself from starting. The speaker at the head of the table looked exactly like Marcus, a mirror image, but he wasn't Marcus. Her senses were extended to feel him, to warn her if he drew close. She hadn't paid much attention to the two nightwalkers when she'd come in, hadn't sensed him among them. Frowning, she replayed the last few minutes in her mind. It wasn't that she hadn't noticed this guy. He'd been turned away from her, intentionally hiding his face. Now he looked at her, as

if daring her to misstep. She followed the mental path to her tormentor.

*What kind of game are we playing now?*

He didn't answer but she felt him drawing near. In a shimmer of air he materialized and took a seat. Turbulent blue eyes clashed with hers, and his displeasure rolled over her. She ignored it and drank him in. This was the first time she'd seen him in person since the ambush and poisoning, and damn it, he was as gorgeous as she remembered.

He hadn't taken the seat at the head of the table. She was relieved he wasn't the nightwalker Lord after all. Or was he? He definitely had the arrogance. She got the sense she was missing a conversation and was pretty sure he was talking telepathically with his look-alike. She stared back at him for a minute, pinned by his angry gaze, until Dupree kicked her under the table. She switched her gaze to the other nightwalker.

## Chapter Twelve

“Benjamin was murdered.”

Fury washed through the room and it took her a full minute to notice it wasn't all coming from her and her lieutenants. Mitchell and Baron were caught up in it, and so were Marcus and Luke. She didn't sense anything at all from the third nightwalker. It was like he wasn't sitting there at all. That spoke of supreme control. She'd normally be worried and on her guard, but she didn't expect to see him after this meeting.

Scowling, she concentrated on Marcus. His anger felt more directed at her than in reaction to Benjamin's murder, which made no sense until she carefully entered his mind. He was pissed that she hadn't told him before now—he had been honoring her wish for privacy—and trying to control it, and something else she couldn't pin down. She quietly slipped out of his mind and redirected her thoughts.

“Who are you?” she asked the nightwalker at the head of the table.

“Luke.” He nodded to the man who didn't look like him. “Kadall. And I believe you already know my brother, Marcus.” His nod indicated Marcus. Oh yeah. She knew him.

“Gia and Dupree.” She pointed them out. “I'm Winter. I'm the new commander.”

Marcus leaned forward and even under such horrible circumstances his voice was like liquid sin stroking her skin. "What happened?"

She felt her rage bubble to the surface again and stared down at the table fighting to control it. When she looked up, she was aware her eyes flashed red but continued anyway. Better to just get it over with. Then she could go on the hunt.

"The compound was attacked yesterday morning."

Anger made his eyes glitter. *Why didn't you tell me?*

She stared at him, but didn't respond to the mental demand.

"How many did you lose?" the other one, Luke, asked, his voice as frigid as Marcus's eyes.

She shook her head. "We aren't sure yet. Probably around thirty." But it could be more. Twenty people had lived there full time, but there were always others in and out of the commander's compound, and the attack did appear timed for maximum loss.

"You won't be taking the place over." She cocked an eyebrow at the order implicit in Marcus's words.

"Of course not," she replied but she couldn't let him believe it had anything to do with him. "It's compromised. We're looking for something else."

*You could stay here.* His voice was soft, but starkly sensual and commanding.

*Thanks for the offer, but we'll be okay.* She knew the invitation had only been for her, but she'd take any buffer she could get.

"How many demons did they kill?" Luke asked.

She switched her gaze back to him, but he wasn't looking at her. He was glaring at Gia who was looking down, hands fisted on her lap, and a piece of information Winter had been wondering about clicked into place. Gia was doing so well, despite lacking a bond, because she was feeding a nightwalker. It should have occurred to her as a possible solution before. Nightwalkers fed on psychic energy and hybrids needed to burn off extra energy. That was knowledge she might be able to use later and she tucked it away into a corner of her mind along with a huge dose of annoyance.

*Oh, you gotta a lot to explain, Gianna Drake, she telepathed to Gia, who didn't bother to conceal a sigh.*

*I know. I'm sorry.*

Not only was one of her most trusted advisors involved with a nightwalker, but he was Marcus's brother. Twins almost certainly. *Did you know?*

Gia didn't answer right away, but Winter felt the affirmative in her mind.

*I couldn't tell you who he was without telling you how I knew and I was so...close to turning. Winter. I couldn't risk it. You and Dupree would have had to kill me.*

*You still should have told me.*

Winter probably would have kept it secret too, if their situations were reversed, and Winter wished Gia hadn't explained, because it made perfect sense to her and she wanted to stay angry. Fuck, she *was* angry. Even if the information didn't help anyone stave off the madness, one of her inner circle was sleeping with

a nightwalker. This was a total exception to the stay-out-of-people's-personal-business rule.

"Winter," Marcus prodded.

*We'll discuss this later.*

Gia sent her an image of rolling her eyes. *Sure. But it isn't a big deal.*

*Oh, please. You know it is. Does Dupree know?*

*No. And you aren't telling him.*

Not likely. They rarely kept secrets from each other, certainly not big ones.

"How many demon kills?" Marcus asked again. She met his gaze, Gia forgotten under the regard of that angry blue.

"None that we found."

Marcus was scowling, his disquiet easy for her to read, and she resisted the urge to stand and walk around the table to soothe his brow. "How did they locate one of your compounds? We're all careful to hide our homes."

She didn't know, but it was a damned good question. The demons couldn't sense them the way they could sense demons, and everyone was careful not to be followed to anyplace vulnerable.

"We don't know yet," Dupree answered after she gave a slight approving nod.

Marcus met his brother's gaze, and again she sensed them communicating telepathically. When he nodded Luke was the next to speak. "We called this meeting because with the increase in demon activity we think it's time we all started working together."

He shocked everyone into silence. The Order sometimes worked with the lupines, though more on

an individual than official basis. The nightwalkers never worked with anyone however. She had to have heard him wrong.

“The demons are getting more brazen. Organized. This situation just highlights the danger we all face if they aren’t stopped.”

“What are you proposing?” Mitchell asked, his voice more wolf growl than human speech.

“An experiment. To see if we *can* all work together.” Luke shrugged, but Winter knew the nonchalance was an act. She could feel Marcus’s concern that she would refuse. Luke went on. “Something along the lines of a task force. The three of us, three of the hybrids and three of you.”

He pointed out the separate groups as he spoke, but his gaze kept returning to Gia. Without needing to enter his mind Winter gathered his emotions to her. It was the kind of trick that normally didn’t work on nightwalkers, but he wasn’t making any effort to shield himself. Since he seemed so fixated on one of her people, she didn’t feel the least bit guilty about it either.

She almost laughed at what she found. Did he really think Gia would let him protect her? Possess her? He was in for a big disappointment. However, since she didn’t sense any violence directed at Gia, only a determination she remain unharmed, Winter resolved to stay out of it. She was still pissed at Gia for keeping him a secret, but she’d rather have to worry about a nightwalker being so close to them than losing her best friend. Besides, Gia was more than capable of handling him.

Dupree kicked her under the table again, snapping her from her thoughts. Marcus watched her expectantly for an answer, but she wanted to hear what Mitchell had to say before she committed one way or the other. She glanced in his direction.

The lupine's grin was feral, dangerous and suspicious, and put her guard up. The last time she'd seen something like it was a few days before he'd challenged and killed the old alpha. "Been watching too much late-night crime drama, walker?"

It was the wrong approach, but she didn't disagree with Mitchell's sentiment. She didn't want to work that closely with nightwalkers either, and one in particular who'd been included in that little group. The telepathic connection was bad enough. Close, prolonged physical exposure would probably push her over the edge into madness. Unless she let him feed from her. But no. He'd try to take her over. She'd seen a possessiveness in his mind that was untamed to the point of being feral. She had too many responsibilities, too many people to protect to risk being taken over by an out-of-control nightwalker. No matter how sexy he was.

Luke didn't respond to Mitchell right away. Instead he just watched him, quiet, his body eerily still while his emotions were still in turmoil. He gave her the impression of a great hunting cat and she repressed a shudder, certain this was a man whose bad side she didn't ever want to be on, that she wouldn't walk away from the experience. Mitchell, who had nerves made of granite, simply waited him out. The silence



stretched and slowly Luke got control of himself until she no longer sensed anything from him.

He shrugged. "Does it matter where the idea came from if it's helpful? We can't continue on our current paths. I would think that's obvious. This is the logical next step."

Shit. She'd guessed this was the argument they'd make and he was right, but Winter hated like hell to admit it. She suspected Marcus had cooked up the plan to pull her in deeper than she already was. But to what end? He'd spent two months refusing to see her, why would he suddenly switch to making it impossible not to see her? Maybe it wasn't his idea after all or maybe he'd sensed her determination to put distance between them. There were too many maybes.

Her phone vibrated while she tried to decide what to do but she ignored it. Less than a minute later, Gia's and Dupree's started up too. He unclipped his and stepped into the hall. She felt a surge of quickly suppressed fury and knew something was wrong before he returned, before she saw the red rage in his eyes. He came back in, but didn't sit and she knew without entering his mind what the bad news was.

"Another attack?"

"Southwest quadrant. Charles. And it's early. Looks like a full house."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let the demon rise. Let the rage and terror and confusion take over. How were the demons finding them? None of them, no member of the Order, would ever give them up. It was impossible to ignore the suspicion that coalesced in her mind fueled by her demon's anger, by

its lust for blood. Some of their compounds were known to the nightwalkers and lupines. Had one of them betrayed her people?

She barely got a grip on her emotions before saying or doing something stupid. Standing, she rounded the table, going for the door. She had to get out, away from these uneasy allies, and she needed to get to Charles's place. See for herself what had happened and what could be salvaged.

Marcus beat her there, an unmovable wall blocking her exit.

"Get out of my way."

"I want a word with you before we go."

She cocked an eyebrow. No way in hell. "You're not going where I am." But she did have a question or two.

"We're working together now, remember?"

She hadn't actually agreed to that but they both knew she probably would have if the conversation hadn't been interrupted by more pressing business. She was going to argue the point anyway, but one look at his face, one glimpse of the implacable resolve in his mind and she knew it was a waste of time. She turned to Gia and Dupree.

Gia and Dupree left, followed by the lupines. At the door Mitchell caught her gaze and mouthed a question to her. "Later?"

She nodded once, had a feeling she was going to need a long, sweaty fight later. Her mentor was dead, she was in charge, and there had been two demon attacks in two days. She honestly didn't think she could take anymore. Sighing, she paced the length of

the room, wished she had the long drive home to look forward to to clear her head, followed by a bed with hours of sleep ahead of her. Instead...well just instead. She didn't turn to face him.

"Did you know about Gia and your brother?"

She sensed a flash of hesitation from him. The question seemed to take him off guard. Good. It was about time the tables were turned. "No. But I wouldn't have stood in the way if I had."

"Is that right?" she asked even though she believed him.

"Would you deny your friend?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Luke is good for her control."

"You knew." Knew that feeding from hybrids could save their soul and sanity. It hurt that he'd kept that from her. He'd been in her mind so much he had to know how close to the end she was.

Pivoting on her heel, she turned to pace in the other direction but walked right into tall, dark and reticent Himself. She almost stumbled backward. His arms caught her, banding around her waist and pulling her tight against his hard body. Her skin sizzled at the contact. She gasped in surprise and lifting her hands to his chest, she pushed. He didn't budge, but she caught a flicker of amusement cross his face.

"Let me go, nightwalker," she said, keeping her voice frigid.

"Marcus."

"Whatever. Release me."

"No." It was sharply spoken. He held her tighter when she tried to push him away again and her body responded, her nipples tightening, her sex growing wet

and welcoming. God, she hoped he didn't notice. He leaned forward and inhaled deeply. When he straightened, his eyes were hot and angry. "You reek of the lupine."

She pushed him again and this time he dropped his arms and stepped back. Arching an eyebrow, she started around the table to the door.

"I don't see that that's any of your business, Marcus. And you're avoiding the conversation." His words made her so damned angry. He knew she wasn't sleeping with Mitchell because he'd assured it, his presence in her mind constant, deliberately making her want no one but him.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her back. She fell into him, grasping his shoulders for support. Hands twisting through her hair, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to the pulse beating in her neck.

"We'll see about that," he murmured.

Fire licked through her belly at the touch and she tensed feeling his teeth scrape over her pulse, wondering what he'd do.

"Stay away from the wolf," he bit out.

She snorted. Give up the only real release she had left? Who did this guy think he was? She wouldn't be sparring so much with Mitchell if Marcus would relieve the hunger he'd fed. Moving out of his arms, she made it to the door before his voice stopped her.

"I mean it, Winter," he said softly, right behind her, his breath feathering hotly over her skin. He set his hands on her hips and pushed his erection against her butt. She groaned and tried to turn around, but he held her in place, lips pressing a soft kiss on her nape. God,

the man was a tease and he was playing with fire. "I don't share."

"You have to stop this," she whispered. "My people aren't like yours. I can't take the...tension."

"I'll take care of it. I'll take care of you." He pressed a trail of kisses from her shoulder up her neck and she shivered when he paused long enough to nip at the sensitive skin below her ear.

"Why didn't you tell me? About the feeding thing?" She hated the breathiness in her voice but couldn't control her response with his lips pressed against her skin.

"I considered it. You would have said no."

"Don't be so sure of that."

"I have every intention of feeding from you, baby," he whispered just before sharp teeth nipped the side of her neck. "When we settle a few other things."

His hands slid around her hips to her belly, slowly edged up under her shirt. The skin-to-skin contact was so electrifying she was afraid she'd combust. She was on the verge of begging him not to stop, to take her right then and there.

"What things?"

"You're moving in here."

The order was like a splash of cold water, slapping her back into reality. Was he crazy? Because she definitely was to let him get so close. She wasn't that close to losing her mind, was she? This was her hormones in control. Not the demon. She jerked away and spun around to face him. "I don't think so."

His expression went dark and dangerous and she knew he was furious at her refusal. He reached for her,

but she was quicker, stepping out into the hall and holding her hand up when he approached.

“No. I don’t know why you think otherwise, but you don’t have any rights over me. I’m not moving anywhere. And while I’m at it, get out of my head.”

She was back to being pissed, thank God. Couldn’t he just sleep with her and let it go? He ignored her anger and stepped closer, followed her as she retreated through the hall. If she had any sense, she’d teleport out. She scowled. What the hell was wrong with her? Her back hit the door and his palms slammed down against it next to her shoulders, his hips thrusting forward to hold her still when she tried to duck under his arms. She was pinned in and disgusted with herself for being caught and liking it.

“I have every right.”

He didn’t, but her body was sure as hell acting like he did. Glaring, she pressed her lips together, refusing to answer. He leaned forward, slowly, letting her watch him come. He spoke a second before his lips touched hers. “You’re *mine*.”

She didn’t argue. She couldn’t as his tongue swept into her mouth. Claiming. Marauding. And so very very dominant. Every objection, every logical argument, every fear fell away and she melted, would have been a puddle at his feet if he hadn’t been holding her up. It was over too soon. He jerked away, coming to stop several feet from her, breathing as deeply as her, almost panting, flushed with need. She took a step forward, determined he was going to stop denying them both. He was going to finish what he’d started eight very long weeks ago.

“Don’t. Unless you’re ready to accept that when I take you I’ll be feeding from you and it’s forever, Winter. No way out.”

That brought her up short, shock immobilizing her. She eyed him nervously, sure she’d heard him wrong. Like lupines, nightwalkers mated only once and for life. Hybrids bonded to survive. Nightwalkers and lupines bonded because there was one person, one soul meant to be theirs and once they met that person they couldn’t resist the connection. Humans, which hybrids essentially were, didn’t have soul mates. Of course, he hadn’t actually claimed she was his mate. It was definitely implied though. She shook her head. No. He had to be mistaken.

“You’re wrong.”

He laughed the teasing, slightly amused sound she sometimes heard in her head. She had the impression it was a rare occurrence, that she was the only one who’d heard it in a long time. “I’m not wrong.”

Damn, she should have paid more attention to those history lessons when she’d just joined the Order, but old mythology hadn’t seemed that important. With a sigh, he offered her his hand, palm up. “Come sit down. I’ll fill you in on those myths.”

Reading her mind again. She narrowed her eyes as she studied him without doing the same. Her senses, her instinct was still working fine though. The offer was genuine. She was surprised how tempting it was, the chance to just sit and have a conversation with him. Another time she would have taken him up on it. She shook her head.

“I can’t stay right now.”

He didn't lower his hand, didn't retract the offer. "Winter." He smiled and she caught her breath. Would he always affect her like this? "Gia and Dupree have things under control for the moment. There's nothing you can do there."

Why did he have to sound so logical?

"A few minutes delay won't hurt."

Hell, he was right about that. Gia, driving her car, couldn't even have arrived yet, and Dupree would act under her authority until she got there. She moved forward and set her hand on Marcus's palm. His fingers closed around hers and even that slight touch made her body come alive with awareness. Without saying a word, he led her deeper into the large foyer and through an open door on their right.

It was an office and she looked around while he went to the long bar on one end. Like the rest of the house it was richly appointed. Thick carpets covered the floors and plush dark leather furnished the room, a couch under the window and two chairs facing the huge mahogany desk. The wall behind the desk was lined floor to ceiling with books. If she had more time, she'd look them over, see what his reading habits could tell her about him.

He returned to her side, handed her a bottle of water, and with his hand on her lower back, nudged her toward the sofa. She sat, twisting so her back was to the arm, one leg pulled up a bit and hooked under her knee. He mimicked her position on the opposite end and she looked around the room again. It was very masculine. It suited him.

"You're not used to living in a house like this."



She snorted. “Hell, no. Even before the merging I was never rich. I was just a secretary married to a mechanic with a little two-bedroom house.”

But she’d loved that house. She’d painted and decorated the place, poured her love for David into it. She sipped her water, uncomfortable with the memories while she faced the nightwalker. She didn’t want him plucking them out of her head. If he was aware of them he didn’t say a word. She wasn’t sure if that should relieve her or irritate her, but he changed the subject so she couldn’t pursue it.

“What do you know about my people?”

“You’re psychic vampires.” The words were out before she could censor them and thankfully he didn’t take offense. He laughed.

“I guess that’s fair enough. We don’t kill when we feed though.”

That’s not what the rumors said.

“Never?”

A look of revulsion crossed his face. “There have been...accidents. It’s not simply energy that feeds us. It’s emotion.”

Of course, she should have made that connection before since, in the case of hybrids, it was the excess of feelings from their demon sides that drove them to madness. There was energy in emotion. Strength and weakness. But if nightwalkers fed off emotion and the preferred way to feed, again according to rumors, was during sex did that mean...

“It can become an addiction,” she whispered. “So those who kill?”

“Once is an accident. If it happens again the punishment is death.”

So maybe the nightwalkers were less haughty than she'd believed. Maybe they kept their distance to protect the other races.

“Have you ever?” She couldn't say the words.

“No, Winter. We are taught control, just as your people are.”

Thank God. She killed demons for a living, sure, but she'd never killed an innocent. She wasn't sure she'd be able to handle being so attracted to someone who had.

“Do you know about the Alukah?”

“The ancient race? Just that y'all were once all one race.”

He nodded. “It's our creation myth. There's no telling how much truth there is to it, but it says we were once one race, not separated into lupines and nightwalkers. We all could shift. We all could read minds.

“The story says we were created by Samarian gods to protect humanity against demons. And we did for a time, but like all sentient creatures divisions were formed. Alliances made. Eventually they petitioned the gods to divide them into two races and we became what we are today.”

She frowned. She'd known that much. “To take such drastic steps that division must have been a chasm. What was it?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? The separation of the races didn't make any difference. They still distrusted each other. *We* still distrust each other.”

“So why enter the Alliance? Why ask to work more closely with us now?”

He gave her that damned sexy grin. “You know why, Winter.”

Her phone rang before she could deny it and she was happy for the distraction. She checked the screen and flipped it open. Gia must have driven like a bat out of hell to arrive so quickly.

“Gia. I’ll be there as soon as I hang up.”

“Hurry. The quadrant leaders are all here.”

She sighed. She didn’t have to imagine their fury and fear since she shared it. She’d have to send everyone underground until they could find new, secure quarters. Two compound attacks in two days was too much coincidence. Someone was giving the demons information about them.

“I’m on my way.”

She closed the phone without saying good-bye and faced Marcus. “I have to deal with this.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You have to deal with us too.”

She shrugged, unconvinced and confused about how she felt about him. She left the room, stepped outside and teleported away before he could stop her.

## Chapter Thirteen

Marcus kept his mind locked to Winter's as she left, plucked the location from her thoughts when she arrived, and teleported seconds behind her. He was in front of a large wall, the gates left open to expose the house that should have represented safety inside. He received a few startled looks, but no one halted his passage through. He saw why when he stepped into the big courtyard. The way had been prepared.

His brother was in deep conversation with the woman called Gia, which was interesting in its own right. He'd realized as soon as he entered the dining room that the hybrid female was the woman Luke had been spending so much time with. It had been equally obvious her mental state was much more stable than Winter's. Since the two were the same age he concluded the old stories were right about feeding from hybrids.

Marcus had been surprised for other reasons, though. Luke tended to stay away from hybrids and lupines. Even more interesting was his body language. He crowded the smaller woman, every line of his body screaming possession, turning aggressive when anyone approached her. Marcus grinned. Luke's talk of never taking a mate was pure bravado. It was clear his single days were long gone. Marcus couldn't deny the anticipation he felt at watching Luke in the hunt. He

sensed Luke's carefree, bachelor charm wasn't going to work on this woman.

Luke looked up and caught his gaze. He remained expressionless for a long moment then grinned, the smile so full of expectation it put Marcus on guard. What the hell was he up to now? Luke nodded to the far corner of the house and Marcus followed his gaze. It was a good thing the shock of his less-civilized side held him frozen in place.

He'd been watching her for weeks, at once disturbed his mate was one of the demon-human hybrids and pleased at her skill. She was not a woman who could be pushed around. He sighed. In a roundabout way that was a problem. Female nightwalkers were protected and treasured. They did not fight or wander the world unescorted. His protective instincts were in overdrive.

And his possessive instincts...the alpha lupine's scent was all over her. It was the first thing he'd smelled when he went into the conference room and it had taken all his restraint not to rip the wolf's mind to shreds then and there. He'd have to pay Mitchell a visit and explain things to him. The thought of the lupine touching her, even if it wasn't sexual, made him snarl.

But this was so much worse. She stood surrounded by men, hybrid and lupine both. There was a lot of rage coming from the cluster of forms, but it was hers he felt the strongest. Did she realize how close she was to surrendering her soul to the demon? His hands fisted hard enough for his fingernails to break skin. He

smelled his blood and forced them to unclench. She wouldn't give in to that evil. He wouldn't let her.

The possessive fury that held him in place lessened, but before he could move in her direction and assert his place at her side, he felt a presence behind him. Turning, he met Mitchell's gaze. Good. He wouldn't have to seek the lupine out later. He could deal with him now.

"Wolf."

"Walker."

As greetings went, it wasn't much but even that little bit tested the bounds of his civility. He felt Winter's alarm and jerked his head up to see her watching him.

*Don't kill him, will ya? He makes a good sparring partner.* Her voice was sardonic, half amused and half uneasy. It was a tone he'd never heard from her before and seemed to signal an opening up, a small acceptance of him in her mind, in her life. That brief conversation in his study had done him more good than he'd realized.

*He can live. For now.*

Turning back, he registered the other man's study and returned it. He'd been in Winter's mind. He knew the lupine alpha was an old lover. Somehow he'd trained himself not to care about that. Well, not care too much. If he didn't bury the anger he felt toward the man who'd dared touch his woman soon, even though it was long before he knew her, he'd lose control. He could destroy Mitchell's mind where he stood and damned the consequences.

They were night and day, he and this wolf. Both tall but where he was leanly muscled, his body better used for speed, the wolf was almost bulky, his build more for strength and force. He had shorn black hair and glowing green eyes. Marcus supposed most women found him attractive. And what about Winter? What did she think? He shied away from the questions; that way led to madness.

“She’s a remarkable woman,” Mitchell said, making the first move. There was a hint of possessiveness in his voice and it engaged every one of Marcus’s senses. He turned to face the wolf, opened his mind in aggression and widened his stance. He wasn’t as strong as the wolf, but he was faster. More agile. And he could crush his mind if it came down to it.

“She’s mine,” he practically snarled, not worried about losing control anymore. He had to assert his dominance, his claim against the one person his instinct said was the only real threat.

Mitchell watched him for several seconds then turned his gaze to seek her out. Marcus clenched his fists. He didn’t want anyone else even looking at her and he knew the impulse was ludicrous. It would ease when she accepted him, but in the meantime he was very dangerous. He almost didn’t trust himself.

“She won’t be happy about that.”

Marcus shrugged. He’d resigned himself to that at their first meeting. It’s why he’d physically stayed away and tried to get to know her first. There was no walking away now. He knew that. It was only a matter

of hours before she did too. There was no way he was letting her go anywhere alone when day broke.

“She’ll get over it.”

The wolf gave him a look that was pure disbelief then threw his head back and laughed. It was the last thing Marcus expected and unsettled him a little.

“Good luck with that,” he said between chuckles. Marcus took an aggressive step forward. He didn’t like his control of his mate being questioned. Mitchell stepped back and held his hands up in mock surrender. “Hey, believe it or not I’m on your side.”

He didn’t believe it. He’d watched the wolf at the Alliance meeting and seen his longing. His thoughts must have shown on his face. He had to be more careful.

“She’s not for me. I know that.” He didn’t try to hide the disappointment he felt over it and Marcus’s respect for the alpha leader went up a little against his will. Mitchell continued softly, “She has to bond soon. She’s too close to giving in to the demon.”

Marcus didn’t respond that that was his problem not Mitchell’s but he wanted to, wanted to hang a flashing neon sign over her head announcing who she belonged to. He was through playing around. The lupine was waiting for a response but Marcus didn’t intend to give him the satisfaction of a reply. Finally, he shrugged.

“If you hurt her, I’ll shred you,” the wolf said softly enough none of the other sharp ears in the courtyard would pick up the words. Marcus smiled, feeling exhilarated, more alive than he’d felt in years. He wasn’t worried. Mitchell knew what he could do in



retaliation. The lupine laughed softly, shaking his head. His tone was wry. "I guess we understand each other."

"Not exactly." Marcus grew serious again. He knew there were going to be men around her, knew she wouldn't give up her position as commander if he asked, knew she wouldn't stay away from Mitchell even if he ordered her to. He was afraid of what he might be capable of if she disobeyed him. "Stay away from her. You've had your last sparring match."

"Impossible," he replied with narrowed eyes. He added sarcastically, "I'm part of your little task force for one thing."

Marcus opened his mouth to reply, to tell him to substitute one of his people for his place, but the lupine went on before he could get the words out.

"It'll be me and Baron. That's non-negotiable. We don't trust you. You don't trust us."

Marcus knew he was right, but hated like hell to admit it. That was why he and Luke would be handling it themselves, with Kadall, one of Luke's most trusted soldiers.

"And the sparring? Take that up with her. I have no intention of stopping."

Marcus felt his control slipping, felt his mind beginning to expand. The lupine felt it too. He didn't budge, his stance still as aggressive as always, but his eyes widened, wariness stamped across his face.

"We've been at peace for fifty years, wolf." And he didn't mind blowing it over a woman, his woman, but he was also responsible for the welfare of every nightwalker in the area. He struggled for control. "Are

you ready to ruin it over a woman who isn't even yours?"

He watched as Mitchell struggled with what he knew was the right course and his instinct to assert his dominance. Antagonizing a nightwalker was probably a bonus. Marcus forced the tension from his body, striving for perfect control.

"I'm putting a stop to the fighting. Don't get in my way. You'd react the same way if the situation were reversed."

Mitchell shoved a hand through his short-cropped hair and his features relaxed. That slightly self-mocking tone was back in his voice when he spoke. "You people are as bad as us during the mating hunt."

It wasn't a question so Marcus didn't reply. He wouldn't have anyway. Nightwalkers were not fully in control of themselves, of their powers while pursuing their mates. They were dangerous, but exactly how unsafe they kept to themselves.

He should tell Winter, warn her, but he wasn't sure that she wouldn't try to take off. She saw herself as a strong independent woman and she was, but he lived inside her. He knew her secret heart, her most secret desires, and he had every intention of giving them all to her. Getting her to accept that she could submit to him and still be the same forceful person with everyone would be the trick.

Tonight. He'd start tonight.

## Chapter Fourteen

Gia gritted her teeth as she felt Luke push at her shields again and looked around trying to spot him. He was deep in conversation with Brady, one of the Order's historians, but jerked his head over to meet her gaze. She felt hunted. No, that wasn't right. The hunt was over; she was pinned, trapped. How could she have let this happen?

She wrenched her gaze away and concentrated on helping Winter, but that was wince-inducing too. She shouldn't have been so secretive about Luke with Winter. Mostly because of their friendship. She'd found a way around the demon's hold on her soul, and it had been cruel and selfish to keep that secret from Winter.

His being a nightwalker was almost worse. It wasn't forbidden by the Order, but she suspected that was because it had never happened before. Or if it had both parties had gone out of their way to keep their relationship private. In all her years in the Order, and she'd grown up with them since both of her parents were hybrids, she'd never heard of one instance. If she'd discovered one of her juniors was involved with a walker, she'd be worried about them compromising the Order. Most walkers were strong telepaths. Luke was certainly a stronger telepath than her—her major power was telekinesis—which was why she'd insisted he not enter her mind in the beginning. Someone with

that much power could influence a person's thoughts, their actions.

She didn't blame Winter for being angry and hurt at all, but she wasn't sure she'd do it differently if she could go back.

*Stop it, Winter said. It's done now and we have too many other things to focus on.*

Gia sighed. *We're okay then?* The last thing she wanted was to screw up that friendship.

*Like a man could mess up a sixty-year-old friendship?* Winter's mental reply was light and breezy. The power of her mind was pure and cool and Gia didn't argue as Winter siphoned off some of her worry and let it float away. Then she was gone, leaving Gia to her anxious organization.

Before coming to Charles's compound she'd stopped at Winter's office and searched quickly, almost frantically, for a long-forgotten list of Order safe houses, something she should have done as soon as they found out about Winter's promotion. Every region was required to maintain emergency safe houses, but she bet the other areas had neglected theirs just as badly.

Gripping the clipboard, she forced herself not to flinch when one of the younger hybrids flashed into being in front of her. She had the younger ones checking out the old houses and reporting which were habitable and not, which were defensible or not. He made his report, she made a check mark next to the address on her clipboard, and sent him off to the next place.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Winter step closer and get in Robert's face as their argument escalated. Winter was careful to modulate her voice so it didn't carry. Robert wasn't so cautious. Even if she didn't already know what the fight was about, it'd be impossible to miss now. Robert was this quadrant's commander and he was pissed. She rolled her eyes. Understatement of the century.

