

**Thank you so, so much to my husband, who keeps
my head above water when the tide comes in.**

Thank you to my daughter. You are the magic in my life.

**Thank you to my family, and to my dearest friends.
You give me hope.**

And from the bottom of my heart - thank you to my loyal readers and supportive fans.

You all mean the world to me.

Chapter One: "The Illusion"

"What's not to love about you, Danny? You're magic incarnate, girlfriend. You can do *anything*, for goddess' sake."

"Not all werewolves like magic, Imani. And why are you trying to sell them like this, anyway? Give me a break, girl. I've got enough on my plate." Dannai took a long pull of her beer and shot her friend a side-long glance. Unconsciously, she gently touched the golden Thor's hammer necklace she wore, and then returned her attention to her drink. The covens were a mixed pot as far as culture and religion were concerned. A single witch could believe in all of the Greek gods, respect the goddess Gaia, and pray to Thor.

Imani Zareb chuckled, the sound a low rumbling kind of chord that made Dannai go weak in the middle. Danny had always loved Ima's purring voice. It was sexy as hell. If it weren't for that voice, Danny would be straight – and that would be it. But Imani was a stunning woman of Brazilian and African American descent, tall and strong, thanks to her father, and well endowed, thanks to her model of a mother.

One of Dannai's favorite things in the world to do was coax a moan out of her dear friend and there were only two ways to do that. Chocolate and sex. Usually for Imani, the two went hand in hand.

"I'm *selling* them because I know how hard this is for you, Danny." Imani turned on the swivel stool at the bar and fixed Dannai with a hard gaze. "Girl, you're exhausted. I can see it in your weird-ass eyes. Not that I don't love your weird-ass eyes, honey, but they *are* weird. You gotta admit it. And right now they're *tired* weird-ass eyes." Imani shook her head and, because she wore a strapless top, her crystal chandelier earrings brushed enticingly across her bare shoulders. "I know you think the coven will freak if you let up and give in, but the shield you constantly wear is draining you."

Dannai found that she had nothing to say to that. Her friend was right. She'd been wearing the shield since she was twelve. Every morning, just as she brushed her teeth and showered and pulled on her clothing, she mouthed the simple words to the spell and, suddenly, to anyone bothering to take a supernatural sniff, she would smell somewhat normal. Human. Albeit, a magical human, but a plain old human otherwise.

It was important. Because without the shielding spell, the werewolves she'd vowed to help every day of her life would have been able to scent what she *truly* was. And then everything would fall apart. It would all come crashing down. Just as soon as one of their alphas caught a whiff.

Dannai rolled her beer bottle between her fingers and sighed heavily. "It's not just the coven, Ima. It's me. What if Lalura is right? What if my changing makes my... You

know – ability – go *poof?*” She blew air through her fingers and then shook her head. She managed to suppress the shudder of dread that the thought invoked, but it wasn’t easy. “I can’t throw this gift away, Imani. People will die without me. People that I could otherwise save. Throwing away this gift would be, hands-down, the most selfish act in human history.”

Imani watched her friend for a moment, her dark chocolate eyes taking everything in. Dannai’s long, sultry black hair fell to the small of her back, but when she turned her head, the long, thick locks slid to the side, revealing the open-backed shirt she wore and the expanse of tanned, smooth skin beneath.

Dannai was incredibly attractive. Breathtaking, without a doubt. She had some very lucky ancestry, whoever her parents may have been. They’d given her skin that had a perpetually tanned look, even though Dannai hated the sun. And her features were as fine as a doll’s. Her big, bright eyes were sultry and strange, a startling mixture of green, blue, and gold. They were stunning, in their own right. She had the most seductive lips, unendingly swollen and red, as if she’d just been fiercely, deeply kissed. She was a knock-out.

But Imani could tell that her friend had lost weight. The toned muscles in her arms and back were starkly outlined against her skin, with little to no fat to smooth out their lean, cut lines. And Imani could see ribs. The sharp angle of Dannai’s jaw and the dark circles under her eyes didn’t help. She still looked gorgeous – but in a shadowy and troubled kind of way.

“As far as I can see, girlfriend,” Imani began softly, “you’re killing yourself so that you can save the world. I wouldn’t call that selfish, Danny. I’d call it *selfless* – *damned* selfless. And nothing lasts forever, honey. One of these days, somethin’ in you is gonna break. I hope it’s your will and not your mind. ‘Cuz I’d much rather see you shackled up with one of them fine alphas than wrapped in a tight white and sleeping in a padded cell.”

Dannai sighed, again, and straightened on her stool. The bartender wordlessly took her empty bottle and replaced it with a frosty, full one. Dannai nodded her thanks, giving him a small smile, and then turned her attention to her companion once more. “Ima, I told you. Not all wolves like magic.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Imani asked, a frown furrowing her smooth brow. “What’s that got to do with–” Imani broke off as comprehension dawned on her. “Oh no, girl. Lord, no.” Her eyes were wide and she leaned in to whisper, conspiratorially, “You’re dreaming of them, aren’t you?”

“Damn it, Ima, keep it down!” Dannai glanced around nervously, wondering just what might be in the shadows of the rather quiet bar around them. She’d been using transportation magic to bring her to this particular bar for years. The bartender was also the owner of the establishment and was a friend, more or less. She trusted Ted to keep anything he might overhear to himself. After all, she’d saved his life once, when a drunk man had attacked him with a broken beer bottle because he’d thought that Ted was sleeping with his ex-wife.

Ted was okay. And, like so many of the people she’d helped over the years, he

was grateful enough to her that there was little in the world that would cause him to betray her trust. But she didn't know anything about the other patrons of the pub tonight. It was quiet, but things weren't always as they seemed. She of all people would know that.

"Please. I don't want Alberich to know about the dreams. He would.... Well, he would *freak*. And you know it." She glared at her friend, her multi-colored eyes glittering in the dim light of the pub.

At that, Imani's face went stony, her look dark. She grabbed her friend by the arm and pulled her off of the stool. "Come on. We gotta have a girl talk."

Dannai blinked, almost spitting out her beer, and stumbled after her friend, whose grip on her arm was merciless. She swallowed hard and gasped out a few words. "Ima, what the-"

"Shh!" Imani shushed her and then she was shoving through the girl's restroom door and leading Dannai inside. When they were both locked into a very crowded stall and a dumb-struck Danny was straightening out her clothes, Imani put her hands on her hips and pinned her friend to the spot with a no-nonsense gaze.

"Listen up, girl. I shouldn't say this, because goddess knows that the walls have ears and eyes and scrying is a very easy spell. But, I'm gonna say it anyway. Jason Alberich is not who his father was. He's mighty keen, yes. But he's not as wise and he's not as... *kind*. He may be the new herald, but I didn't vote for him. *No* one voted for him, Danny. Because no one *got* a vote. And I don't like that. It may be how the coven has operated for thousands of years, but I don't care. Jason...." She lowered her voice and Dannai could see that she suppressed a shiver of her own. "Well, Jason Alberich gives me the creeps," she whispered. "And, that's not all, honey. I think Lalura is influenced too much by him. I can't help but question all of her insistence that your powers will be lost if you do the horizontal two step with an alpha."

Dannai's jaw dropped. "You would question Lalura? Ima, she's, like *ninety*! She's got to be the oldest and wisest in our coven! *Everyone* respects her prophecies and *no one* takes her advice lightly. How can you say that about her?"

"It isn't her - It's Jason. I think he can be very influential. He's handsome, he's charming, he's smart and he's very powerful and he puts it to good use, Danny."

Dannai shook her head and backed up against the door of the stall. She threw her hands up in the air in a helpless gesture. "Regardless! Why on earth would Lalura be lying about something like this?"

"Because, Danny," Imani leaned forward until they were mere inches apart. Her steady, dark gaze penetrated Dannai's gemstone eyes and held her. "Alberich has a thing for you. He has for *years*. Decades. *Every* male member of the coven has!" She threw up her own hands in frustration and straightened again. "Can you seriously not see that? Except, Jason's the only one who might be able to do anything about it. You know how Lalura felt about his father and how she feels about him, too. She *adores* him! What if he's filling Lalura's head with lies – and she's passing them on to

you?" She poked Dannai in the chest with one long index finger, punctuating her point.

Dannai was stunned speechless. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. There was no way in hell that Jason Alberich would do that kind of thing just for a chance at sleeping with her. He had his pick of women in *and* out of the coven and he enjoyed them regularly, but Dannai had not been one of them. Not that she minded. She wanted to keep that part of her life separate from her personal life.

Imani was the only coven member she'd ever gone to bed with. And Imani was a woman. And a friend. So, it didn't count... At least, that was what she told herself.

But worse than her insinuation that Alberich could be interested in her in that way was Imani's implication that Lalura, the coven counselor, could be lying about Dannai's gift and how it would disappear should she ever become a turned werewolf. It was something she'd been told for twenty years – since she was twelve, when she had realized, with abject dread and horror, that she was not only a witch – but a dormant.

Lalura had raised her, nearly from infancy. Dannai'd been abandoned as a babe, her real name and origins utterly unknown. It was Lalura, the coven counselor, who had recognized the magical talent in the tiny infant at the orphanage and adopted her into magic's fold. It was Lalura, a great fan of Greek mythology and a lover of the Iliad, who named her. One name. Dannai, after the mother of the Greek demigod, Perseus. It was Lalura, also, who helped her create the shielding spell that she now wore.

Danny had been protecting herself with it all of this time because her power was incredible and irreplaceable and vastly important. No one else in the world possessed a power such as hers. She was the most coveted member of the coven, and for good reason.

She could heal an individual with nothing more than a touch and a thought. Any injury whatsoever would simply heal up and disappear, as if it had never been.

There was no way that Lalura would lie to her about this great gift and anything that might happen to it. The woman was like her grandmother.

"Danny, I can see the wheels spinning in your head again and I know you're still misunderstanding me. I'm not saying that Lalura would do anything to hurt you. Goddess knows she loves you. But I *am* saying that she may not *know* she's hurting you, because Alberich may be pulling her strings."

"For twenty years, Ima?"

"If I recall correctly, Alberich was quite a trouble maker in his dark, brooding teen years. And, as I recall, he had it bad for you even then."

Again, Dannai couldn't believe that Imani was saying this. Before she could retort with anything clever, Imani cut her off. "Girl, you've been working with werewolves for so long that you've forgotten how normal humans behave," she continued. "A *human* man doesn't mark his mate and turn her into a female dog, Danny. He does *other* stuff – and Jason Alberich has done it *all* when it comes to you." She shook her head

in dismayed scorn. "You've apparently just not noticed. Which, if you ask me, is just plain head-up-your-ass, girl. I mean, I don't like the guy, like I said. But a girl *notices* when someone like that takes an interest in her."

It was a while before Dannai could speak. But by the time she finally could, she had realized that there was no arguing with a person's opinions or fears. What Imani was suggesting was that there was simply a *chance* that not everything was as it seemed. And, again, Dannai couldn't deny that possibility.

"Okay..." Danny began, licking her lips. Imani's gaze flicked to her mouth and then back up again. "So, what do you suggest I do?"

Imani crossed her arms over her chest and tried to hide her satisfactory smile. It didn't work. "Well, first, tell me who you're dreaming of – and why you seem to think he wouldn't like magic."

Dannai's stomach knotted almost immediately. At once, images of her dreams flashed before her mind's eye. Her heart sank and her voice lowered in defeat when she finally replied, "It isn't a *he*, Ima. It's a *them*." She swallowed hard and looked at the floor of the bathroom, not really seeing the mess or wet tiles. Inside, she was still gazing into jet black eyes in a sinfully handsome face, above an equally sinful hard body that begged to be touched. She groaned inwardly. "And one of them is Lucas Caige."

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Ted the bartender watched the two women enter the women's restroom. His brown eyes were shadow-cast by his hooded brow as he seemed to stare right through the closed door. Anyone watching him would have figured that he was irritated. Perhaps angry that the women had left and might not intend to come back and pay for their drinks. Or, perhaps he was worried they were doing illegal things in the restroom. Maybe he thought they'd brought drugs into his establishment.

It was a sensible enough assumption, and boring enough too. So, the bar's inhabitants paid him and the missing women little heed after their initial interest waned.

But in reality, the bartender wasn't thinking any of these things. In actuality, he was listening. No one would imagine that he'd be able to catch any sound made beyond the dense wood of that closed door.