"When is someone going to intervene in that?"

She jumped at the voice that came from over her shoulder and she spun around. Marcus. Cocking her head to one side, she studied him. He was a curiosity. He was nothing like Luke. She hadn't known they were twins, but she did know he was Luke's brother. She felt bad for not telling Winter but she'd been keeping her...involvement with him as quiet as possible. Luke looked at her again and she scowled back. He'd made it very obvious *secret* wasn't working for him anymore.

Marcus cleared his throat and she looked up at him again. Did they have to be so damned tall? And what did he want? She winced a little when she heard Winter raise her voice, almost yelling when she asked Robert if he thought he could do a better job and the idiot responded yes. She faced their small circle again and answered the nightwalker who stood stiffly at her side.

"Winter can handle herself. Dupree's there if she needs any assistance."

She nodded to where Dupree hovered nearby, careful not to step into a conversation that should have been private but close enough to help if necessary. If

Marcus heard her, he didn't acknowledge it. He stepped forward and she grabbed his arm to stop him. Luke's fury rolled over her, but she didn't turn to look at him until she noticed Marcus concentrating on her. He carefully removed her fingers, which were suddenly gripping hard enough to bruise, from his arm.

"You should be very careful for the next several weeks. Don't touch any males, especially where my brother can see it," he said softly.

He was gone so fast she didn't see him move though she knew he hadn't teleported. When she looked he was standing next to Winter, arms crossed over his chest, glaring at the quadrant leaders standing around her. Gia shook her head. Winter could handle him; she had her own issues. Issue. And she was going to find him and give him a piece of her mind.

That turned out to be unnecessary because when she turned to look for him he was in front of her. She felt him pushing at her shields again, demanding entrance into her mind, and she sucked in a deep breath while shoring up her walls. He crowded close to her, caught her around the lower back when she tried to retreat.

"Let me in, Gia," he whispered, his breath warm against her neck as he spoke, his masculine scent filling her nostrils.

Her knees went weak as she responded to his proximity but she shook her head no. He'd made the rules clear when they began their affair. He wouldn't be around long, he'd said. He didn't do long term, didn't do commitments, he'd said.

And she hadn't cared.

She'd only been concerned with controlling her demon, with feeding the demands of her demon. A sexy nightwalker who lavished her body with attention was the perfect solution despite being temporary. Neither had realized at the time that his feeding from her, leaching off that excess energy would be as effective as bonding herself to someone. For the first time in years, she'd experienced relief, but had steeled herself against the day the struggle would return, when he decided he'd had enough of her.

She'd barricaded her heart too, but that was a wall that hadn't held. If she dropped her shields, let him into her mind, he would see how much he meant to her. See that it was too late for her. She let fury mask her fear of discovery. It fueled the demon, gave her strength and with a glare, she shoved him away.

They'd agreed in the beginning he wouldn't have access to her mind. Agreed either one of them could walk away whenever they chose. She wouldn't, couldn't do that and knew she'd be shattered when he eventually did.

"We had an agreement. Don't try to change the rules now, Luke."

He stared down at her with absolutely no expression on his face. She only knew he was deeply angry because she felt it rolling off him in waves. "Things have changed."

Exasperated, she threw her hands up in the air and tried to pace away but she didn't get far. He grabbed her elbow and pulled her back, pulled her to him. Her body pressed close against his and she struggled against the urge to snuggle closer. He had the power to

destroy her. She squeezed her eyes shut and rested her forehead against his chest.

“Things have changed,” he whispered again, his low sexy voice sending tendrils of fire licking through her veins.

She sighed. They’d had this argument already tonight. Several times. He was like a broken record or a CD set to replay over and over again. She had to end this, had to walk away before he did permanent damage to her heart. Stepping back, she met his gaze not sure if she could, not sure if she had the strength to walk away.

One of the hybrids she’d sent out flashed back into the courtyard and she exhaled her relief. The conversation could be avoided for a little while longer. She had work to do, even he couldn’t argue that under the circumstances.

“I have work to do,” she said, already walking away.

“This conversation isn’t over, Gia,” he said softly behind her.

Her back stiffened as she moved, as she forced her heart to harden. Yes it was. It was definitely over.

The nightwalker called Luke was not for her.

Not really.

Not forever.

Ignoring the knot in her stomach and the small, buried part of her crying out its pain, she went back to work, went back to the things she could control.



## Chapter Fifteen

Feeling battered by exhaustion, Winter checked her office clock on the wall. 4:00 a.m. The sun would be up in a couple of hours and normally she'd go to bed shortly after that. Demons were night creatures and a hybrid's schedule followed those they hunted. But not today. They'd relocated to her place hours ago, after the researchers were finished at Charles's. She stared at the door to her left that led into her bedroom. God, she wanted nothing more but to walk in there and collapse on her bed, but that wasn't possible. They were here to gather their things and clear out. She rubbed a hand over her face. When was the last time she'd slept? Really slept? Fifteen-minute power naps didn't count. She didn't even remember and it wouldn't be anytime soon.

Marcus moved up behind her and set his hands on her shoulders. His fingers dug deep into knotted muscles, easing some of the tension. She closed her eyes and leaned back, almost moaned her pleasure. It felt so natural, so easy, to lean into his strength.

She heard the click of a phone closing and straightened, opening her eyes to watch as Gia sat down in one of the big comfortable chairs in front of the desk. Weariness was evident on her face, in the way she slouched back. She covered her eyes with her hand.

“That’s everyone but us,” she croaked, her voice nearly gone from all the talking she’d done through the night.

By *us*, she meant herself, Dupree and Winter. Every other hybrid in the region had been placed in a safe house. If someone was betraying them, and she didn’t believe that for a minute, it wasn’t an ideal solution, but it was all they could do for the moment. The good news was everyone outside of Charles’s and Benjamin’s compounds were accounted for. The bad news was only half the safe houses were usable so people were packed into them without a room to spare. She was tempted to just let the three of them stay at her place, but knew that would be inviting disaster akin to daring the cosmos to come after them. She might be going a little crazy, but not that crazy.

“We’ll have to see if we can find a suitable hotel,” Gia said.

“There’re always the caves,” Dupree added. She shivered. No way. The demons wouldn’t go near them and neither would humans except for one specific purpose. The caves were connected to the basement that was the local source for demon souls. She had no interest in sleeping near that.

“No. You’re all coming back to our house.”

Winter looked across the room where the nightwalker leaned back against a bookshelf. Luke. His casual pose, ankles crossed, hands stuffed in his pockets, didn’t match the determined glint in his eyes. Kadall stood a few feet from him, but Winter still couldn’t read him. She had no idea if he approved or disapproved of the suggestion. She met Dupree’s gaze

and he shrugged, as curious and in the dark about Gia's relationship with the nightwalker as she was.

Life was stranger than usual. After having little or no contact with walkers for her entire existence she was suddenly surrounded by them. Mitchell and Baron had headed home, but Marcus, his brother and Kadall had come with them.

She wasn't sure why. Was too damned tired to care at the moment and as much as she hated to take Luke up on the offer, as much as she knew she shouldn't trust these walkers, she was going to accept.

*Good.* There was too much satisfaction in Marcus's voice, but she didn't have the energy to explore it. She was going to crash, and crash hard, soon. Leaning forward so that his hands no longer touched her shoulders, she spoke to Gia and Dupree.

"Pack a few things so we can get moving. Don't forget the computers."

They nodded and everyone left the office. She was surprised to see Kadall following Dupree, but didn't say anything. Dupree would run off the nightwalker if he didn't want company. He was good at getting rid of people.

She closed the laptops on her desk and unplugged the power cords. After retrieving a bag from the closet designed to hold both computers, she put them inside, rolling up the cords and shoving them into a side pocket.

Marcus was a steady if quiet presence. He followed her into her room, didn't say a word as she pulled a small duffle bag from under the bed and placed the

bare minimum inside. She didn't see the point in taking much with her—she wouldn't be staying long.

*You're going to need more than a couple of changes of clothes.*

She started at the voice in her head, surprised he used telepathy to communicate with her when he was standing right on the opposite side of the bed from her. She scolded herself. *Don't even think about the bed,* she told herself. *Don't think about the sweaty athletic things you could be doing in it.* She wasn't going there right now, as much as her body protested. Even if he was willing, and so far he'd been more interested in mental acrobatics than reality, she was too worn down to get the most out of it.

He moved behind her, once again kneading sore muscles with his magic fingers. She felt his smugness as he pressed his hard body against her back. *Don't worry, baby. I have every intention of making full use of a bed when you've rested.*

He slid his hands down her arms. Tiny goose bumps rose in their wake and she groaned, her body stirring into life despite the fatigue that rode her. He whispered in her ear.

"The others are ready."

Nodding and stepping away from temptation, she finished with her bag and stepped back into her office where the others all waited. Marcus took both bags from her and one by one they all flicked away. She and Marcus were the last two to leave.

"Ready?" She swayed a little as she asked, but he caught her, steadied her.

"After you."

Concentrating on the foyer in his house, she pushed herself there, felt her molecules move as she shifted through space. It was empty when she arrived, Marcus right on her heels. He took her hand and led her up the stairs, down a long hall into a dark room that smelled like him, looked like the kind of place he would sleep. She didn't consider the implications of being led there. Ignoring him she quickly stripped down to her bra and panties and crawled into the inviting bed, welcoming the oblivion of sleep as it wrapped her in its embrace.

Marcus closed the door softly behind him and went to join his brother and Kadall. They were both waiting in his office and Luke silently handed him a glass filled to the rim with scotch. He considered ribbing his brother, reminding him he'd sworn never to take a mate, but held back when he noticed the lines bracketing his mouth and the angry look in his eyes.

"Everyone settled in?" he asked instead.

"Yes." Luke gritted his teeth.

"His woman insisted on her own room," Kadall added.

Ah, that explained the irritation.

"At the other end of the hall no less," Kadall went on. Teasing, confident that his own mate was upstairs doing what she was ordered to do no doubt.

Marcus wondered if she would be influenced by the two female hybrids now in the house. He'd seen a flash of ire more than once in Marelle's eyes when Kadall had asserted control. He shared the thought with Luke, who smiled slowly in response, a smile full of anticipation that made Kadall narrow his eyes and

swing his gaze back and forth between the two of them.

“Whatever you two are planning, forget it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, old friend,” Luke said good-naturedly, slapping Kadall on the back.

“Yeah, right.”

Marcus laughed. Things were changing, his drab boring day-after-day existence looking much more interesting with every new development. He drained his glass, refilled it with considerably less liquid than his brother had added and sat behind his desk. Time to get down to business.

“What do we know?”

Kadall sat in one of the armchairs near the desk while Luke pulled the shutters closed and dropped into his customary spot on the couch in front of the window. “Not much.”

A shadow darkened the doorway. “Anyone welcome to join this little pow-wow? Or is it nightwalkers only trying to figure out who’s targeting hybrids?” Dupree drawled sarcastically. Marcus reached out to make sure Winter was really asleep. “Don’t worry. She’s out cold. Gia too. I checked on them before I came down.”

Dupree strolled into the room and went straight for the liquor cabinet, looking for all the world like he didn’t realized he’d just enraged two possessive nightwalkers in the thrall of the mating hunt. Marcus wasn’t sure how, but he knew it was an act. The hybrid waited, watched, for their reactions even if it didn’t show, even though his mind felt tranquil. He turned

around and leaned against the wall, ankles crossed, one hand in his pocket while the other lifted his glass. He took a long swallow.

“Heard you warned Mitchell away.” Dupree met his eyes and Marcus got a glimpse of the steel in him. “Not the smartest move, man. Gonna piss Winter off.”

“I can handle Winter,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Grinning, Dupree lifted his glass in salute. “Good luck with that.”

They were the exact words Mitchell had used and just as irritating when delivered by the hybrid. Dupree turned to Luke. “Gia’s not as bad, but I wouldn’t try to push her around either.”

Luke stood, his aggression radiating off him. Marcus knew Winter had never been involved with Dupree and was able to rein in his possessive instincts a little, though he didn’t want to share her at all with anyone even an old friend. He didn’t know if Gia and Dupree had ever been involved though.

The other man held his hands up, all casual grace and easy charm. “Hey, man, don’t look at me like that. I’ve never been involved with Gia like that. With either one of them. I like my women a little more...tractable.”

Kadall snorted. “Those two sure as hell aren’t.”

“No, they aren’t,” Dupree said and Marcus knew this was the real man. Serious, reserved. Marcus made his decision.

“Have a seat. You can fill us in.”

Dupree sat, one ankle crossing over his knee as he leaned back in the chair with that easy charming grin,

but when he spoke his voice had bite. "You show me yours and I'll show you mine."

From his spot by the window, Luke snarled. The hybrid didn't acknowledge the sound at all. No flinch. No change in his eyes or demeanor. He just sat and waited for Marcus to answer him.

"Kadall," Marcus said, ordering him to make his report. The soldier waited half a second, met his eyes before nodding slightly.

"We've been running increased patrols and studying their reports. The demons don't appear to be near our homes any more than usual. They are in our patrol areas more, but the major increases seem to be mostly near hybrid compounds. Without seeing yours or the lupine's reports, however, I can't say for sure."

Dupree ignored the unvoiced request. "So they are targeting us."

"So it would seem. Why? How are they finding you?"

Dupree shook his head. If he knew, he wasn't saying.

"What about the demon half of you? Could it be giving you away?" Luke asked.

"No," Dupree replied curtly then clenched his jaw as if to hold back more words. Marcus waited him out, let him come to his own decision about how much to trust them. "We merge with the soul of a demon, y'all already know that. What you might not realize is that these are demon souls without a body. They have nothing to communicate with. They don't even communicate with us outside of feelings. And those are primitive. Rage. Blood lust."



“Then you have a traitor,” Kadall said softly.

To his surprise, Dupree didn’t argue.

“Could be. Could be one of us or one of the lupines or one of you.”

Marcus stiffened in outrage, felt it mirrored by the others in the room, though he didn’t blame the hybrid for being suspicious.

“It wasn’t us.”

Dupree arched his eyebrows. “Really? You can account for every single move all of your people make? I’d like to learn that trick.”

Damn. He’d never admit it, didn’t even want to consider it, but the hybrid had a point. Not that he was right.

“It wasn’t one of us.”

“You don’t know that.” Dupree shook his head. “The only thing that is clear is we are the target. The question is why. And how.”

There were no takers for either question.

“What about your researchers? They were out there tonight.”

“Nothing yet. They haven’t even identified everyone from the commander’s compound yet.”

Marcus was surprised they hadn’t made more progress. It must have shown.

“You saw Charles’s today. A lot to sift through.”

Marcus nodded, trying to ignore the clenching in his gut and failing. The place had looked like someone tore through it and shredded everything that stood in its path. That could have been Winter. He was never letting her out of his sight again.

“Anything else?”

Dupree shrugged. "I don't have anything right now."

Marcus stood. He had a half-naked woman in his bed who'd be more than willing when she woke. Which probably wouldn't be for several more hours, but in the meantime he could hold her. Make sure she was safely secure in his arms.

"Tomorrow then," he said as he left the room to jog up the stairs and to the woman who turned him inside out.

## Chapter Sixteen

He snarled his frustration and flung the desk against the wall. She'd been here, the Order rooms she called home. Winter. The woman who now ruled the hybrids. He could smell her, almost taste her blood on his tongue. How had she escaped him? And all the others. He threw his head back and roared. All of the hybrids were gone, all of their places empty. They'd scattered to safe houses.

The other demons with him shrank back, cringing from his fury. All but the warlord. The members of the Alliance were wrong about demons. The lesser ones were stupid, little more than uncontrolled emotion with almost no ability to reason. But the strong soldiers and certainly the warlords were different. Very different.

The warlord leaned against the wall, cunning in his eyes, his lips turned up in a cruel smile. Amused. This one needed watching. He thought he was smarter and stronger than the beast before him that used to be human, then hybrid and now...something else. The warlord thought he was stronger, but he was careful to keep his distance. Wary of his new ally.

"Find them, halfling," the warlord ordered with a growl and the beast's rage dropped to a low simmer. He smiled, seeing the chink in the warlord's armor, seeing the fear he couldn't quite hide.

The warlord held his gaze, eyes glowing red, his fury and power a palpable thing in the air. The other

demons shrank back from him, but he held his ground. He wasn't fully one of them so he couldn't show any weakness, wouldn't be cowed like the rest. To do so would get him killed.

"Go!" The roar shook the house, but he kept his pose insolent, took his time leaving the room. Behind him he heard the warlord screaming, heard the sickening sound of teeth crunching into bone, and knew the warlord had reasserted his control by eating one of his own.

The beast smiled. He'd won this round.

## Chapter Seventeen

He had left her dreams alone and she was so relieved at not meeting him there, she wasn't prepared for him when she woke. Hadn't shored up her defenses. *Winter*, he whispered, his fingers stroking along her spine. He flattened his palm over the curve of her butt, lingered a moment and kneaded her flesh. Then his wicked fingers were on the move again. She arched her back against him as his feather-soft touch inched up her side, around her torso to her breasts. Her nipples tightened into hard painful points. She groaned. Not again.

She struggled to fully wake, determined she wasn't going to open her eyes only to be horny as hell and alone. She couldn't take another day like that. Not one damned more.

The fingers of one hand closed over her nipple. She groaned as he squeezed, then pinched. Felt the warmth and moisture flood her sex, her muscles contracting against the sensation. Or trying to hold it to her. She wasn't sure which anymore. Only that she was on fire and only he could put out the flames. He rolled her to her back.

*Open your eyes, Winter.*

She didn't want to, didn't want the dream to end before she reached some kind of fulfillment at least. Just a little lessening of the tension, just a little easing

of the craving. One tiny orgasm. Was that too much to ask?

*Are you real?*

A soft, sexy chuckle. *Now, Winter.*

Apparently he was.

It was impossible to ignore his demand and sighing, feeling the dream slip through her fingers, she opened her eyes and held her breath for several long seconds. He was braced over her, his hands close to her body, his chest close enough to tease her nipples. She exhaled and he caught it, his mouth crushing hers. His hunger as strong as hers.

He lowered his body on top of her and his weight crushed her into the mattress but she didn't complain. She gloried in it. She welcomed it, welcomed him, especially the hardness, the erection pressing against her entrance. Reaching between them, she wrapped her hand around the steely length of him. He moaned in pleasure and thrust back and forth in her grip. With her other hand she shoved at his shoulder but he didn't budge.

*I want to see you.* Had to see his flesh in her fingers, the pleasure on his face.

*Later.*

He carefully removed her hand, while moving down her body leaving a trail of soft kisses, little nips. He stopped eye-level with her breasts and stared with such avaricious greed she ached. Groaning, she lifted her hands to grab his shoulders, knowing her fingernails dug too deep but not caring. She needed him closer, needed his mouth on her with a yearning she'd never felt before and only he could assuage.

He sat up, pulled her hands away and lifted them over her head. Then he kissed her, soft and gentle this time, coaxing.

*Wrap your fingers around the bars on the headboard, baby.*

She tried to refuse, tried to shake her head no, but her fingers clenched the iron bars anyway. Protest was impossible with his lips fused to hers, with his tongue in her mouth and his fingers doing wicked, wicked things to her body. His hands moved back to her breasts.

Breaking the kiss, he slid back to his previous position, his hot gaze holding hers as he lowered his head. He flicked his tongue over her nipple. Returned for a second taste before sucking it into his mouth. It was scorching, the pleasure almost painful. She might have screamed and her hands flew back to his shoulders, trying to hold him close, silently begging for more.

*Winter.* She heard the growl in his tone even though he didn't speak aloud. Slowly, she lifted her hands, wrapped them through the bars, but only because she felt the promise of completion in him. He wasn't going to leave her wanting this time.

*If you cooperate, so be good, baby.*

She should have been pissed at his dictatorial tone, the implicit demand that she submit totally to him, but the burning in her blood, on her skin wouldn't allow it. She felt something wrap around her hands and tugged, jerked when she couldn't move. He stopped suckling her and sat back on his heels, a look of supreme satisfaction on his face. She pulled more forcefully this

time. She wasn't used to being tied down. Fantasized about it sure, but never trusted anyone enough to try it.

She looked up to see what he'd restrained her with and her stomach clenched when she saw nothing. He was holding her still with the strength of his mind. He was so powerful, too powerful, this nightwalker who'd claimed her. For the first time she felt a wisp of unease.

"Don't. You trust me, Winter," he said, fingers trailing lightly down her stomach. She shook her head even as her muscles seized up against her command. She didn't. She didn't trust anyone that much.

"Yes. You do, Winter." He leaned forward, sucking her nipple back into his mouth, and she groaned. Went limp. All protest gone. He released her and sat back on his heels. Damn it, if he left her like this again she'd kill him. She swore she would. He laughed.

*You can't hurt me anymore than I could hurt you, Winter. Unless of course you wanted that. Or if your defiance is so bad I have to punish you. Don't make me punish you, Winter. I'm not sure if I can do it.*

"Leave me like this and you're taking your life into your own hands, Marcus," she snapped, struggling against his mental bonds.

His smile was slow, almost cruel but sexy as hell. She was a goner. Really. Could she resist him if she had to? He slid down her body, his mouth, his hot breath hovering just over her skin.

"I have no intention of leaving you like this, baby. You're mine to take care of. And torment."

His grin was sinful as he pushed one long finger into her core, slowly thrusting in and out. Her ability to



think, to reason and complain, evaporated. He moved his thumb, rested it on her clitoris, and she caught her breath waiting and anticipating.

He leaned over slowly, holding her gaze while he took her nipple between his teeth, gently tugged it while finally applying pressure to her clit. Her body seized up as sensation immobilized her, as the orgasm rushed through her. Then his fingers were gone and his lips were on hers swallowing her cries as the long, hard length of him thrust inside her.

Marcus was enthralled. She responded so beautifully, no inhibition or hesitation. But she was holding a piece of herself back, not giving him her full surrender. He was confident that would come in time. After this the bond between them should snap into place. He surged deeper into her at the thought, harder and faster. Moaning, she wrapped her legs around his waist, digging her heels into his lower back and urging him on.

With a biting tug on her lower lip, he broke the kiss and moved along her jaw to her throat, tasting, reveling in her skin. She was creamy pale, blemish free and sweet. He explored the hollow between her nape and shoulder, sucking her tender flesh between his teeth hard enough to mark. A visible sign of his claim that she couldn't deny. Her arousal grew, the lust, the desperation she felt spilling out of her mind. He lapped it up, savored it, felt his own powers expand and grow as he fed off her. Then she was coming again, her channel convulsing so hard around his cock that he couldn't hold back and he came with her.

He pulled out of her reluctantly and rolled to his side. Releasing her hands, he rubbed her wrists to ease the sting then pulled her across his chest. She murmured in contentment and snuggled close already asleep again. He smiled as he drifted off. She was finally where she belonged and he wasn't letting her go.

## Chapter Eighteen

This time she was the only one to wake. She eased away, slow, careful not to disturb Marcus as she slipped from the bed. Her stomach rumbled and she clapped a hand over it, glancing over quickly, relieved to see he hadn't budged. The empty feeling intensified as she pulled on her clothes, carrying her boots and weapons with her as she crept from the room. How long had she slept? She hadn't noticed a clock in Marcus's room and the windows were shuttered.

Keeping her steps light, she followed the hall to the stairway and made her way down searching for the kitchen. All the windows she passed were shuttered so she guessed it was still daylight. Nightwalkers could tolerate very little sun. It weakened them to the point of death in a matter of minutes. How long did she have until nightfall? How long before he could come after her? Because after that mind-blowing session in his bed, she was certain she had to get away while she still could. Before she became addicted to his touch. Before he used that addiction to take over her life.

At the bottom of the stairs she hesitated. The exit was straight ahead of her, the dining room they met in to her left, a hall continuing past it, and the open office door next to her right. The kitchen was probably down the hall, but she stepped forward, peeked into the office first. The nightwalker they called Kadall was

sitting behind the desk reading something on a laptop. He looked up and met her gaze.

“Do you need something?” There was nothing in his tone to indicate how he felt about the hybrids now in the house, no emotions bled past his mental shields.

“Kitchen?”

He smiled slightly. “At the end of the hall. It’s fully stocked. Help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

He shrugged. “Nothing to it. You all must be on the same clock. The other two are already in there.”

There was curiosity in his voice this time. She didn’t try to explain that she, Gia and Dupree had worked together so long, been friends so long that they sensed each other on a deeply instinctive level that went beyond what even most hybrids experienced.

“Something like that,” she responded, shrugging one shoulder and left to find them.

Dupree handed her a plate of bacon and fried eggs when she entered. She set it on the table and went straight for the coffee pot. After pouring a mug and adding a liberal dose of sugar, she returned to the table.

“What time is it?”

“Almost three,” Gia answered.

“Any reports yet?”

Gia shook her head no, looking down at the table. She’d pulled her hair back in a severe knot and actually put on makeup. She still looked like hell.

“You okay?” Winter asked her softly.

Gia’s head jerked up and her expression was closed. “Fine.” Her voice turned curt. “We’re

supposed to meet the quad leaders in about thirty minutes and Mitchell called. He wants to organize some joint patrols." Her smile was mocking. "Taking that task force thing seriously, I guess."

Winter tilted her head to one side and studied her. What the hell was going on? It wasn't like Gia to be so bitter and she felt the other woman's demon closer to the surface than it had been in months. Trouble in paradise? God, she hoped not. They didn't have time for that kind of crap now. Which is why she was getting the hell out of Dodge before it was too late.

She needed her computers before she took off, but she didn't recall seeing them in Marcus's room. Her other bag was in there, but there wasn't anything in it that couldn't be replaced. "Do y'all have the computers?"

"I do," Dupree said, the first words he'd spoken since she came in. Was that disapproval she heard in his voice? She turned to study him. His expression was as inscrutable as it always was.

"Good." She turned back to Gia. "Do we have someplace to stay yet?"

"Working on it," she answered as her phone rang. She walked away and spoke softly to whoever was on the other end.

"I'm not sure if we should leave here," Dupree said while they waited for Gia to finish. She was floored. He couldn't have surprised her more.

"Are you nuts?"

"No way," Gia said at the same time, her phone now closed and clenched in her hand.

“It’s secure. No one knows we’re here so whoever’s telling the demons how to find us won’t be able to.” He shrugged when they both glared at him. “Just sayin’.”

Damn it. She scowled at the ceiling. And damn the man upstairs who, after having sex with her, left her in more knots than before. She was willing to take a foolish risk just to get away from him. She should be fine now after expending the sexual tension. She tried to get mad, angry enough to walk away without a backward glance. It should have been easy—the demon was all about rage—but it wasn’t and that’s when she remembered, that’s when another change finally registered.

He’d fed from her, leaching off the dangerous excess energy the demon had been generating. Physically and mentally, she felt really good, better than she had in years. She wished the emotional part of her *wasn’t* working so well though.

“What’s it going to be then?” Dupree asked.

“We’re leaving.” Her heart twisted as she gave the order, but she had to get out. “Now.”

Dupree nodded but it was clear he disagreed. “Be right back.”

He returned less than two minutes later with three computer bags. She took hers, he handed Gia’s over, and one by one they teleported away to one of the safe houses. The farthest one she could think of.

## Chapter Nineteen

They were early, but the quad leaders, Robert, Ingrid and Jordan, were waiting for her when they arrived. The safe house was a small three-bedroom ranch and she looked around the crowded living room where the section and squad leaders had gathered to receive their orders. One of them would have to fill her old quadrant command. She mentally reviewed the list of possible replacements Gia had given her. It was just another detail that needed to be dealt with that evening.

“Thinking about who’s taking over for you?” Jordan asked softly at her side. Busted. He’d been her best squad leader, the most obvious choice for quadrant leader in her place, but he’d gone to another quad before she’d been promoted. Even if he took her old position, she’d be left with a quad vacancy. He knew her almost as well as Gia and Dupree.

She grinned at him. “Who would you choose?”

He cocked an eyebrow obviously surprised she’d solicited advice, but studied the small knot of tense bodies that made up the southwestern contingent at the meeting tonight.

“Lance.”

“Really?” She was surprised. The other hybrid was a bit of a hothead. Not a great quality in a leader and one she reluctantly admitted to sharing. But Gia had made the same recommendation and Winter had half

decided to appoint him to the quad on that endorsement alone.

“Newly bonded. To a lupine. He’s calmed down a bit.”

“Ah.” A detail she should have known, and had probably been told. Gia was nothing if not thorough.

She caught Dupree’s signal from across the room and nodded in response. The small room they were going to hold the meeting in was ready.

“Let’s go,” she told Jordan and noticed the other members of the quad already entering the short hall. She paused as she passed the men from the southwest quad.

“Lance.” She indicated he should follow her and sensed him fall into step behind Jordan.

The room wasn’t spacious, barely big enough for the two couches and chairs that were crammed into it, but it would do. No one was sitting when she walked in and she realized with irritation they’d waited for her, because oh yeah, she was the regional commander now. Her new position was going to take a lot of getting used to.

Refusing to heave the sigh of exasperation that threatened, she went to the chair opposite the door. A tactical move. She didn’t want her back to an entrance. Dupree grimaced, but took the seat she’d avoided, clearly unhappy about not having a view of the door but just as unwilling to share the couch with anyone else. She had to bite the inside of her cheek to avoid grinning. The others sat, except for Gia who stood behind her.



“Lance is taking over the southwest?” Robert asked.

“Yes.” She gave Lance a hard look. “Don’t make me regret that decision.”

“I won’t.” She heard the controlled fury in his voice and nodded, approving. Control was key.

“Good.”

“Has everyone checked in?”

“Yes,” Gia answered, moving to her left. Winter was relieved. Gia’s change of position saved her from constantly having to look over her shoulder, and the knots in her neck and shoulder that would no doubt result from the constant movement.

“Any progress on the real-estate search?” She had the nagging feeling the safe houses wouldn’t stay secure much longer.

“We found an estate on the northeast side. Signed a lease on it this afternoon. Between the main house and two guesthouses it’s big enough for everyone in the quad.” Jordan spoke for the northeast quad.

She nodded. “Anything else?”

Ingrid looked uncomfortable as she spoke up. “I know a nightwalker who offered me the use of one of his houses. There’s enough room for about half my people if we double up. He said he might have a lead on some other places too.”

Winter studied the younger woman. Just great. Another one of them wrapped up with one of those damned nightwalkers.

*You too, Ingrid?*

Ingrid's face was pinched, not really fearful just reluctant. *Could we talk about it later? Should I tell him no?*

She was tempted, but it wasn't like she could refuse the offer. The safety of her people came before her reluctance of further involving them with the other race. Or herself with one in particular.

"Do it," she told Ingrid. She turned back to Gia, her urgency growing as she realized how many of them would not be safe tonight or tomorrow or probably the next day. "This is number one on the priority list."

"Got it. When I spoke to Mitchell earlier, he said they can put up about twenty also."

She nodded. Good. She had every intention of being one of those twenty along with Gia and Dupree.

"Patrols. Until I say otherwise, four-man teams. And full watches on all the sleeping areas 24/7."

If Benjamin had made such an order a week ago, the voices of the quad would have raised in outraged protest. A full watch was six armed patrols working twelve-hour shifts, which translated to twelve hunters not out doing what they existed for if the watches were all day and night long. Some of the smaller squads didn't have the manpower for even that.

"We're gonna have to reorganize some, too." It was necessary whether they liked it or not. And they weren't going to like it. "No more isolated squads. I don't want anyone living in a place with a smaller than platoon-sized unit." Roughly fifty people.

That they protested. Of course. There was only one reasoned argument though. From Lance. She should have known he'd give her a headache right away.

“We’re not going to be able to find places big enough to accommodate that, Commander.”

“Make do,” she responded harshly before turning to Gia. “We’ll have to build.” Even when they found and eradicated the threat to their people, no one would ever really feel safe in the old places.

She was nodding, jotting down notes on her clipboard. “That will be easy actually. The Order’s been acquiring land for the last few years.”

Winter raised an eyebrow. She hadn’t known that. Gia shook her head at the unasked question, her own confusion obvious, and explained.

“No one knew. I just found out. Gray said the council didn’t even tell Benjamin.”

“Odd,” Ingrid muttered.

Winter agreed. It was strange. She could understand the quad leaders not being kept informed, but why leave Ben out of the loop? Rising from the chair, she shrugged it off. She had enough problems without trying to decipher the serpentine movements of the council.

“Hourly check-ins until further notice.” The others stood and she looked around the room, holding each person’s gaze a moment before moving to the next. Then she grinned, not caring if it was just this side of feral. “And happy hunting.”

She left the room, left the house without a backward glance, glad to be free of the claustrophobic place. Outside she took a deep breath and waited for Gia and Dupree. The man appeared first, hands stuffed in his pockets, for all appearances cool as the day was long. He stopped next to her, but didn’t look at her,

instead studying something off in the distance. She wasn't offended. Anyone who spent any amount of time with Dupree adjusted to his mercurial moods quickly.

"You gonna ask Mitchell if the squad can stay there?"

The squad that had been hers as a quadrant commander, technically her personal guard, moved with her in her new role. She'd had no choice but to put them up in one of the safe houses last night. Tonight they would be together again.

"Yep."

"The squad yes. The three of us, no," he said, delivered in a commanding tone that made her skin itch. If anyone else spoke to her like that, he'd have been in the dirt. But this was Dupree and when he spoke in that demanding tone she knew it was because he thought she was doing something not only foolish but dangerous. She sighed.

"You still think we should stay with the nightwalkers?"

With Marcus. She was afraid to even think his name, as if the action might invoke him, might wake him and jump-start the claiming he'd begun last night. She couldn't have that. Squeezing her eyes shut, she forced David's image to rise in her mind. Years, decades, ago she'd joined the Order because the husband she'd loved more than anything had been stolen from her. She'd guarded her heart carefully since then, didn't want to dishonor that memory, that choice, now over simple lust.

She was still mostly human. She indulged. Sex was a necessary, enjoyable part of life. Right? Why couldn't the nightwalker leave it at that? He hadn't said otherwise, but she knew he wasn't going to. Wasn't going to walk away, wasn't going to leave her in peace with her memories.

"It's the safest place," he said so stubbornly she knew there was something more to it. Just as she knew she wouldn't get it out of him and she wasn't giving in.

"No." She shook her head.

"Have it your way."

"I will, thanks," she snapped back.

A ghost of a smile crossed his lips. "I'm going to check on the squad. I'll make the necessary arrangements."

"Thanks."

He was gone before she even finished the word. She hissed her irritation and went in search of Gia who was inside whispering in a corner with Ingrid. They both shut up when they saw Winter. She sighed. What now?

"Anything I need to know about?" she asked dryly.

Ingrid pressed her lips together and Winter knew she was holding in a laugh.

"Not really," Gia answered. "I'm going to the office."

The downtown building was the official front for the Order's regional investments and holdings, and it also housed their lab in a secret underground complex of rooms. Gia had all three laptop bags. "I've got a list

of contractors so I'll see how soon we can get the plans drawn up and break ground."

"Okay. Take a couple people with you. I don't want anyone alone."

"Sure. I'll catch up with you and Dupree later. At Mitchell's?"

"Yeah."

With a nod of good-bye to Ingrid, she was gone.

"Well, that was quick," the other woman muttered. It was obvious she'd wanted to continue her conversation with Gia. Winter was curious, but she didn't push Ingrid to talk to her. If it was something she needed to know, they'd bring it to her attention when and if it was necessary. Besides she was pretty sure it had to do with personal relationships with nightwalkers, and it had always been her policy not to micromanage the lives of her people unless they were in danger. As much as she distrusted the walkers, she didn't sense any danger so she let it go and excused herself.

"Y'all be careful," she warned the remaining quad leaders before teleporting to the lupine pack's lair.

She reappeared in the yard and walked up the front porch steps, not really surprised to see two guards lounging against a rail, their relaxed poses belied by the feral glints in their eyes. One of them nodded at her, the other spoke.

"Go on in, Winter. He's waiting for you."

"Thanks."

She went inside and jogged down the steps that led to most of the pack's living space and went searching for Mitchell. He wasn't in the gym, their usual meeting

place, or any of the other common areas. She let her senses flair out and felt him upstairs in his living quarters. The guards could have told her. Gritting her teeth, she went back up.

He was waiting in front of the French doors when she walked in, back to her and staring outside, his hands resting on his hips. She shut the door behind her, the soft click ringing through the quiet air, and he turned his head to look at her over his shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Tilting her head to one side, she stepped forward to join him. Something was off. His attitude was too indifferent and it felt forced. Standing next to him, she mimicked his pose, not doing what she really wanted to do and study his profile. Figure out what was wrong with him.

“What’s up?”

He shrugged. “The usual. Night’s coming. Patrols will start soon. Same shit, different day.”

Okay, now she was getting worried. It was unlike Mitchell to be anything but insufferably cheerful. With her at least most of the time.

“Yeah.” She paused. Should she call him on it? No. It wasn’t worth the headache right now. A lousy attitude to take with a friend, but she was feeling overwhelmed as it was. “About the patrols. Gia said you mentioned hooking up?”

He nodded. “Dupree’s around here somewhere. He and Baron are setting up teams and dealing with sleeping arrangements.”

Thank God. “Cool. We can all double, or triple up, if necessary.”

He finally turned and looked at her. There was absolutely no expression on his face, no inflection in his voice when he spoke. "No. We don't have the space and you already have an offer from the nightwalkers."

Anger filled her. Pure and simple and totally human. None of the demon's rage infected it, magnified it. She wasn't sure if she was happy about that under the circumstances.

"I'm going to kill Dupree," she snarled, but softly, the words almost inaudible.

Mitchell's brows drew together. "Why?"

"Why? He isn't responsible for this? You just decided one of your oldest friends isn't welcome out of the blue?"

"Not out of the blue." He cocked an eyebrow. "But it doesn't have anything to do with Dupree."

"Care to explain that?"

He shrugged and turned back to the window. "Ask Marcus."

Scratch that. She was going to kill Marcus. Dupree could live for a little while longer. Mitchell on the other hand...

"Explain that," she snapped.

Again with the shrug. "He made it more than clear you're his and he won't take kindly to interference."

She threw her hands up in the air and paced across the room. "You have got to be kidding me! You're gonna blow off fifty years of friendship because of something a nightwalker said?"

He faced her and she knew she wasn't going to win this fight, didn't have a chance. His eyes were sad and



resigned, but also determined. “It works different for us, remember? You’re his. The sooner you accept that the better.”

Oh, she didn’t think so. No way in hell was she giving control of her life to someone else and like lupines, nightwalker males had a reputation for uncompromising dominance. One they’d earned. But the only way to deal with this would be to go directly to the source. They were going to have this out once and for all. In a flash she was gone and once again standing in the foyer of the nightwalker Lord’s home.

## Chapter Twenty

He'd been alarmed when he first woke, but it quickly passed. Marcus felt the bond between them, not yet strong but secure enough that Winter wouldn't be able to break it. He let his mind open, reaching out to test his surroundings. He, Kadall and Marelle were the only ones in the house. He hoped wherever Luke was he was in control. The last thing he needed right now was his twin going ballistic. Since Luke's mate had shut him out last night that was a very real possibility. He reached down the path that connected them and received assurance that Luke was fine. Only then did he turn his complete focus to Winter.

He knew she was all right. He was always in her mind, but knowing and seeing were two different things. She was in some kind of meeting, thinking. Always thinking. Working scenarios in her mind, trying to trace all the twisted paths of possibilities behind the demon attacks. She'd reached the same conclusion he had. It was almost certainly a hybrid feeding information to the demons. Someone who'd gone rogue or was so close to it there was little difference. What she couldn't figure out was who—names, faces, backgrounds ran continuously through her mind and he felt her frustration. She didn't know, really know, enough of them to make an informed guess. Buried under all that was worry. Worry about

those she was responsible for. Worry about her own limitations, the risks she posed to her own people.

She saw herself as a liability. She was afraid she wasn't strong enough or fast enough or smart enough. She didn't see what everyone else saw when they looked at her. What he saw.

She was magnificent.

He shut his eyes, reveling in the scent of her, the feel of her in his mind. Even though she didn't want this, didn't want a bond with him, she was there. Had been there for weeks. He felt her trying to re-erect the wall she'd managed to put up just a couple of days ago and laughed. It was much too late for that.

She was also a pain in the ass.

She knew he didn't want her leaving the house when he couldn't follow and ensure her safety, but did she comply? Hell no. She rushed foolishly out into danger just to avoid him, to avoid what was between them. Then she tried to block him. It was his right to have complete access to her mind. He would be a bit more forceful in his explanation next time.

His stomach growled. Rising, he grabbed the first pair of clean jeans he could find and dressed in a hurry. Downstairs he could smell cooking food and went straight for the kitchen. Jerking to a stop as he entered, he cleared his throat.

Turning to face the doorway and thereby shielding his mate from Marcus's sight, Kadall lifted his head from Marelle's breast, but kept his hands firmly gripping her ass. Marcus arched an eyebrow, waiting as Kadall struggled against his instincts, struggled to contain the snarl Marcus knew he'd be feeling, not to

mention contain the power of a mind that wanted to snap out at the intrusion, the possible threat. Restraining the urge, Kadall swept the woman up in his arms and edged past Marcus in the doorway.

He entered the kitchen shaking his head. Kadall should be beyond that kind of struggle, the bond between him and his mate strong enough, the claiming long ago complete, that he should be able to maintain the civilized veneer they all wore even when interrupted like he'd been. Marcus didn't make it habit to interfere with mated pairs, but he'd have to speak to Kadall, get to the root of this new development. He couldn't afford to have a senior soldier so unstable at this point in the game. Maybe he was simply feeling Marcus's and Luke's struggles. God knew the energy level in the house was off the scale.

Liquid popped and sizzled on the stove. Inhaling deeply, he approached and turned the heat down to low. Spaghetti sauce. Must be Kadall's turn to cook; it was the only thing in his repertoire. Setting another pot, this one just water, to boil on the stove he entered the pantry in search of pasta. He finally located a box buried under a bag of dried beans.

Sighing, he returned to the stove. He really had to find a new cook. The last had left when she'd mated a human of all things. Rare, but it happened. The bond would keep the human alive and young as long as she lived.

That was when life was too boring, before he met Winter.

Suddenly, he felt her anger, her determination. He closed his eyes and let it wash through him, connecting

to her to see what had her so riled up, and smiling at what he saw. Mitchell had just informed her that she couldn't stay with the pack, that he wouldn't interfere in what was between her and Marcus. The wolf was smarter than Marcus had originally given him credit for.

The water started to boil and he opened the box, dropping enough pasta for two in. She might be furious with him but she still had to eat. She wouldn't make him wait long.

He felt her presence in the house as soon as she arrived. The air crackled with fury. He didn't seek her out, was careful to mask his presence in the house. He wanted her to use the mental connection between them to find him. Every time she used it, the link was strengthened. She knew exactly what he was doing and he laughed out loud at the surge of irritation she sent down the path.

He didn't turn around when she entered but he felt her watching him, an almost physical stroke over his back. He knew she didn't do it on purpose, had done it unconsciously, but it cheered him anyway. She could fight what was between them, but she couldn't win. It was only a matter of time before she accepted that.

He drained the pasta over the sink, reached for two plates and put a generous helping on each. "Hungry?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral so none of the irritation he felt over her leaving showed. He didn't acknowledge her anger either.

He heard her move, her steps soft in the still room. "I could eat."

She stepped up next to him and taking the plate he handed her added sauce to it. She got two forks from the drawer and handed one to him. She must have been in the kitchen before she'd left this afternoon.

Winter had come back intending to give him a piece of her mind. Then he'd offered to feed her and now look at her, all docile and accommodating and quiet. God, what was wrong with her? She would have screamed in frustration but she was suddenly starving, her stomach reminding her she'd abandoned the bacon and eggs earlier without taking a bite. She ate. She could yell to her heart's content later.

Neither spoke other than her murmured "thank you" when he handed her a glass of wine and his just as quiet "you're welcome." When her plate was clean, she carried it to the sink and rinsed it off, adding it to the others waiting to be run in the dishwasher. Such mundane tasks. So homey. She couldn't decide if she liked that feeling or not. Turning to face the table she saw he was also finished and leaning back in his chair studying her, a self-satisfied expression on his face. Yeah. Right. She didn't like the congenial atmosphere. Didn't like the smirk that seemed to say she was going to give her life over without a fight.

"You had no right," she said.

He arched an eyebrow but didn't try to pretend he didn't know what she was talking about. "I had every right. You're mine."

How could he sit there so calmly and make such an outrageous statement? It was impossible. She simply refused to *be* with someone that much, that completely. She shook her head. No. No way.

“You aren’t going to win this fight, Winter.” So damned calm, so cool. Nothing like the hot temper that had been in her head for the last two months. She knew he was angry, she felt it, but he kept a firm lid on it. Of course, some of the sexual tension had been eased and he’d fed from her. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. There was the obvious benefit, the lessening of the demon’s control. But it was one thing about the nightwalkers she’d always found kind of creepy. She snorted to herself. Like binding your soul to a demon’s wasn’t creepy? She wasn’t exactly in a position to throw stones.

And never mind any of that. She just wasn’t ready to tie herself to one man, to make the choice that felt like a betrayal of David’s memory. Maybe it would help if she explained. She doubted it, but it couldn’t hurt, right?

“I was married, you know. Before I joined the Order.”

“I know.” He said it softly, tenderness in his eyes.

It got her back up. She didn’t want his sympathy. She wanted space. She wanted to be left alone. She knew she was broadcasting the thought when his gaze hardened and his jaw clenched. He stood and stepped closer to her, taking her chin between his fingers and forcing her to look up at him.

*I’m not going anywhere and neither are you.*

His lips closed over hers, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. Stealing her over, digging deeper into her heart. Her body responded against her will, against her command for it to slow down. She pushed closer to him, rubbed her hard nipples against his chest, aching

for relief. Her sex grew wet as he intensified the kiss, his tongue delving deep, mimicking the actions she wanted from his cock.

She slipped one hand up the back of his shirt, swallowing his groan when her skin contacted his. Then she reached a hand between them, outlining the bulge of his erection, rubbing it before trying to pop the snap at the top of his jeans. He stopped her with a low growl and secured both her hands at the base of her back. Need crawled through her and she choked on a sob. Would he fuck her already? Or was he going to torment her, going to deny her because she'd snuck out of his bed earlier?

He tugged on her hands, forcing her to arch her back so that her breasts thrust forward and up, the hard tips clearly outlined in the tight shirt she wore.

"Is that really what you want? You want me to fuck you like any other woman? Like someone who means nothing to me?"

Leaning forward, he scraped his teeth over her nipple. At the same time, he thrust into her mind, sending wicked image after wicked image of what he wanted to do to her, what he wanted to make her feel. She almost screamed at the overload of sensation, almost came at the feel of him at her breast and in her mind. Almost. He kept her just on the edge. She felt the purpose in him, the intent to prove he meant more to her than some casual sexual encounter. He moved his thigh between her legs and lifted her on it a little, rubbed it against her sex. She trembled with the need to come.

*No. You haven't earned it yet.*



Her mind froze for a split-second, then rebelled at the command, the dominance in that voice. She struggled against him, tried to force him to release her even as her body yearned for him, yearned to be taken in every way he'd ever shown her. But the level of trust required was something she didn't think she was capable of.

He released her abruptly and she stumbled back. Wrapping her arms around her middle she paced away and struggled to regain control, forced herself to remember all her responsibilities, all the reasons she couldn't just give herself over to someone else's care. She couldn't *be* soft and weak. There was no time and no room in her life for it.

By sheer force of will, she didn't jerk away when his hands settled on her shoulders. He leaned closer, his lips brushing the sensitive skin under her ear and her body did what it predictably did at his touch.

"It's not a weakness to let your mate take care of your needs. And it's my right. My privilege."

He sucked her skin between his teeth, bit sharply and her womb convulsed. His hands moved under her shirt, sliding up her torso to cup her breasts, lightly pulling on her nipples. Oh the hell with it. She pushed her ass back against him. She'd give up control if it appeased this incredible need.

*That's it, baby. Give over to me. Let me take care of you.*

She couldn't respond, couldn't think about anything but the orgasm that was just out of reach, the tension spiraling tighter and tighter through her body. He spun her around, kissed her as he picked her up and

left the kitchen. Up the stairs. Back to his room. Right where she'd started out the day.

She dropped her weapons in a chair and stripped out of the rest of her clothes as fast as she could while he did the same. He met her gaze, eyes an inferno of desire and demand. She felt fevered, impossibly hot as she backed up. He grabbed her when the backs of her knees hit the mattress, before she could sit and scoot back.

“Not this time. On your knees, Winter.”

She rolled over to her knees, upper body supported by her elbows. She knew he meant it as a kind of punishment, felt his need to prove to her once and for all she wanted more than just easy sex from him. But she also felt his excitement as he circled the bed, as he removed the rest of his clothes. He wanted her, needed her like this. Submissive. Presenting herself for him and only him. The only man who'd ever receive her surrender. She was surprised he saw it that way, would never have reached that conclusion on her own and wasn't sure she was quite ready to go that far now. She would submit this time, right now, and leave the future to worry about later.

It seemed to be enough for him.

The bed dipped when he climbed on behind her and she held her breath as he moved into position. The head of his erection pushed against her entrance, but he waited, stroked her back and her ass with cool palms. She wanted to push back against him, wanted to demand he take her, but she knew this was a test, knew if she did what she wanted she'd fail and he'd deny her again.

He leaned forward over her back, whispered in her ear as he thrust into her. "See? You can submit."

Straightening, he gripped her hips and started to move. There was no slow easy buildup. It was fast and hard and rough. And she loved every minute of it, coming almost immediately. He fucked her through it, kept her coming with mental fingers on her clit every time she started to cool down. She was sure she couldn't take anymore, sure each new orgasm was the one that would kill her.

He pulled away from her and let her roll to her back, but her relief was short-lived when he covered her, his erection wringing a groan from her as he pushed home again. He kissed her, slowly, tenderly to match his strokes in her. Taking his time now, soothing her electrified senses. She relaxed into him, able to breathe again when he broke the kiss.

"One more time, baby," he whispered in her ear.

She grabbed his shoulders as he picked up the pace, harder and deeper, in a fast even tempo. Her fingernails dug into his muscles as her sex clenched around him and she felt her mind splinter. He cried his release, warm jets of sperm filling her, and stilled above her, clinging to her. After several minutes, he rolled to her side. They were both panting, sweaty. The need was temporarily sated but nowhere near appeased.

"I'm not moving for at least a week."

He chuckled and she groaned when her cell phone started chirping.

"Damn it," she mumbled, trying to make her exhausted body roll out of bed to find the stupid thing.

Her body refused to obey her. Marcus stood, rummaged around on the floor and handed it to her as he collapsed back at her side.

“Yeah?”

“Another one,” was Dupree’s clipped reply. She was suddenly wide-awake.

“Fuck! Where? Who?”

“One of the safe houses. On the north end. Four dead, everyone else accounted for.”

She closed her eyes wishing she could go back several days, wishing she knew what the hell was going on. Standing, she tucked the phone under her ear as she reached for her pants.

“I’ll meet you there,” she said to Dupree and closed the phone.

Marcus beat her to them and handed them over. He looked really pissed off. Shit. She added it to the long list of things she didn’t have time for.

“I’ve got to go.”

She pulled her bra and shirt back on, sat on the edge of the bed to zip up her boots, had her weapons strapped back on in record time. Guilt crawled through her, sped her up. Her people had been butchered while she indulged herself with a nightwalker.

“Don’t do that.”

She didn’t have to ask what, had sometime in the last several hours accepted she couldn’t kick him out of her head. She shrugged.

“Why not? It’s true.”

“You can’t be everywhere at once,” he snarled, getting into his own clothes. “And even if you’d been

there, you'd probably be dead too and then what good would you be to anyone?"

He said the right words, but it wasn't what he was thinking. He didn't give a damn about them; he just didn't want to lose her. He slammed up walls against her when he realized she'd picked up the stray thought. She narrowed her eyes.

"That's hardly fair. I don't get to have any private thoughts but you do?"

She explored the shield with mental fingers, pushed at a weaker spot and it crumbled like dust. Unfortunately, she didn't know if he'd let it happen or if she'd really accomplished it on her own and now that her access was returned she wasn't positive she wanted it.

He used fury to cover his fear. His fear he could have lost her in any of the three attacks, his fear he still could lose her. It was a side of him she didn't want to see, a softer humanizing side. She shook her head. Later. She'd deal with this later.

She closed her eyes, picturing the house she needed to go to and felt Marcus move through her mind and also fix on the location. She knew he planned on following her and was not happy at the relief she felt because of it. She had Dupree and Gia as backup, but she couldn't deny Marcus's usefulness in a fight. On that thought, she focused, felt her molecules shift as she teleported to meet Dupree.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Luke found a quiet, unused space in the sub-basement, collected an abandoned chair and settled in to wait. There were other things he should be doing—organizing patrols, checking up on the training of new recruits, trying to figure out who the hell inside the Order was betraying his, or her, own. It was pretty damned obvious someone was.

But no. Instead he was hiding out underground, waiting for the sun to set and Gia to arrive. It was all so...stalkerish. And completely ludicrous, that he, Luke Black, player extraordinaire, lover of all women and universally loved in return, was reduced to stalking his own damned mate. Absurd and infuriating. The walls bulged a moment as anger swept through him and he was careful to rein in his power, to let it release harmlessly.

He set the chair against the wall and brushed away a cobweb before sitting and leaning his head back. One day very soon he was going to spank her pretty ass for putting him in this position. She'd insisted on her own room last night, but he hadn't believed she was really serious about keeping him out. So imagine his surprise when the door was locked. He could have easily gained entrance, picked the lock or just blasted the door open, but he thought it would be more satisfying to force her to come to him.

If he didn't feed from her soon, thereby leaching off the excess energy from the demon, she would start to come apart. Wincing, he recalled his first meeting with her. She'd been barely walking the edge between sanity and madness then. He wouldn't let her carry this defiance far enough to endanger herself.

But she hadn't come to him today either, had in fact left the house as soon as she could. She wasn't struggling, fighting her demon side for control yet, and he had no idea how long it would be before she needed to. Whatever the length of time, it was too much. He was *not* sleeping alone again.

The question was how to get her where she belonged and the obvious answer was sex. He couldn't live without touching her, so how could she? He scowled and stood to pace the room. She'd managed just fine last night. He couldn't demand her capitulation either. He'd tried that, insisted last night she drop her shields and give him access to her mind, but she'd refused.

Refused to accept she was his in the most irrevocable way, refused to grant him access to what was his right as a mate. He stopped pacing and pictured her, then glared at the ceiling. It trembled a little, fine dust shaking free to fall on him as it did. Damn it, why couldn't his mate be another nightwalker? Why did he get stuck with a stubborn, beautiful hybrid?

Returning to the chair, he reached out, hoping to catch her in a weak moment. No such luck though he wasn't as cut off as he'd been. He couldn't get into her head, but he felt her. Her turmoil. Her confusion and

anger. Her sorrow. He shouldn't have been able to sense her over such a long distance. He wouldn't have with anyone else he didn't already have a connection with like his brother or Kadall. He jumped up from the chair, excitement surging through him. He shouldn't be able to sense her emotions so well. That he could was surely a sign in his favor. The bond was growing. Now to just reel her in, make it complete.

With all his concentration turned on her, he felt her teleport into the building, felt her realization that he was there somewhere, felt her trepidation. He was surprised when she didn't leave right away, that she wasn't running as fast as her feet would carry her from the confrontation. Of course, she realized she had time. The sun was still up and the windows on the top floor of the building, in her office, weren't shuttered. He couldn't go to her yet.

He waited impatiently for the sun to set, never hating it as much as he did in those moments. It wouldn't kill him. Not right away at least. It would sap his energy, create little sparks of fire along his skin and nerve endings. Nightwalkers, naturally, avoided it like the plague it was. Finally, finally, it slid over the horizon and it was safe for him to go up.

The elevator was too slow, so he found the stairwell and jogged up. He could have teleported, he'd been in her office before and knew the layout, but he didn't. He *wanted* her to feel him coming for her, wanted her to know there was no hiding, no place on earth and certainly not in Camden, that she could conceal herself.



She was sitting behind her desk when he walked in, pretending to ignore him, but he felt her awareness, preened at the hidden scrutiny. She may not want to want him, but she couldn't deny she did. He sauntered forward, sat on the edge of her desk until she was forced to look up and meet his gaze with a frosty glare.

He kept his eyes hot and carnal, took in a deep draught of air when he smelled her arousal. His nostrils flared as her nipples hardened under his gaze. How could she deny what was between them when she responded so quickly to nothing more than a look?

"What are you doing here?" She crossed her arms over her chest as if to hide her response to him. "I've got work to do, Luke."

He shrugged, but didn't vacate the space he'd claimed on her desk. "Do it then. I'm not stopping you."

She exhaled a gusty breath and he didn't even pretend to not watch the way her breasts rose enticingly as she did. She noticed and didn't appreciate his admiration apparently.

"Stop hovering," she snapped. "And don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" he drawled, wondering how she would respond. He wanted to keep needling her. Her color was high, her eyes sparking in challenge. He'd never seen her like this and he liked it. He liked it a lot.

"Well?"

"You're just trying to egg me on, aren't you?" she whispered.

She shoved the chair back and stood, walking to the windows to stare outside. He didn't have any idea what she was thinking, but he couldn't take the forlornness he felt from her. Approaching softly, he was careful not to startle her as he stepped up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. Her whole body stiffened.

"So tense, darlin'," he drawled quietly.

"Times are tense."

He knew she meant more than the mating hunt they were engaged in and a familiar surge of anger swept through him. At the demons yes, but mostly her. She was his mate. She didn't have the right to endanger herself. His hands tightened on her shoulders and he pushed a little harder than he intended at her mind.

*Let me in, damn it.* Then he felt nothing but fierce joy as she desperately tried to push him out, away. *Too late now, darlin'.*

She wrenched free of his grip and stalked away, hips swaying in the seductive manner that always enchanted him. She caught him staring at her ass when she whirled back around. He simply shrugged at her outraged glare. Could he help it if the mere sight of her walking turned him on?

"Stay out of my head, Luke," she snapped. "And stop that."

Stop his arousal? The lust, the need for her that had become like a second skin, always with him? Impossible. He shook his head.

"You'll get used to it."

Her eyes narrowed to angry slits, just a hint of red around the irises and he knew she'd have to come to

him soon. She never intentionally let him see her demon half. She ignored his statement, refused to engage him on the subject of their mating. "I have too much to do tonight to deal with you. Go away. Let me work."

He stretched out on the old leather couch on the far wall. Crossing his arms on the armrest, he laid his head back, closed his eyes and made himself at home. "Work. I'm not going anywhere."

"Damn it. I can't—" She cut herself off abruptly, but he knew what she was leaving unsaid. He didn't budge from his position, didn't even crack open one eye.

"Can't concentrate with me here, darlin'?"

"Oh, shut up," she muttered. He heard her move back to her desk and resume her seat.

The sound of papers rustling was the only thing that filled the air for several minutes, then she sighed and started making calls. He listened carefully to her side, picked what he could of the rest from her mind while trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. They were building new compounds rather than buying existing houses, but still needed to lease several places for the time being. He'd have to speak to Marcus.

They owned a few houses that were possibilities. There was even room in their house, but he was loath to offer it. The three couples in residence were straining things enough. His stomach grumbled. Though they needed a good cook. One more person wouldn't hurt. A woman so no one's instincts went crazy. His stomach moaned again, reminding him he hadn't eaten since the previous night. He could go

several days without the psychic energy from feeding, but he needed food. He stood and her head jerked up at the movement.

“I’m going to pick up some dinner. Chinese okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, turning back to the computer screens she’d been studying. “I ate something before I left the house.”

“That was hours ago. You need to eat more than once a day.”

Another reason she needed him. She forgot to eat, had been worse about it when he first met her. From the beginning of their odd relationship he’d been feeding her. That sure as hell wasn’t changing now. She sighed.

“Fine. Get whatever you want,” she answered but she wasn’t really paying attention to him, distracted by whatever was on her screen.

He struggled not to take it personally. He’d seen her like this before, so wrapped up in work she practically ignored him. Rather than start another argument he left, teleporting into the alley next to a local Chinese joint.

He was back in minutes with a paper bag packed with cartons and bottles of water. She looked up when he started to unload the contents onto her desk.

“You *are* going to eat. Even if I have to feed you myself.” That idea had interesting possibilities. Feeding her in bed. Naked. She flushed and he smiled when he realized she’d picked up the thought. “Want to give it a try?”

She snatched a box from his hand. “No.” But there was a hint of interest in her tone, a hint of curiosity

that fired his blood. Oh yeah. It was definitely something he was going to do later.

They ate quietly, her concentrating on her computer and him watching every bite that went into her mouth ensuring she ate enough. Her phone beeped an incoming message almost the second she set the empty carton down. She glanced down at it and then straightened, rose to her feet. He caught her hand as she tried to slip by him.

“What is it?”

“The lab. I’m going down.”