In fact, however, he could hear every word – crystal clear.

After a few moments, he returned his attention to the counter, cleaned it off, picked up a nearly empty bottle of Captain Morgan, and stepped into a back room as if to re-stock the alcohol. Ted set the bottle down on the counter and then made his way through the stockroom, into the kitchen, and toward the freezers at the back. He popped the larger one open and reached one arm into the icy steam that rolled out into the warmer air around him.

When he pulled his arm back out, it was holding up a large man, bound and gagged, several feet above the ground. The dangling man was Ted's look-alike in every way, from his short cropped brown hair and brown eyes to the stubble on his

chin and even the clothes on his body. He had been tied up with twine and looked a touch on the blue side. Rime had iced up around the man's eyes, nostrils, and mouth. He was shaking badly and making small, mewling sounds behind the thick material of his make-shift gag.

Ted none-too-gently deposited him on the tiled floor of the kitchen and smiled down at him. "Thanks for the shift, Ted. Money was good, and the company was even better."

With that, the bartender left his bound look-alike on the floor and headed toward the back exit. He stepped out into the quiet California desert night and looked around. Brown eyes searched the shadows. He smelled nothing. He saw nothing.

There was not another soul to be found. He was alone.

Another smile flashed across his face, but this one was different. This one had fangs. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and chuckled low and long. When he opened his eyes again, they were no longer brown.

They were blue.

Seconds later, the bartender was gone. In his place, a tall, built blonde man strode across the parking lot toward the shining black 2009 Shelby Cobra parked there. He stopped beside it and looked down at its charcoal stripes and liquid-like shine. "Oh, little witch," he tsked gently. "Never touch another man's ride." He shook his head in admonishment.

But his sapphire eyes sparkled with a kind of mischief, and his beautiful, deadly, fang-filled smile was genuine. "You can have the car, Danny." He laughed again, and the delicious sound would have sent shivers of erotic bliss through the body of any woman unlucky enough to hear it. "I'll even help you earn it, sweetheart."

* * * *

Dannai shoved her hand into the front pocket of her jeans and pulled out a single key on a single keychain. The key was more for ceremony than anything else. She didn't need it to get the car started.

But on her thirty-second birthday, a witch friend of hers had magically created a cobra keychain and given it to her inside a new pair of Frye boots. Frye's were her favorite. She owned a single pair and had never loved any shoes more. But when she'd tried to slip the new pair on, something had literally hissed at her. Many laughs from her friends – and dark looks from her – later, she'd pulled the keychain out of the left boot and studied it closely.

Its visage was the very same Shelby Cobra that graced so many other key chains of similar make. However, where the others were unremarkable displays of wealth, created for the sole purpose of showing off when a Shelby owner could not be in his car, *this* key chain was not. For one, it was made of enchanted, pure gold and a *single* carved black diamond that most likely no one but a witch could acquire.

Secondly, this key chain had a distinct purpose. If anyone tried to steal her car...

Danny smiled at that thought now, as she once more stared down at the keychain, watching it shift ever so slightly beneath its cloak of magic. It was a great gift. After all, the car was her favorite thing in the world. She'd named him "Thor."

It had been two months since she'd lifted him from the police impound lot in Las Vegas, where a permanent mirror spell kept the cops in the dark about its absent nature. Another vehicle was in its place – and they'd been searching for a stolen white Chevelle SS for sixty days, with no luck.

Danny sighed around her smile as she pretended to unlock the car with the pad on her keychain and then opened the door. A waft of warm, leather-scented air rushed toward her, enveloping her in that new car bliss that she always experienced when getting into Thor. She slid into the driver's seat and closed the door. "Heaven," she sighed.

Then she pushed in the clutch, moved the gear shift to neutral and put the key in the ignition because she liked the way it felt when the metal slid into place. She gave it a turn. The engine roared to life, a deep, angry rumble that sounded like monsters and thunder and an earth quake all wrapped into one.

"Oh, baby," she grinned, shaking her head, "you really know how to talk to a woman."

She sat back in the seat, buckled her seat belt, and put the car into first. As she pulled out of the lot, she thought of her conversation with Imani. She'd told her friend of the dream that she'd had of Lucas Caige. What she hadn't told her, however, was the dream that she'd had of the *second* werewolf.

There was no force on Earth that could make her share who the second werewolf was. Especially not with Imani, who would probably call out the troops, lock Danny in a key-pad cell, and contact the werewolf Clan Council, just as a precautionary measure. Which would be bad. *Very* bad. Because those people never took anything lightly – especially precautionary measures.

Danny was really in trouble with this one. It wasn't like she could will the dreams away. It wasn't like she could change what she was. Some how, for some reason, she'd been born a dormant. And fate had thrown her two wolves that were bad for her. One considerably worse than the other, but that was beside the point.

Danny bit her lip and punched the button to turn on the stereo. There was silence for a second and a half, and then a complicated guitar solo introduced ACDC's Thunderstruck. Danny nodded and tried to relax. This was just what she needed.

Imani had already transported back to the house they shared up North. But not Danny.

She clicked the window control and the tinted glass on both sides slid smoothly into the doors. The wind whipped in and wreaked havoc with her long, black locks and Danny's smile was back. There was nothing better than the cool, salty night air of Western California.

Okay, she thought. Four minutes down, five hours and fifty-six minutes to go.

In Thor, she could make the trip in two and a half hours. If she wanted. After all, it would only take a few cloaking spells to hide her from the police that waited along the coastal drive up to Trinidad, a small town bordering the Redwood forest. But Imani was right. Danny was weary from using magic. It was why she didn't really feel like

transporting her and the big black beast up the coast in the first place. And she didn't mind the drive. Not a bit of it.

So she settled into a groove of sorts, let the guitar riffs pour over her, and turned her thoughts toward anything – *anything* – but the dreams that haunted her.

And the faces that haunted her dreams.

Chapter Two, "Now you see it..."

It was after she'd been on the road an hour when Dannai felt the strangeness come over her. The warning. It was bad timing, but then people who commit murders don't exactly plan them so that they are convenient for anyone.

Somewhere, someone innocent was in mortal danger. Right now in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Lily Kane, formerly Lily St. Claire, was having a vision of a grisly murder. At the same time, somewhere in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, one Claire St. James, also known as Charlie, was noticing the red marks on the insides of her arms begin to glow. And because those things were happening to her dear friends, Dannai felt the warning too. It was like a humming in her blood, unpleasant and sudden and horribly urgent.

With practiced speed, Danny glanced in the rear-view mirror, down-shifted the Shelby, and pulled the vehicle over to the side of the road. There were no stations anywhere for miles in either direction. She should know; she'd made this drive enough times to have it memorized.

But the route up 101 was a scenic one, and the tourism business had called for the state to carve "look-out" points along the road so that people could pull over, break out their cameras, and snap a few keepers of the shoreline or the redwoods.

It was one such viewing spot that Danny now pulled the Shelby into and then shut it down. The small lot was empty, save for her own jet-black car. This late at night, this far from any cities or towns, there were no lights to illuminate the scenery. The early September night was black, and the sea was blacker. There was nothing to witness – no view to be viewed.

Danny turned off the lights and wasted a little energy placing a shielding spell over the vehicle. The magic she applied simply blended the car into the scenery behind it, and she prayed she wouldn't be gone long. For so many reasons.

Danny got out of the car and closed the door, stepping away from it to summon some more of her power. As she raised her arms at her sides to transport herself to her friends' psychic signals, she noticed the heaviness in her limbs.

Imani was right. Danny was tired. She had healed so many people lately. She'd had to keep her shield up so strong because she'd been working around alpha male werewolves. And those damned dreams haunted her night times, stealing her sleep and negating any rest she would otherwise have had.

She was growing weak.

Just let me get through tonight's ordeal, she thought, and then I'll get some sleep.

Her magic answered her call, surrounding her in a vortex of shifting power that melted the world around her – and then solidified it once more. Danny lowered her arms and looked around.

She was in a vast space. It was dark. There was damp; she could hear the echoing drip of something remnantly wet somewhere nearby. There was a cloying scent of rotting garbage.

There was also a sound like whimpering; soft, unsure, and muffled. Something shifted, scraping against the concrete. Danny slowly turned in place, her gemstone eyes searching through the darkness. A light spell would have cut through it. But she didn't dare, because it appeared that she had arrived first this time. It happened every once in a while. Every now and then, Lily's visions were so clear and so emotionally distracting that Lily left a bit of herself behind within them. When that happened, Dannai's transportation magic would go awry, locating itself to Lily's mental impression – instead of to Lily herself.

Danny wondered what Lily had seen in that vision. What was so bad this time that it left the seer so emotionally distraught? Whatever it was, Danny was fairly certain she was about to find out.

"I can hear you breathing."

Danny stilled, silencing her breath. The voice had been a man's. It was thin and grated and too high pitched.

"I saw you arrive. If you've been sent by him, have you come to help? Or to stop me?"

Another shift and scrape against the concrete. Danny readied a spell on the tip of her tongue, feeling the power she called go coursing through her arms and down to her fingertips. Ready and waiting.

And then the world was awash in red, as if a stop light had exploded. In the few seconds that it bathed the interior of the large open space, Danny was able to make out two tiny, bound forms laying atop a dirty mattress. She saw a man seated in a chair beside them. He was undressed. There was a knife in his hand. A lighter in the other.

He was looking at Danny with a strange kind of expectation; his expression was slanted and off. He was too thin. Hungry. His teeth were yellow.

There was a sucking sound, a separation of air as something forced its way into a space where nothing had been a moment before. Then it sealed back up again like thunder, leaving behind two tall, lean forms with glowing eyes.

Surrounding the newcomers was a dim aura of light, as if they'd wrapped themselves in it and brought it with them, just in case.

Charlie! Lily! Danny called out to them mentally, letting them know she was there. She rarely used this form of communication, as it felt claustrophobic and invasive and was on the more draining side. But it seemed natural now.

The girls turned to face her and even through the dim light, she could see that they both looked relieved. Danny's gaze flicked from them to the children on the mattress. They were laying with their backs to one another, their wrists bound together. They couldn't have been more than six years old. One boy, one girl, both stripped of everything but the ropes that bit into their tender flesh and the gags that muffled their sobs.

There was no blood yet, but even so, Dannai tamped down the vomit that immediately swelled from her stomach to her esophagus and winced as it burned on its way back down. She wouldn't be able to keep it there. Not for long.

She looked back up at Charlie and Lily. Charlie's real name was Claire St. James. The turned werewolf stood a touch taller than Lily, her long and lithe musculature the result of being a female born werewolf, enhanced by the fact that she was also a dormant and had been turned by her fiancé, Malcolm Cole, two months ago. The fact that she'd been training in martial arts for more than a decade didn't hurt.

Her long, thick, strawberry blonde hair was pulled back into a pony tail at the moment and she wore no make up. She didn't need any. On her wrists were leather bands, much like the ones that her mate, Malcolm Cole used to wear. For Charlie, they served two purposes. They absorbed any sweat she created while playing the drums. And they hid the ancient gypsy curse that marked the insides of her arms.

Beside her, Lily Kane, formerly Lily St. Claire, spun toward the children on the mattress a few yards away, her long, gold hair fanning out in a halo of honey-shimmer behind her. Lily's stark amber eyes flashed with both pain and anger as she took in the tiny forms that she had most likely witnessed in her vision, bound and helpless and naked on the filth of the mattress beneath them.

Lily had become a werewolf two years ago, when she'd mated with one Daniel Kane, police chief of Baton Rouge, and alpha male to the extreme. They made a striking pair, even if both were so head strong that their marriage often times found itself on rocky ground.

One clean swipe of Lily's sharp extended claw had the children's wrists unbound. But the two tiny forms remained where they were, trembling violently and otherwise unmoving, too traumatized to do anything else.

The man in the chair stood. "You haven't come to help, then." His reedy voice shook with insanely calm rage, and the knife in his hand glimmered, flashing against the magical aura surrounding the women.

"You sick, sorry son of a bitch," came Charlie's voice. Her ice blue eyes were glowing in warning. Her teeth were bared, her fangs elongated.

Dannai took all of this in within seconds. Sheer, precious seconds that gave her a feel for the situation so that she could summon any magic they might need to get them all through this without inviting tragedy.

The man lunged toward Charlie.

But Charlie was a martially trained werewolf and mate to Malcolm Cole, perhaps the most powerful werewolf aside from the Overseer. She carried his magic in her veins. And his curse on her wrists. Both were a boon to her now, in a time like this, when right needed a lot of help and wrong needed to be vanquished.

Charlie lunged forward as well. However, where as the naked man stumbled across the concrete, his knife hand flashing in warning, Charlie seemed to move without any warning at all. Her beautiful form blurred into motion. It stood in one place one second – and was on top of the would-be rapist and killer in the next.

Dannai closed her eyes when Charlie ripped out the man's throat. She always closed her eyes. She couldn't stand to see it; couldn't stand to watch it. She could still hear it, and that was bad enough.

She knew that Charlie didn't want to do what she did, that she didn't want to be the assassin in their trio of supernatural saviors. But Danny, the witch, was not allowed to kill. If she ever used her magic to do such mortal harm.... Well, it was a road she could not go down, for so many reasons. Their choice was to either allow Charlie to destroy every criminal they engaged, or restrain those criminals and chance the authorities.

In the end, all three women felt that they could not afford to allow an imperfect judiciary system to help criminals as sick as these back onto the streets where they could do more irreparable harm.

It was a pact they'd made two months ago, when they'd begun this routine. If they were going to be called by the Fates to fight this kind of fight – then they were going to fight it *their way*.

So, Charlie killed. She did it so that Lily wouldn't have to. She did it because she was the fighter in the group, and that was the power she had to offer. It tore Malcolm Cole apart. It tore Lily and Dannai apart. But Charlie bore the burden with incredible strength and determined purpose. If it were not for her, so many innocent women and children would be dead – raped, mutilated, tortured, missing.

While Charlie finished off the children's abductor, Danny turned away and ran to join Lily by the bed. Lily was now holding both children, taking off her own sweater to wrap them both up in it. This is what Lily did.

Her visions led her and her two friends to the sites of the crimes they were fated to stop. Her skills as a social worker and her love for the human race in general helped ease the trauma of the dark events for the victims they saved.

And now it was Danny's turn. As the most powerful witch in the most powerful coven in the world, it was Danny's unique healing touch and her ability to make particularly traumatized women and children *forget* what they have gone through, that was required.

Danny's powers helped them heal, both physically and mentally, so that they could get on with their lives and leave the past behind.

Danny knelt beside Lily and looked into her friend's golden eyes; Lily nodded. Danny's gaze skirted to the two children. They were tow-headed, both blue-eyed and pale-skinned. They had a few bruises here and there, but other than the scratches left by the ropes at their wrists, they were physically unharmed. It required only a very quick psychic evaluation of their minds to determine that neither child had yet been sexually violated.

Danny and her friends had made it in time again. Danny closed her eyes, held her hands palm-down over each child's head, and whispered the quiet words of an incantation. To the children, it sounded like a lullaby, soft and sweet and pure.

And it was this tender thought that carried them off into their healing sleep as Lily released another, separate tendril of power that wove its way gently through the children's bodies, repairing broken blood vessels, stretched or torn tendons or muscles, and easing away any visible signs of bruising.

Charlie joined them once more, her forearms covered in blood that was not hers.

From where she was knelt beside Lily and the children, Danny waved a quick hand over her friend's upper body and the blood was gone.

Charlie looked down at her now clean hands and exhaled as if she'd been holding her breath. "Thank you," she whispered.

Danny nodded and smiled.

Charlie was a little shaken up, Danny could tell. She always was after a kill. The blood awakened a hunger in her; and the prey awakened disgust. The dichotomy of the cruel and inevitable situation was one that often haunted Charlie, though she would never admit it. But there was no way out of this duty of theirs. And even if there was... would they take it?

"You look tired, Danny," Lily spoke softly from where she cradled the two sleeping children in her lap. The thin gold chain she wore around her neck held a single enchanted pearl, which nestled in the hollow of her throat. It was a gift from Danny and it allowed her to transport to the scenes of her visions. It would also take her back to her gorgeous and swarthy, if a bit *difficult*, alpha werewolf husband when this was all finished, but not before Charlie's curse took *her* back. They never had much time.

"I'm fine," Danny said, brushing off the question as she knew a friend should never do. Lily gave her a rueful look, but left it alone. For now.

"I'll take them to Council headquarters," Lily said, looking down at the children asleep in her lap. "They'll reunite them with their families."

Danny nodded.

"Gotta go, guys. We still on for next Saturday?" Charlie asked.

Danny and Lily glanced toward her. She was gazing down at her arms. A warm red glow emanated from beneath the leather bands she wore around her wrists. It was time for her to go.

"Ten o'clock, girl," Danny told her. "And it's girls' night only," she reminded her. "Which means you'll have to shake that green-eyed fiancé of yours." This was neither the time nor the place to talk about dance club hopping. The very idea of it, to anyone witnessing the scene, would have been surreal.

But these days, these slight moments they possessed together after their jobs were done were almost all the trio had. They had been far too busy lately. The world was going to shit.

"Got it. See you then." Charlie smiled a beautiful, weary smile. And then there was a red flash – and she was gone.

Lily stood next, cradling the children. A human woman would have had trouble with their combined weight. But Lily wasn't human. She glanced down, readjusted their weight so that it was more even, and then her gold gaze once more cut to Danny. "Something's going on with you, Danny. You've got shadows under those stained glass eyes."

Danny didn't say anything to that. Where would she start? The dreams? Or the two very dangerous alphas *in* the dreams? She should have seen this coming; she

was a dormant, just like Lily and Charlie. She was tall and thin, like they were. Her eyes were stark and different, just like theirs. She was involved with the werewolves in some way – just as they had been. When she really thought about it, she was surprised the dreams hadn't come sooner. There was so much she wanted to tell Lily.

But there was no time. So, she just shrugged.

"I've got a feeling about you, sweetie," Lily told her, her shimmering eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "And when I get enough alcohol down your throat on Saturday, you're damn well gonna tell me what it is, my friend."

At that, Danny smiled. Lily was probably right on that count. She was the seer, after all.

"Gotta go." Lily's pearl began to shed a warm, white light. She hugged the sleeping children tighter to her, smiled one last time at Dannai, and then she too was gone.

Danny stood alone in the clammy, damp warehouse that was beginning to smell of blood. It was a rusty kind of scent that joined the other stench already prevalent in the would-be crime scene. In the stretching silence, the sound of something dripping somewhere once more reached Danny's ears. Car horns honked at each other in the distance. The mattress at her feet reeked of urine.

Suddenly Danny felt very tired indeed.

But it was her job, as always, to get rid of the evidence. It was left to her to clean the slate so that the victims could go on with their lives without questions from the authorities.

With what strength she could marshal, Dannai walked toward the fallen body of the man who had planned unspeakable things – and she closed her eyes once more. Again, the bile threatened. Again, she tamped it down and focused.

Pure, she thought. New. Be clean....

She raised her arms at her sides and light began to gather in her palms. It was a green light, reminiscent of a freshly mowed lawn or the flash one sees on the horizon before the sun goes down. It was this glowing jade newness that spread from her outstretched hands and into the moldy darkness of the warehouse beyond. It touched upon the mattress, and as it passed over, the bed lightened to a bright white, its dank stench lifting until it smelled of nothing but cotton and coils and preservative.

The green light continued, racing along the ground like an emerald flash flood, cleansing everything in its path. The blood disappeared, the evidence vanished. And when the bleaching light reached the body that Charlie had left behind, it leapt over the fallen form, enveloping it tightly.

Dannai grimaced with the effort it took to do away with something so large that was once alive. But she managed, if barely.

And a few seconds later, the green light receded, racing back into Danny's body with a rush and an exhaled breath.

The kidnapper's body was gone.

Danny fell to her knees on the ground beneath her. Her body was trembling.

Sweet had gathered on her upper lip. Her breathing was quick and ragged. Dizziness waited for her, barely kept at bay.

She needed to get home. Soon. And when she did, she needed to sleep for a week.

Danny tried to stand, stumbling a little as that dizziness finally washed over her, a triumphant, insidious tide. She braced herself beside a concrete pillar, closing her eyes against the tilting darkness. "Come on, Danny. I know it's been a long night, girl. But you just need to use a little more...." A little more magic. Enough to get her back to Thor. That was all.

Danny opened her eyes and knew what she had to do. It was a last resort and one she wouldn't even contemplate under any but the most necessary conditions.

She let her shield fall, allowing the scent of her dormancy to re-establish itself around her. It felt strange to suddenly be without the cover she had worn for so long. It was a little like going without underwear or forgetting to buckle her seat belt.

But it freed up a bit of her power. It would be enough to make it back to her car.

Quickly, Danny used the newly acquired strength and transported herself back to that spot on the side of the road on the West coast. The sound of the surf and the salty breeze that wafted through her hair were an instant reward for her efforts. Thor was still there, as liquid black and darkly beautiful as he had always been.

Danny had never been so glad to see him. She strode to the driver's side door, opened it, and slid behind the wheel, shutting the door behind her. The scent of leather enveloped her in a warm, welcome embrace. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

Then she opened the storage compartment between the seats and pulled out a bottled water and a dark chocolate candy bar. She kept the stash there for emergencies – and as far as she was concerned, this qualified.

She carefully unwrapped the bar, making certain not to drop any chocolate flakes anywhere in the car. Not that she couldn't have simply willed them away later, but it was best to be careful to begin with.

She ate in silence, allowing the energy the sugar and caffeine provided to infiltrate her weakened body and awaken her tired mind. While she chewed the bits of coated nut, nougat and caramel, she thought of the sea and the incoming, rolling bank of fog half a mile out. She thought of the stars above her, half-hidden behind an impending gray. She thought of her dreams.

She thought of everything and anything but the scene she'd just left, because if she didn't, she wouldn't be able to get the chocolate down.

Finally, she was done with the bar. It had afforded her just enough energy that she might be able to throw her shield back up if she absolutely had to. But for now, she was going to leave it down and spare herself the work.

She took a long swig of her water, re-capped the bottle and placed it back in the storage compartment. Next, she crumpled the candy bar wrapper and shoved it into her purse, throwing her purse into the back seat of the car.

She started Thor, peeked in the rear view mirror, and pulled out of the viewing

lot.

* * * *

It had been two months since he'd set out on his own. It didn't take long for that first tank of gas to run out, and when it had, Lucas Caige had simply filled it back up again and kept on going. He'd had no destination in mind. He simply needed the movement, the road, and the freedom that came with two wheels, a bit of gasoline, and a lot of wind.

So, he'd gone from Vegas to Phoenix. Then up to Salt Lake City. He'd driven through Wyoming; stopped in Billings, Montana. He'd then ridden on into Seattle, where he met up with some old buddies of his.

The group of them had gone together into Oregon and camped out near Eugene. And then Lucas had continued on his own. He was still uncertain. Something was still under his skin. So, he kept going; heading South into northern California alone.

Now.... There was a strangeness settling over him. A sort of peace, maybe. It was almost lethargic. He simply didn't want to go any further.

Maybe he was just tired.

After all, there wasn't much for a werewolf to eat on the open road. Wolves weren't overly fond of candy bars and bags of chips. There were only so many jack rabbits a predator could stomach and frankly, he was getting tired of washing the blood off in dank motel showers.

After sixty days, Caige was ready to pull over. He was finally ready to stay in one place, in one bed, for longer than a single night. He was tired of washing his clothes at Laundromats and more than a little weary of the untrusting glances he got from dry cleaners when he took his leather jacket and boots in to get them cleaned.

He knew what they thought of him.

Scooter trash. Scum. An animal.

If they only knew.

As it was, they were more than a little surprised when he never failed to produce a shining credit card or a large roll of cash.

He sighed. It didn't matter.

It was time for a long, hot bath, a warm woman, and a soft bed that had never been slept in by anyone else. Wolves were sensitive to these kinds of things. The stench of a thousand bodies and all of their sweaty nightmares and sticky fantasies could become overwhelming at times.

He'd gone far enough. This was as good a place to settle down for a bit as any.

That's what he was thinking when the black Bugatti coming in the opposite direction suddenly swerved into his lane. He knew the incredibly expensive car by its headlights; it was a luxury vehicle and he was good at identifying that sort of thing. Not that it mattered.

Lucas had almost no time to react. A split second, that was all.

He leaned to the right, taking the bike off of the road and onto the shoulder. But the Bugatti kept coming. It sped completely through his lane and continued toward him, crossing the thick white line that braced the shoulder. Caige had no choice but

to lay the bike down.