He stood. “I’ll come with you.”

She pursed her lips and he waited for her to tell him no, to argue. It surprised him when she only shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

What was she up to now? He followed her out. She eschewed the elevator too and hurried down the emergency stairs. He followed her down and into the basement.

At the locked door, she swiped a security card then laid her palm flat against a reader. The light turned green and she twisted the knob. He followed her in, felt the weight of the lead-lined walls pressing against him as he entered. There would be no teleporting in or out of this place. It was as secure as they could make it. But what happened if they were trapped? If one evening demons crowded in the hall waiting for them to exit? He filed the problem away for later. These weren’t his people and therefore not his immediate concern, though he knew it was something he’d have to help Gia address. Assuming she hadn’t already of course.

She walked over to a tall good-looking man with the aura of great age and Luke bristled even after seeing the thick gold band on his left hand. He approached, set a hand on her hip and held her to him when she would have jerked away. The scientist cocked an eyebrow but didn't comment.

"Timothy. Luke." She ground out the introductions through gritted teeth. "What's up?"

Timothy nodded but didn't offer to shake his hand. Smart man. He handed Gia a stack of papers. "Prelim from Benjamin's compound. We're re-running to double-check."

"Why? What did you find?"

"It's more what we didn't find."

Her brows drew together as she skimmed the pages. He read it over her shoulder. Line after line of item numbers matched with names. His stomach rolled. They'd matched what remaining body parts they could through DNA.

"Where's Benjamin?" she whispered, flipping to the last page. He wasn't there either and she looked up to meet Timothy's gaze. Luke kept his suspicion and his sadness, to himself. He'd known Benjamin for years. He may have been a hybrid, but he was one of the good guys. Had he gone rogue? Was that why there were no remains of his to identify? It would explain why the demons had found the hybrids so easily.

Timothy shrugged. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Gia was shaking her head. *Not rogue. No way.* He didn't think she was even aware of using telepathy to

speak to him, she was so aggravated by the thought. She went over the list again.

“Janet’s here.”

Janet was Benjamin’s wife. They’d been bonded for years, as long as Luke had known him. Supposedly, a bonded hybrid couldn’t go rogue, but was that true? They were as insular as the other supernatural races and more secretive about some things than the nightwalkers and lupines.

A heavy burden of dread pooled in his belly. What if he couldn’t keep Gia safe? What if the bond wasn’t enough? He couldn’t live without her; that was not an option. But he’d seen a hybrid rogue or two in his time. Once gone there was nothing that could bring them back.

A female technician cautiously approached Gia and told her she had a phone call. He was glad for the distraction. She turned to the closest desk, picked up the handset and answered it absently, still mulling over the DNA results, but her demeanor changed immediately. Her body language screamed alert and her skin paled. He didn’t have to ask what was wrong. He was standing close enough to overhear.

“I have to go. Timothy, let me know right away when you get those results.”

“Sure. Is there a problem?”

“Another attack. On one of the safe houses.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, eyes a little red as his anger swelled.

“Something like that,” she grumbled and after giving the scientist directions to the house, spun

around to leave the lab. In the hallway she looked surprised when Luke fell into step beside her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked as she took the stairs up two at a time.

“Going with you.” Elaboration wasn’t necessary. It wasn’t up for debate and she must have seen his resolve in his eyes because she didn’t argue the point.

Back in her office, she shut down her computer and secured all her paperwork in a locked drawer. Overkill since the hybrids owned the building and it had state-of-the-art security, but under the circumstances he didn’t blame her. She nudged him out the door, secured it, then flickered out of sight without even warning him. Sighing, he delved into her mind, found the location and followed. One day very soon he was going to show her who was boss. He just hoped it was still him when the time came.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

He stood in the shadowed woods, watching as the others started to arrive, but it was only one he was interested in, one the trap was set for. The part of him that used to be human struggled to remember why it was so important to take out this one particular woman, but the demon shrugged it off. It didn't matter.

He felt the impact of her presence, of her power when she teleported into the yard and drew in a covetous breath. That was why. Her strength was raw and earthy, channeled in the wrong place, channeled into fighting demons rather than taking control of them. He needed her power.

The other two appeared, the tall black man and another woman, the two who were always near the blonde. Winter. He took another deep breath, let her rage wash over and through him. Such power. Such strength. He grinned. Such a waste. He wouldn't waste it though. When he ate her brain and heart her power would be his, her soul would be his. And he'd rule. He'd take that unusual force of hers and channel it into beating the warlord, then he'd make himself king on earth.

He had to act quickly before more of the hybrids arrived, and he knew they would. He took a step forward, reaching with his mind to connect to the two demons he'd ordered to hide nearby, but snarled in frustration when two more people flickered into the

clearing. Nightwalkers, and both scanning, something the hybrids had been foolish enough to forget to do. He'd counted on that.

The mind of one of the walkers brushed by his, hesitated for a split-second. If the nightwalker had attacked in that moment, he might have killed the beast, but he didn't and that moment of weakness saved him. He teleported out, far enough away that he would not be detected and roared his rage to the sky.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Dupree and Gia arrived as she did, watchful and alert, though she doubted anyone else who saw them would realize that. She concentrated on keeping that thought to herself, buried her active thinking into a hidden corner of her mind. There had to be a trick to keeping your thoughts to yourself even if you shared a mental bond with someone.

Marcus and Luke both appeared while she was practicing it and she felt them sweeping the area, knew they were communicating with each other as they did so. Saw the slightest stiffening in Marcus's spine as he found something that wasn't right.

"What?"

"You didn't scan," he growled. "An amateur's mistake, Winter."

She cocked an eyebrow, refusing to take umbrage at his accusation. "What is it then?"

"Demon. Gone now."

Scowling, she faced the woods, letting her senses expand and flare out. Nothing. If there had been something there, her demon should have alerted her. Usually if there was a demon nearby, her demon was exultant, eager to engage and spill blood. She felt the energy void where the demon had been but her other half didn't react to it. Frowning, she turned in a careful, slow circle, scanning as far as her mind would reach. There was nothing else there, but she couldn't

shake the feeling something was off. Wrong. She snorted to herself. That was crazy. Of course something was wrong, demons had attacked one of her safe houses.

Jordan was waiting for her at the front door, quiet and observant and patient. He nodded when she approached and pushed the door open. She didn't wince at the sight or scent of the blood everywhere. Was she getting used to it? No. A piece of her buried so deep she was hardly aware of it, cried out its outrage, its vows for vengeance, as she calmly walked through the still house looking for something. What, she didn't know, couldn't say.

The demons had made a bigger mess than usual considering there'd only been four hybrids in residence at the time of the attack. Limbs were scattered everywhere, blood and brain matter dripped from the walls. She gritted her teeth and turned away in revulsion from a torso that had obviously been chewed on, the heart and several organs missing.

She stepped back outside and took a deep breath of fresh air into her lungs, but it didn't help. She walked around the side of the building to empty the contents of her stomach behind a bush. Marcus was somewhere nearby, she felt him, but he kept his distance, close enough to aid her if necessary but far enough away to avoid her wrath. The man might be smarter than she'd given him credit for.

Her fingers dug into her knees as the last of the dry heaves ended and she stood with relief, rubbing the back of her hand over her mouth. Yuck. Dupree stepped into view and silently handed her a bottle of

water. She unscrewed the top and took a long drink, swishing it around her mouth before spitting it out. Then she poured the rest over her hands and shook them off.

“Thanks.”

He nodded. “No problem.”

Two sets of headlights turned into the driveway, one after the other, and Gia joined them. “Techs.”

It hadn’t been necessary to tell her. Her night vision was as good as theirs. Better even. But she recognized it as a need to fill the silence, the intervening moment the time Gia needed to steady herself. She exhaled a long breath as the team unloaded equipment from the van and turned to face Winter.

“I was with Timothy when Dupree called, listening to the prelim report from Benjamin’s.”

There was note, a tremor to her tone that alerted Winter to the fact something wasn’t right. “And?”

“They’ve got initial DNA on all the...parts. Benjamin wasn’t there.”

It took her mind a few seconds to process that information and in that time Marcus and Luke joined them.

“Those results are certain?” Marcus asked.

“You’d have to discuss that with Tim. Those were the results. Under the circumstances, the tests will all be re-run, but our lab is very good. Don’t hold your breath they’ll come up with something different on the second go-around.”

She knew Luke and Marcus were talking privately about it, caught a little bit of Marcus’s side. Narrowing her eyes she turned to glare at him.

“Ben did not go rogue. No way.”

Marcus was quiet, holding her gaze for several long moments before answering. “You can’t be sure of that.”

“I *know* him. He brought me into the Order. Trained me. Taught me everything I know.”

His expression softened. *I’m sorry, baby, but it’s the most obvious explanation.*

“He was bonded. He couldn’t go rogue,” Gia interjected.

“Exactly.” What about his wife? “Janet?”

Gia frowned. “She is on the list.”

Shit. If Benjamin were alive, he’d last a few days, a couple of weeks at most, fighting the demon. If he didn’t create a new bond immediately, she’d be forced to hunt him down. She reached out for his mind, unsure if the flicker of awareness was real or just blind hope or absolute terror. She didn’t want this damned job, Ben’s job, and she sure as hell didn’t want to be the one hunting an old friend and mentor.

The unavoidable conclusion was he was alive. Somewhere. Somehow. But she refused to believe he’d gone rogue, not so soon, or that he was the one betraying them. It just didn’t fit with the Ben she knew. He’d fight, long and hard. He always had. But even Ben, who she’d believed damned near invincible during her early years in the Order, could be overwhelmed, could fall. He could be anywhere, injured but alive and unable to call for help.

“How big was the search radius around his compound?” she asked Gia.

“A mile. I can have another, bigger sweep done tonight.”

She nodded. “Do it.”

She ignored Marcus’s disapproval. She knew she couldn’t afford to waste any resources. She also knew she couldn’t leave Ben alone and defenseless and that was the only logical explanation. Unless the demons had taken him. Marcus grunted.

“Why would they take him, Winter? As a hostage? They don’t do that.” He paused. “Unless they’re torturing information about your Order out of him.”

Gia huffed. “He would never give up anything. He wouldn’t betray us.” Winter nodded agreement.

Marcus shook his head. “Maybe not and it doesn’t matter. They don’t take hostages.”

They didn’t. They also weren’t known for launching large coordinated attacks, but there had been cases, instances her Order hadn’t shared with anyone over the centuries. Times when a particularly bright and cunning warlord came from the Underworld. She groaned. Fuck a duck. They should have realized when there were two attacks that that’s what they were dealing with. It shouldn’t have taken three. Only a warlord was smart enough to track down the Order’s compounds and safe houses, smart enough to plan the attacks. And a warlord, especially a powerful one, could be very, very dangerous because he controlled large numbers of lesser demons, could command them and expect to be obeyed.

“A warlord.” She faced Dupree and Gia, but felt the two nightwalkers stiffen at her words.

“Myth,” Luke said.

She turned around to face him, but Gia beat her to it. “No, they aren’t. Why do you think the Order was created in the first place? You were too busy feuding with lupines. Someone had to deal with the threat.” She turned back to meet Winter’s gaze and Winter could tell she was displeased with her next words. “I’m going to get the relevant books from the library and bring them back to the nightwalkers’ house.” She seemed to consider something a moment. “Nadia, too.” Nadia was an Order historian and a friend. Winter trusted her implicitly.

She nodded, dismissing Gia, knowing Luke would stay at her side and they would both be safe enough at the abandoned commander’s compound where the library was housed. She ground her back molars together. She shouldn’t be concerned about the nightwalker’s safety no matter what he might mean to her friend. Marcus was a bad influence. Fisting her hands on her hips, she glared at him but he only looked back calmly, cocking one eyebrow as he waited her out. *Ignore him, Winter. Just ignore him.*

She heard his laughter in her head, his sexy slow drawl. *What is it you people always say? Good luck with that.*

Snarling, she turned her back to him and eyed Dupree, who stood silently waiting for orders. He was quieter than usual, more still. She frowned. He’d grown more and more reserved since her fight in the woods with the demons, but the change was so gradual she hadn’t realized how much he’d pulled away from her and Gia and their friendship. It had happened so slowly, she hadn’t noticed, hadn’t felt anything off



about his aura. She still didn't. He'd always been an exceptional blocker, but he must be suffering the long-term effects of demon bonding she and Gia were. He was made in the same year. If he was though, he showed no signs of it. She hoped he did what was necessary before it became too late.

*Can I use your house as a meeting place?* she asked Marcus.

*Of course.*

Spoken like she should just take it for granted. But why the hell would she? He may be claiming she was his mate, but she wasn't buying it.

"Get the quad together at dusk tomorrow night." There wasn't much left of the night. "At the nightwalkers' house."

*Cook* a voice whispered through her mind and she realized after a moment of Marcus's laughter it had come from Luke. Was she going to have access to the brother too?

*No.* Marcus answered. *We do need a new cook, though. A woman.*

*A woman? You've got to be kidding me. Chauvinist much?*

*Not usually.* A long pause. *There's too much tension in the house now as it is. We can't bring another male in.*

She sighed. "If you know a female cook, or someone who'll take on those duties, bring her too. There's room and everyone I can keep secure is a bonus."

Dupree nodded. Was there a flicker of...something in his eyes at the order? She couldn't tell.

“As for everyone who’s in one of the old safe houses? Send them to the caves.”

“What are you doing?” he asked. She studied him carefully, like a bug under a microscope. No censure. Barely any curiosity. Dupree was closer to the edge than she’d realized and brutally repressing it.

“I’m going hunting.”

“Alone?”

She glanced over her shoulder, registered Marcus’s slight nod. “No.”

Dupree met Marcus’s eyes, apparently saw what he wanted to see there. “Okay.”

“Dawn then.” He flashed her his quick signature grin. “Maybe I can arrange breakfast.”

Then he disappeared, gone almost as fast as his words faded into the abrupt silence.

She turned to Marcus. Alone again. And since her first thought was of ripping his clothes off and having her way with him that was not a good thing. He grinned.

*Save it for later.*

Rolling her eyes, she brushed past him and set off into the woods. There was killing to be done.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Dupree left as soon as he could after Winter started probing his mind. She didn't need to see what was in there, the struggle he was dealing with. He was just biding his time until he could get her and Gia safely bonded.

Sure they could let walkers feed off them and be safe. Did they really think he didn't know about that? Neither could keep a secret from him. He was surprised it'd taken Winter so long to figure out. Sharing that extra energy with nightwalkers was just a temporary solution though. It took the edge off, but the only way to guarantee a hybrid was safe was the blood bond.

Winter would resist of course and he didn't blame her. Like Winter, he had no interest in bonding himself for eternity to someone he wasn't insanely in love with. Since that hadn't happened to him in the almost eighty years of his existence, he was pretty damned positive it wasn't going to now. He'd do the necessary thing when the time came. Take his own life. No way was he going to make them hunt him down.

He was good at what he did. Damned good. It would take Winter and Gia both to hunt him, to kill him. He wasn't doing that to them. The only other hybrid in the region who could have taken him was Benjamin, but Ben was no more. Even if he lived, and Dupree was fairly certain he did, he was rogue. Totally

gone to the evil they all took on. That evil might have given him the strength to take Dupree now, but he doubted it. When someone went rogue, they also tended to go stupid.

Pausing on the lawn he'd teleported to, he took a deep breath, ruthlessly squashing down the demon who surged up with the scent of so many others nearby. Worse, it scented the woman and wanted her. He had to be in control to walk in there, the same cold, heartless bastard everyone had come to know and be wary of.

The Order had given him a home, something to live and fight for, in a time of his life when he'd desperately needed it. Young and orphaned, they'd become his family. He hadn't been allowed to go through the merging ceremony until he was twenty and it was one of the proudest moments of his life.

A scent came to him in the slight breeze. Baking bread. The barest hint of vanilla. That's why he watched over her. That's why he was going to jump at the chance to get her into the nightwalkers' house. Because she was like him. Taken in by the Order as a child, allowed to grow up knowing about all the evil things out there in the world and somehow maintaining her innocence. Half in his world and half out of it. He squeezed his eyes shut, struggling against the lie, against the urge to walk in there and snatch her up, carry her off somewhere he could not only keep her safe but all to himself.

No. He couldn't do that. He would see her safe, along with Gia and Winter, and then he would disappear. Take his own life. Because none of them

could really live with him, none of them could really live with the possessive, protective, wild need he had to keep them all to himself.

Especially her. Kara was light and sunshine and laughter and joy. He ignored the part of him that insisted she was also his. She didn't have any place in his world and he felt like an old lecher when he dreamt, when on rare occasions he allowed himself to imagine otherwise. She shouldn't be subjected to the demands he would place on her.

He smelled blood and his demon roared to the surface. Damn it, he was losing control. He forced his hands to unclench, looked down at the damage his nails had done. He wiped the spots away on his jeans, focused and walked up the lawn to the back door. Bracing himself, he set his hand on the knob and pushed it open.

Smells enveloped him. Hers first, that unique vanilla and spicy scent he could never quite rid himself of. Bread baking. Other men. He barely restrained the snarl. The young males always hovered around her. All the more reason to get her into the nightwalkers' house. He wouldn't have to worry about that anymore.

As always, Kara sensed his presence before he announced himself, and she rushed from the counter where she was rolling out dough with a smile. He caught her up in his embrace. Didn't have a choice did he? And took the opportunity to glare around the room at all her young hopefuls. *None* of them were worthy and as long as he was able he'd ensure she was free of them. It didn't have anything to do with him wanting her for himself. He knew better than to give in to that

foolish wish. She pressed a kiss against his neck before pulling back, her eyes worried.

He ran a hand down her shoulder to her elbow, the only touch he ever allowed himself, the only intimacy he ever allowed himself. Sensing his withdrawal, she backed away and he immediately pulled back, made sure all his shields were in place. Walking to the oven, she grabbed a mitt and opened it, pulling out a fresh loaf of bread. When she turned, her eyes were still clouded with concern.

“What’s going on, Dupree? Can you tell me anything?”

He shook his head. She knew he wouldn’t. “Nothing to tell. I did find a place for you though. Get your things and I’ll take you.”

She wasn’t demon-bonded, but he had the unique ability of being able to teleport people with him and he had every intention of getting her out of there ASAP. Tilting her head to one side, she studied him and he sighed, knowing she was going to argue.

“I can’t leave. I can’t run and hide. Dupree, you know that better than anyone.”

He did. She’d been training for years, since she was a child, waiting to reach Ben’s arbitrary age of twenty-five to bond her soul with a demon’s. In this one instance, he agreed with his former Commander. He didn’t want Kara taking that on. Didn’t want her soul endangered as the rest of them were.

“You won’t be running or hiding. You’ll be using your skills to the best of your ability.”

Suspicious, she narrowed her eyes. “And how is that?”

He had to tread carefully. He didn't have a problem just snatching her up and taking her, but he didn't want to lose her trust.

"We need someone who can take care of herself. But also who can cook."

Her eyes widened, but more with outrage than surprise. "You want me to be someone's cook?"

"You're the best and personally, I'd like to eat well while I'm stuck living with the nightwalkers. Not much consolation, is it? But it'll have to do."

She tilted her head to one side and studied him and, not for the first time, he wished he could read her. Why couldn't he read her? He wasn't much of a telepath, but he read others' emotions easily and he'd never had a problem getting into a human's mind. Except for hers. Her mind was closed to him.

"You're staying with nightwalkers?"

"Yep. And Winter and Gia."

He couldn't read her mind, but he could see the interest on her face. He grinned. "Come on, sweetheart, you know you want to."

She still hesitated. He appealed to the chef that lurked in her soul.

"You'll *love* the kitchen. Granite counters. Stainless steel appliances. Gas stove."

She still held back and he did what he'd always promised himself he wouldn't, used the physical attraction between them to push her. Stepping forward, he lifted his hand to her jaw, spread his fingers and rested his palm against her throat. Her heart thumped, quickly, irregularly and his tried to match it. *She*

*should be mine.* He ruthlessly repressed that inner voice.

“Not fair,” she whispered.

“Who said I was fair?” he responded just as softly. “I need to know you’re safe, Kara.”

It was a low blow and he knew it, but he didn’t care. He had to know he’d be leaving her safe, leaving her secure and he refused to examine his reasons why. She saw something in his eyes, on his face. She always did, was the only one he couldn’t hide from. Eventually, she nodded.

“Okay. I’ll get my things.”

He held his breath as she left the kitchen, held his breath until she returned with a duffle bag swung over her shoulder. He took it from her, wrapped his arms around her shoulders and visualized the foyer at the nightwalker mansion.

Then they were there.

He had no idea where to put her, no idea which room was empty. Thank God, a woman poked her head out of the office, smiling when she saw them. She stepped out with a nightwalker pressed tightly up against her back. The one he’d met last night. Kadall. He nodded at the other male.

“This is Kara. She’s gonna take care of the cooking for a while.”

After a slight hesitation, Kadall grinned. “Cool.”

“She needs a room,” Dupree prodded.

“Of course.” He nodded at Kara. “I’m Kadall and this is Marelle. My mate. She’ll show you the rooms that are empty. Take whichever you like.”



Kara's smile was slow and hesitant, but genuine. "Thanks." She followed Marelle up the flight of stairs. Dupree didn't look away until she'd disappeared from sight.

"Your woman?"

Dupree jerked around at the voice, at the intrusive question. Made his gaze hard and ignored the exultant *yes* in his soul. "No. Just someone I look after."

Kadall arched his eyebrows but didn't comment. He only shrugged and turned back in to his office. Dupree stood frozen a moment, unsure what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go. Up after Kara seemed like a damned fine idea. But no, no. He wasn't subjecting her to his desires, to his demands she give over every ounce of herself to him. Wasn't. Doing. That.

She deserved a life. A real life that didn't include a control freak, half-demon monster. He knew she wouldn't thank him for making that decision for her, but he also knew it was for the best. She was sixty years younger than him. She'd learn in time. Without another word to the nightwalker, he concentrated and flashed out of the house, out of her range.

Away from temptation.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Winter struggled to hide her frustration. It was a long fruitless boring night with a broody, infuriating man dogging her trail. He wasn't speaking to her, not even mentally, and frankly that was just fine with her. He'd tried to order her back to his house an hour ago, had even threatened force if necessary. Winter snorted. The only way to get her there now, before dawn, would be to physically haul her there. She was exhausted, but wasn't budging on this. It was the principle of the thing.

She'd visited almost all the safe houses, paused in her approach to the last one now to gaze at the sky. It was still black, but sunrise wasn't far off, just another hour or so. Tilting her head to the side, she stepped up to the edge of the tree line that bordered the lawn in front of her. Nothing moved. No person. Not even the wind. Her scan was met with nothing. A knot formed like a heavy iron ball in the pit of her stomach. God, not again. Hopefully the house's residents had already relocated. Hopefully she wasn't going to find anything horrifying when she walked through that front door.

Marcus was right beside her when she stepped into the clearing, as she walked over to the small porch and hesitated before turning the knob. Then the smell hit her. Putrid. Death and sulfur. Just on the other side of the door. How had the demon avoided her scan?

*There's a demon here.*

She sensed rather than saw his nod. *At least two.*

Her demon, feeding off her rage, clamored to the surface, desperate for her to let it free. She restrained the urge just barely and promised the demon it would get its chance. She would get her chance. But the last time she'd rushed into a fight, she'd damned near got herself killed. Marcus relaxed marginally beside her, his relief evident. She rolled her eyes.

*I never make the same mistake twice.*

She felt his disagreement. He thought she was out of control, always reckless. Whatever. There wasn't time to argue the point now.

*We need to draw them out,* she whispered along the mental connection. No way in hell was she getting trapped inside.

*I don't think that will be necessary.* He grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of the way just as the door exploded outward. Four demons poured out. She didn't have time to wonder again how it was so many were working together. Spinning out of the way of one's sharp talons, she pulled her knives, rolled under it while stabbing upward. She grinned at his grunt of disbelief and spun around to meet the next attack. He fell as three new demons appeared in the yard. They stood between her and the house. She couldn't see Marcus.

*There're more,* Winter pointed out.

*Yes. We should retreat.*

She snarled her no, engaged another demon in the fight. He was a better fighter than the others, and though she heard Marcus yelling at her in her head, she tuned him out, concentrated on killing the new

demon. He was good, very good, and forced her to retreat across the yard, toward the house. Scowling, she realized he was trying to herd her and she jumped forward, got a lucky slash across his chest but immediately had to dodge a blow, which put her closer to the house.

With each move, each shift, she found herself nearer to the door. She started to feel a little desperate and then Marcus was by her side. He was bleeding from a cut on his arm and she hesitated a split-second seeing it. Time enough for the demon she'd been fighting to surge forward, to plunge the wicked-looking knife he carried upward, sloping toward her neck. Marcus wrenched her out of the way in time to save her from death, but not from all of the blade's fury.

The cut started at her collarbone and stretched diagonally down across her chest and over her belly. It burned and she growled when she realized she'd been poisoned again. Her demon howled its outrage and she let it take over, gave it free rein. She remembered from the last time that she only had a few seconds before the poison started to work, before she would slow. Before she got herself and Marcus killed.

She rolled forward, closer to the demon, slashing up with both her blades as she rose, following when he tried to retreat and regroup. She got lucky. He stumbled as she thrust, burying her knife in his throat.

Marcus didn't wait, didn't give her a chance to catch her breath. He grabbed her around the waist, shoving the image of his foyer into her brain, and

ordering her to teleport, forcing her to when she wasn't fast enough.

When they arrived, he released her so fast she was afraid he'd somehow been scalded. He stomped across the space, footsteps quick and angry, to the foot of the stairs before whirling around and coming back to her. He stood close, so close his clothing crinkled against hers. She held her breath, afraid to move, afraid to speak. He was livid and he wasn't hiding it. The walls bulged, breathed with the weight of his anger.

"Are you fucking crazy or just suicidal?"

She winced at the accusation, at his raised voice, but she didn't back down, not even when heads started poking around corners and outside of doors down the hall behind him. Not even when she felt the poison hit her bloodstream and she struggled not to sway against him.

"Shit," he muttered, sweeping her up in his arms before she could collapse. He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs and turned in to the office, laying her down on the couch after Luke vacated it.

She took a deep breath, ignoring the sudden cold when he released her and stepped away. She shivered. Scowling, he left the room but reappeared in seconds with a blanket that he covered her legs with. Closing her eyes, she let her mind float until the touch of his fingers against her skin jerked her back to attention. He lifted the bottom edge of her shirt.

"This has to come off. We need to clean that wound."

He waited though and it took her sluggish mind a minute to realize he was waiting for Luke, Kadall and

Gia to leave. She frowned. Where was Dupree? She didn't have to wonder long. She felt his energy rushing in before him. Marcus sighed but allowed himself to be pushed out of the way.

"Jesus, Winter. We can't leave you alone for a second, can we?"

Gentle hands fingered the bottom of her shirt and lifted it up. She felt everyone withdraw from the room but Marcus and Dupree. Marcus tensed as Dupree peeled it from her body. She opened her eyes to watch him. His back was ramrod straight, fists clenched at his sides, but he didn't interfere. She smiled at him while Dupree ripped the collar open so she could slide her arms free rather than try to pull it over her head.

A knock sounded on the door but it was pushed open without waiting for permission. Kara grinned at her as she came in with a tray containing a bowl of water and gauze.

"Hey, Commander."

"Kara."

Winter cocked an eyebrow at Dupree, but he didn't explain, ignored her just as she suspected he would. She didn't push him. He tried to pretend Kara was a baby sister, but Winter had seen the way he looked at the young woman when he thought no one was watching. If she was staying in the house maybe the proximity to her would help thaw him out a little, maybe he'd realize it wasn't brotherly affection he felt for her at all.

Kara set the tray on the floor and Marcus nudged Dupree out of the way. Then he sat on the edge of the sofa and dipped a washcloth in the water. He started at

her collarbone and gently began washing the blood away.

“Leave us,” he said quietly. Over his shoulder she saw Dupree stiffen, but the hybrid let Kara tug him out of the room. The door closed with a soft snick, and Marcus used his mind to turn the lock with a resounding click.

“You are in so much trouble, Winter.”

Her heart stumbled at the lightly spoken words, at the sensual promise in his tone. He followed the cut down, stopping over the inside swell of her breast. He rinsed the cloth and returned to the last place he’d touched her. Going slowly he moved it down her body, removing every trace of blood in its path.

“It’s not too deep. No stitches required.”

“Good,” she whispered, feeling her eyelids droop, feeling her mind shut down. She was distantly aware of being covered to her chin, of his low command to sleep. Like she was in any position to argue?

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Marcus found the others, plus the two newcomers he'd sensed when they arrived, gathered in the kitchen. The room fell silent as he entered. Kadall, Marelle, Luke, Gia and a woman he didn't know sat around the table.

The other woman, the pixie-cute girl who'd brought in the first-aid supplies stood stirring something that smelled divine at the stove, while Dupree stood a few feet away in a dark corner watching her. He met Marcus's gaze briefly, nodded, then turned his attention back to the woman. Dupree may not have claimed her, but it was obvious she was his woman.

Marcus grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and went to the table. Spinning a chair around, he sat, leaned his forearms over the seat back and met his brother's gaze.

"Two guests." Luke grinned and nodded toward the stove. "That's Kara. And this," he added, turning to the other woman, "is Nadia."

"Nadia's our senior historian," Gia interjected. "Luke said she could take over the dining room."

He smiled, hoping to put her at ease. Gia radiated tension, her body strummed tightly and her eyes were pinched. Luke's hand rested on the nape of her neck and she froze for a second when he squeezed before finally relaxing a little.



Dupree stepped closer to the table but didn't sit down. "What happened tonight?"

Marcus took a firm grip on his power as his anger rose again. He was going to wring Winter's neck when she was healed. "We were checking the safe houses. There were demons at the last one."

Kara and Marelle both reacted, one with a gasp, the other turning from the stove and coming closer to hear.

"How many?" Luke asked.

"Four, but as soon as we killed them four more teleported in. The one that cut her was trying to get her closer to the house. We couldn't get in to see what kind of trap they had. We barely got out of there as it was."

"We need to check it out," Dupree said.

Marcus nodded. "Tomorrow." He gestured to the shuttered windows. "Sun will rise soon."

Dupree shrugged, but there was nothing casual in his eyes when he answered. "I don't have that problem."

Marcus shook his head. "Bad idea." He could see his words didn't affect the hybrid male's decision to go on his own and he struggled for a way to keep him at the house. He wasn't a nightwalker, so Marcus couldn't order him to stay but he knew Winter would be very displeased if he let Dupree leave. In the end, he needn't have worried.

"I'm going with you," Kara said.

Dupree's expression didn't shift a fraction. "No you aren't. You're staying here where I know you're safe."