The night was dark; the moon and stars had been hidden by the thick blanket of fog that had rolled over the coastal road less than half an hour earlier. He had no idea what lay beyond the shoulder. How steep was the fall? How far down did it go? And what waited at the bottom?

Whatever it was, he would most likely live through it. It was his bike he was worried about.

As soon as he'd leveled the motorcycle and disconnected himself from its skidding body, the Bugatti crunched into the bike's front tire, seemingly intent on running the two-wheeler completely over. It was an impressive feat; there wasn't much clearance beneath the sports car.

It also meant that the driver was determined. This wasn't an accident.

Lucas managed to roll out of the way just before the car would have sped over him as well. The sound of metal being chewed to bits, the sparks flying, the stench of spilled fuel was truly horrible. He knew his bike was toast.

As the offending sports car re-directed itself and screamed toward him, Lucas let himself drop off of the side of the road and into the nothingness beyond.

* * * *

Dannai loved the fog. It made her feel as if the rest of the world had disappeared for a while. What a magic trick *that* would be. It was peaceful and welcome and, in the decade that she had lived in Trinidad, she had never once grown weary of it.

Tonight, the fog had come in with what seemed a sense of purpose. It was thicker than normal, obscuring Danny's view of anything beyond twenty or thirty feet in front of her car.

She took it slowly and let the Metallica, Rush and Nickelback pouring from her stereo beat the tension out of her muscles and sweep the worry from her mind with their demanding drum beats and impossible guitar solos.

She sighed as *Tom Sawyer* forced her to ease back into her seat and take a deep breath.

Something flashed through the fog up ahead. Danny downshifted, easing off of the gas. She squinted through the swirling mists and slowly took in the scene as a tangled mass of metal and torn rubber came into view.

It had once been a motorcycle; that much Danny could tell from its remains. But someone had destroyed it. A cold ball of lead sank into Danny's stomach as she put on the brakes and searched for any sign of its rider.

Her heartbeat quickened when a tall form came climbing up over the ledge of the drop-off. He was dressed in black leather. The rider.

He's walking. Which meant that he'd survived the crash. Danny sighed a breath of relief and parked the car in front of the motorcycle's wreckage, shifting it into first just as the fallen rider managed the last leg of his climb back up and his boots hit pavement.

Danny rolled down her window and stuck her head out.

"Are you all right?" she called back to the man, who had his back turned toward

her as he viewed the ruins of his bike with what must have been a very deep sense of regret. Danny could imagine that kind of pain. She'd hate to see anything happen to Thor.

She watched the man as she waited for an answer. He was tall and the view of him from behind was not at all unpleasant. His black jeans hugged the muscles of his legs in nothing short of a sexual taunt. His ass had to be the most perfect ass Danny had ever laid eyes on. And the broad back and thick arms encased in the leather jacket he wore were nothing to laugh at either.

He had jet-black hair that fell just to his shoulders, wavy and unkempt in that manner that she'd always found so attractive. Daniel Kane had hair like that. In fact, from behind, this man reminded her a lot of Lily's husband.

Holy shit, she thought, suddenly. *That's not Daniel, is it? What would he be doing way out here?*

But when the tall, well-built man finally turned around to face her, the expression on his handsome face a mixture of grief and gratefulness, Danny at once realized that it was not in fact Daniel Kane.

It was Lucas Caige.

Chapter Three, "Smoke Screen"

Oh, you have got to be shitting me....

Danny couldn't believe what she was seeing. If she hadn't felt so physically awful at that moment, she would have chalked the scene before her up to a dream. Bad or good, she had no idea, but a dream all the same.

The Fates were conspiring against her. She'd done something bad; that was it. She had to have done something bad. And the gods were getting back at her.

My shield, she thought, suddenly – frantically. *I have to put it back up!*

Caige seemed to compose himself as he moved toward her. She noted the rip in the leg of his jeans and the road rash that had taken chunks out of his leather jacket. But of course, the werewolf himself was unharmed.

How is he planning on explaining that to me? she thought, even as she summoned her meager amount of power and hastily threw back up her shield. The effort instantly made her dizzy, but she hid it well, managing to keep her eyes trained on the notorious werewolf, even when his form blurred in her eyes.

Surely, he wouldn't be aware that she knew who and what he was. He wouldn't know that the woman who had stopped to help him was actually a witch and that she worked with werewolves all the time and that the name Lucas Caige was a rather infamous one in her circles.

Oh shit! she thought, again stunned by a sudden realization. *He doesn't know I'm magic! But he'll smell it on me and he hates magic!*

I don't have the energy for this, she added, her inner voice a near hopeless whine, as she leeches some of the vigor from her muscles, from her blood, and from other places within herself, and used it to weave yet another shield.

It was very hard. It was like sewing a shawl out of a spider web. It sapped so much of her strength that she literally slumped in the driver's seat. She'd gone too far this time – and all so that Lucas Caige wouldn't know who she was.

Caige seemed to notice her sudden weakness because she could hear the sound of his boots on the road as his pace quickened. "You okay?" he asked as he neared the driver's side window.

He's Australian, she thought, weakly. She remembered that about him now. He'd moved to the states a long time ago. His accent was very, very faint.

"I'm fine...." She was going to tell him to get in and that she would drive him to the nearest station, but when she sat up to face him, a wave of black fuzziness washed over her. *Oh, how perfectly ironic*, her mind hissed.

She felt herself falling.

And then.... "Move over," his voice commanded.

Her heart thudded, as if it had flipped over in her chest. Pain followed on its heels. She groaned as she felt his arms around her, lifting her. But she kept the shields in place – both of them. She was stubborn to the very end. He wouldn't know who she was; even if it was the death of her. Another skipped, painful beat and she realized that it might just very well be that.

"I'm taking you to a hospital," he told her. She heard him put the car in first and felt the engine roar as he pulled out onto the interstate. She opened her eyes to look at him from where she now sat in the passenger seat.

So gorgeous... she thought, witlessly. Even messed up from an accident, he was a tall, dark god. The dangerous kind. Like maybe Ares. *Oh yeah*, she thought. *He looks like Ares.*

And then she realized what he'd just said. "No..." she mumbled. His dark eyes cut to her. She forced herself to go on. "My friend will help. She's not far." She had to get to Imani; the other witch would instantly understand what was happening. She would know what to do.

Caige seemed to consider her for a moment. He shifted into third and fourth without taking his eyes off of her. The Shelby sped down the road, the night and fog blurring into a gray-black streak outside of the windows.

And then, as if he understood all too well why an individual might have an aversion to hospitals or doctors of any kind, he gave in. "Where?" he asked simply.

"Twenty miles... up road. In Eureka." She paused, gathering more of her waning strength. "White house on –" she cut off, swallowing hard before she finished with, "Lucas street."

Yep. The fates definitely had it in for her.

If Caige noted the coincidence, he made no indication of the fact. Instead, his dark eyes glittered as they looked her over inbetween glances at the road to make certain they stayed on it.

"You sure about this?" he asked.

This had to be the damndest thing in the world to him. Here she was, a stranger who had pulled over to help *him* out of a jam – and she was about to faint on him. He was probably pretty freaked out.

Handling it well, though, she thought. He'd taken over with ease, skill and complete confidence.

"Yes," she answered. Then she closed her eyes. She couldn't keep them open any longer.

* * * *

Lucas watched the young woman slip down into the seat beside him and close her eyes. He wondered if he should pull the car over. But he could hear her heart beating. It was erratic and a bit weak, but it was still beating. She was still alive.

What the hell had just happened?

One minute, he was thundering down the road on his favorite Harley – the next, he was being run off of it by someone with an affinity for luxury sports cars. And the minute after that? He was being rescued by a woman in a Shelby Mustang with some kind of health problem.

Which was strange.

Because she smelled perfectly healthy to him. He was good at sensing when someone was sick. It was simply part and parcel to being a werewolf.

This woman smelled like vanilla and cocoa beans and caramel. Not sickness.

Lucas frowned. He downshifted as the car took a rather tight turn, and then he leveled out again and chanced another glance at his would-be savior.

Her eyes were closed now. But when they'd been open, they had been starkly beautiful. Either he'd imagined it, or they were so many different colors, he wouldn't be able to describe them if he had to. And they were so *bright*, like gemstones.

Her sleeping face was something out of a man's wet dream. Her skin was flawless, her eyelashes long and heavy where they rested on her cheekbones. Her slightly parted lips were so full and red, it looked like she'd just been kissed. A lot.

Maybe she had?

With that thought, his hand tightened on the steering wheel, and his fangs threatened to lengthen.

Lucas blinked and his frown deepened. *Why the hell do I care?* he thought. *What the hell is going on tonight!*

Lucas shook his head, ran his hand through his dark, wavy hair, and took another tight turn. They would be coming up on the exits for Eureka soon. He'd spent some time in Eureka years ago. It had only been a few months, but it didn't take Caige long to get the layout of a place.

He only hoped that he could recall the town well enough to find Lucas street without having to jostle his passenger awake.

Whoever she was, she was a knock-out. His gaze skirted up the long, lean length of her legs. She wore tight jeans that made his job easy. Her waist was tiny. Almost too small. He could see her hip bones beneath the denim material she wore. He'd have preferred a few more meals under a woman's belt, but all in all, she was stunning. *And as a bonus*, he thought as he laughed a small, bewildered laugh, *she has great taste in cars.*

The 2009 Shelby Mustang was a beauty. *Like its owner*, he added.

And then he sighed and shook his head again. *This is insane. My bike is totaled. Someone tried to kill me tonight. And some chick picks me up off of the side of the road and then passes out on me.*

Christ.

Beside him, the woman moaned and her head rolled to the other side. Lucas gazed down at her as her long black hair shimmered and shifted, exposing a collarbone and the swell of her breast beneath the filmy blouse she wore.

Again, his grip tightened on the wheel.

He'd felt her bare back when he'd moved her over into the passenger seat. She'd obviously been coming back from some kind of date; the shirt she wore was open in the back and made to impress.

Lucas felt sudden pain in his upper gums and angrily forced his thoughts away from the image of the beautiful woman beside him flirting with some unknown man.

You're a nut job, Caige, he scolded himself. *Just find her friend's house and be done with this mess.*

The fog hadn't let up even a small amount since it had rolled in earlier that night. It sat on the road and surrounding forest now like a tightly packed mass of cotton balls, immobile and dense. So it was with some luck that Caige noticed the exit he wanted without passing it up as it appeared so abruptly out of the mist.

He turned on his signal, pulled off of the highway, and eased onto a side road. Searching for the right signs was like trying to find a certain letter in alphabet soup. He would inch toward a street corner, learn it was the wrong one, and he would turn around and go the other direction. Luckily, the Shelby spun on a dime.

But he was worried about the woman.

There was a purse in the back seat. It probably had a phone in it; and the phone probably had an ICE number.

Caige pulled the car over on a dark curb and grabbed the small purse from the back. He opened it, feeling more than a little guilty for going through someone else's personal belongings.

Thankfully, there wasn't much in the purse to go through. A tube of Chapstick, a twenty dollar bill and some change, a small leather notebook with an attached fountain pen. And a Blackberry.

Caige pulled out the Blackberry and tossed the purse back into the back seat. It took him a few minutes to sort through everything, but he found the ICE number just as the black-haired woman shifted in the passenger seat and her gemstone eyes fluttered open.

He gazed down into them as he dialed.

She gazed back. "What... what are you doing?" she whispered.

"Getting help. I have no idea where I am," he told her.

She smiled at that, flashing white, perfect teeth. She was probably thinking that she couldn't believe a man was admitting he was lost. Caige's stomach tightened as he stared down at that gorgeous smile, but the call was answered after the first ring and the new voice on the other end of the line helped him focus on the situation.

"Yeah, is this a friend of-" Caige cut himself off, realizing that he didn't know his rescuer's name.

"Danny," she supplied weakly.

"Is this a friend of Danny's?" he asked, not missing a beat. The woman on the other end of the line went still. He could almost sense her dawning apprehension.

"What's wrong?" she asked, all seriousness.

"She's not feeling too well. I'm on the corner of Harrison and Russ and I need directions to your place."

There was a brief pause, and then the woman took charge. Lucas listened carefully, noting the deep, throaty sound of the woman's voice. She was of African American descent; he could tell that much. And she sounded like sex incarnate.

Lucas disconnected as soon as he had what he needed and put the car back into first. In a few short minutes, he was pulling up to a white two-story house and a tall, lithe woman who did indeed look like sex incarnate, was running out the front door to meet him.

Lucas opened the driver's side door and climbed out of the car.

The woman stopped in her tracks.

He frowned. She looked more than surprised to see him. She looked utterly shocked. And a good deal afraid.

Instantly, he wondered what he had done to cause such a reaction, but his mind was also focused on the semi-conscious woman in the front of the Shelby.

Danny, he thought. *I wonder what it's short for.* As he made his way around the car to her side and then lifted her into his arms, he rolled the name around in his mind. Danielle maybe? Danica? *Danny has a nice ring to it*, he thought. *Unique for a woman.*

He came back around the car and started toward the tall woman who was now waiting for him several yards away. She seemed to compose herself, come to some kind of decision, and then started forward to meet him half way.

Danny felt so light in his arms. *She's too small*, he thought. *Is she actually sick and I just can't sense it?* Bewildered, he realized it wouldn't matter if she was.

She was warm and her nearness was making him feel strange. Her vanilla scent was enticing; it played havoc with his senses. He wanted to strip her down and find out where it was coming from.

With that thought, he steeled his nerves and tamped down the hard, unexpected desire rose up from out of nowhere. Now was not the time to get physical with the locals. He had to pick up his bike, get it fixed, or buy a new one. He needed to make a few large, important purchases. He needed to get settled in.

This wasn't the night for following his dick into some stranger's painted-on jeans. His gums ached again. His hands curled possessively around Danny's lean body. Her head rested trustingly on his shoulder.

Christ, he thought. *"Danny" must be short for "trouble."*

* * * *

Imani wondered whether the gods had suddenly turned on her and her friend. When the car pulled up and none other than Lucas Caige opened the door and got out, she was fairly certain that one of two things was happening.

Either she was dreaming – in which case, she should pay attention because the dream could be some kind of harbinger – or the fates had flawlessly orchestrated something quite elaborate. And more than a touch cruel.

Imani quickly took in Caige's torn jeans and scraped up leather jacket, along with Danny's nearly unconscious form in the front seat of the car and hazarded a few guesses as to what had gone down. All of them involved Caige in some kind of automobile accident, and Danny unwittingly stopping to help.

To be on the safe side, in case this wasn't in fact a dream, Imani hurriedly erected her own shielding spell to hide the nature of her magic from Caige's perceptive sense of smell.

Lucas Caige was well known in coven circles that dealt with the werewolf Council. Most werewolves were okay with magic. Most of them were familiar with the

covens, their witches, and their enemies – the warlocks.

They accepted one another; the witches and the werewolves.

However, Lucas Caige was one werewolf who would just as soon see every magic user on the planet wiped out by some disease as deal with any of them himself. He had his reasons, Imani had to admit. Lucas had once had an older brother. In Australia, fifty-seven years ago, a warlock had killed him.

There had been nothing that Caige could do to stop the man, and the dark magic user was never found. He was never brought to justice. He had cursed Byron Caige with a black magic that ate him up from the inside, stealing his strength. He became tired all the time, dizzy, and slept days on end. Then, one night, Byron Caige simply disappeared. Coven seers proclaimed the alpha werewolf dead and the werewolf council determined that Byron had probably gone somewhere else to die.

At the time, Caige had been an alpha werewolf in charge of his own pack. The Caige family produced very strong men. This was something that every witch knew, as it was their job to understand the history of their magic and what it wrought. However, most werewolves were not aware of Caige's past, especially in the US, which is where Caige finally moved after an unsuccessful decade of searching for both his brother's body and his brother's killer.

He left his pack and his memories behind and started over.

He moved around a lot, joining a motorcycle gang at one point and eventually settling down in New Mexico with a tattoo business as a cover. Caige was actually quite wealthy; he'd amassed a good deal of money during the twenty-five years that he'd lived as an alpha in Australia.

The dark consequence of what magic had brought to Caige's life was why he hated magic now, and it was why Imani made sure to cover the scent of her own magic as Caige approached her now with a semi-conscious Danny in his arms.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

"I was in a wreck on my bike. She stopped to help me and then passed out in the front seat. I took over with the driving, but got lost. You know the rest." Caige nodded toward the house behind Imani. "We should get her inside and get some blankets on her. This damp will go straight through her."

Imani nodded and turned, leading the way into her home. As she moved, a good three or four feet ahead of Caige, she allowed a comb of her magic to sweep over everything in her path that might scream "Magic!" at Lucas Caige and give her and Danny away.

It was difficult to orchestrate such a feat while trying to keep the very scent of her magic from his awareness. But she figured she'd managed it pretty well when he didn't say anything and simply followed her through the house, up a flight of stairs, to one of the several bedrooms on the second floor.

"Put her here," she instructed, turning down the covers so that Caige could gently lay Danny on the mattress. It was their guest room; the bed queen sized, its comforter soft and thick enough to keep even heavy chills at bay. Imani could have led him into Danny's room, but for some reason she didn't think it would be a good idea to allow

her friend's privacy to be invaded by him in that manner. Yet.

"What's wrong with her?" He asked. She noticed that his tone had lowered, growing more serious.

"She has blood sugar problems," Imani answered quickly. The truth was, she could sense that Danny had two shields wrapped tightly around her, not just one. She was assuming that the extra effort was at least partially at fault for her friend's current weak condition. But it was still strange that Danny was so out of it, so she didn't really have an answer for Caige.

Not that she'd have shared if she did.

"What does she need?" Caige asked then. Imani glanced up at him. His tall, strong form was rigid with apprehension and his pitch-black eyes were locked on Danny's form. She couldn't tell what he was thinking; that wasn't one of her abilities. Witches could sometimes project thoughts into a subject's mind, but it didn't go both ways and it was incredibly draining.

However, from the look on his face, she guessed it had something to do with attraction. Lust, definitely. And very real concern. Which was strange. Why did he care so much? He'd only just met her.

Because it's Danny we're talking about, Ima, she told herself. *And she's a dormant. And she has been dreaming about Lucas.* Even without the dreams, Danny was too lovely, too innocent. She was sure to attract someone like Caige eventually.

Hell, Jason Alberich was bad enough.

Imani had a feeling that life was about to get really damned interesting.

"She needs rest and some juice," she replied. "Maybe some medicine. But I have everything here." She turned to face him fully and he finally gave her his attention. It was obvious that he didn't want to take his eyes off of Danny.

"You have been very kind to help her like this. You don't even know her."

"She stopped to help me. It's the least I could do."

"No," Imani shook her head, her own gaze darkening. "The least you could have done was rape her and leave her to die on the side of the road somewhere while you made off in her car."

Imani waited for this to sink in and if the look on Caige's handsome face was any indication, he didn't like the sound of it at all. Not one bit. His expression had hardened into a killer's mask. Cold. Determined. She wondered if his fangs were out. His mouth was shut, so she couldn't tell. But he didn't volunteer to say anything just then, either.

"You didn't hurt her – a beautiful stranger at your mercy. Instead, you brought her here. That means a lot. So, accept my thanks Mister..." she waited for him to fill in the space.

It took him a moment.

Ah, she thought. So the fangs *had* come out. Goddess, her mind sighed. *He already had it bad for her.*

"Caige," he finally said. His voice had lowered yet again, and it was slightly gravelly. Like a wolf's growl. "Lucas Caige."

"Mister Caige, thank you."

"It's Lucas." He nodded once, and then turned his gaze back to Danny. She was sleeping peacefully, her blue-black hair fanned out across the pillows and reflecting the lamp light in the room like the feathers of a raven.

As always, Imani was impressed with her friend's magical abilities. She'd managed to keep the shields up even as she'd slipped into slumber.

"You live around here?" Imani asked. She watched him carefully as he, in turn, watched her friend.

Without taking his eyes off of Danny, he said, "I do now."

Interesting, thought Imani. *I wonder what the hell that means.*

"Okay then," she began, "you can take her car to your place." At this, Caige's head whipped around and his dark, penetrating gaze pinned Imani to the spot. She continued. "In Eureka, it's faster than calling a cab and somehow, I don't think that Danny will mind." *Not in the end, anyway.* "She obviously trusts you."

"How do you know?" he asked, his gaze narrowing a little.

Imani blinked, temporarily thrown by the heat and weight of those dark eyes. And then she asked, "How do I know she trusts you?"

He nodded silently.

"I can tell," she said. "If I thought she didn't, I wouldn't offer to let you take the car. Believe me, she really likes that car." Imani turned away from him and walked to the door of the bedroom. Caige was forced to follow her. It was easy to see that he didn't want to, but the man had no choice. There was only so much lingering that a complete stranger could do before it was simply unacceptable.

Imani led the way down the stairs to the first floor and the front door of her house. Caige didn't need any more hints. He waited by the door as Imani handed him the key to Danny's car. She made certain to take the Cobra emblem off of it first. It wouldn't do to have Danny's prospective lover attacked by a car full of magic-venomed Cobras.

"Just have it back relatively early, if you don't mind," she told him gravely.

He nodded and managed a smile. "Will do. Thank you." Then he turned toward the small table against the wall by the door where Imani kept her grocery lists beside an antique lamp that her grandmother had given her in her will. He picked up the pen she kept there and jotted something down. He turned and handed it to her. "Here's my number. Call me if you need anything."

Imani blinked at the number, her brow furrowed. She knew he meant that literally. Lucas Caige had enough money to get them anything they might need.

But Imani wasn't supposed to be aware of that. So she faked her confusion.

And Caige fell for it. "Just give me a call if she doesn't get better soon, okay?" He gave this order with a bit more force, though he tried to make it sound more like a suggestion than an order.

Imani nodded placatingly. And then Lucas stepped out into the night and Imani

closed and locked the door behind him. Within a few seconds, she heard Thor roar to life and pull out of the lot.

Imani pressed her back to the door, exhaled, and closed her eyes.

Chapter Four: "Boil, Boil..."

"Danny."

Dannai frowned in her half-sleep and rolled over. Her skin felt numb; she was still suspended in the fog somewhere between dream and dawn.

"Danny."

A voice cut through the dense mist, like a face wafting into view and drifting away once more.

"Danny!"

Danny jerked awake, and sleep fell away from her like water slicking off of a rain coat. "What!" she shouted back, her voice hoarse from disuse. She blinked a few times, clearing her vision, and then rolled over in the warm bed. From the way the sun was coming in high through the gauzy curtains over the bedroom windows, it looked like it was late afternoon.

Imani stood over her, hands on hips, head shaking. "Girl, you've been asleep for fifteen hours."

Danny frowned. "So?"

Ima cocked her head to one side and pursed her lips as if considering something for a moment. "You don't remember what went down last night, do you?"

Last night? She was so sleepy, that trying to capture a short-term memory felt like trying to catch a dust mote on a windy day. She remembered... sharing a drink with Imani at the bar. And then a ride in Thor. And then....

Images of children and a dirty mattress assaulted her, forcing her bolt-upright in bed. "Charlie and Lily needed my help," she said numbly, recalling everything now with horrible clarity. "It was awful."

"Oh, Jesus, girl." Imani was sitting beside her then, pulling her into her warm embrace. Danny stared off into nothingness as the memories continued to play through her mind's eye.

"A little boy and girl. Ima, what the hell is wrong with people?" Danny's voice broke then. She wasn't expecting it. She had been on many rescue "missions" with Charlie and Lily, and she'd always been okay afterward. What was different this time? She felt slightly stunned and when she tasted the salt of tears on her upper lip, she was mystified by them.

"Honey, you wore yourself out somethin' fierce," Ima told her. Danny could feel the other woman shaking her head. "This sure explains a lot." She fell into a brief silence and then her body seemed to still beside Danny. "Do you remember what happened after the rescue?" she asked.

Danny wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and sat up again. The images of the rescue faded and were replaced with a strange, heavy sensation. It sat low in her belly and grew warmer.

Motorcycle.... An accident....

Danny felt her jaw go slack and her eyes widen.

Werewolf.

"Oh holy mother," she whispered. "I ran into Lucas Caige."

"You did more than that, sugar," Ima drawled. "You brought the big bad wolf home with you."

Now she remembered. She'd thrown up a second shield after already having drained herself at the rescue. And then she'd passed out in her own car while trying to help Caige after he wrecked his bike.