She set her hands on her hips and turned to fully face him. "I'm twenty-four, Dupree. I can take care of myself. Hell, you made sure of that."

"Forget it, Kara. You're staying here."

"Don't count on it." She narrowed her eyes. "And when Winter wakes up I'm going to ask her to lift Benjamin's edict."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop twenty degrees and it was a second before Marcus realized the surge of power he felt came from Dupree. He stood slowly, watching as the hybrid got himself back under control. His hands clenched and unclenched in a steady rhythm as he met Marcus's gaze.

"She's only human. Don't let her leave," Dupree ordered.

Then Dupree was gone, the young woman he'd left behind loudly cursing his name as the air shimmered where he'd stood. She stomped to the stove, turned off a burner and moved the stew pot to a cold burner. When she started to leave the room, Gia stopped her.

"Don't even think about it, Kara."

The young woman looked at her in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding!"

Gia shook her head.

"I'm not even a member of the Order, remember?" she asked bitterly.

A calculating look entered Gia's eyes. "But your petition to join is long-standing. Disobey Dupree's order and I'll see that it's never approved."

"You'd deny my application?"

"How serious are you really? You haven't made the appointment with the priest yet."

“Priest?” he interrupted.

“Everyone who joins has to go to counseling with the priest first,” Gia answered, but he wasn’t sure she meant to. She was focused on Kara, gave her a long and hard look until the other woman cast her eyes down.

“I was hoping to convince Dupree it’s the right thing for me first, but yes I am serious,” she said with aggravation. “You’d really deny my application?”

“I don’t have to deny it to keep you in limbo for years.”

“Fine,” she snapped. “I withdraw it then. If you have that kind of influence so does Dupree and he’ll never let me create the bond if he can stop it.”

Gia shrugged. “Your choice, of course.” Then she grinned. “I wouldn’t go that far if I were you though.”

Kara frowned. “Why?”

“Dupree has better control than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

Knowledge lit the young woman’s eyes. “And I’m the only one who makes him lose it.”

Marcus almost felt sorry for Dupree. The hybrid male obviously loved this petite woman so much he wouldn’t allow her to go through the same demon bonding he had, wouldn’t let her risk her soul in the same way his was endangered. But Dupree was trying to deny his feelings for her, trying to repress the emotions Kara obviously reciprocated. And Gia had just handed her a powerful weapon in that very private fight. Kara now knew she tested Dupree’s control, and a man on the edge of control sometimes made decisions he’d sworn to himself he’d never make. Like

allowing his woman to bond with a demon. Or bonding with her himself to stop it.

“Yeah. But, Kara, the time will come when you have to decide which you want more. To be a full member of the Order or Dupree. Dupree...let’s just say you can’t have both. But either one of those choices will require you being able to take orders.”

The girl was quiet now, thoughtful. Marcus watched her face, saw the moment she realized the entire conversation with Gia had been a test over whether she could follow orders. It was an inside look into how the Order was run that he found fascinating.

“I’m going to go rest for a while. It’s been a long night.” Kara pointed at the stove. “Chili’s done.”

“Well, that was interesting,” the woman called Nadia said a few minutes after Kara left the room. She grinned at Gia. “And here I was thinking I knew everyone’s secrets.”

“You don’t know this one either,” Gia responded dryly.

“You got it.” Nadia nodded. “No problem.”

Sighing, Gia stood and walked to the cabinets. “No, there are plenty of other problems without borrowing that one.”

She opened two before she found the bowls and Marcus gave Luke a mental slap. Instead of assisting his woman, he’d been staring at her ass. With a rueful grin and a mental shrug, Luke stood and went to help her reach the bowls that were on a shelf higher than her reach.

While Gia and Luke took care of ladling out dinner, Marcus studied the other woman. Like all the female

members of the Order she wore a confident, competent air. Her hair curled wildly around her shoulders, brown like her eyes. Pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. He guessed she'd been around thirty when she'd undergone the bonding ceremony, but had no way of knowing how many years ago that was. Long enough that she was comfortable in her own skin, comfortable with her position whatever it was. Historian, Gia said.

"Why am I giving over my dining room to you?"

She looked to Gia, whose nod was so slight he almost missed it, before she answered. Disciplined. He could respect discipline even if it rankled that she didn't understand he was the final authority in this house.

"I'll be looking for anything I can find in the old scrolls and books on warlords. I need some space, really just a table big enough to spread out."

"Someplace secure," Gia added, setting bowls on the table.

"You don't think your offices are?"

She pressed her lips together, obviously debating how much to tell him. "The lab is. The rest of the building?" She shrugged. "They found a safe house. I have to assume nothing is secure."

He was puzzled at their structure. He knew Gia and Dupree were Winter's top lieutenants, but he'd assumed Dupree was the one in charge of security and patrols while Gia handled the business end of things.

She hesitated so long he didn't think she was going to explain. No matter. He'd get it out of Winter in due time.

“Physical security, taking care of the business assets...I handle that stuff.”

He nodded. “And Dupree runs the patrols?”

“And most of the training.”

He returned his gaze to Nadia. “And how does one become an Order historian?”

She grinned. “Once upon a time, a long time ago, I was a history professor.”

“Nadia is one of the civilian members of the Order.”

“And you aren’t?” Luke asked. Marcus had assumed the same thing since it appeared Gia was an administrator.

“No.” Her smile was fierce and made it clear his brother better watch his back.

“Giving away trade secrets?” Winter’s voice was joking, but raw. He jumped from his chair and practically ran to where she leaned against the doorframe.

“You should be lying down.”

He scowled. He’d left her asleep on the couch in his office. She shouldn’t be functioning on any kind of conscious level for days with that damned poison in her veins. She only shrugged and moved to step around him, but she swayed and he caught her, carried her to his seat at the table. He flipped it around and sat with her in his lap. Sighing, she leaned her head back a moment, turned her face to kiss his throat. His body threatened to seize up. It was the first open affection she’d shown him, but it was over too soon. Looking up, she met Gia’s gaze across the table.

"This shouldn't be possible," the other woman said, frowning.

"It shouldn't. But it is. Maybe you build an immunity? Or maybe there wasn't a lot of poison on the blade." Winter shrugged again. "I'm just glad I'm not incapacitated."

But she was exhausted, worn nearly to the end of her endurance. He wasn't going to allow this chitchat to go on much longer. She needed to be in bed.

"Is that Kara's chili?" She sniffed the bowl in front of her. His bowl. He had a sudden nearly overwhelming desire to feed her.

"Yep. She's upstairs."

Winter shifted in his arms as she reached for one of the spoons in the middle of the table, and he saw her cock an eyebrow as she watched Gia.

"Dupree?"

"Gone."

"Wonderful," she added sarcastically but then groaned when she took her first bite from the dish. "At least we'll eat well."

Gia snickered. "Yeah. Never mind the heartburn, right?"

Winter didn't respond, but he felt her laughing agreement.

"Kara's going to ask you to lift Ben's edict."

That got her attention and she lifted her head in surprise.

*What's the edict?*

Winter should be used to him showing up in her head by now. Crap. Sitting on his lap, his warmth and

strength seeping into her, she found him impossible to resist.

*We used to allow twenty-year-olds to go through the bonding. Benjamin thought that was a bad idea. Thought you couldn't really know your own mind at that age. So he refused to let anyone in his territory under twenty-five create the bond.*

"What did you tell her?"

"Told her I could hold up her application indefinitely."

Winter raised her eyebrows again. "I missed something I take it?"

Gia shrugged. "Kara. Dupree. The usual."

"Uh huh."

Gia looked over, held her gaze. "Dupree is never gonna let her do it, Winter."

She felt the walls closing in on her even though they were talking about someone else. "He doesn't get to make that choice. He doesn't have any rights over her. And she's an adult."

Gia watched her a long moment and Winter felt her struggle, part of her even shared it. Part of her cringed knowing this young vibrant woman would willingly tie part of her soul to a demon. But the other part, the part that was responsible for keeping everyone safe and fighting off the demons, knew she needed every soldier she could get.

"Dupree will get over it," she added. He'd be good and pissed, but if he'd really wanted to change what was virtually an assured outcome he should have acted years ago.

"So are you lifting the edict?"



She seriously considered it. They'd already discussed the need to up their recruitment efforts, especially since they'd lost so many in the last few days. But Ben's reasons for the edict were still sound and she still agreed with them. A few months, in this case at least, wouldn't make a difference.

"No. If there's an arbitrary age minimum, twenty-five is just as good as any other."

Gia nodded and Winter sensed her relief. Probably because she didn't want to be the one to deal with Dupree if Kara was allowed to bond sooner than he expected. She sighed. He was going to have to get used to the idea pretty fast. Kara's birthday was only a few months off.

The table fell silent. Well, enough of the depressing shit. She almost snorted. Like it all wasn't depressing at this point? She needed some good news pretty damned soon. Looking up she pinned Nadia with her gaze.

"You have anything useful yet?"

She frowned, shook her head. "No, Commander. I'm sorry. It's a lot to go through. There were some—" she paused half a second, "—interesting things in the vault."

Winter arched an eyebrow at the expression on Nadia's face, a mixture of hope and reluctance. "Interesting how?"

"I haven't had a chance to check yet, but I think we have some of the banned texts."

Some of the early records were forbidden to Order members. Winter was surprised Ben had any, and they probably weren't the secret texts.

“Will they help?”

“I won’t know until I read them.”

“I don’t have to emphasize the need for haste, I’m sure,” she muttered dryly, but everyone heard her. There were soft chuckles around the table.

“Of course not,” Nadia answered.

“Good.” She covered a yawn with her fist, met Gia’s and Nadia’s gazes. “Get a few hours sleep. We’ll meet again in the afternoon.”

She carried her bowl to the sink and rinsed it out, aware of Marcus’s eyes on her every move. She had no idea what to do about him and right now wasn’t in the frame of mind to even attempt it. She’d never known demons to use their poison on knives, wasn’t sure what to make of one doing so now. It seemed to go along with the powerful warlord theory, a demon smart enough to adapt, and that worried her.

She left the room without speaking, letting thoughts just flit through her mind and sift naturally. Was the poison on the knife diluted or had she built up some kind of immunity? The only way to test that would be to take another dose from the same source again, and she wasn’t keen on that idea.

But her gut said she was building an immunity. She’d felt the poison on the blade as it sliced her skin, felt it start to slow her down, start to dull her mind and senses, but unlike the last time she’d been able to fight it off long enough to teleport out. Well, okay, to be honest if Marcus hadn’t been there, she might not have been able to get out. He’d held her power together when it had wanted to shut down.

And it had shut down, but only briefly. Not nearly as long as the last time, not nearly as long as a full dose should have put her out.

She pushed open the door to his room, not even bothering to fight the urge to cling to him. She could feel him behind her. Worried. Pissed as hell. Fighting didn't seem worth the energy. Unbuckling her weapon belts, she put them on top of the dresser careful to set them down gently, no clanging. No noise. No scratching old expensive-looking furniture.

Her head was pounding its disapproval. The last few days of little sleep and the most recent abuse, the new dose of demon poison, were making themselves known. She sat on the edge of the bed, unzipped and pulled off her boots, before letting herself fall back without removing her clothes. She closed her eyes, covered them with her hand against the glare from the overhead light that still got in.

"Winter."

She sighed, but didn't budge, didn't uncover her eyes. "Could we do this tomorrow? I know you want to ream me out, but I'm just not up for it right now."

The bed dipped beside her.

"You almost got yourself killed tonight. Again. We have to talk about this reckless streak of yours."

The light seeping through her fingers disappeared and she turned her head, lowering her hand. "Would you accept an 'I'm sorry'?"

He watched her, eyes tracing every line of her body, and he sounded distracted, not focused on what was supposed to be an argument. "No."

"How did I know you'd say that?"

He sat and tugged her up too, carefully pulling the shirt she'd found in the office over her head. His gaze was hot, carnal. It seemed almost a physical stroke over her skin. With gentle fingers he traced the edge of the bandage crossing her body.

"Does it hurt?"

Like a bitch. But the awakening in her body more than made up for it. "A little."

He smiled. "Liar."

She shrugged. She didn't want to argue; she wanted him to fulfill the promise his eyes were making. He got out of bed and stripped while she shimmied out of the rest of her clothes, but when he rejoined her he did nothing but gather her close. She rested her head on his chest and gradually relaxed into sleep as he rubbed her back in gentle strokes.

She sighed contentedly. She could get used to this.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Winter knew it was a dream, knew this dream and smiled as she opened her eyes. She saw the white marble columns of the courtyard Marcus dragged her to in sleep when she was defenseless. But it wasn't Marcus she faced when she turned.

"David?"

She could have sobbed. She'd looked for him in her dreams in the early years, but she wasn't a dream walker. It wasn't one of her skills. She only shared Marcus's dreams because he was able to pull her in. This, the much beloved face before her, was nothing more than her subconscious at work.

He smiled. "Are you sure about that, Victoria?"

Startled at the use of the name she hadn't heard in years, hadn't associated as her own in decades, she took a step forward, cocking her head to the side to study the apparition. Her memory was stellar. He looked just as he had the last time she'd seen him. Well, before the demons had got to him. He was tall and broad, still sporting the buzz cut that had been so popular in the fifties. She'd often teased that he kept it so short to disguise the fact he was going prematurely bald. He'd just laugh at her and tell her she liked it.

"Nothing to say? That's not like you," the dream David joked.

"Well, it's not every day your dead husband visits you in a dream."

He stepped closer and lifted his hand, drew one finger down the side of her face before cupping it with his whole hand. She turned in to the caress, the tactile sensation so real she wondered if maybe he was really there. No. Impossible.

"Anything's possible," he whispered, kissing her forehead. "I should have come sooner, but I hoped you'd move on without a push in the right direction."

She frowned. "What direction? What are you talking about?"

Great. Even her dream life was filled with riddles and mystery.

He cocked an eyebrow. "The nightwalker? Marcus? It's time to let me go, sweetheart."

She jerked away. "If this is some kind of trick I don't appreciate it."

It was cruel to toy with her like this. She'd kill Marcus. Dream David sighed.

"It's really me, Victoria. Your mind is strong enough to sense any subterfuge."

Jesus. He was right. Even asleep no one could mess with her mind this badly, so it all was just a dream, just a long-gone wish. She fought the urge to explain to David why she fought the connection she felt with Marcus, why she tried to keep him alive in her heart.

"I can't," she whispered. Couldn't take that risk again, couldn't endanger anyone else anymore than could be helped. Because the truth was it was her fault. The demon who'd killed David had been stalking her and he got in the way.

"Do you want forgiveness? I absolve you of the guilt you feel, Victoria."

This time she did sob and choked on the sound. He moved forward and brought her into the circle of his arms. A comforting embrace, a shoulder she'd known she could count on.

"It wasn't your fault," he whispered. "It wasn't."

She didn't agree, but she nodded, clinging to him as she felt herself beginning to wake.

"Let it go, sweetheart," he said, the last words she heard before he disappeared. She had the heart-rending feeling she'd never see him again. The dream had been a one-time deal.

She slept the rest of the day undisturbed. When she woke, she felt lighter. She lay quiet for several minutes, unmoving, mentally examining her body for signs of trouble but she couldn't find anything wrong. Had the dream David lightened the crushing guilt she always carried?

Marcus's arm tightened around her stomach. "You're thinking of another man in my bed," he growled.

She cracked a smile. He knew he had no competition. He'd made damned sure of it. "My husband. He came to me in a dream last night."

Marcus rolled on top of her, nudging her legs apart so his hips, his erection nestled at the juncture between her thighs. He searched her face. Serious.

"And what did he have to say?"

Why had she told him that? And how should she respond to his question? She was careful to keep her thoughts private and could see that displeased him. She had to fight the urge to reach up and smooth the worry lines from his forehead.

“He said he forgives me. And I need to move on,” she whispered, surprised at her honesty.

If possible Marcus got even more still, more watchful. Finally he answered, as he pushed inside her, her sex hot and wet and welcoming. “He’s right.”

She gasped as he moved deeper, grabbed his shoulders and dug her fingernails into his flesh as he withdrew and plunged back in. Deep. So deep she thought he might touch her heart.

“Maybe.”

Never. It wasn’t possible, was it? Her heart belonged to another, in the past.

*No, Winter, it’s mine. You just haven’t figured it out yet.*

She couldn’t argue with him when he was moving so deeply, so commandingly inside her, stroking her higher and higher. Winding her tighter and tighter. He quickly had her riding the edge of orgasm and with one squeeze of his fingers on her clit, pushed her over.

She wasn’t sure if she came with her whole body or if it spread through her whole body, and she didn’t care. She just wanted it to never end. He gave her her wish. Still moving inside her, but slowing his strokes, he rolled to his side bringing her along so they faced each other. He kept one hand on her lower back holding her in place for his thrusts as he dipped his head to her breasts.

He dropped soft kisses around the plumpness, avoiding her nipple as he switched to the other breast. She thought she’d go mad with anticipation and exploded with a second orgasm when he took one



nipple between his teeth, humming *mmm* as he did. His thrusts grew stronger, roughened.

*Look at me.*

She looked up, knowing he wanted to hold her gaze as he came, wanted her to see the intensity he felt. What she saw made her catch her breath. The depth of his need, his desire was staggering, but there was also possession and tenderness and something so raw and earthy she couldn't name it. Didn't dare try. It was too much and her mind shied away from it, from the sudden fear she couldn't escape him. Ever.

*No. There's no escape.*

She didn't argue, didn't worry over his picking up the stray thought because she was coming again and she knew he was right along for the ride when she flew apart.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Marcus lay back against the pillows and tried to ignore the fact that Winter was only a wall away and naked under a stream of water. She needed a little bit of space. Not much because if he allowed her, she'd run with it. He grinned. Life would never be boring again. He could live without the demon fighting, not that he expected to be able to get her to retire from the Order for a long time to come. It was too much a part of her, the identity she'd forged for herself after her husband's murder.

Crossing his arms under his head, he stared at the ceiling and pondered his next move. What was she ready for? How far could he push her? The dream might be a good sign. It was possible sometimes to speak to the dead in the twilight realm of dreams, but since she wasn't a dream walker she shouldn't be able to call them to her. If that was the case, then the dream came from her subconscious nudging her to step into a new future, a future not tied to a dead man's memory. Which meant she was more ready than she thought to move forward. He just had to convince the conscious part of her brain.

The water turned off and he imagined her in the spacious bathroom drying off, wiping stray drops of water from her body. He'd be happy to do that for her. With his tongue. Standing, his cock rock-hard again, he went to the door and rested his palm against it a

moment as he took a steadying breath before pushing it open.

She stood in front of the counter with a large towel wrapped around her torso. With another she patted her hair dry, the heavy mass hanging long and loose to her waist. He stepped up behind her and leaned over, nuzzling her neck and taking in her scent. God, he loved the fresh woman smell of her. That maddening, elusive scent that was just for him. She poked an elbow against his stomach. Not hard enough to hurt but enough to get his attention. He lifted his head and met her gaze in the mirror.

“No time for playing. I have work to do.”

He groaned. Why did he get stuck with such a stubborn mate, one who couldn’t even find a few stolen moments to play? She narrowed her eyes.

“You definitely aren’t stuck with me. Feel free to leave any time you like.”

He snorted as he stepped into the shower, turned the water on and adjusted the spray higher. Like leaving was an option?

*You’re my mate. You can’t walk away from that.*

*So you say. I’m not buying. I’m still half human, remember?*

He didn’t respond. He’d convince her eventually. When she moved into the other room and dressed, he hurried to finish the shower afraid she’d try to sneak out again. He was relieved when she only went downstairs to the kitchen. He was right behind her and damned glad she’d insisted on working when he walked in.

One of the new hybrid guests had cooked breakfast. He struggled to remember her name as she handed him a plate of bacon and eggs. He smiled.

“Thanks, Kara.”

They ate in silence and Luke, his expression surly, wandered in as they finished. None of the others were in sight, but Marcus sensed everyone in the house except Dupree.

*Problems?* he asked his brother privately.

*Nothing I can't handle.*

Which meant it had to do with the woman more than likely. What were the odds they'd both found mates among the hybrids where no one had ever thought to look before? It might explain their dwindling numbers over the past few centuries, the seclusion they'd forced on themselves, and a situation they'd kept as quiet as possible. How many mates had been lost because they hadn't thought to look outside their own species? The lupines weren't suffering the same fate; they'd always found some of their mates among the humans and hybrids. Once the current situation was resolved he'd have to look more closely at the problem and possible solutions.

Gia came in as Winter was rinsing her plate in the sink and Luke shifted in his chair, the movement so slight it was hardly noticeable but Marcus felt the shift of watchfulness, alertness in his brother.

The woman had a phone tucked under her ear and was writing on a clipboard. Still listening to whoever was on the other end of the phone, she handed the board to Winter who read it quickly before handing it

back. Unclipping her phone from her belt, she stepped out of the room.

He followed her into the hall and watched as she scrolled through the address book, finally finding the number she wanted. After a deep breath that lifted her breasts in a way that made his mouth water, she pressed the connect button and lifted the phone to her ear.

He found an out-of-the-way place to lean against the wall while she paced and wondered what the hell was going on now.

“Hey. It’s Winter.”

She made a face at the long response, but remained quiet. He stood too far away to hear the other side of the conversation. He could have taken it from her mind but wanted her to share the information on her own.

“It’s under control...No, that won’t be necessary...Um, that’s under control too...Yes, sir...Of course...I’ll keep you posted.”

She closed the phone with a loud angry pop at the same time Gia exited the kitchen, Luke right on her heels.

“He’s pissed.”

“You think?” Winter answered sarcastically then shoved a hand through her hair. “Sorry. Not your fault.”

The air shimmered near the door as someone teleported in. He went on alert until he realized who it was, but didn’t entirely relax then either.

Gia shrugged. “It is. I didn’t think to tell Timothy not to forward the report to the council.”

“Why would you?” Dupree asked with an arched eyebrow as he approached. “Since when do we leave them out of the loop?”

“Since things got weird,” Winter muttered. Marcus almost laughed. When had they not been strange?

Dupree stopped, crossing his arms over his chest. “That’s not exactly unusual.” His gaze was sharp as he continued to watch her. “What else happened?”

Winter looked at Gia who removed a page from her clipboard and handed it to the male hybrid. Marcus watched understanding flash over the man’s face, but refused to ask the question. Winter had to learn to trust him, to be forthcoming with him.

“So it is Ben,” Dupree said.

Winter shrugged one shoulder and kept her expression neutral but he felt her confusion and sorrow. And her determination. He fisted his hands. Damn it, it was killing him not asking. Luke saved him the trouble.

“What’s going on?”

Dupree handed the piece of paper to him and his brother perused it quickly while Dupree spoke. “Janet, Ben’s mate, was apparently dead before the attack. For several days.”

Meaning there had been time for Ben to lose control, to give in to the demon who shared his soul. Winter wrapped her arms around her waist and paced around the foyer. He wanted to go to her, to gather her in his arms and comfort her, but knew she would rebuff the move, knew she didn’t want to appear weak in front of the others. He knew she was questioning her own strength even though she’d discovered how to

keep her thoughts private. He'd been in her head enough to know how she worked. She finally stopped moving, but when she looked around the room her gaze only included Gia and Dupree.

"We have to find him."

There was a long deep silence.

"I'll find him," Dupree said.

"You aren't surprised," Winter answered, tilting her head to one side as if waiting for an answer to a question.

"No." He shook his head. "All the scenes smelled...off. You would have realized it if you weren't so distracted." He jerked a nod toward Marcus but she ignored the implication. He added softly, "I know you don't want to accept it. To believe it. I don't either, but it could happen to any of us."

"It just doesn't make any sense," she whispered.

"How did she die?" he asked Dupree, whose face grew harsh, cold and brutal.

"Something ripped her throat out."

He was shocked not so much at the cause of death but the delivery. "That was the killing blow?"

Dupree ground his back teeth together before answering. "There were other signs of injury on her. Demon claws."

No chance of it being an out-of-control lupine then and that wasn't how nightwalkers killed. Mitchell was no doubt grateful for that. He certainly was. The room was quiet, everyone deep in thought. Winter had withdrawn to a place in her mind he couldn't follow. When she spoke he had the overwhelming urge to grab

her up and run, hide her and contain her somewhere in the world she'd never escape and never be in danger.

"We can find him." She spoke to Dupree. "Gia will stay here."

Dupree shook his head. "No point in both of us going."

She huffed. "Bullshit. Both of us or no one. This is *not* a suicide run, Dupree."

They exchanged a long look Marcus couldn't even begin to unravel and finally the hybrid nodded. "Okay," he said.

"Good." She took a deep breath and turned to him. "I'm hunting with Dupree tonight. We can move fast and efficiently together. You can reach me if I send a location, right? If you stay connected to me?"

There was no way he was letting her go alone. "I could. But I'm going with you."

"Me too," Gia said.

"No," Winter answered her friend. "I need you here. I need to know what's in those histories, what we're facing. Even if Ben's gone rogue, this new incursion started long before that. His turning just escalated something that was already happening."

Gia opened her mouth to argue but Winter interrupted her. "No. You're better at this stuff than the rest of us." She cast an apologetic glance at the hybrid historian. "Sorry, Nadia."

She shrugged. "It's true. Gia's been at it longer."

"There ya go," Winter said then turned to Dupree. "How long until nightfall?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Okay. What's your plan?"



Dupree studied her as if trying to decide how serious she was, if he could talk her out of it. Marcus was joined to her. He could have advised the man to not waste his breath, but he held his counsel, hoping maybe her friends could convince her to stay in safety when he couldn't. No such luck.

"They won't go back to the safe houses."

"No," she agreed.

"But maybe they'll keep a watch on Ben's place."

"Maybe."

"If they do and we show up, if you show up, they'll come in."

"Maybe. But how many do they have? And even if we call in everyone we can are we leaving ourselves open somewhere else?"

Dupree shook his head. "I don't think this is that complicated. Not yet."

"Maybe." She stood facing Dupree, hands on her hips, and Marcus sensed him accepting Winter's lead, backing down. "We need intel more than anything right now."

"I have the patrol reports from last night, and the quad ran patrols all day today, too," Gia said, frowning. "Those just include ours and neutral territory. I wonder if Mitchell will give us access to his stuff?"

He straightened. He didn't want the lupine alpha anywhere near Winter. He'd backed off, but he still wanted her, still felt like he had a prior claim on her friendship if nothing else. He stared down at her, struggling with his own nature. Her pale blond hair

hung loose, framing her face and giving it a softer look but it couldn't disguise the determination in her eyes.

Winter couldn't say why she shifted closer to Marcus, why she didn't resist the instinct to assure him Mitchell wasn't a threat. He should be a threat, damn it. Her hand rested against Marcus's thigh, rigidly muscled, tense.

"Task force, remember? We're all supposed to be sharing information."

She watched his internal struggle flash across his face, watched him fight his dominant instincts, and was pleased when logic seemed to win.

"Call him," he said.

She smiled then felt a blush spread up her neck at the sudden flash of memory, of him moving in her, loving her slowly and completely. He arched an eyebrow, crowded closer to her, and she groaned mentally.

*Later, baby. I promise.*

She couldn't even blame him for putting the image in her mind or the way her body revved up at his proximity. That was all the product of her memory, her imagination. God, she had to get a grip on her libido. With any luck and a lot of skill, she'd be able to indulge it later.

While she'd been lost in her thoughts, Gia had been on the phone. Now she flipped it closed.

"Mitchell and Baron are on the way. Plus the quad."

"Good," she answered and resigned herself to waiting.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Benjamin hid in the trees careful to match his scent and smell to the animals lurking nearby. It wasn't difficult, just required concentration, a skill he'd developed and nurtured over the years. He didn't know any who could match him. He hated hiding, wanted to barge in, search and destroy and gorge on living blood. But he waited instead, forcing patience on a creature who was unaccustomed to it.

A lupine passed nearby, pausing as if he realized something was not quite right in this section of patrolled land near their lair. Slowly, carefully, Benjamin let his power swell a little but continued to force it inward instead of out. He laid a cloak of invisibility over himself, all the while keeping his scent that of the boar a few feet away. The lupine passed by.

He kept a dam on the satisfaction that surged through him, not willing to give himself away when he was so close. He'd discovered something fascinating a few days ago and now proved his theory was correct. When he'd consumed the first hybrid's heart and brain, he'd felt his power grow, felt it expand. By the end of the evening he'd suspected he'd not only taken the hybrid's soul, but his skills.

When a human merged his soul with a demon's, he never knew what powers he'd receive. Strength and long life, of course. Some immunity against the demon

poison. Everyone seemed to get teleporting too. But everything else was a crap shoot. Invisibility had never been a skill of his, but he knew who it had belonged to and he'd taken it for his own.

Mitchell and Baron stepped out of the front door of the house that fronted the pack's lair and walked to a waiting car. Carefully, he eased out of the foliage he'd been hiding in and hurried to the car he'd hidden near the road. He should have thought of this plan earlier. The hybrids had gone underground, weren't likely to return to anyplace he knew, but eventually Winter would either go to Mitchell or he'd come to her. He sneered. Look what friendship got you. Caught in a trap that was inescapable. And the bitch kept escaping his traps. It was infuriating, the rage now honed to a razor-sharp edge. He needed her. Her heart. Her brain. Her strength.

He reached the hidden automobile and waited for the lupines to pass him on the road. When they did, he waited, gave them time to get far enough ahead so he could still follow but without being seen. They stayed on the country road until it bisected a four-lane highway where they turned left, headed north. He followed, banged his fist against the steering wheel thirty minutes later when they turned into the lane that led to the nightwalker Lord's house.

The demons who'd survived last night had claimed the man fighting alongside her was a nightwalker, but he'd discounted it. Nightwalkers didn't work with anyone, didn't know the first thing about cooperation. It was clear something had changed and that didn't bode well for him.

He found a place to turn the car around and headed back into Camden to plan, not fully trusting his abilities, especially the new ones, to conceal him on walker land. How to deal with this new development? He growled, low and menacing and unheard in the confines of the car. He'd screwed himself and he knew it.

Months ago when he'd been preparing to retire, a long-earned retirement with his wife to the beach, he'd recommended Winter to the council as his replacement believing she was the only one of the quad leaders strong enough to lead the whole region. Unless he missed his guess, the council had taken that suggestion to heart.

But not only was Winter strong, she was smart and she surrounded herself with people just as smart and strong. They would have figured out by now he wasn't dead, would have figured out that Janet had been killed by a demon early one morning walking through their woods. And it wouldn't take Winter long to discover the demons' lair especially if the nightwalkers and lupines worked with her. It had been remarkably easy once he set out to find it. He'd actually been embarrassed he hadn't figured it out before.