"Oh crap," she mumbled, dropping her face into her hands. On the upside, the shield must have worked because she was home safe in her bed instead of dead in a ditch somewhere, which is probably what she would have been if Caige had scented magic on her. He hated magic. He wouldn't have harmed her himself; in general, werewolves weren't outwardly aggressive that way. But he wouldn't have helped her, either. And a passed-out woman on the side of the road in an expensive car was just asking for trouble.

"Well, that's done," Danny said.

"What is?" Ima asked.

"At least I won't have to worry about crossing paths with him again. I made a kick-ass first impression."

"Yeah, that you did," Ima agreed, earning herself a dirty look from Danny. "But then again, some people are wise enough to see past those."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Danny noted the look that crossed Imani's face. She knew that look. It meant she knew something Danny didn't know. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Not much, sweetie. Just that mister tall, dark and hungry brought you home last night and almost didn't leave."

Danny sat up a little straighter. Her fingers found a thread in the quilt and began to pull at it. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he was lookin' at you the way you look at dark chocolate, Danny."

"So?" She knew it was stupid, even as she said it.

"So, do I have to spell it out for you?" Ima threw her hands up in the air and rolled her eyes. "He was *into* you, girl. Like – ~~way~~ into you."

"Bullshit," Danny gave her a little shove. It was her turn to roll her eyes now. "There's no way, Ima. He's not that kind of guy. I mean... he's not into people like me."

"You mean women, honey?" Imani gave her a deadpan look.

Danny threw one right back at her. "Magic users, Imani."

But Imani wasn't done yet. "I've known a lot of guys, girlfriend, and I've seen a lot of things. And I'll tell you right now that as far as Lucas Caige is concerned, I know two things for certain. One, the man is fucking fine." She shook her head and pretended to fan herself, muttering under her breath about the goddess-given attributes of one particular werewolf.

Danny bit the inside of her cheek and patiently waited for her to finish.

Finally, Imani put her hand down and looked her in the eye again. "And two," she continued, as if she hadn't paused, "he likes you. A lot."

"How would you know, Ima?" Danny asked, sighing heavily.

"He drove your car home last night and returned it this morning freshly detailed. Not that it needed it, but that's beside the point."

"So, he's a considerate person. No big deal." There was a glass of water on the nightstand beside the bed. Danny took it and began to take a drink.

"No, that wasn't," Ima admitted, rising from the bed and smoothing out her skin-tight dress. "But bringin' you flowers, a box of baked goods, a pound of freshly ground coffee, and refusing to leave until I agreed to make you meet with him tonight was a little bigger of a deal."

Danny almost choked on the water, barely managing to get it down before it spilled over her lips. "You *what*?" she gasped, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and setting the glass down again with a surprised *thunk*. "Ima, how could you?"

"What's done is done, Danny, so no use fussin' over it. If I were you, I'd get up and get somethin' to eat. I made stew and you'll need your strength tonight." Imani shot her a triumphant smile and then kicked it up a notch when the smile became a wicked grin.

"Ima, what the *hell*?" Danny couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I can't believe you would do this to me! Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep two shields up at once?" Even getting as angry as she was in that moment was taking its toll on Danny. She had slept, yes, but she hadn't eaten and magic wasn't a calorie-free endeavor.

"I do, Danny." Imani was suddenly serious. She sat back down on the bed and gently placed her hand on Danny's arm. "But you're a dormant and you're dreaming about him. And if what you say about the second werewolf in your dreams is true and he's too terrible to even consider, then you have two choices. You can either see this through with Caige or you can move to Siberia. But even then, you'll still dream about them, and those dreams won't get better. They'll get worse. You know it as well as I do."

Danny stared at Imani for a long while. She didn't know what to say. The horrible truth of it all was that Ima was absolutely right.

Despondency crept in around Danny's edges. "He'll never accept me, Ima." Lucas Caige had lost his brother to magic. He would never accept a witch as a mate.

"Never say never, honey. And I think you're wrong anyway." Ima stood up again and once more brushed herself off. She was gorgeous in a tight emerald green dress and emerald choker pendant. "Remember that an alpha gets bombarded with those feelin's too. And I'd say Caige is about as alpha as you can get."

Danny couldn't argue with that. Lucas Caige was tall, dark and dangerous to the point that it leaked from his pores. Daniel Kane had been like that but he'd been a cop, and the fact that he was on the side of the law canceled out a bit of that "dangerous" feeling people got around him. Malcolm Cole was dangerous, in every sense of the word – but he was also famous and the public trusted famous people for some reason.

Caige, however... was without bonds. He was unpredictable. A wild card.

"I want a shower," Danny finally said, tossing the covers aside. A nice, long, hot shower would clear her mind and allow her to come up with some sort of plan.

"Fine, but you'll eat, too, if I have to tie you down and spoon feed you."

Danny laughed and stood. "You don't have to bribe me with bondage talk to get me to eat your cooking, Ima." She shook her head at her best friend. "I love your stew."

The stew was delicious. Danny sat at the dining room table, where Imani had placed the rainbow-hued array of wild flowers Caige had delivered, and finished off a second helping. Danny was about to go for her third bowl when Imani's phone rang. Ima got up from the table and started fishing around in her purse for it. While she did, it occurred to Danny that she had no idea what time Caige was supposed to show up. She glanced at her watch: 6:46 p.m.

"Yes, it's me," said Ima as she took the phone from the dining room and into the kitchen. Danny's gaze narrowed. She didn't like the look on Imani's face. It was filled with worry and distrust.

Under her breath, she whispered a few choice words of incantation and was suddenly privy to Ima's entire conversation. It might have been wrong, but Danny never claimed to be a saint.

"... tonight. If she doesn't show up, he'll pitch a fit and that's a frightening thing," came an accented male voice through Imani's phone.

"Don't I know it," mumbled Ima. "But that's just too bad. She has other plans for tonight. You'll have to tell him."

"You want me to be the bearer of bad news to Alberich? I don't think so, Imani. Get her down here or you tell him yourself."

Imani's patience was obviously wearing thin. She sighed heavily and when she spoke next, her voice was very tight. "Listen Sasha, Danny has a chance at something really good tonight, and I'm not gonna let her blow it just because that spoiled brat of a coven leader decides he wants—"

Ima was cut off as Sasha, a twenty-seven year old wizard, asked, "What does she have going on?"

"None of your business!"

On the other end of the line, Sasha sighed as well. Danny felt sorry for him in a way. Sasha had the disadvantage of having slept with Imani in the past, which was wonderful for him at the time, but which also put him in a position of some subservience with the beauty. "I'll see what I can do," he said. "But this won't end well. I have a feeling." With that, he hung up and Imani was quiet.

Danny imagined that the woman was trying to regain her composure. She wouldn't want Danny to think anything was up. But as soon as Ima walked back into the dining room, Danny bombarded her with questions.

"What did Sasha want?"

Ima stopped mid-step and raised both brows. Then she put her hands on her

hips and shook her head slowly. "Now that's just plain ladylike, eavesdropping that way. Especially when you'll be needin' all of your strength to put up your shields."

"Oh well," Danny shrugged. "Now what's going on?" If Alberich had given some sort of edict that all of the coven needed to be somewhere tonight, it was the perfect excuse not to see Lucas Caige. Which Danny actually felt ambivalent about. . . . On the one hand, he was so hot it was sinful. But on the other, it made her insides feel strange just thinking about him. Spending an entire evening with him might just do her in.

"It was nothing." Ima blew it off and threw her phone back into her purse.

"See, now that's the thing about magic," Danny said, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest. "You can't lie about a conversation to a witch who just listened in on that same conversation."

"Yeah, well, if you knew what we had been talking about, you wouldn't have to ask."

Danny pursed her lips to keep from smiling. Ima had a point there. "Please just tell me."

Again, Ima sighed and plopped herself down in the chair opposite Danny. "Fine. Alberich wants everyone in the coven to attend the festival tonight. I told Sasha I'd be there but that you were busy."

Danny mulled that over. "Did he give you a reason? Is something wrong?"

"He didn't say. But it doesn't matter. Like I said," she finished, tightening her voice a little to show she was serious, "you're busy."

Danny cocked her head to one side and pinned Ima with a hard stare. "Speaking of which, what time did the werewolf say he would be huffing and puffing outside of our house?"

"Seven."

Danny's eyes widened. "But that's ten minutes from now!"

Outside, the sound of a Harley's engine drew closer. It was an unmistakable kind of roar and it stilled Danny in her chair. Across from her, Imani smiled a brilliant, white smile. "The boy is early."

Danny slowly stood up, at once feeling helpless. She hadn't even brushed her teeth yet! With that thought, she bared her teeth, waved her finger at them, and at once tasted mint on her tongue. She ran her tongue over her teeth. Clean and smooth.

"I saw that," smirked Imani.

"It means nothing."

"It means you *care*," said Imani, as she began to shield the house once more in order to prevent Caige from scenting their magic.

"I *don't* care," Danny insisted.

"Bullshit."

Lucas eyed the well-kept façade of the two-story house in front of him as he shut down his bike and dismounted. He knew he was early, but it couldn't be helped.

"Danny" was eating a hole in him. He had been capable of thinking of nothing but her since he'd first laid eyes on her when she had pulled over to help him.

It made no sense. The woman had passed out on him, of all things. But there was something about her.

He had never seen eyes like hers, that was certain. They were mesmerizing. But it was more than that. Her body was killer; her voice was husky and sweet; her smell was.... There was a vanilla caramel scent that rode the surface of her being like icing on a cake. But underneath was a scent that was familiar to him, though he couldn't place it for the life of him. He just knew he liked it. A lot.

Lucas pocketed his key and ran a hand through his hair. Maybe he had been on the road too long and this was all just his imagination. Or, maybe it was the Florence Nightingale effect – but backwards. He chuckled softly and shook his head. He may as well just face facts. He had exchanged all of a handfull of words with her and he was already smitten. In fact, he couldn't stay away. He'd returned twice already that morning – once to return the car, and a second time to bring "provisions." He'd wanted to repay her kindness to him.

Or at least that was what he'd told her roommate. Who was fucking hot, too.

But not like Danny. Again, he wondered what her name was short for. Her roommate had refused to tell him, which was admittedly a little odd. But everyone had their little quirks.

Lucas made his way to the front door and knocked on it with his gloved fist. He was sure they'd heard him pull up on the bike, so he was hoping it had given them enough of a warning that they would forgive him for being early. As he waited for them to answer, he also hoped that he was right about Danny.

Given the kind of car she drove and her rather reckless trust of him to bring her home last night, he had deducted that she was as free a spirit as any woman he'd ever met. If he was right, then she'd be okay with taking the bike for a spin.

He'd just purchased the bike that morning and had paid the sales associate to drive it to Danny's house for him when he'd dropped off her car. In the meantime, he was having his other motorcycle repaired. It was pretty much totaled but it was a classic, and he felt strongly about things like that.

The door handle jiggled a little and Lucas heard no fewer than three locks slide free on the other side. He hid his smile. The locks might have deterred any human not willing to break a window, but they wouldn't have done squat against a werewolf.

When the door opened, Lucas expected to be facing Imani, the woman he'd been dealing with for the last twenty-four hours. But instead, Danny herself stared back at him with her kaleidoscope eyes.

At once he found himself breathless. It had only been a day, and though he couldn't get her out of his head, he seemed nonetheless to have forgotten how beautiful she was. That silken black hair, those impossible eyes, those full lips.... As she had been when he'd seen her last night, she was wearing jeans. Once again they seemed painted onto those long, lean legs below that tiny waist. He felt his blood warm as his gaze traveled over her body. Her blouse was filmy and ethereal and

framed a décolletage of skin that glowed, it was so smooth. Across her collarbone and against the hollow of her throat hung the same necklace she'd worn the night before. It was a simple, thin gold chain with a tiny gold charm of Thor's hammer.

His gaze traveled back up to her face, where he lost his breath yet again. She was watching him expectantly, no doubt annoyed with his blatant ogling. But the corners of her perfect mouth were turned upward in amusement.

"Hi," he finally managed, feeling absurdly stupid. "It looks like you're feeling better," he ventured. "I'm glad." He smiled and hoped the sincerity of his words would make up for the bad behavior of his inner wolf.

Danny bit her lip; stark white against deep pink, and Lucas felt himself go hard.

"Thank you for the flowers," she said. Her fingertips lightly brushed her neck, as if she was nervous. He caught her scent again – vanilla and cupcakes – and his gums ached. "They're beautiful. How did you know I would like wild flowers?"

He'd chosen flowers that matched the different colors in her unusual eyes. It had been a fancy. Lucas shrugged. "I didn't," he admitted easily. "I took a guess." *But an educated one*, he thought. *Everything about you seems wild.*

She smiled, flashing those white teeth. "Good guess." She stepped aside and gestured to the hall beyond. "Please, come in."

Lucas stepped up onto the threshold next to her and felt the air thicken. It was like a static charge beneath a thunderhead just before the lightning strikes. In that moment, he wanted to shove her up against the wall behind her and eat her – all of her. He imagined what she would taste like... like some whip-cream laden dessert. He could be upon her before she blinked.

His fangs were poking through his gums now, a threat he couldn't ignore. But he forced what he could of his wolf to heel and kept moving down the hall so that she could close the door behind them. When he heard it click shut, he stopped and turned to face her once more.

"I want to thank you for stopping to help me yesterday."

"It was what anyone would have done," she shrugged, smiling nervously. She ducked her head, and he could see the outline of her long lashes against her cheek bones.

"No," he said. "It wasn't." He had been a stranger in torn black leather and people were generally frightened of such things. Not that he could blame them. But Danny had stopped, regardless of his rough appearance. "You didn't have to help, but you did."

"Well, I can say the same," she said. "You drove me home safe, so we're even." She smiled a winning smile and began to brush past him. But then she stopped – right there beside him, and she reminded him of a child playing with matches. "Actually, I suppose I owe you now since you cleaned my car, brought me flowers, and stocked my fridge with baked goods." She laughed softly and looked up at him with a slightly guilty expression.

Lucas swallowed hard. His throat had gone dry, even as his mouth had begun to water. "You don't owe me anything," he said softly. He watched as she stilled there

beside him and the pupils in her eyes expanded. She glanced at his mouth and then her gaze even flicked over his chest, and he felt his wolf rise to all fours. He was getting to her just as she was getting to him. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Actually," she said, "I... I just finished eating." Her own voice had grown softer and her tone had lowered. "Can I get you some coffee or tea though?"

"I'm good," he said. He needed air. He needed to get out of that house and away from the beds upstairs, or he was going to lose it. This wasn't like him. She was just another woman, wasn't she? Why was she affecting him like this?

Keep it together, Caige.

He tried to speak and found that he needed to clear his throat. He did so, pulling his gaze from hers and running his hand through his hair. It was a nervous habit. "Danny, can I take you out of here for a while?" It was a bold question, admittedly. But he was desperate. Most likely, she would turn him down. After all, for all she knew, he'd just wrecked a bike yesterday and wasn't safe on a motorcycle. But at least then he would have an excuse to leave.

"Yes," she said.

Lucas blinked and snapped back around to look at her. But she wasn't looking at him. She was staring steadfastly at the floor, most likely too embarrassed to meet his eyes. "Okay then," he said, snapping up the opportunity before it flittered away. He pulled his key out of his pocket and turned back around to stride toward the front door. When he reached it, he glanced over his shoulder to find her watching him. He smiled, turned the knob, and popped the door open. "Come with me."

Danny followed Caige across the lawn to where he had parked his bike. It wasn't trashed or even banged up and she realized he must have purchased a new motorcycle that morning.

She watched him walk; she couldn't keep herself from doing so. He moved like a predator - his stride long and sure and his jeans just the right amount of tight. She thought of the muscles under those jeans and wondered again whether she was doing the right thing.

When he mounted the bike with practiced, graceful ease, she felt her mouth go dry and her heart flutter in her chest. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, feeding a sudden urge to fight or flee.

What the hell am I doing? she asked herself. *This is a werewolf! And not just any werewolf - it's Lucas Caige!* He started the bike up and it roared to life. He used his boot to kick the stand away and righted the monster machine as if it weighed nothing. Danny watched all of this through eyes growing wide with trepidation.

"Danny?" Caige spoke her name softly, expectantly. At the edges of his tone skirted something that sounded like a warning. She looked up into his eyes and saw the warning repeated there. *Run*, it said clearly. *Run so I can chase you down.*

He held his gloved hand out for her and she glanced down at it. *It's just a ride*, she told herself. *He's just going to take you for a ride.*

"No shit," she muttered under her breath as she moved forward and placed her hand in his. His fingers closed over hers with immediate possessiveness. *Strange*, she thought. His behavior thus far had been of a man already smitten. Cleaning the car? Bringing flowers and food? Holding her hand as if he were afraid she would slip through his fingers?

Danny had to stop and check that she actually had her dormant shield up. It seemed to be the only logical explanation for why he would be so interested in her. But it was up. She was safe.

She looked down at her hand in his, allowing him to help her onto the back of the bike. It wasn't her first time riding a motorcycle, so she knew what to do. But, all the same, he only let go when he had to.

She settled herself onto the leather seat behind him and knew that she was going to have to wrap her arms around his waist. She could smell the leather of his black jacket in front of her and she couldn't keep from admiring the way his black hair curled against the collar and his broad shoulder begged for her to lay her head against it. She felt safe there behind him; inexplicably so.

Thor help me, she thought. *This is ridiculous*.

With sudden determination, she slipped her arms quickly around his waist and tried to ignore the rush of warmth she got from him. *Gods, he feels good*. His abs were strong and solid beneath her grip; she wanted to run her hands along the ridges and dig her nails in. She could smell the aftershave he'd used and her lips parted. Her stomach grew heavy, the crotch of her panties damp.

That's it, she thought, and leaned back to remove her arms. But Caige released the handle bars of his bike and grasped both of her wrists in his gloved fingers before she could pull away. She stilled beneath his tight grip as he turned a little to address her over his broad shoulder.

"Hold on tight, Danny," he warned. Whether he meant for a double meaning to attach itself to his words or not, she caught one. "Don't let go, understand?" He pulled her arms back around him and pressed her hands into his stomach.

"Got it," she mumbled, knowing damn well that his werewolf ears would pick it up. She also knew he would be able to scent her arousal, and the shame of how much his very nearness was turning her on made her want to jump off of the bike and haul ass for the house.

But he had yet to release her wrists. It was as if he could not only scent her arousal, but her fear as well – and he wasn't going to let her go anywhere. The thought almost turned her on more.

Finally, he let her go and returned his grips to the handle bars. He straightened out the wheel, revved the engine, shifted, and lifted his boots as the bike took off.

Danny's heartrate kicked up a notch as he left the driveway and hit the dark stretch of road that ran along the front of the house. She glanced once behind her at the shrinking facade of her two-story house. Not for the first time that night, she thought of how crazy she was behaving. And then Caige began to pick up

tremendous speed, putting distance between her and the safety of her home as if his life depended on it.

Chapter Five: "Toil and Trouble"

She wondered where they were going. They'd been driving the mist-shrouded streets for at least ten minutes, neither of them attempting to speak over the Harley's engine. Not that she wasn't fine with just riding.

The September night was cool and crisp. The smell of wood smoke permeated the sky, and between the drifting, low-lying clouds, Danny could make out the thick starlit strip of the Milky Way. She was glad she'd grabbed her jacket before leaving the house. She could easily heal any malady she picked up due to a compromised immune system, but it was always easier to just not get sick in the first place.

Still, she wasn't *completely* cold. Lucas's body was like a furnace in front of her. Did werewolves just burn hot, or did he have a fever? He was radiating enough warmth that the only really chilly parts of her own body were her nose and ears. The smell of his aftershave, scented soap and leather jacket drifted over her, buffeted by the wind, but still strong enough to warm her on the inside as well as his nearness was warming her on the outside.

She felt comfortable there behind him. She seemed to fit there, her body pressed against his, her arms wrapped tightly around his middle. Caige carved the corners in the road as if he'd been riding for fifty years – and maybe he had. The bike seemed an extension of him more than a vehicle of any sort, and even its roar fit Lucas's dark, un-kept character.

Every now and then, she glanced over the black leather on his broad shoulder to catch glimpses of his switching grip on the throttle, his black motorcycle boot on the gear shift, the strong line of his jaw with the five o'clock shadow... and she felt a warmth somewhere deeper. More private.

He was getting to her. Every square millimeter of the man was pure, unadulterated masculinity.

Danny closed her eyes and leaned forward to rest her cheek on the solid wall of his back. She knew she was playing with fire. Dark, black, cold-burning fire that would sear the shit out of her if she wasn't careful. But there were the dreams to contend with. And Imani was right. Things weren't going to get better.

The truth of it was that despite Caige's infamous dislike of magic of any kind, Danny had always sort of admired him from afar. It was why she knew so much about him – his past, his brother, even some of his habits. She had always been interested in the black-eyed werewolf who stood apart from the others. The loner.

Of course, she'd never revealed herself to him. Now, as she rode behind him, pressed so tightly against him, she had to wonder why. Why hadn't she ever wanted Caige to see her in person when the werewolf community called in the witches for help? Why hadn't she ever wanted him to know she was a witch?

Because I've always liked him.

Danny blinked and straightened in the saddle. *Crap*, she thought. *I never wanted him to know because I didn't want him to associate me with something he hated. I wanted him to like me instead.* Even before her dormant-induced werewolf dreams

had ever started... she'd had a thing for Lucas Caige.

As this realization rolled over her like a bank of mind-numbing fog, Lucas slowed the bike down and turned onto a smaller street. Danny recognized the street, as well as the lights that were making the night time sky glow over the tree tops in the near distance.

At the moment, around the next corner, the Trinidad Fall Festival was taking place. There would be music, food, arts and crafts booths, games, a bon fire, and several performances by actors, magicians and the like. The festivities began in late afternoon and continued long into the night, when the booths took to selling hot apple cider, cocoa, and coffee.

It was the same festival that Jason Alberich, their coven leader, had demanded everyone in the coven attend tonight. Imani had made excuses for Danny, but it looked like she would be showing up anyway.

Of course, she thought. Lucas would naturally decide to bring her here. It was the perfect date spot, really. There were lots of people, so he would assume that she'd feel safe. And the bonfire on the pristine strip of beach was very romantic. Couples could always be found snuggling together nearby.

Lucas pulled the bike into the lot and jockeyed into a protected spot between a white BMW and the brick wall that protected a private garden. Then he shut the bike down. Danny began to rise to dismount, but before she could fully stand up, Lucas was turning in his seat and grabbing her leg with his gloved hand.

The contact was only meant to still her in the saddle, but the intimacy of the touch made her breath catch. Caige's eyes widened almost imperceptibly and speared her with their hypnotic darkness. Danny found herself easing back into the seat. Her body felt as if it were melting there beneath his gentle grasp. He glanced down at his hand and, after a moment of silent contemplation, he slowly slid his fingers off of her.

"I never asked you if you wanted to come here," he said, his voice a little tight. "We don't have to stay if it's not your kind of thing."

Danny opened her mouth to respond, but only air came out. She closed her mouth, cleared her throat, and tried again. "N-no," she said in a strained voice. "This is great. It was a good idea." His gentle grip had set off a heat wave that yet rippled through her body, relentlessly weakening her in the most delicious way. She was flushed now – and he'd only touched her for a moment.

Caige watched her intensely for a few seconds more, and then he smiled. "Okay then," he said. Without warning, he reached out and grabbed her with both hands around her waist. Danny barely stifled a squeal as he easily lifted her entire body off of the bike and gently set her down beside it. He didn't let her go until she had her feet solidly beneath her. Then he quickly and gracefully dismounted himself, rising to his full height, which towered over her despite her own tall figure.

Danny swallowed hard and looked up at him, feeling unsteady even though she was standing on her own. His smile was killer. He liked surprising her, obviously.

Caige pulled off his gloves and stuffed them into the inside pocket of his leather biker jacket. "Let's walk," he said then, once more reaching out without warning. This

time, he brazenly took her left hand in his right and wasted no time intertwining their fingers. "You look a little cold. I'll get you something warm to drink." His grip was strong and the heat branded her hand where he held it.

Werewolves do burn hot, she thought to herself as he led her through the sandy parking lot and into the chaos of the festivities. *I wonder what the rest of him feels like.*

The Festival stage was lit and there were actors sword fighting one another on top of it. The small crowd that had gathered cheered and clapped; Danny could make out a few of the actors' lines even from this distance. The night was beautiful and the smell in the air was one of spice and pumpkin and apple and smoke, and she was beginning to think she might have a wonderful time with Caige tonight – when suddenly, he stopped in his tracks.