Of course, he'd still had part of his human soul then. He should have turned himself in then and there, let the non-compromised hybrids handle it. But he couldn't. He'd avenge his wife's murder and embrace the demon if he had to in order to get it done. He'd had to.

It hadn't taken him long to sniff out the monster. It had infuriated him that he couldn't get close to the

demon warlord. The warlord who it turned out wanted Winter. Why Ben was unable to determine, but he'd realized damned quick he could use her to get close to the warlord, close enough he might be able to kill the warlord, might get his vengeance.

He gave himself completely over to his demon and joined the real monsters. It was a calculated risk. The lesser demons couldn't touch him, but the higher-ranking ones would have killed him if not for the fact he was the warlord's new pet. Still, he never let his guard down. Never slept in their lair despite spending most of his nights there hoping the warlord would let his guard down.

And now a mistake he'd made months ago compromised his plan. Unless...it was possible Winter could help him. Without realizing it of course. She'd know by now he'd gone rogue. She'd know to stop the attacks she'd have to kill him and she would guess the best way to do that would be to find the lair. But she wouldn't go in alone. She'd seen some of their numbers the previous night. She'd invade the lair in force. She might even be able to get close enough to the warlord to injure him. She wouldn't be able to defeat him, but that wouldn't stop her from trying. He would wait. Bide his time until they were both weak enough to kill.

She wouldn't lead the raid at night. She'd wait until day. The daylight was different in the underworld where the demons came from and, though the earth's light wouldn't kill them, it slowed them down. Some became so lethargic it was almost like a coma. Some it seemed to barely affect, like the warlord and some of

the senior soldiers. They were the danger, the reason he'd never taken the risk himself. He wanted his vengeance too much to do something stupid. And he wanted control.

He wanted the warlord's power.

He didn't care who had to die to get it.

He reached the parking garage he kept the car in and contemplated going down into the lair. Would he be able to keep his glee to himself? His anticipation of the attack he knew was coming? He turned the car off, took a deep breath and felt the blood rushing through his veins, turning his vision red. No. Couldn't hide it, couldn't go down yet.

He stepped out of the car and walked in the opposite direction. He'd hunt instead. Maybe he'd find a hybrid or lupine or nightwalker for dinner. He wondered if he could take a nightwalker's power or a lupine's physical strength the same way he could a hybrid's. His step lightened. It was worth a try.

## Chapter Thirty

Winter sniffed the air. Kara was cooking. Probably a good idea since so many people were due to show up at any minute, but Winter knew the other woman did it more for cheap therapy than anything else. She'd heard Dupree arguing with her again.

Just as she'd argued with Marcus when he told her he was leaving to check up on some of his people. Without her. She should have been glad for the space. Instead she was irritated. It was okay for him to take risks but not her? It hadn't done her any good to protest, however. At least he'd taken Luke with him for backup.

Sighing, she went into the dining room to help Gia and Nadia. She'd have to deal with Kara's petition soon, but it was on the list for later. That *later* list was getting insanely long.

The room was chaos. They'd brought in a medium-sized table to set up the computers and phones. It was a cluttered mess, but not nearly as bad as the long dining-room table which was covered with stacks of old books and scrolls. Winter didn't know how the hell Gia found anything in the disorder, but as usual she seemed in total control of the chaos.

She was setting up a big easel when Winter walked in then lifted a large white board onto it. Winter stepped closer and saw it was the Commander's map from Ben's office. The large four-by-four foot board



was printed with a map of the city, divided into quadrants and then sections. Gia started coloring some in with multicolored erasable markers. Winter studied it as Gia worked.

“These are the areas that have checked in today?”

“And yesterday. Blue for in the last hour. Yellow the last twelve hours. And red for not for twenty-four hours.”

There was a lot of red.

“Those need to be redone ASAP.”

“Dupree’s organizing it.” She paused, looking at the board. “We need more people.”

“We always need more people. We’ll make do.”

Gia met her gaze and Winter saw her concern and weariness and anger reflected in the other woman’s gaze. Gia spoke softly enough so Nadia, the only other person in the room, couldn’t overhear. “I don’t think that’s going to cut it this time.”

“I know,” she answered just as softly then continued in a normal tone. “We need to find their lair. Attack them at the heart.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “But I’m out of ideas.”

Tilting her head to one side, Winter studied the map. Could it be that simple? If it was, she was an idiot. They all were. She picked up two more markers, one purple and the other green, tapped them against each other while she considered her words.

“The patrols Dupree’s been running with the lupines. Are they in our territory or Mitchell’s?”

Gia blinked, understanding coloring her cheeks. “Shit,” she muttered. “Theirs I think.”

The front door opened and shut with a thudding sound and after a few seconds Mitchell came into the room. She was glad Marcus had disappeared and Mitchell returned her embrace with hard squeeze before releasing her. He stepped back and grinned at her, but his attention was soon caught and held by the map board. He approached and studied it.

“Your patrols?”

“Yeah.” She handed him the green marker. “Why don’t you fill yours in?”

“You’re thinking there’s a hole in our patrols somewhere. A dead zone that no one goes in.”

“Yeah. I am.”

The more she thought about it the more certain she was that was the case. And wherever that hole was, wherever that unpatrolled section was, was where the demon lair was hidden.

Marcus and Luke entered as Mitchell was finishing. She explained what they were doing and Luke took the purple marker from her. When he was finished they stood back and looked.

“Fuck me. Don’t tell me that’s what I think it is.” She turned at the voice, saw the quad had entered and nodded at Lance.

“That, ladies and gentlemen, is the location of the demon lair,” she responded with a smile full of anticipation.

Lance walked forward, frowning. “It’s downtown. There haven’t been any reports of demon activity or sightings down there.”

She shook her head. No, there hadn't been. The better to hide their lair. She was positive that's where they were.

"They'll be underground," Gia offered, walking to her computer.

"What are you doing?" Luke asked, having followed her and now looking over her shoulder.

"Checking out the city's zoning and planning database."

He arched an eyebrow and Winter bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing at his disbelieving expression. There went Gia's innocent reputation. "You're hacking it?"

Gia shrugged. "Not really. I have a password."

"Whose?" he demanded.

Winter rolled her eyes. "It's not important right now. Can we focus? Or let her focus?"

Luke met her gaze and she knew he was furious at what he believed to be her interference. She stared him down, but it was Marcus who moved up behind her and set a hand on her hip that seemed to dissuade Luke from giving vent to his temper. The room fell silent, the only sound the clicking of keys on the keyboard until Gia began to laugh. She looked up and met Winter's eyes.

"God, we're idiots. Come look." She stood and stepped away so Winter could sit and look at the schematic on the screen.

"What am I looking at?"

"The old city, which in the way of old cities..."

"Is underground."

“Yep. The whole area is condemned and blocked off. It’s unlikely someone would stumble on to it by accident. We’re all idiots. This should have occurred to us long ago.”

Gia was right, and worse it was so much more than a typical demon hideout, complete with roads and buildings and alleys all hidden underground. How long had they been down there? How many were there? She did a quick calculation. They were down to two hundred hybrids in the extended area and she could utilize maybe half of them. Many served in noncombat positions and she wouldn’t risk them. Then she’d need to leave guards in case of another demon attack. If she gathered the noncombatants in three or four locations with around ten guards at each she could field sixty hunters.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath and steeled herself. Marcus was going to be pissed. “Divide the noncoms into four groups. One at the lab, one at the cave. Your lair?” she asked Mitchell and he nodded his assent. “One with the lupines.”

She met Marcus’s gaze and he nodded. “And one with the nightwalkers. Ten guards on each group.” Ten was a bare minimum and she wasn’t happy with it, but it couldn’t be helped. “The rest of us go in at noon. You in?” she asked Mitchell while avoiding Marcus’s gaze, already feeling his fury rise. Again, Mitchell nodded.

“Absolutely not,” Marcus ground out between clenched teeth. “We won’t be able to join you at that time.”

Marcus wanted to throttle her. Was she crazy? *Never mind*, he told himself, *don't even ask*. Of course she was. Which didn't even begin to lessen his wrath. She didn't have the right to risk herself like this. He'd been far too lenient. She was watching him, head slightly cocked to one side, expectant expression on her face, and he realized she wanted to pick this fight. Why?

He jerked his head toward the dining-room door. "My office."

Her eyes narrowed to angry slits, defiance clear in every taut line of her body. God, she was incredible. He wasn't about to let her get away.

*Now Winter. Or I can haul your ass upstairs for a more...private discussion.*

He let the sensual need, the craving that never stopped, color his voice and felt her respond despite her rejection of it, despite how much she didn't want to feel it too. But it got her moving, probably more because she was afraid he'd embarrass her in front of everyone than anything else. She stopped at the doorway and looked at Gia before preceding him out the door.

"Get things moving."

Gia nodded and he noticed the way she studiously avoiding looking at Luke. "Will do."

Marcus followed Winter into his office and was careful to close the door softly rather than give in to the urge to slam it shut. The booming sound would have been very satisfying but probably wasted on her. She waited with her arms crossed defensively over her chest, every muscle tensed for flight.

“It has to be done this way,” she said before he could start.

“No.” He growled and stalked closer to her. His voice was cutting. “I can’t make sure you remain safe during the day and you can’t be trusted to watch out for yourself.”

She winced and he experienced a pang of remorse. Maybe he was being too harsh but there didn’t seem to be any other way to get through her thick skull.

“Look. I’ll hardly be alone. I’ll have the whole quad with me and sixty soldiers. Plus Mitchell and his men.”

He saw her realize her mistake as soon as the words escaped her mouth. She pressed her lips together and waited while he got control of the beast in him that wanted to rail and rampage and tie her up for her own safety. It was a bad time to remind him of the lupine alpha, to remind him the lupine would be in a better position to guard his mate than he would. No. He couldn’t live with that, any of it. He shook his head, struggling to control his temper.

“No. You stay here. They can handle it without you.”

She looked at him like he was insane, like he’d suddenly grown horns or turned into some creature she didn’t recognize.

“I’m the *Commander*. Marcus, I can’t stay behind. These are my people at risk and my people taking the risk. Forget it.”

He fisted his hands and swung away from her, felt his grip on his emotions loosening. The walls undulated and he took a deep centering breath. He

entered her mind softly, whispered *sorry*, but was completely unwilling to risk her life again. She shocked the hell out of him, was ready for him throwing up a wall he couldn't get around without damaging her mind. He wanted to roar his fury. She stood tense, ready.

"You've been invading my mind for two months. You keep claiming I'm yours." She paused as if searching for words. "But you still don't see me. You either have no idea who I am or you just don't care."

"That's not true." He saw her all right. She was reckless, with a dangerous disregard for her own safety, willing to risk her life for others who shouldn't matter as much to her as he did. She was selfless in a way he would have admired in anyone else, but had a hard time accepting from his mate. He wanted to be the center of her world, not on the edge of it.

She smiled but it was bitter, sad. "You would really prefer if I was that selfish? That uncaring about anyone else? How long would you respect that woman?" She huffed. "Well, guess it doesn't matter. You don't respect me as I am."

Jesus God. She didn't really believe that did she? Except...she obviously did and he'd let her. He'd fought her, her devotion to her people at every turn when she was only doing what he'd do in her position. Fuck. He was an ass. And she was right. He didn't want some insipid follower, a woman who didn't or wouldn't think for herself, stand up to him when necessary. He was going to be hard enough to deal with as it was.

“One mark, Winter. One little cut and I’ll take it out of your ass later, I promise.”

She smiled. “I promise to be careful.”

He scowled. That wasn’t what he’d asked for at all.

“And you stay connected with me the whole time you’re gone. No blocking me out.” Maybe he’d be able to get to her if she needed rescuing.

“Don’t even think about it, Marcus. It’s too far. None of us have been there. Even if you got the image from me it would be too easy to make a mistake. And it’s too deep.”

He didn’t respond. He knew the risks better than most. He couldn’t teleport directly from the house to the downtown center. The distance was too great and the distance one could travel was proportionate with one’s power. Not even he was that strong. Then there was the problem of depth. Teleporting through earth was difficult. The travel through several tons of dirt sapped power, and the deeper you went the faster the drain. But it might be possible if he got close enough, and he could get close enough.

The hybrid offices in town were at the edge of his limits, but he could get there. Luke too and he’d take him for backup. The demon lair wasn’t far from there and hopefully it wasn’t too far underground to reach.

She frowned thoughtfully and he realized he hadn’t shielded his thoughts from her. “You think that’ll work?” She shook her head. “No. It’s too dangerous. If you got stuck in between we wouldn’t be able to get you out.”



He shrugged. "I'll wait there anyway. Let the guards on duty in the building know so I don't have to kill anyone. I still don't like this plan."

She approached him, stopping just an inch away before lifting her hand to stroke the side of his face. She spoke softly. "I know. But *you* know it's the best way. The demon lethargy will be at its highest point around noon."

Yes, it would. All but the strongest of the demons would be mostly useless, defenseless while the sun was at its zenith. It was a sound plan. He approved of it, he just didn't want her to be a part of it. But if he was going to celebrate the things he loved about her, he had to take the things he didn't too. It was a package deal. He should have seen that before.

He turned his head and pulled one of her fingers into his mouth. Lightly sucked the digit and released it with a bite. She groaned and pressed closer, hands running up his back and moaned for entirely the wrong reasons when someone banged on the door.

"Shit," she muttered, pulling away and stalking over to answer it.

Dupree leaned against the wall on the other side. He sauntered in without a word and handed a sheet of paper to Winter. She accepted it without looking at it, following Dupree's progress as he paced to the sidebar and poured himself a stiff drink. She arched both eyebrows as she glanced at the paper with distaste.

"What is this?" she asked him.

He downed the contents of the glass and poured another before answering. Downed it too. "Dental impressions. From the remains."

She frowned and looked down, turned greener and greener as she read. "Oh my God."

"Yep," Dupree answered. Marcus took the paper and read it silently, pulling her up under his arm when he finished.

"I'm sorry. I know he was your friend."

According to the report some of the bite marks at all three scenes matched Ben's records. Incontrovertible proof that Ben had gone rogue.

"How were they able to match them?"

"Standard procedure," Dupree answered. "Any time someone new joins they give blood and dental impressions. It's sometimes the only way to identify a body."

Dupree poured another shot. "Certainly has come in handy this week."

Winter cringed at the matter-of-fact tone, at the image it no doubt invoked. She grew jittery and pulled away.

"You have a gym around here?"

"Yes, but you aren't going to spend the next two hours beating the shit out of Mitchell." He grinned. "I might like to see that, but not tonight. Not with you going in there in a few hours."

She glared. "I need to work off some steam."

He knew the perfect way to do that, but she wasn't in the right frame of mind. He had another idea. "Let's go run."

Her smile was slow in coming, but nearly knocked him down with its radiance.

"Let's do it."

Winter, unable to contain a surge of excitement, took the hand he offered and followed him from the house, down the back hall and outside. For the first time in years, she paused and saw the night. Took it all in. The sky was a starry, brilliant expanse above her and the world around them stretched out in a million shades of green, enticing her. Beckoning. The air was filled with pine and gardenia, with the big blooms on the roses that climbed up the back of the house. It was quiet, but not eerily so. Cicadas sung, the breeze whistled through the trees.

She stepped off the porch, wondering why she was noticing the beauty of the night for the first time in decades. Maybe it was the upcoming battle, which she knew could be her last. But she suspected it wasn't. She suspected it was the man at her side who'd awakened her senses in so many other ways. Why not this too?

He led the way across the lawn, into the trees and a small running path. She followed, urging him faster and faster. They ran for two hours. She was surprised when the path ended on the opposite side of his lawn, one big loop.

Instead of going inside he walked to a swing under an arbor, patted the spot next to him till she followed and joined him. She still felt antsy, knew it was the demon clamoring for more control, for the violent emotions it craved.

Marcus pulled her across his lap and she felt his erection pressing hard against her backside. Her body responded immediately, lust roared to the surface, fed by the demon and she struggled for control. She didn't

want what was between them influenced by the beast, tainted by it.

She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her go, wrapping his arms around her and nudging her head until she laid it against his shoulder. They were still and quiet for several minutes, but as each second passed by she was fighting her demon half more and more. She squeezed her eyes shut, prepared herself for the argument that would come when she insisted he release her. She needed distance between them. Touch was just making her struggle harder. She never got the chance to protest. He took the wind from her sails.

"I need to feed," he whispered, his breath blowing across her ear, fluttering her loose hair.

She was afraid her heart would never restart but its beat returned at a fast, furious rate. She knew he was offering her something, offering her respite more than himself. She didn't know much about nightwalkers, but she knew this one, she'd been in his mind. He could go without feeding for days. No, he knew she needed to release the pent-up energy and so he made it more than an offer. Made it his own need. He chuckled.

"That's normally true. But I find I crave your taste."

She tilted her head back, supported by his arm she felt free floating, and studied him. Since she was addicted to him, the feel of him in her mind and body, it only seemed fair. Slowly, she nodded and he leaned closer, inch by excruciatingly slow inch, until his mouth touched hers, until his tongue stroked hers.

Until she couldn't tell where he started and she began and she no longer cared.

She whimpered under the onslaught, the overwhelming need that swept through her, his and hers, commingled in a way that could only intensify it, escalate it. She finally realized, finally, that she might be able to live without him but she didn't want to. And she didn't want some half-measured, some half-hearted attempt at a bonding that wasn't pure and true.

She wasn't sure if she could offer herself whole, wasn't sure if she had that in her anymore, but knew it was worth the effort to try. Knew he would drive her crazy in and out of bed, knew he'd fight her every time he thought she was endangering herself. But she also knew, because she'd been in his mind even if she'd refused to see the man he truly was, that he was determined and devoted. That he would never give up on her, never let her retreat into herself. Never leave her to stand alone.

So she surrendered.

She felt the bond snap between them. Strong. Unbreakable. Where before they'd simply been able to connect mentally now they *were* connected. Her mind to his mind. She had a second to marvel, to stroke mental fingers over it, this bond nightwalkers created with their mates. They'd have to complete the blood bond of her people, but that was simply ceremony now. This bond protected her. She was safe. Joy filled her as he swept her away in a sensual desire she knew would never abate. Never fade. Never die.

## Chapter Thirty-One

A couple of hours later Gia watched Winter reenter the dining room with that satisfied expression a woman only got from great sex. She felt the briefest pang of jealousy—she'd been having exceptional sex up until Luke went crazy on her—but deftly pushed it away to deal with other issues. The room was in chaos, but in another hour or two, it'd be controlled chaos. Her domain.

Since only a few of the hybrids and none of the lupines were strong telepaths they were setting up a command center similar to what the human military would use. Right now it was mess with wires and cables running all over the nightwalkers' dining room. They were using four attack groups, two lupine and two hybrid, all four on different frequencies. She would monitor all of them from the control panel. Winter's, Dupree's, Mitchell's and Baron's mikes would be set up to scan all channels.

They'd found some drawings of the old underground in the city's records archives and she'd placed a transparency of a street map over it. It was spread out across the table being examined for possible entry points by Dupree, Mitchell, Baron and the quad. Winter joined them when she entered. Gia was relieved Marcus didn't follow the commander into the room. Hopefully, Luke would continue to stay away too. She had no idea what he was doing. She refused to

*care* what Luke was doing as long as he left her alone. Yeah right. That was working out well. Grinding her teeth, she bent under the radio console and rearranged wires that she had plugged in the wrong places.

Luke brushed against her mind. He didn't try to enter, but she felt curiosity in his touch as much as the recently constant anger, and realized she'd unconsciously reached out for him. Damn it. She had to do better than that. *Concentrate on the work.* Slamming up shields against him, she jerked to her feet, banging her head on the sharp edge of the desk.

"Damn," she muttered, rubbing the growing knot while reaching for the power switch. With a burst of static it crackled to life. Hell yeah. She was smarter than the stupid machine. She was in her element now. Grinning, she picked up one of the small earpieces and twisted the dial to the right frequency, held it to her ear and then pushed a button on the board. "Testing."

Her voice came in loud and clear in her ear and she went to work on the next nineteen. When four sets of twenty were complete, she turned to Dupree, who was organizing the evening surveillance on the downtown area, and the soldiers who would take over for them when the sun came up. Dupree was still bent over the map, but quietly arguing with Kara who stood at his shoulder.

"Dupree," she interrupted. He gave her a look of gratitude as he walked over, ignoring Kara who didn't follow him because Winter quietly pulled her aside and whispered to her. Kara grew paler with every word. Gia would hate to be on either end of that conversation.

“How many do you need?” she asked, indicating the earpieces.

“Forty. Twenty for each shift. Five-man teams.”

“You got it.”

“As soon as you’re ready, I’m sending out the first shift.”

She nodded and pulled a chair up to get at it, noticing Kara leave the room as she did. “Decided what to do about her yet?”

Dupree scowled at Kara’s retreating back. “She keeps bugging Winter to rescind the edict.”

Gia shrugged, meeting his gaze. “Not gonna happen.”

“Thank God,” he muttered under his breath.

He looked calm and in control, but Gia could feel his struggle. He was good at hiding it, containing it, better than anyone else she knew, but they’d been friends for sixty years. Probably no one else realized how close he was to giving in to his demon, but she did. She couldn’t stand the idea of losing Dupree. She and Winter would have to hunt him together and she just wasn’t sure she could do that if it came down to it. Time to be nosy.

“She can save you, you know,” she said softly.

He glowered at her, a sure unspoken demand to back off. She’d never been good at backing down.

“Neither one of you would regret it, Dupree. The way you look at her...that’s no passing infatuation.”

“She deserves something better. And we are *not* having this conversation.”

He spun on his heel and left the room. She sighed. At least he hadn’t denied it. She’d discuss it with



Winter later, after the attack on the demon lair. Maybe together they could sway him. Before she could give it more thought, hybrid soldiers started to enter the room and though Dupree followed them, she didn't say a word. Returning to the map and avoiding her gaze, he assigned rooftop positions.

They'd made a list of most likely entrances based on what they knew of the area, but the hope was demon patrols returning before dawn would lead them to easier ways in. If they couldn't find them on their own or follow someone in, they might be forced to use axes to create a new entrance. Axes pounding against wood or metal tended to make lots of noise. Most demons were lethargic and unable to fight in the day, but not all. It was too great a risk to take if it could be avoided.

The last of the earpieces were quickly programmed and she tossed them into a box for Dupree. In moments, he had teams testing them and then moving out. She looked around the room, which was clearing out as the quad left to organize their people. Her laptops were in place. The radios were ready. She was in control of the chaos. Now all there was to do was wait and hope everything went smoothly.

A few hours later Winter came in to double-check everything before leaving for the mission. It took everything Gia had in her not to cling to her old friend a moment. She knew what had to be done. Knew she might never see her again. But she was careful to conceal her thoughts, careful to not let Winter get any idea of her plans. She wasn't quite so careful a few minutes later when Luke stopped in.

"Everything's ready here?" he asked.

She looked around at the computers and radio system, and nodded. "Ready as it's gonna get."

"Good. Good." He nodded. "Gia..."

"Shh." She stepped close to him and put a finger over his lips. "Now's not the time, Luke."

It never would be, but she couldn't tell him that, not when there was that flash of hope in his eyes. He lifted his fingers and stroked her cheek, lowered his face to hers. His lips brushed hers. She pulled away before he could fulfill that promise.

"Later, darlin'."

His eyes were disturbed, but he held her gaze a moment and squeezed her hand before leaving. She followed him into the foyer and watched until he was gone, unwilling to name the painful twisting in her stomach.

She was still staring after him when she felt an excited surge of energy rush up the hall behind her. Turning she faced Nadia, who'd found an out-of-the-way room to study scrolls when the dining room became command central. She was flushed, her eyes bright.

"Has everyone gone?" she asked.

Gia nodded. "Yes." Which meant she was in charge here. "What's up?"

"I found something in the scrolls. You know the, forbidden ones?"

Gia still couldn't believe they'd found those scrolls in Ben's safe. She and Winter had kept their existence to themselves, Dupree and Nadia. She hadn't had a chance to look through them yet, but the Order had

banned them centuries before. They had to contain dangerous information.

“What did you find?” she asked, motioning Nadia to follow her back into the dining room so she could monitor the radios.

She sat behind the console and Nadia paced, a look of revulsion crossing her face. “You know how the lab said someone had...eaten parts of the bodies?”

She nodded, fighting the nausea the report still gave her.

“Well, one of those scrolls is actually a letter from a Commander to the council. It says they had a rogue eating hybrid organs to steal their powers.”

Jerking to her feet, Gia rushed to the nearest bathroom, her stomach giving up the fight. She flushed, rinsed her mouth and washed her face before returning.

“Sorry,” she said when she was back in the dining room.

“You okay?” Nadia gave her a sympathetic look and Gia squashed her incredulity. Sure. Why not? Discovering Ben might be eating organs, her friend’s organs, in an effort to steal their powers happened every day after all, didn’t it?

“I’m fine. Go on.”

Nadia nodded curtly, accepting her word. Well, she was second in command in the region wasn’t she? She found that as hard to believe as Winter did, but everyone around them accepted it like it had always been so.

“There’s an answering letter from a member of the council that basically says, it’s true, destroy the rogue,

and then destroy any letters or documents that mention it. And make sure no one ever, ever discusses it.”

“But he didn’t, did he? He hid the letters and somehow Ben got them.”

“That’s my guess. I could check the council archives maybe, but then they’d know that we know, and...”

She didn’t have to go on. Gia knew exactly what she was thinking, felt the same anger and frustration she saw light Nadia’s eyes. It was dangerous information, yes. But if they’d known earlier they might have been able to prevent a few deaths. Even now, she wasn’t willing to make the information widespread. There was always a risk a hybrid would go rogue and once they did they’d know a way to increase their powers. She shuddered. It was too horrible to contemplate.

Of course, it *could* be false information. The beginning years of the Order were dark, clouded in mystery and superstition. “Bring me the scrolls,” she ordered Nadia.

When she returned with them, Gia locked them in the small portable safe that had been brought from her office. She and Winter were the only ones with the combination.

“This stays between us and Winter and Dupree.”

Nadia nodded her understanding. “Are you going to warn her now?”

Gia pressed her lips together and considered it. Not only was it shocking news, but distracting. No one needed that going into a battle. Finally, she shook her head. “You can brief her when she gets back.”

Nadia's eyes flashed in understanding. Somehow the other woman knew Gia had no intention of being around when everyone returned. She didn't bring it up though. "I'll get back to work then. I still need to find info on the warlords."

Gia gave her a distracted nod as the radio came to life and she bent to focus on it.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Winter stood in the alley surrounded by lupines. It was time. To her surprise, Marcus had insisted she go in with Mitchell's team. The two of them seemed to have reached some kind of agreement regarding her. It made her nervous, suspicious. What was the nightwalker up to this time? Surely, he didn't think to keep her out of the fighting. Mitchell knew better than to even try.

Mitchell hissed to get her attention and she focused on the mission, edging up the side of one building to join him. The surveillance teams had been able to locate six entrances. They'd split the four entry teams originally planned into six smaller teams to take advantage of all of them. Winter was certain there were more, but there was no time to search them out or worry about them.

It was almost noon. She glanced at her watch. Two minutes. She nodded at Mitchell and he cautiously eased open the fire door on the building at the back of the alley. It swung open without a squeak, odd in a building that had been abandoned for years and condemned. Definitely the right place.

It was easy to find the stairs to the basement. In a dim corner, they found a metal grate. Once opened it revealed a ladder that she could only assume led into the sewer system. The stink was horrendous, a mix of decaying waste and sulfur, and her eyes watered.

Ignoring the urge to gag, she climbed down and pushed forward through knee-deep water, refusing to consider what it might be concealing, and followed a path lit by dim uncovered light bulbs and cleared of cobwebs and debris.

She'd memorized the map before coming down and thought the corridor they were in led straight into what they believed was the old town square. She motioned to Mitchell to slow down. This was too easy. There should be traps, some kind of warning system, maybe even guards. She had a rifle slung across her back, but didn't bother with it. Drawing her knives instead, she moved in front of the lupine, letting her demon half rise to the surface and reach out with its senses. It went on alert—tense and watchful and expectant.

After a few feet the tunnel curved sharply and when she rounded it, she saw the end, glowing yellow and orange as if lit by fire, which it probably was. She doubted there was much working electricity down here. The tunnel lights seemed to be wired from the surface. As she moved closer, she heard sounds, low rumbles, clanking. Signs of life she hadn't expected at this time of day. Then a horn sounded. Loud and long, followed by a battle cry. Mitchell stepped up next to her and they began to run as the sounds of fighting, metal striking metal, cries of men and demons, came to them.

The tunnel seemed impossibly long. One hundred feet. Fifty. When she crossed the threshold, she couldn't credit what she was seeing. It exited on to the old town square, huge and flat. She didn't dare look up to see what kept Camden from crashing down on top

of them. There was no time for fear or awe as a wicked battle-ax was swung at her.

She ducked just in time, swinging her right arm up as she rolled and hitting the demon square through the heart. There was no time to rejoice, no time to take a breath of relief. More came. And came. And came. She couldn't believe her eyes, wondering if she was somehow being tricked into seeing larger numbers than were actually there. But the sounds of men screaming, men dying...this was no show. It was too good to be an illusion. Her demon side was drunk on the smell of so much blood, her vision cast with a haze of red and she knew her eyes had changed during the fighting.

How the hell was this possible? There shouldn't be so many who could fight the day lethargy. Was the warlord that strong? Dominant enough to control so many powerful demons? Or worse. Had they somehow found a way to circumvent the lethargy caused by the earth's sun? She fought with renewed vigor, making her way through the center of the square, barely avoiding the thrust of another demon's blade.

She turned her head to speak to Mitchell, but he was gone, lost somewhere in the melee. Her gaze searching, her arms still driving out in defense, her eyes fell on someone else. Someone she'd been desperate to find, but who shouldn't be here. Benjamin met her gaze, his eyes gone all red, a rictus of a grin on his face that made her skin crawl and her blood boil. Turning his back to her, he slipped into an alley. She kept her eyes glued to his back as she shoved through the crowd after him.



Ben's death was her burden to bear. And her right. A lot of hybrids had been killed because of and by this one. As Commander, it was her duty, her obligation to avenge those deaths, to ensure others wouldn't pay the same price for his betrayal and her delay in hunting him down. How many of those deaths were on her head?

If it were any other rogue, she'd be anticipating the fight, sad that one of her own had turned to total evil, but still eager, more than willing to dispatch the threat. But this wasn't any other rogue. This was Ben. Her trainer and mentor. Her friend.

She gritted her teeth as she was forced to lunge out of the way of a sweeping blade and then countered with no finesse, but all her strength behind it. The demon fell and she pushed forward, just a few feet from the alley now.

Lifting one hand, she pushed the tiny button on the earpiece and spoke into the mike that curved along her jaw.

"Dupree." She paused a moment. Gia had the system programmed so that if she spoke one of the lieutenants' names first, the conversation would go out on a private channel. Gia would be monitoring of course, but she needed this info too. "Ben just ducked into an alley. I'm going after him. You're in charge out here."

"Fuck. Don't even think about going after him alone, Winter." It was Gia's voice in her ear. Marcus in her head wasn't any better.

"Wait for me, Winter," Dupree answered. She tuned him out. She tuned them *all* out.

The sounds of fighting behind her intensified as she entered the alley. It was only a few feet long and at the end was an open door glowing with light. She slowed. Getting close to one wall she crept down it until she could peek inside.

There was no sign of Ben, but inside a hulking demon spun in circles, raging. Blood dripped down the side of its mottled red face and its chest heaved. Horns, huge and spiked, curved from the top of his head. He radiated strength and power. His body was thickly muscled, his eyes glowing red and with too much thought to be an ordinary demon.

Marcus was a steady presence in her mind and she shared her suspicions with him. *This must be the warlord.*

*Get out of there, Winter.*

She had to agree. It would be suicide to take on a warlord by herself. She started to back up slowly, but it was too late. The demon had already spotted her. Lifting its snout, he sniffed the air a second before his gaze fell on her retreating form. He roared his challenge and charged. She reached for her rifle, the fact it was missing somewhere in the fight registering way too late. Shit.

She waited until he was within arm's length then dived to the opposite wall, making herself into as small a ball, as small a target, as she could. His momentum slammed him up against the wall, shaking flakes of plaster free to float like snow in the air. Screaming his fury, he whirled back around. There was nowhere to go. She felt Marcus's horror, his cry for her to *move*

*damn it*, but where to? Then the damnedest, and luckiest, thing happened.

Someone stabbed the demon from behind, the edge of a long blade missing its mark and coming through the demon's side at the waist. It wouldn't do much damage, and seemed to have only enraged it more. Without turning to face the attacker, he lashed out. There were two thuds. The first the impact of the demon's fist hitting his attacker and the second the man being flung against the wall. Suddenly, she could see him. When had Ben learned the trick of invisibility?

*No time for that now, Winter.*

Marcus was right. She'd worry about it later. For now, she had to get out. The way out of the alley was blocked so while the demon's attention was focused on Ben, she carefully backed up into the room hoping there was an exit in there. If nothing else maybe she could close the door and call for reinforcements.

He didn't follow her, but there was no exit. As quietly as she could she explored the room. It was small, around twelve-by-twelve feet, and set up as an office with a large desk and three chairs. No closets. No other doors. No place to hide.

She smelled him before she heard his approach. Turning slowly, she faced him, frantically trying to figure a way out. He blocked the doorway, his grin slow to come and pure malice.

"Finally. The one I've been looking for."

She cocked an eyebrow. Impossible. "Why would you be looking for me?"

He snarled and stepped into the room. Ben was nowhere to be seen. “Half breeds. Soul stealers.”

She shrugged, not sure what he was talking about but not about to admit it. *Careful*, Marcus admonished her. He didn’t have to share what he was thinking with her. It was stupid, foolhardy to bait a demon. Well, she’d never been known for her cautious nature.

“We do what we must.” She smiled, letting the feral nature of her demon show through. “To fight you.”

“You steal souls from the Abyss. Take what should be mine.”

Again she shrugged. She should have known better than to try to converse with a demon. Warlords didn’t make any more sense than the rest of them. It could be important though. She’d discuss it with Nadia later. Right now she had to focus on getting out alive. But she couldn’t fight him, not yet. Not alone. “That doesn’t tell me why you’re looking for me.”

His expression was almost disdainful. “Half breeds are stupid. You don’t even know what you have.”

She had a demon soul that was getting more enraged by the moment, wanting to attack, and not understanding why she didn’t. She was shaking with the effort to control it. Finally, she heard footsteps in the alley, knew it was Dupree coming to her aid.

She repositioned her knives in her hands, shifted on the balls of her feet in preparation. The only way to do this would be fast and hard, from the front and behind. She tried to tell Dupree her plan, but he wasn’t much of a telepath and she wasn’t sure if he got the message.

Marcus did though and fumed, but didn't rant at her. She knew he didn't approve of this move, but he was too worried about blowing her concentration to say so. She even agreed. It was just the kind of crazy stunt she would pull.

"What do I have then?"

He knew she was going to attack, spoke at the same time that he moved. "Not just a warrior's soul," he grunted.

She rolled out of the way in time, but not before taking a long slice with his blade. It only took a moment to feel the poison. She screamed her fury in her mind and waited for the effects. She didn't even consider teleporting away. This might be her only shot at killing this demon. If her backup would hurry the hell up. He watched her expectantly. Nothing happened, but instead of pissing him off more it seemed to please him.

Her gaze flickered away a moment. Dupree staggered into the doorway, a gash bleeding from his forehead. He wasn't quick enough when the demon whirled around and struck. His body slammed against the wall with a sickening crack she recognized as breaking bone. He slumped to the ground and the warlord's tail swished, leaving a long gash down the front of Dupree's chest. He didn't move. She hoped desperately to see his chest rise, didn't get any response when she shoved her mind at his.

There was nothing left in her but rage and guilt and the burning need for retribution. She got close enough to stab the demon in the back, but not near enough his heart to slow him down. She barely lunged out of the

way when he turned to attack her. They circled each other—he toying with her while she tried to buy more time. The others would come. If they could. Outside the doorway Dupree still didn't move. She refused to accept that he was gone. He couldn't be gone.

There wasn't a lot of room to maneuver in and the warlord shoved the desk out of his way so hard it banged against the wall and bounced back a couple feet. It was too much to hope the sound was heard outside over the din, but she hoped anyway. She didn't want to die here, like this. She wanted a chance to tell Marcus...what? So many things. That she liked having someone to talk to, even if he pissed her off most of the time. That she liked waking up in his arms. That she loved him.

*I know. And your timing sucks. Now concentrate on the room. On everything in it, exact positions.*

*Don't even think about it.* She knew what he was planning, but it couldn't be done. They were too deep in the earth. She tried to tell him that as she avoided a thrust of the demon's blade and lunged in for her own attack. She didn't move fast enough and she felt his knife scrape over her ribs. The pain was like fire as it sliced through her skin.

*You just concentrate on staying alive.*

She knew that likelihood was dwindling as the demon struck her again, this time in the thigh. He wore her down in an embarrassingly short period of time, each of his attacks landing while only a few of hers did. She felt herself slipping, felt her death approaching.

*I'm sorry*, she whispered to Marcus. Sorry she was slowing down. Sorry she wasn't strong enough. Sorry she was leaving so many people exposed, failing to perform a duty she'd sworn to never falter in. But mostly sorry Marcus had to witness it, knew he'd always carry it with him as a failure to protect her.

*NO!* His anguish screamed through her mind, but she didn't have time to think about it. The demon had decided it was done toying with her and she gave in to instinct, gave herself over to her demon completely. She would *not* die here. Not like this.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

*God damn it, Winter!* But calling her was no use. She was gone, her mind nothing but a red haze of fury. She'd given over control to the demon completely. Irrevocably maybe. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to bring her back. Could it be done? Conventional wisdom, everything they knew about the hybrids, said no. He took a deep breath. They were bonded. She had to still be in there somewhere, it was just a matter of finding her. If he could get her out alive.

He'd been in her mind, watching the fighting for what felt like hours. Furious and unable to do a damned thing about it. He felt how deep underground she was, a heavy pressure on the connection between them. He'd paced all afternoon, hoping like hell she wouldn't need help because he wasn't sure he could get to her if she did. Now he had no choice.

He turned to Luke and Kadall, waiting with him in the Order's basement, and felt their power surge into him without having to ask. He'd been giving them an account as he saw it through Winter's eyes, realized he'd actually called out when he felt her mind surrender to the demon's. Teleporting to her was a brainless thing to attempt, but she was his mate. He didn't have a choice.

He concentrated on the room she was in, the layout, the feel and smell of it, and pushed himself there, felt his molecules coming apart and moving slowly as if



through foot after foot of sludge. For a few seconds he got stuck and brutally repressed a spike of fear. That he wouldn't get free. That he wouldn't get to Winter on time. He felt more power pouring into him, took a moment to wonder whose it was when the answer came to him. Gia linking through Luke. It was enough and finally, he came back together, in one piece in the room he needed to be in. There was no time to feel relief.

Winter was down, her form slight but still fighting. She couldn't hope to win, but she didn't give up. He allowed himself a moment of pride before attacking. He focused all the mental energy he could summon, surprised at the amount considering the difficulty of the teleportation, into a sharp point, threw it at the base of the demon's neck. It didn't kill him, but it knocked him off his feet, stunned him.

Marcus drew his knives and threw. The first missed. In the heartbeat it took him to throw the next, the warlord was back on his feet. Marcus's second knife embedded in his shoulder. From the corner of his eye, he saw Winter get to her feet and circle around behind them. With a roar, the warlord yanked the blade free and charged for Marcus. He lurched to the side, felt the demon's claws nick his arm and then threw another burst of power at the warlord.

The warlord wasn't any better prepared for the second strike and fell back into the desk. Winter didn't give him time to recover, immediately she was on him, knife plunging into his heart. Once. Twice. Again.

"Enough, Winter."

Arm raised over her head to strike the warlord again, she slowly turned to face him. There was nothing sane in the eyes gazing back at him, nothing that acknowledged him as anything but an intruder into her fun. She got to her feet and sprang, going for his throat and chest. He grabbed her wrists just in time. He spun them around, slamming her back against the wall and pinning her wrists over her head, using his body to hold her still.

“Winter!” he barked, shaking her. “Control the demon.”

She snarled and bucked against him, struggling to get free.

“Now, baby,” he said, hardening his voice to the tone he used to command, trying a different tactic, doubting gentling or reason would work on the beast. “If any of your people see you like this, they’ll be forced to kill you.”

There were no more sounds of fighting out there. He heard men calling to each other, heard someone ask where the Commander was. Something flashed through her eyes so fast he was afraid he’d imagined it. She was in there somewhere.

“Damn it, Winter. You’re disobeying me again.”

There was intelligence in her glare this time, but she still yanked at her wrists, tried to twist them in his grip to point the blades in his direction.

“What? No comeback?”

Her chest heaved from her exertions, her jaw tightened and determination warred with bloodlust in her eyes. His relief was almost palpable.

“That’s it, baby. Fight it. You control the demon, not the other way around.”

He heard footsteps in the alley and she did too. She opened her fists and let her knives clatter to the floor. Surrender. Leaning forward, she rested her head against his chest.

*I need a minute. Don’t let anyone in yet.* There was an underlying tone of pleading in the words, and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to protect her from prying eyes.

Mitchell was the first through the doorway and Marcus met his gaze over Winter’s head. They exchanged a long look before he looked around and saw the demon dead on the floor.

“The warlord?”

“Yes,” Marcus answered, unwilling to discuss it further until Winter got control of herself. He didn’t want to explain how she’d managed to survive the confrontation until he got to her to help. He didn’t need to. An expression of understanding crossed the lupine’s face and he turned to greet the others approaching the door. He met them and turned them back. Marcus easily overheard as he ushered them away.

“She’s fine. And the warlord’s dead. Give her a minute. We’ve got a mess to clean up out here anyway.”

After several minutes her breathing evened and her body began to relax. She lowered her hands to grip his biceps and tried to push him back. His arms convulsed around her. She lifted her head to meet his gaze and her eyes were back to normal.

"Dupree," she whispered.

"Mitchell's people carried him out."

"I got him killed. How many did I get killed here today, Marcus?"

Her guilt and sorrow was a crushing weight in his brain.

"Dupree isn't dead, baby. I can feel his mind." There was a moment of sharp relief at his words, but it was quickly suppressed. "The others," he added, "made their own choices, Winter. They wouldn't have let you come alone. They had their own people to avenge. You can't take that all on yourself."

"My people. My responsibility."

"You aren't responsible for everyone's decisions." She shook her head, rubbing her nose back and forth against his chest like a cat seeking solace. He stroked his hands up her arms, then moved around to her back and let her take what comfort he could give her.

"Do you let yourself get away with that?" she asked, curiosity in her voice but also almost teasing.

He could lie, but she'd know. "No."

"Didn't think so." She finally sounded steady, like herself, and she pushed against him. His arms tightened around her.

"I'm okay. Really." She took a deep breath, the action causing her breasts to rub against his chest. His reaction was predictable. "Thank you."

He snorted. "Don't. From now on I'm tying you to the bed at daybreak."

She grinned. "You'll spoil me. That could be fun."

His hands slid down her back, pausing to cup her ass a moment before reluctantly letting her go. He was

alive. She was alive. There was a future to look forward to, for at least another day. But with Winter as a mate, there would always be the risk it was the last night, the last moment to love her. She cupped his cheek with her palm.

Her eyes glowed, her love spilling out for him to catch. The wonder of it, the promise of more made him shiver. He could see by her slow teasing smile she shared the feeling.

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning on going anywhere,” she whispered, a hitch in her voice, eyelids lowering as she stood on her toes to brush her lips over his.

*I wouldn’t let you.* He gripped the back of her head to hold her to him, but was gentle, tenderness filling him as he took her mouth. She sighed into his kiss.

*I know.*

The blissful moment was short-lived. She broke the kiss, retrieved her knives and took his hand, leading him to the doorway.

“Let’s go see what the damage is.”

In the square, Dupree was laid out on the ground. Winter approached him first, relief and joy lighting her face and filling Marcus’s mind. She spoke to the one tending Dupree quietly before moving on to Mitchell.

The lupine had teams hauling demon bodies to a large pile. There were gas cans waiting to set them on fire when the task was complete.

“Ben?” he asked the lupine. He’d been in Winter’s mind, knew the rogue hybrid was around somewhere.

“No sign of him.”

Winter scowled. “He was here.”

“Yeah. I saw him at the beginning of the fighting.” He met her gaze and added softly, “He’s rogue now, Winter.”

“I know. He must be here. Check the alley.” Marcus shared her memory, the demon’s attack against Ben. She’d seen him fall, had assumed he was dead, but couldn’t know for sure without a body.

Mitchell shrugged. “Sure. I’ve got both teams watching out for his body too.”

She noticed the other pile of bodies—the hybrids and lupines—the same time as Marcus did. He felt her remorse, her guilt like a punch in the gut.

*Don’t. You couldn’t have stopped any of them from coming with you.*

She nodded. *I know.* But the oppressive feeling of guilt didn’t lessen.

“It’s still hours till sunset, but we found a way up into a basement you should be able to teleport from. When this is done, we’re sealing all the entrances we’ve found.”

People were beginning to pour gasoline on the piles of bodies. Marcus saw the injured survivors being evacuated and two hybrids lift Dupree and carry him to an exit. Winter’s gaze followed their progress until a group of lupines appeared from the alley carrying the dead warlord’s body. She shivered and he pulled her close, into his embrace. For once she didn’t fight the comfort he offered. He wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or worried about that. The warlord’s body was tossed in with the other demons and someone struck a match. It was blazing in seconds.

“Nothing else we can do. I’m leaving Baron in charge of the rest of the clean up. Come on, I’ll show you that basement,” Mitchell said.

He let Winter go and took her hand, but she didn’t budge when he tugged it.

“I can’t leave until everyone else is out.”

Of course, she’d fight him over this. He was careful to conceal his true thoughts, but let her feel the weight of his exhaustion, the weight of his concern. Her reaction was instantaneous. She was afraid he wouldn’t be able to teleport back to the mansion on his own.

He was tired, but not that tired. He kept that thought to himself. He wanted her out of there and if that got it for him, he could deal with the appearance of weakness. She allowed herself to be led out of the square, into a short narrow tunnel and up a steep flight of stairs. In the basement, there was another flight of stairs up that the wounded were taking.

“Garage up top.” Mitchell answered his unspoken question.

Which meant daylight. This was as far up as he could go, but he didn’t feel the repressive weight of tons of earth over him anymore. He could teleport easily from here. He squeezed Winter’s hand.

“Ready?”

“In a sec.” She pulled free of him and approached the leaders she called the quad. He heard her quietly making arrangements for a debriefing in several hours, ordering them to make sure everyone checked in with Gia before attempting to get some sleep. Then she was back at his side, hand slipping into his. “Let’s go.”

He joined his mind firmly with hers, both envisioning the basement in the Order's office building. Once there they took a moment to focus on the foyer in his house before willing their bodies to move from one place to the other. It was quiet when they entered and he didn't give her the chance to walk into the dining room where the command center was. He picked her up and carried her upstairs to their room, into the bathroom.

After setting her down, he opened the shower door and turned on the water, adjusting the nozzles so the temperature was the way she liked it, blistering hot.

"Get in. I'll be right back," he ordered, not waiting to see if she'd obey this time before opening the door.

He stopped in the bathroom connected to his office and took the world's fastest shower to get rid of the blood and gore from the battle. When he felt clean, he hurried to the kitchen hoping to find something cooked and ready to be served.

No one was in the room, but he found plastic containers of food in the fridge when he checked it. Pulling several out, he made two plates of sliced ham, potato salad and corn. He tucked a couple bottles of water under his arm and carried them upstairs, but sighed when he opened the door and set everything on the closest dresser top. She was already out of the shower, curled up on their bed fast asleep.



## Chapter Thirty-Four

Dupree came to in the lupines' lair with soft fingers stroking his face.

"He's going to be okay, right?"

Kara's voice. Kara's touch. How long had he been out? The wound across his stomach felt fresh, sending lancing pain through his nervous system. Wouldn't you know pain receptors wouldn't be affected by the demon poison?

"He'll be fine in a few days." Mitchell's voice, soft and coaxing and interested.

The demon in him snarled. No fucking way was that lupine getting his hands on Dupree's woman. Any other time, he would have fought the fury, the possessiveness, but with him incapacitated she was defenseless. Somehow he managed to pry his eyelids open, managed to make his vocal cords work though his voice was no more than a croak.

"Kara." He got his hand to work and motioned her to join him on the narrow bed, between the wall and his body. She climbed over him and though he still couldn't move much, he felt it all. He felt every inch of her soft body as it slid over him. Couldn't believe he didn't have a raging hard-on.

Mitchell met his gaze and grinned. The asshole knew exactly what he'd instigated. "No worries, old friend. We'll watch over both of you."

With that parting shot, he left the room and closed the door behind him. Dupree froze. They were alone. He worked damned hard to make sure he was never really alone with Kara and for damned good reason. He tested his body, searching for sensation and control to return. Toes, check. Fingers, check. Feeling was rushing back into him. He would've sighed in relief, but she was lying right next to him, braced up on one elbow and staring at him.

"You scared the hell out of me," she whispered, and he saw the terror in her eyes. For him.

"Then maybe now you understand why I refuse to let you go through the merging ceremony."

It was the wrong approach to take, but hell, he couldn't help it. Some of the poison was working out of his system but it obviously hadn't vacated his brain yet. She glared down at him.

"You don't get to make that choice for me, Dupree."

"Yeah, I do."

He stared back at her, willing her to get it. She shouldn't be in his world. She should be part of some nice loving human family with no concept of the evil eager to consume the world. She should run fast and hard from him because he was finding it harder and harder to resist her. And maybe she hadn't yet because he hadn't shown her. The depth of his fury. His need. The demands he would make on her.

She punched him in the shoulder and part of him was relieved he felt it. The other part furious she was still denying him. She tried to climb over him, tried to leave him, but he caught her hips and rolled over,

pinning her beneath his body. He snarled when she struggled against his hold, but was floored, thrown back into reality when her hands lifted to cup his face. When he saw only acceptance and acquiescence in her eyes. Her body relaxed under his. Soft. Welcoming.

"You should be running like hell from me," he muttered.

"And leave the other half of my soul?"

Stunned, he stared at her. She had no idea what she was saying, no idea what she was asking for. She shrugged. "I've always known, Dupree. Why do you fight it so much?"

"You deserve more," he whispered, gaze fixed on her lips. Could he risk one taste? Just one little taste to take with him when he left this world?

"Maybe," she answered, her face lifting from the pillow, lips getting closer to his. He groaned and she continued in that whisper that touched the most secret places of his soul. "But maybe I'd rather have you. Just you."

He kissed her. In his weakened state, he couldn't resist. *Yeah right*, he chided himself. He was just tired of fighting. Tired of wanting. And she tasted like heaven. Sweet and light. Heat and temptation. He stopped before he got carried away and she fell back into the pillow, but her hands gripped his upper arms.

"You get back here and finish what you started, Dupree Jackson," she ordered.

He almost smiled. She was one of only a handful people who never showed it when they were afraid of him or his mood. She should be running in terror now, not egging him on. Not testing his restraint. His body

was hard and tight with desire. His demon on the edge of his control.

“You’re playing with fire.”

She grinned up at him and his heart seemed to stop. *Mine.* “The only way to play with you is to play with fire.”

Why did she have to go and say things like that to him? Like she had a chance in hell of taking him on and coming out the other side sane? He would have leveraged himself up, out of the bed and away from her if he’d had the strength, but the poison was still working through his body.

And that was just an excuse, because if she stayed under him much longer, her warm pliant body his to do with as he pleased, he would cross an irrevocable line in his mind. He would make her his and damn the consequences. Fuck. Who was he kidding? That choice was made, but she had no idea what she was in for.

He would demand complete submission. Total surrender.

He made himself roll over. He would make those demands, but not yet. He would give her as much time to adjust to her changed reality as he could.

“Dupree?” For once, he let her see everything he was feeling when he met her gaze and she gasped.

“How did you get here?”

“I drove.”

He nodded. Okay. He could send her away for a few hours. He’d worry less about her if she was with Winter, at the nightwalkers’ house. “Go back. I’ll be there in a few hours.”

He sensed Gia near, knew she wanted to talk to him. He'd rest here. Catch up. And return to Kara soon. She saw that lingering promise in his eyes. He let her see it, hoping she had enough sense to run fast and hard, but she didn't. She pressed a kiss against his lips and left. He knew she'd be right where he wanted her when the time came and he'd take her, wouldn't allow her any escape.

God, he was an asshole.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Gia felt the disturbance in the air when someone teleported into the house and she let her senses flair out, trying to get a feel for who it was. The person was too well blocked so she moved from her position over the radio console and peeked out the door in time to see Marcus carrying Winter up the stairs. She smiled, relief sagging her shoulders. Winter was going to be okay. Marcus wouldn't have it any other way and Winter seemed just fine with that.

The radio crackled and Gia moved back to the board to check off the latest team reporting in. She glanced over the list. Almost done now, only two left out. Once they called in, she would break down the radio system and have it returned to their offices for storage until it was needed again. Checking the clock, for about the tenth time in the last hour, she wondered what was taking those teams so long.

And where Luke was.

Not that she wanted to see him—she'd deny that with her dying breath. But she knew she was on borrowed time. He would return any minute now that Marcus was back and she needed to get away before he did. He'd fight her if he knew she was planning on leaving. She didn't have any idea what his game was, but she wasn't getting sucked in anymore than she already was.

He'd spent weeks in bed with her, always making sure she understood it was nothing more than a casual experience for him, that there would never be anything real between them. She'd already known that, had recognized him for the player he was. So what the hell was all this mate business about for the last few days? She couldn't figure out what his angle was and the truth was she was already too invested to stick around and try. If he was going to break her heart anyway, it might as well be sooner. Not after she let herself believe his smooth lies, not after letting herself learn to hope. No way. She wouldn't do that to herself.

One of the teams checked in and she lunged for the radio and clipboard, acknowledging them. The last team called a few seconds later. She immediately went to work. The machine was much easier to break down than put together and it went quickly, wires removed and rolled, console folded into its box. She set the equipment next to the back wall, out of the way, for pick up later. She left the laptops where they were. Winter and Dupree would need them.

Exiting the room, she paused in the foyer, looking up the staircase a moment before deciding to abandon her bag. The air seemed to shimmer near the door, someone teleporting in, but she didn't wait to see who it was. She left as soon as the image was formed in her mind.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Luke felt the disturbance in the air and realized someone had left as he entered. He strode into the dining room, saw the radio equipment packed and leaning against the wall. She wouldn't have left. Wouldn't have dared. Fuck yeah, she would have. He whirled around, running up the stairs and down the hall to her room. He didn't bother to knock, but he didn't need to. It was unlocked, her things still in the room, but no sign of her.

He took a deep breath, forced his heart to stop racing. She'd just gone to a meeting. Or something. That didn't do much for his temper. He stomped out. Damn it. He'd told her to stay put. What the hell was she thinking?

He went back downstairs and looked around the dining room, but didn't find any clues to where she'd gone. It was still daylight and he'd just come from the downtown office. He didn't think she would have gone there, not with the way she'd been trying to avoid him. Her old compound was a possibility. Snarling, he paced. She wouldn't have been stupid enough to go there with Ben alive and missing and obviously targeting hybrids. Where did that leave him to check? The lupines? Of course. They'd taken the poisoned hybrid back to their lair with them. She must have gone to check on Dupree.



She shouldn't have gone without telling him, without waiting until he could join her. There was peace now, but he couldn't just teleport into the lupine lair. There was a big difference between wary allies and friends.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Gia's first stop was the lupine lair. She was amazed to find Dupree conscious and propped against a pile of pillows in bed, so deep in conversation with a member of the squad he didn't even notice her enter. She cleared her throat and jerked her chin at the young soldier in a silent order to leave. He didn't argue. Smart kid.

"What's up?" Dupree asked.

"You apparently." There was no point in hiding her confusion from Dupree. They'd known each other so long he'd have seen through the ruse anyway. He shrugged.

"Believe me, if I could explain it, I would."

"Uh huh."

"You're leaving aren't you?" His gaze was sharp and knowing.

"The council gave me permission to join another region."

"You tell Winter?"

She shook her head. "Figured you could take care of that."

There was exasperation in his gusty exhale, but his eyes were soft, sympathetic. She choked back a cry. God, she was going to miss him and Winter. Damn Luke for putting her in this position.

"You won't be able to run from him for long, Gia. He'll chase you," Dupree said quietly.

Maybe. "He won't find me."

But he would if she didn't get her ass in gear. She leaned over and hugged him, lingering longer than she should, wavering in her decision. He sensed her hesitation. "Stay. Work this out."

Biting her lower lip, she shook her head. "Gotta run."

Truer words...Before he could try to talk her into staying she teleported away, back to the compound she'd called home for so many years. It wasn't the safest place to go, but she just needed a few things. She'd be packed and gone before she could get into trouble. Besides what were the chances after the recent battle there'd be a demon nearby? Just thinking it was tempting fate.

The stillness hit her first. The house was eerily quiet, and she felt the echoes of the lives that used to inhabit it. Now it just felt empty and abandoned. Creepy. She hurried to her room, dug a duffle bag out of the closet, and started cramming clothes in it. When it was almost full, she added her spare boots and zipped it up.

Glancing around the room one last time, she wished it didn't have to be this way and for the millionth time that week cursed Luke. He'd driven her to this. The anger that surged through her was exhilarating and wouldn't it be even better to lash out at him? To make it abundantly clear she was leaving because of him?

She left the room and jogged down the stairs to the underground garage. She'd drive to their secret place and wait. Eventually, he'd look for her there and she'd tell him exactly what she thought of his careless

promises. And that's *all* she would do. She wouldn't give in to the allure. To the sexual draw between them. Yeah. Right. But no really, she was strong. She could resist one nightwalker. Even if he was incredibly sexy and wicked and used all his charms to his advantage.

In the garage, she patted her pockets and groaned when she realized she had no keys. It took her several minutes to find the spares in a drawer full of keys. Minutes that cost her everything.

She registered the fist flying at her before she saw it, but not in time enough to fix a location, any location, in her mind to teleport. She'd never bitch at Winter about not teleporting out the first time she'd been poisoned by a demon again. If she lived.

The impact knocked her to the ground and left her lightheaded, dizzy. She tried to marshal her telekinetic abilities to strike, tried to call for help, but was stunned to find her mind caged. She only knew one hybrid capable of that feat and he'd died the day before.

Nadia was right. Powers could be stolen. Vision blurry, she saw Benjamin step in front of her but he didn't attack, didn't kill her. And then there were demons surrounding her, pulling her to her feet roughly.

"Don't hurt her," Ben ordered. "I need her alive if she's to be bait."

Of course. What better way to draw out Winter and Dupree? If he wanted one of their powers, he'd want all three. The telepath, the telekinetic and the teleporter. She crawled as deep into her mind as could. She wouldn't be the one to betray her friends. She felt the feeble connection between her and Luke snap and

break, but she couldn't indulge the cry of pain and outrage it engendered.

She would survive, maybe not wholly sane, and protect the ones she loved in the process. When she failed to check in with Gray, people would worry. Winter and Dupree would never stop looking for her.

She just had to hold on until they found her.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Fuming, Luke went to the basement gym and pounded out his frustration on the punching bag. He kept at it until sweat poured from his body, until his knuckles were bruised and throbbing. Until he finally, finally felt the sun set.

After hurrying through the shower, he teleported to the road that led to Mitchell's lair. No one challenged him as he approached, the guard stopping him only long enough at the door to nod.

"They're expecting you upstairs."

Surprised, he raised an eyebrow. He'd never been invited up into the alpha's private quarters. As he climbed the stairs he felt Gia's lingering psychic scent and hurried. He had a thing or two dozen to shake into her. He followed the trail, found a weak-looking Dupree leaning against the closed door.

"She's gone," the hybrid male said.

Luke resisted the urge to growl. She had to stop this avoidance crap before she pushed him to something dangerous and desperate.

"Where to?"

Dupree shrugged. "No idea. She left hours ago."

Luke glared at him, again wondering if this was a man from her past. His fists clenched and he restrained himself. The hybrid smiled as if he knew the exact nature of Luke's struggle. It just pissed him off more.

Gia had a lot to answer for when he got his hands on her.

*Luke?* Marcus called him. *Where are you?*

*Mitchell's.* As if he'd been summoned, the lupine opened a door down the hall and stepped out. *Looking for Gia.*

*Well, that answers that question.* There was a hint of resignation in his tone.

*What?*

*Winter can't get in touch with her. She's afraid Gia left. When she tears you a new one for running off her best friend and second in command, keep in mind she's my mate. Your sister-in-law.*

*And bite my tongue?* he answered wryly. It didn't happen to him often, but he recognized an order from his brother when he heard one. It was obvious Winter didn't know where Gia was, probably wouldn't tell him if she did, and blamed him for her running away. And that's exactly what she was doing. It didn't matter. He'd find her.

"Everyone ready to move out?" Mitchell asked, but he was watching Dupree who responded with a weak smile.

"Let's get the show on the road."

"Where to?"

"Debrief at your place." The lupine shrugged. "Don't know why you came here, but Dupree said you would. And check it out. You did."

Luke studied the hybrid a minute before moving out of the way so he could make his way slowly down the stairs. He'd never bothered to find out what talents the demon had given Dupree, but it was the kind of

thing he should know. An ability to resist demon poison for one. He should be laid out for at least a few days, but just mere hours later he was on his feet. Moving slowly and painfully, but awake and lucid.

Outside, he watched Dupree climb into a SUV with Mitchell and Baron. Luke declined the offer of a ride. He wanted to check one more place before going back to the mansion. In the next thought he stood outside the compound Gia used to live in. He let his senses flare out, searching for any signs of demons or their traps. All that came back to him was her scent and he allowed himself a surge of hope as he approached the building. She'd been there recently, within the last few hours at least. Maybe she still was. It felt empty when he entered, but he searched even knowing what he'd find.

She was gone.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Winter woke alone, but the house was full of energy, full of voices. Stretching sore muscles, she winced when the gash under her ribs pulled. Her fingers brushed over the tender spot, not really surprised to find it covered in gauze. She rolled out of bed and went straight to the shower, hurrying so she could head downstairs.

After putting a fresh dressing on her wound, she dug clean clothes out of the bag she'd brought with her. Was it just a couple days ago? She couldn't keep living out of luggage, would have to get the rest of her things from the compound soon. Dressed, her weapons strapped on and hair hanging damp down her back, she went downstairs, following her growling stomach to the kitchen.

Every chair around the table was occupied by Kadall, Kara, Nadia and the members of the quad. Marcus sat on the end, his back to the door and turned his upper body when she entered. He smiled and held his hand out. When she took it he pulled her onto his lap. His hand traced the edge of the bandage under her shirt, before sliding around her torso to rub soft, teasing circles on her back.

*Better?*

His lightest touch was enough to excite her, yet soothing at the same time. Her sigh wasn't audible but he heard it.

Her stomach grumbled.

“Hungry?”

She laughed, feeling better than she had in weeks, in *years*. “Starving.”

Grinning from the other end of the table, Kara stood. “Got you covered, boss.”

A minute later she was eating the best lasagna she’d ever had, and made a selfish command decision. Kara was definitely staying, even if Winter had to let her go through the merging and then make the younger woman her personal chef. She finished the food with a plan and a contented sigh, but Marcus wouldn’t release her so she just pushed the plate in front of her.

“Where are Gia and Dupree?”

“Dupree’s with the lupines,” he answered. “I don’t know about Gia.”

Winter didn’t feel her in the house or get a response telepathically, so she tried her on her cell phone. No answer. She looked around the table, met everyone’s gaze.

“Anyone seen her?” She kept her voice light. She wouldn’t worry, wouldn’t panic. Yet.

Kara shook her head. “I haven’t seen her since the end of the operation, after all the teams checked in.”

“You haven’t left the house?”

“I went to visit Dupree when it was all over.”

Shit. *Ask Luke if he’s seen her, please.*

*Sure, baby.* The conversation with his brother was brief and she heard every word of it, her belief that Gia had fled the area to avoid Luke growing with every word.

*I’m going to kill him. Just so you know.*

*He'll find her.*

*He better and quickly. It's not safe for anyone to be on their own right now, and I need her help to pull off this job.*

More than that, she needed her friend. But she understood the need for space, the need for quiet while trying to work out how to make a bonding work. Luke was pushing Gia too hard. He had a lot to answer for. Normally, she wouldn't stick her nose in Gia's business, but this was different. She was too important to the functioning of the Order and to Winter and Dupree both.

"The others are on the way," Marcus told everyone else in the room. Luke had informed him that Dupree, Mitchell and Baron had left the lair. They would be another thirty minutes at least.

"Who has the after-action reports?" she asked in the general direction of the quad.

"Emailed to you," Lance answered for them.

She nodded and Marcus let her stand after she elbowed him in the gut. She left the kitchen and entered the dining room, knowing even if Gia had gone, she would have left the laptops behind. They were there, on the small table set up as a desk in the rear of the room.

She turned hers on and, when the laptop hummed to life, opened her email account. Marcus grabbed her a chair from the table and then leaned forward to read over her shoulder. It was a measure of how much she'd come to accept him. A few days ago, she would have laid into him for attempting to access Order information.

The reports were written in a standard, drab fashion completely at odds with the excitement of the events they described. They described entry points, casualties, kills and the destruction of all the bodies.

Dupree and the lupines entered as she finished the final report. He leaned heavily against the wall.

“Sit down, damn it. Looking at you makes me tired,” she snapped and, with a wan grin, he complied. She was amazed to see him on his feet at all. He shouldn’t have had any kind of immunity having never been a victim of demon poisoning before.

Luke teleported in. She rose from the desk and moved to a chair at the head of the table as the rest of the house’s occupants began to trickle in. Concentrating on Dupree rather than give in to the temptation to flay off Luke’s skin with the sharp edge of her tongue, she ignored everyone else.

“This shouldn’t be possible,” she said softly. “You shouldn’t be conscious.”

“No. I think putting the poison on a blade dilutes it enough so our systems can fight it faster, and then build the immunity. We need to get the scientists on that.”

She nodded. “Take care of it then. Until Gia comes back...” She let the thought trail off, but turned to glare at Luke. He held his hands up in a motion of surrender and backed up to lean against the wall, but she couldn’t help feeling he found her anger amusing. He responded to her suspicion telepathically with a soft and sober *no*. She took a steadying breath, feeling Luke’s worry and anger. He knew Gia had left because he’d pushed her so hard. Winter wasn’t sure if she

should throw up her hands in exasperation or throttle him, and—story of her life—she didn't have time to decide now. She'd deal with him later.

Turning to Mitchell, she got down to business. "Your numbers? We've got twenty more dead and I don't have an accurate count of the demons killed."

"Fifteen of ours. Fifty-one demons dead. It's impossible to say how many there were to begin with, but I'm guessing at least one hundred, and none affected by the day lethargy."

So half of the demons had escaped. "Ben?"

Baron took over, shaking his head. "We did a final pass through the tunnels before sealing them. No sign of Ben anywhere."

"Shit," she muttered. "So I've got at least fifty demons loose who aren't defenseless during the day. Plus Ben."

"Yeah."

Lance leaned forward. "I keep hearing Ben was there, but I never saw him."

"He was there," she said grimly. "He's found a way to cloak himself."

He scowled. "That's not a skill he got at the merging."

"No." And that was a problem. Skills could be developed, but they didn't appear out of nowhere.

*Commander?* It was a polite telepathic query.

*Yes, Nadia?*

*I found something, but Gia said to discuss it only with you and Dupree.*

Well, wasn't that interesting?

*Quiet until I say otherwise.*

*Of course, Commander.*

“Fuck.” She looked at Dupree. He wouldn’t be one hundred percent for a while and with Gia gone it was time to expand her inner circle. “He must have had that skill and just kept it to himself for some reason,” she said with the sinking feeling she didn’t want anyone else to pursue the matter until after she’d talked to Nadia.

“Find Ben,” she ordered Lance. “But don’t go after him by yourself.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but just nodded his head. “Yes, Commander.”

She stood, preparing to leave. “Full alert. Hourly check-ins.” She sighed. *Damn it, Gia.* “We need to set up a team to monitor those, someplace secure, and report to me or Dupree.”

“I can handle it,” Kara said. She pointed to the computers and folded-up comm center. “Everything’s already here.”

And she wasn’t going anywhere. She left it unsaid but it was clear she’d finally accepted she was staying right where Dupree wanted her. That was fine with Winter if the younger woman could take over some of Gia’s duties. It made sense actually. She knew all the hybrids; she’d be pretty damned useful. But it wasn’t Winter’s house and she wasn’t certain Marcus would appreciate the Order invasion continuing.

*Go for it. It’s fine.*

*Thank you.*

*You can thank me later.* The thought was accompanied by a mental image of lasciviously

wagging eyebrows that almost made her laugh out loud.

“Set us up in here,” she told Kara. Marcus’s dining room would serve fine as her headquarters.

“See to your security. I’ll check in on everyone later,” she said, dismissing the quad. “Lance, stick around a minute.”

The rest of the conversation would be kept as close to the chest as she could manage, and of the four members of the quad it was the newest one she trusted most. She smiled at Mitchell and Baron. “Thanks for your help. Dupree will be staying here. If we find out anything, I’ll let you know.”

Mitchell narrowed his eyes, his expression saying he knew she was keeping things to herself. She didn’t intend to, planned to catch him before he left, but she needed the quad gone. He must have seen something on her face, because he only nodded, stood as the rest of the table did. The quad began to blink out of the house and when they were all gone, the lupine turned to her, arms crossed over his chest and scowling. She shook her head and motioned everyone to follow her. There was a more comfortable place to continue the conversation and she was worried about Dupree. He shouldn’t be out of bed yet. He should be resting.

Marcus, Luke, Kadall, Mitchell, Dupree, Baron, Lance and Nadia all crowded into the office behind her. Marcus sat behind his desk while she perched on its edge, watching, worried, as Dupree gingerly sat down on the couch. The others took the remaining seats or leaned against the walls and waited until Dupree looked up and met her gaze.

“What are we keeping from the rest of the quad?”

“I’m not sure yet. Nadia?”

The historian cleared her throat and everyone turned to look at her. She flushed a little under all the scrutiny and froze up.

“What is it?” Dupree pressed.

“I’ve been going through the old scrolls, looking for information on warlords.”

Winter had forgotten all about that.

“And?”

“In the very old ones—” Winter suspected Nadia was talking about the scrolls they’d discovered really were part of the banned texts, “—the first generation of the Order, there were rumors of knights going rogue and stealing others’ powers by ingesting their heart and brains. There are letters about it actually, between the council and a regional commander.”

The idea made Winter’s stomach roll and she forced down a surge of bile. No wonder the early generations of elders had tracked down those scrolls and destroyed them. Some information was safer kept secret, especially among a people prone to evil and insanity. How the hell had Ben got his hands on those scrolls?

“Christ on a stick,” Lance muttered. “I’ve never heard that before.”

Nadia nodded. “It’s only popped up in these papers. It looks like the idea was ruthlessly suppressed. We know the Order starting bonding mates about fifty years after it was formed.”

“When the first knights would have started going rogue.”



“Yes.”

Winter dragged a hand over her face. Just freaking wonderful.

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“Gia knows. I went to her as soon as I found it.” That was fine. Gia would keep the knowledge to herself.

“Okay, assuming this is true. Who had the ability to make himself invisible?”

“Maris,” Lance said.

The room fell silent while everyone thought over the ramifications.

“There’s more,” Dupree finally said, breaking the silence. “Tell them what you skipped in there, Winter.”

She smiled. Dupree must have heard part of her conversation with the warlord. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know none of this is random.”

A reminder. Dupree kept his own secrets.

“Right,” she said softly, keeping her gaze on him while speaking to the others. “The warlord talked during the fight. This isn’t random. It seems like he was looking for me specifically.”

Mitchell frowned. “Why?”

Between the battle and catching up on sleep, she hadn’t had much time to think it over, but she shared her theory. It was more of a hunch than anything. Instinct. “He called us soul stealers. Said, or implied at least, that the souls we merge with are sometimes, um, occupying a body already, I guess.”

Mitchell looked at Baron who shrugged. "News to me."

"So why you?" Kadall asked, but she was watching Dupree, saw him reach the same conclusion she had.

"Because some of us are...different. Stronger. Faster. Have more psychic strength than any of the rest. Winter is one of those. And the demon she merged with, that the other really strong ones merged with, must be..." He didn't finish the thought. He didn't need to.

"Warlords," Baron said in a soft awed voice into the quiet room with an accompanying whistle.

She nodded, leaping to another conclusion. "Ben, too." She met Dupree's gaze. "You and Gia." The three of them had always been uncommonly tough.

He nodded. "Probably."

"Commander," Nadia interrupted, voice trembling a little with barely repressed excitement, and Winter looked at her, cocking an eyebrow when she didn't continue. She seemed to give herself a little shake before continuing. "I haven't been through all the scrolls yet. After I found...the other stuff, Gia locked the banned ones in the safe. But that's not all. I put everything that wasn't a part of Ben's official catalogue, everything that came out of his vault, into that safe."

"You think the information we need is in there?"

"I can't say, but I'm willing to bet *if* we have it, that's where it is. Before he went rogue, it's something Ben wouldn't have wanted to be general knowledge. To keep y'all safe."

Winter narrowed her eyes. "You too I bet. You didn't get an average demon soul when you merged."

Nadia shrunk back. "Me? I don't think so."

Winter shook her head. She should have seen this before. Nadia may be a noncom, but her mind had a pure, powerful strength. She was one of their strongest telepaths. It made the circle of people who needed to be on higher alert even bigger.

"We don't have a lot of telepaths who can match you."

Dupree sighed, easily following her train of thought. "And I've run with you, Nadia. Not many of us can keep up." He exchanged a brief glance with Winter before turning back to the historian. "You just earned yourself extra self-defense lessons."

She didn't look the least bit happy about it either.

"The strongest among us, the ones with the most unique abilities...that's a lot of people to keep extra vigilant," Lance put in.

"And Ben knows who we are. Who all of us in this region are," Winter said.

"We need a carefully worded warning," Dupree responded.

"We need Gia," she growled, glaring at Luke.

Dupree only shook his head. "Don't have her. Give me a couple days to get back to full strength then we'll speak to the ones we suspect privately. We can emphasize the possibility of personal attack without saying a whole lot."

Did they have two days? She felt Marcus's assurance he would be at her side, but she was reluctant to drag him into hybrid matters any more

than she had. It wasn't that she didn't trust him; she just didn't think her people would accept him mated to their commander.

*We'll deal with those problems as they arise.*

*Maybe.* It would be better if it was Dupree who went with her on those visits however and they all knew it. Despite her worries about Marcus being accepted, it was damned good to know she wasn't alone, wouldn't ever be alone again.

"Two days," she answered Dupree but cocked an eyebrow. "Think that'll be enough time? Push yourself and you're no use to anyone."

His expression closed, eyes flinty. "I'll be fine."

Prickly. Why were all males so damned prickly? She sighed. "Fine."

She decided to take her own unspoken advice. The last few days had been exhausting, and she felt better, but with the immediate danger over she wanted to sleep for about a week. Or twelve hours at least. She stood.

"Later then." She met everyone's gaze as she looked around the room. "And let's make sure we keep this information to ourselves."

"The council?" Lance asked.

She hesitated. "I'll make a report to them when it's time." But not before Nadia went through all the secret and forbidden scrolls. Winter was pretty sure when the council heard about them they'd demand she hand them over or destroy them. She wasn't doing that until she was armed with every bit of information possible.

"Y'all get out of here. Everyone's exhausted."

She hugged Mitchell briefly, ignoring Marcus's tension as she did. The lupine was a friend, nothing more, and she wasn't a nightwalker female. He'd have to accept that sooner or later. He stayed still, didn't even bitch at her mentally. She almost smiled. Progress.

"I'll talk to y'all later," she told the lupine and his second in command then left the room.

Marcus followed her with that quiet stealthy glide she was starting to get used to. It wasn't the first time he'd made her feel like she was being stalked. Her shiver was one of anticipation. He might hunt her, might even catch her, but it was a capture she craved, one she looked forward to.

He didn't speak when they entered the room. The only sound that broke the silence was his heel kicking the door shut. But he didn't need to say anything. She felt his need, his anger, his fear, his love. His acceptance.

She set her weapons down, removed her boots and socks, then tugged the shirt over her head, careful of the long cut across her torso. He still didn't speak, but he didn't have to. His eyes did it for him, all heat and want and carnal desire. He didn't try to hide anything from her. Butterflies took flight in her stomach. To be *needed* that much...it was a responsibility she'd never expected.

She reached for the top button on her pants, but paused, meeting his gaze. *Aren't you going to get naked and have your way with me?*

His eyes flashed a warning. So it was said a little archly. So what? Here she was offering herself to him

and he just stood and watched. She didn't mean to share the thought, but he smiled.

*You test my control. Just let me look for a minute, baby.* He pointed to her pants. *Take off the rest.*

She hesitated.

*Winter.*

It was a seductive whisper in her mind, a lure she couldn't fight, but when she dropped the pants and shimmied out of her panties, he didn't move an inch. Just stood and stared.

"Well?"

"Beautiful."

No smile, no change in his expression, but he finally moved. He stopped close enough she could feel his heat but not close enough to brush up against her. Unless she moved, unless she closed the distance between them. She lifted her foot to do just that but he stopped her.

"Stop. Give me a minute to just look at you, Winter."

She crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly uncomfortable. Unsure. He reached for her arms and pulled them to her sides. "Don't do that. Don't hide yourself from me."

She bit her lower lip. Shit. She'd thought she could do this, thought in the middle of that battle with the demons she could handle an emotional attachment. Could handle him. But faced with it, she wasn't so sure. She felt exposed. Vulnerable. Yet oddly unafraid.

Then he smiled and he reached for her, pulled her flush up against his body. His cock was hard and throbbing against her belly, but his hands were gentle.

Tender. And his eyes...did she deserve that kind of love? That much devotion?

"Doesn't matter if you think you deserve it or not," he said before his mouth covered hers, before his tongue thrust in to tangle with hers.

*You have it.*

She lifted her hands to grip his shoulders, to hang on for everything she was worth, because while she didn't believe she'd earned this, she wasn't about to let him go. She was too selfish. Too greedy. And he belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

He didn't take his mouth from hers, that wonderfully talented tongue stayed right where it was, but she heard the growl in her mind. Satisfied. Triumphant. A little cocky and a lot self-assured. It was almost like a purr, a chant in her mind, *mineminemine*, over and over again.

A week ago, hell days ago, she would have been furious. But now a laugh bubbled up in her throat. It was a sound of joy and of satisfaction. Of belonging. This nightwalker touched her soul in ways she'd never imagined possible. And he touched her body the same way, with the same reverence.

Marcus couldn't hold back any longer, on fire with the need to possess her. He backed her up to the dresser and lifted her to cling to the edge, then stood back to remove his clothing with jerky movements. Too fast. His zipper rasped over his erection and he thought he might come then and there, before he even got inside her. He should have waited to get naked as she put it, because now that he was he couldn't slow

down, couldn't stop, and he wanted this to be so good for her that every other experience faded to nothing.

Feminine laughter in his mind. *That's already happened.* She shared what she was feeling with him. Love and lust. Fire and passion. The euphoria of feeling her in his mind was enough to make him combust. Then her hand was wrapped around him, her other hand pushing him back so she could jump off the dresser.

*I wonder what you taste like.*

He felt her intent, hot and carnal, and fisted his hands. He had to stay in control.

She laughed aloud this time. *But I don't want you in control. It's my turn.*

It was a testament to how important she was to him that he let her have it. Kneeling on the floor in front of him, one hand stroking him while she gripped his hip with the other, she looked up to meet his gaze then flicked her tongue out over the head of his cock. God help him. If she did that again, he'd come like an untried teenager who'd just discovered women.

Her lips closed over him, pulled him into her mouth, and he groaned. He wouldn't last two minutes. He tried to distract himself with all the things that needed to be done tomorrow. He felt her teeth. *Stop that. Let me give you the same kind of pleasure you give me.*

Grinding his teeth, he cleared his mind and looked down at her, felt her satisfaction that he'd done as she asked. His woman. On her knees. It wasn't triumph he felt seeing the submissive pose, but tenderness. Love. He let her continue another few minutes, sucking him



hard into her mouth, rolling her tongue around him, over the head of his cock. He felt her desire, rising like a red haze, with each movement, along with his, until he knew he couldn't last.

He gently pulled away, lifted her and carried her to the bed where he used his mouth and fingers to drive her crazy. She cried out with her first and second orgasms, but he didn't stop, didn't slow. Her taste was too addicting.

"Enough." She pushed at his shoulders. "Come inside me now."

In the end, he couldn't deny her anything, but he could slow them down, draw out the pleasure for both of them. He kissed his way up her body, pausing to pull one nipple into his mouth, sucking it hard up against the roof of his mouth. He felt the trembling in her body that signaled the beginning of another orgasm, but this time he'd go over that ledge with her.

He surged into her and gave her exactly what they both needed. Fast, hard thrusts. Her channel convulsed around him, squeezing with the tremors of her release. It was more than he could take and throwing his head back, he came with a roar, his mind instinctively reaching out to soak up the extra psychic energy flooding the room.

Rolling to the side, he pulled her over to drape across his chest. Her palm was flat on his belly while he ran his hand up and down her back. They were both breathing hard.

"That was..."

She didn't have to finish the thought. He felt the *incredible* she would have added. *Give me a few minutes and we'll do it again.*

She laughed. "No way. I'm not moving for a week."

"Really?" he asked, letting his voice go dark and seductive. "Bet I can change your mind."

She smiled and in exactly ten minutes he did just as he promised.

## Chapter Forty

*She didn't know where she was, but she knew she was in mortal danger. So she ran, fog thick around her body, the ground under her feet alternately spongy and slick. Glancing over her shoulder, she increased her speed, the macabre grin growing closer with each step. He reached out with clawed hands, the tips of the nails glistening with poison.*

*Faster, damn it, had to run faster.*

*She shouldn't be alone, should never be alone, and she reached out to the person who was supposed to share her mind, her life. Her soul. There was nothing, no one, there. Only a long smooth wall that, instead of protecting her from others, imprisoned her. Locked her in. She battered at the wall, threw focused arrows of thought at it. Where was he? Why wasn't he trying to get to her?*

*She saw a glow of light ahead and pumped her legs harder, faster, ignoring the fatigue that threatened to overtake her, gulping a sob as she tripped on something and fell facedown into the ground she couldn't see.*

*Then she felt the claws, felt the tearing sensation, the agony as they ripped not only into her skin, but her mind. She screamed the agony, but no sound came from her throat. No help came to the rescue.*

*Winter jerked awake, heart hammering, breath sawing in and out of her lungs. She still felt the urge to*

run, felt the urge to fight, and it took her several seconds to become aware of the body she struggled against, to take his scent into her lungs and settle down.

“That was one hell of a nightmare,” Marcus breathed against her neck.

“It wasn’t a dream.”

He sat up, leaning on an elbow and partially blanketing her body. “Yes it was, baby. You’re right here. Safe in our bed. In my arms.”

She was, but the terror of the dream still clung to her. Snuggling closer, she wrapped her arms around his waist and tried to convince herself he was right. He petted her, stroked his smooth, soothing palms over her back until she calmed, until she drifted back to sleep. She felt a weak probe against her mind before she gave in to unconsciousness, replied weakly.

*Gia?*

It wasn’t until she woke, the nightmare still vivid in her mind, that she realized it wasn’t hers at all.

## Chapter Forty-One

A mate bonding could only be performed by someone who outranked you. In her case, a member of the council. She was stunned that the Grand Master himself had come for hers and not a lower-ranking member, however. And she was unsettled at the way he was eyeing them. Well, not her. Marcus. With suspicion and distrust and a sharp cunning that made Winter nervous.

As if thinking his name was a call, Marcus stepped up behind her, settled his hands on her hips and leaned down to nuzzle her neck. The combination of arousal and comfort that filled her wasn't as disarming as before. She was beginning to accept it as a part of her new life. But Gray worried her. Tainted that feeling.

*Don't worry about him, Marcus whispered. We'll come to an understanding.*

*Don't count on it. That man's plans have plans.*

Marcus chuckled. *So do mine. So do yours. We're all responsible for a great many people. You can't blame him for wondering how our bonding changes things. You'd feel the same in his place. So would I.*

That was truth. But she didn't have to like it and Gray's withheld approval concerned her. Marcus's fingers stroked up her side, his amusement heavy in her mind.

*Possessive aren't you?*

Just like that her worry turned to anger. *You're mine*. She'd been ordered to bond. She wasn't going to stand any criticism of her choice. He turned her around in his arms and she tilted her face back for his kiss, let herself get swept away in his heated promise, in his total acceptance and devotion. They were interrupted too soon and she turned reluctantly to face Gray, relieved when Marcus refused to let her go. He stood behind her, his arms tight around her waist. Gray gave him a considering look and she fumed silently.

*Shh. Let us deal with this*, Marcus commanded. It said something about her state of mind and heart that she didn't snap back at him, didn't it? That in this she let him take the lead when weeks ago she would never have considered it. But right now Marcus and Gray were just two dominant males circling each other, trying to decide if one was worthy of protecting her or not. Days ago she would have been offended. Now she was just amused and willing to step back to enjoy the show. Should be interesting when Dupree and Mitchell joined in.

*Don't remind me of the lupine*, Marcus growled mentally, but there was amusement not anger under the mock growl.

The others walked out of the woods. Her closest friends and inner circle. Dupree, Nadia and Lance. Kara, Luke and Mitchell, the other non-Order members. It was an unusual group for what was normally a very private ceremony, but except for Gia's absence, it felt right.

"Are you ready?" Gray asked.

She looked up at Marcus, her smile slow to come but sure. “Absolutely.”

Marcus lifted her hands, his lips grazing her knuckles with just a hint of teeth. This time his ferocity not quite a joke. *Don't forget it.*

She shared her laughter mentally. She was beyond doubts. They turned and followed Gray into the grotto of all that was left of a pre-colonial monastery. It was the location they used for all mate bondings in her region. A solemn, sacred place and because of that no one spoke as they entered.

She and Marcus faced each other while the others formed a circle around them. As Gray began to speak the ancient words that would create a new blood bond, she pulled her obsidian blade. The same blade that had joined her to the demon served a new purpose now. She waited until Gray finished the few short sentences before slashing the knife across her hand, watched silently as Marcus did the same. Their palms came together, their blood mingled, and she felt the *force* of his life rush through her. It was exhilarating and he caught her as she swayed.

Then amazingly she felt the bonds, the nightwalker's soul bond and the hybrid's blood bond, combine into something fierce and bright. Dupree gave her a startled glance. It was clear he felt the difference in her. Curious. She wondered if the rest of her original squad, the other people she shared a blood bond with, felt the strength of her new bond too. They'd been worried a nightwalker's blood might weaken the group's bond. No one had been brazen

enough to come out and say it, but the concern was impossible to ignore. And how wrong they were.

"I guess that answers that question," Gray said so softly she had to strain to hear him.

She looked over to see him switching his gaze from her to Dupree, his gaze speculative. Pressing her lips tight on her response, she turned and led the way outside. The grotto wouldn't be witness to her upcoming chat with Gray.

In the clearing, she faced him and made her voice hard. "Whatever you're thinking, forget it."

He cocked an eyebrow. The Grand Master probably wasn't used to being spoken to in that tone. She didn't care. If she didn't make her stand now, she wouldn't be able to later. Dupree and Mitchell, who recognized her mood, shifted into a fighting stance. That's when she noticed who was missing.

*Where's Luke?*

She felt a pause in Marcus's mind, knew he was searching for his brother. *Searching for Gia.*

A search that in the last few days had grown desperate. Gray spoke softly, as if reading her mind. "Gia hasn't checked in anywhere."

"Shit," she muttered then made her voice firm. "We'll find her."

Gray gave her that considering look again. She wished like hell she could read him. He was so well controlled, so well shielded, she didn't have any idea what he was thinking or feeling. But the aggression that had just filled the air dissipated and the others, except for Marcus, stepped back to give her space.

"About the scrolls," he said.



“What scrolls?” she asked, lying without compunction. She knew exactly what scrolls.

Finally, his reserved demeanor cracked and he chuckled, his eyes turning bright with amusement. “Right. I wouldn’t admit to having them either. But when you’re done learning what you can from them, Winter, they have to be burned. You understand the danger they represent.”

“If I had any dangerous scrolls,” she said carefully, “I’d make sure they didn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

He sighed, a resigned look crossing his features for just a moment. “I’ll accept that. For now.”

Their attention was caught by a heated conversation at the trailhead. Dupree and Kara. Why was she not surprised? She rolled her eyes when Dupree practically screamed *over my dead body* into the still air. Then he took Kara by the arm and they teleported away.

“That has to be dealt with ASAP. You can’t afford to lose Dupree,” Gray said, his tone once again that cold Grand Master voice he’d perfected. It made her hackles rise and she gave him a frigid smile.

“My people. I’ll deal with them in my way. You made me commander. Regretting that now?” she asked with a saccharine sweetness that alarmed everyone who knew her. Gray just smiled.

“No. Don’t prove my faith in your abilities wrong though, Winter. You won’t like the results.”

At her side Marcus went hunter-still. “Don’t threaten my mate, hybrid,” Marcus said, icily controlled, but she felt his fury.

Gray's gaze clashed with Marcus. "I agreed to this bonding because I believed you could temper her...more volatile instincts. See that you do."

Oh good God, was another man calling her reckless? Before she could vent her surge of temper, Gray nodded and disappeared from the clearing. The others had wisely already vacated the area, which only left one person to rail against. But when she spun around to Marcus he had his arms crossed over his chest and was giving her that insolent grin that infuriated her as much as it made her melt.

"I don't think he meant to be insulting," Marcus said dryly.

"Oh really? How do you figure that?"

"I think you'd agree that your bonded hybrids are more stable than the single ones. Less willing to take unconsidered risks."

"Rash, you mean. Less careless."

Marcus shrugged but she could see this was important to him so she took a deep breath and tried to will away the anger at Gray's less-than-positive vote of confidence. She hadn't wanted to be commander after all.

"You react differently when you have someone to go home to," he said softly. "We all do."

Was that a kernel of self-doubt she saw in his eyes? How could he doubt her feelings after everything they'd been through? He was close enough to reach out for, but that wasn't enough. She stepped forward, into arms that immediately circled her waist and pulled her close.

"I know what I have to come home to," she whispered while pressing soft kisses up his throat.

*And I know you can't be reined in,* his mind said softly to hers while invisible fingers found her nipples and teased. *I'll just be sure to give you plenty of incentive to return.*

She gasped as the teasing grew more heated. *Speaking of home...*

His lips were on hers before she could finish the thought. He kissed her gently at first. Seducing. Taming. It was so easy to give in to his unspoken demand that she surrender to his care, so easy to return his love.

It was close to sunrise before they returned to the place they called home.

## About the Author

Loribelle is like the South she calls home. Hot and sultry. Languid and sexy. Magnolias and gardenias scent her silk-lined boudoir, and men and children alike bow to her magnificence...

Okay, maybe it isn't quite that glamorous. She does have two smart and lovely daughters who give her a run for her money and a son that will one day be someone's model of a romance hero. (She promises.) Her husband is a real-life hero, and Loribelle just tries to keep up with the demands of military life. In between, she writes a book or two.

She's had every job under the sun, but haven't most writers? That army military police, bookstore manager, waitress, wedding photographer, website designer experience has to prove useful sometime. As they say in the South, it all washes out in the end.



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