His body went completely rigid, from head to boot, and his grip on her hand became painful. Danny glanced down at their hands and then looked up and all around, wondering what had happened. But she saw nothing except revelers and art booths and children with multi-colored streamers and candy apples in their hands weaving wildly around the adults. A few of the children she even recognized. There was Mischa, the six-year-old son of Rebecca and Adam, two of the coven members. Alice was there too; she was a year younger than Mischa and the daughter of Jennifer Rae, another coven member.

And then it hit Danny. Magic. It was all around them.

Oh no, she thought, her head snapping back around to look up at Lucas. His dark eyes were sparking strangely at their centers and his mouth was closed tight.

Fangs, she realized. *He's trying to hide his fangs.*

It washed over Lucas like a crimson tide, smothering and strong and shocking to the point that his fangs instantly erupted in his mouth, and his fingertips began to ache where his nails threatened to grow.

Magic. The scent was staggering. It was everywhere. It smelled like stardust and promises and flowers that were *almost* in bloom. The scent was indescribable really, and to most people it probably would have smelled like hope.

But to him, it was nothing short of the stench of impending death. He had no way to defend himself against magic. There was nothing he could do to protect Danny from whatever it was that was here in this crowd.

His wolf reared its head and awakened within him, snarling at the gates, clawing at the edges of his being and begging to be set free.

"Lucas, you know I just had a thought," Danny said beside him. He looked down at her and saw her flinch.

Fuck, he thought. *Keep it together Caige!* He barked at his wolf to heel, sending the animal within him scurrying backward long enough to keep the red in his eyes from showing any more than it most likely already did. He took a deep breath, shoved his fangs in, and also forced his grip on his woman to loosen.

My woman. Where the hell did that come from?

Danny slowly pulled her hand from his and had enough kind consideration not to rub it, which he knew she must want to do. He'd really been holding on. "It's kind of crowded here," she ventured softly, her voice like a salve on his hyper-alert nerve endings. "It might be a little quieter further down the beach. I know a short cut if you're game."

God bless her, Caige thought. Maybe I'll manage to keep from scaring the crap out of her tonight after all.

"Danny!"

Caige's head snapped up and around at the sound of someone calling Danny's name. A young man dressed in Russian dancing clothes was jogging toward them. He was a fairly handsome man, probably in his mid-to-upper twenties, with thick brown hair and a slightly goofy smile. His gray-blue eyes were open and friendly.

And he smelled like magic.

"Danny, what are you doing here?" the man asked in a heavy Russian accent. Caige glanced down at the woman beside him. She looked distinctly uncomfortable, self-conscious and more than a touch afraid. Lucas's inner wolf bared its fangs.

"Sasha!" Danny replied amidst a nervous laugh. "Is Imani here with you?" she asked then, looking around for herself.

"Yes, but –"

"Danny, what the *hell* are you doing here?" came Imani's angry voice from behind them. Lucas and Danny both spun to see the gorgeous African-Brazilian woman standing hands-on-hips, head cocked to one side, deep chocolate eyes shooting daggers at Danny. Danny took a step back.

But Imani was having none of that. With lips pursed and gaze narrowed, the woman came forward and grabbed one of Danny's hands. Caige fought the sudden impulse to yank her back out of the woman's grip. That was ridiculous. The two were best friends – almost sisters. What was wrong with him?

The magic was getting to him. He needed to get out of there.

"I'm sorry, Lucas. Can I borrow her for a moment, please?" Imani asked and then didn't wait for a reply before she was pulling Danny several yards away to speak with her in whispered tones.

Lucas felt a warning in the air. The stench of legerdemain was all around him, threatening from all sides. But it was more than that. Danny seemed scared, and for some reason that bothered him even more than the magic. Imani was also acting strange. And there was something else.... He couldn't put his finger on it.

"Uh, it, uh, was nice meeting you," Sasha said behind him. Lucas turned to watch the man bow a bit, his own expression very wary and distracted. And then the Russian was jogging off again, glancing once in the girls' direction before he disappeared into the crowd.

Without thinking, Lucas tuned himself into what Danny and her friend were saying, using his sharpened senses to make out their hushed words.

"... knows you're here! He knew the second you were within range. You two shouldn't be here!" Imani hissed.

Danny yanked her hand out of Imani's and narrowed her own gaze. "I don't know what the big deal is about Jason knowing I'm here, Ima, but I'm aware that we shouldn't be here!" she hissed back. "We were just about to leave when you showed up."

"Why the hell are you here to begin with?"

"Lucas wanted to come – he drove us here and I didn't know this is where we were coming. Now calm the hell down! We're leaving." Danny turned away from her friend to walk back toward Lucas, but stopped when the crowd suddenly gasped as one and then fell silent just as quickly.

The hair on the back of Lucas's neck stood on end. His skin felt prickly. Every light in the Festival grounds went out, one after another, until the entire area was dark. Lucas could feel the people around him freeze in place, afraid to move amidst the absence of light. Warning bells were going off in his head. His vision automatically adjusted for the darkness, switching to a stark contrast of grays, whites and reds.

From somewhere unseen, a drum began to pound. One beat. Two. Low and slow and methodical. It was a hypnotic sound, capable of stirring the blood. A few onlookers began to whisper amongst themselves.

Lucas felt something soft brush his fingertips and he looked down to see that Danny had found her way back to his side. He wasted no time in taking her hand once more, and she didn't object. But he could see her clearly in the darkness and her gaze was on something in the distance.

He turned to look. On the opposite end of the Festival grounds, a light began to grow. It was a firelight, perhaps from the tip of a torch, but it expanded in time with the beating drum, a brightening glow in the September night.

There was a sudden flash, and two of the torches along the Festival's walkway burst into fiery life, momentarily blinding everyone. The drums picked up their tempo, joined by several other drums beating out a fast pulse. A second later, two more torches burst into flame amidst gasps of delight and surprise. Then two more, and so forth, until the expanse of sand beneath the Festival stands and stage was decorated in long, flickering shadows.

Tiki torches around the stage also exploded into flame, revealing the source of the single fire that had lit the darkness only moments before. A tall man with light blonde hair stood at the center of the stage, dressed from head to toe in black swaths of clothing, a black, lit torch in his left hand.

He was relatively far from where Lucas and Danny stood, but even at this distance, Lucas could tell that he was a young man, possibly in his late twenties to early thirties. He was about Lucas's height, well built, and there was a charismatic air around him that Caige could feel radiating outward like ripples on a pond. It mesmerized the Festival participants, drawing them closer to the stage as the drums beat themselves into a fury.

The hypnotic rhythm crescendoed, powerful and potent, and then it stopped

altogether – and the crowd waited breathlessly. The man smiled, flashing perfect white teeth. “Welcome,” he said. He simply spoke the word, but it echoed throughout the Festival grounds as if amplified by invisible, floating speakers.

Magic.

“Tonight marks the first night of the Harvest Moon,” he continued. “In honor of this event, I give you –” he paused as he raised his right hand, and a ball of fire erupted in his palm. The crowd gasped and then clapped, and he continued. “A light in the darkness!” With that, he pulled his arm back and threw the ball of fire. It sped over the heads of the revelers toward the waiting, yet dark bonfire pit beyond.

The ball of flame struck the enormous pile of wooden crate and pallet remains and exploded into a towering mass of brilliant, raging fire. A few women screamed a little, and the men roared with impressed delight. The children squealed, jumping up and down. But the show wasn’t over.

Above the raging bonfire, amidst the streams of smoke rising toward the heavens, shapes began to take form. The first was of a man, tall and strong. Only his smoky outline could be discerned. But he reminded Lucas of someone, and the image gave him a truly nasty feeling.

The male outline seemed to erupt into flame itself, burning away into oblivion until it was followed by a second shape. This one was of a motorcycle. It also erupted into flame, again amongst the excited, impressed ooh’s and aah’s of the crowd. The last form to take shape was easily recognizable and when it materialized completely, Lucas’s eyes began to heat in his head. His vision was changing again, turning more red.

A massive black wolf sat back on its haunches and lifted its head to howl at the moon. Despite the immaterialness of the smoky outline, the wolf’s howl reverberated through the Festival grounds, echoing hollowly, sorrowfully, before its image was also engulfed by flame and burned away.

The message was clear. Lucas was no fool.

He looked away from the fire pit toward the stage to find that his assumption had been correct. The man on the stage was watching him. Even though he was far enough away that he couldn’t tell what color the man’s eyes were, Caige could feel those eyes upon him, burning into him with nothing short of pure, unadulterated hatred.

There was more magic pouring out from him than Lucas had ever felt or smelled before. The crowd no doubt believed that everything they had just witnessed was due to pyrotechnics and advanced planning and illusion and technology. It was none of those things. The man on the stage was a wizard, and a powerful one at that.

Lucas felt his chest rumble and realized he was growling low in his throat. He was losing control. This was all too much. The wizard obviously had something against him – the burning images were testament enough to that – and whatever it was, it was serious. But this was not the place to hash out their differences. There were children here.

Danny was here.

Lucas tore his gaze from the stage and glanced down at Danny. She too was watching the man with the light blonde hair. Her kaleidoscope eyes were huge in the frame of her beautiful face. His protective instincts were taking over. He needed to get her out of there.

And then he would come back and find the wizard and rip his fucking throat out. He didn't care what beef the man had with him. The fact that he was magic and hated Caige was enough. It was an itch that needed scratching. And if he died in the process of trying, then so be it. Everyone had to go some time.

But then there was a sucking-popping sound, and Lucas's head whipped around once more just in time to see the man on the stage vanish. The torch he'd been holding in his left hand dropped to the stage and went out, its smoke curling lazily upward toward the night sky. The people in the audience clapped and cheered and began to disperse.

"We should go," Danny said beside him. He looked down at her to find her smiling a small smile, her eyes large and pleading, her expression a mixture of confusion and worry. He found himself wondering what she would have to be confused and worried about.

What had she and Imani been talking about? Come to think of it, who was this Jason person? And why had she been watching the man on the stage – instead of staring at the bonfire like everyone else had been?

What was going on?

Lucas was moving on autopilot now and when he raised his hand and gently cupped the side of her face, he did so without thinking. His thumb slowly caressed the line of her cheek bone and she blinked. He could feel her shiver beneath his touch, a lithe column of trepidation and anticipation, and his own body responded in kind.

She's mine, he thought. It was an unbidden declaration, uncalled for and nonsensical. He'd barely met her. He knew nothing about her. Yet, logical or not, there it was – along with the crazy powerful wizard who hated him and the crowd permeated with the stench of magic and the uber-rich driver of foreign sports cars who had tried to kill him by running him off of the road last night. The world had gone to pot and made no sense any longer.

And he wanted Danny like he'd never wanted another woman in all his life.

Here, in this place of fire and night, she was a beacon of goodness, a port in a storm, and he was quivering beneath the weight of the gale all around him. The feel of her skin beneath his touch was doing things to him. He wanted to feel more. He *needed* to feel more – like a dying man crawling to an altar.

Lucas couldn't have stopped what happened next if he'd tried. He took her face in both of his hands and drew her closer, his hold on her inexorable, his thirst unbearable. He could smell magic everywhere – but Danny's sweet scent licked at him, smoothed over him, and made him forget. He could hear her breathing go ragged, hear the quickening beat of her heart, and all other sound faded away.

Danny raised her arms and pressed her hands against his chest, as if she could

stay him where he was and prevent him from doing what he was going to do. But she couldn't. Nothing could have.

So as he leaned in and whispered her name across her lips, she closed her eyes, at once as lost in him as he was in her. Lucas moved in for the kill. He could not suppress the growl that escaped him as he claimed her lips with his own, at last tasting the sweet salvation her pouting mouth had been promising him all night.

She was delicious. He was delirious. The essence he had scented on her from the very beginning was concentrated here, vanilla and sugar and sweet, supple satisfaction. He took all he could get, wanting more with each passing second. The fires that burned in the torches around him were spreading – he could feel them engulfing him in their heat. His cock hardened and throbbed; his grip on her tightened, and he pressed deeper, his tongue delving and licking and drinking her in.

He forgot about the wizard and where he might have gone to. In that magical moment he couldn't have cared, he was so spellbound.

Danny moaned against him and his hands slipped around her neck, gripping, loosening, and moving further down. He wanted to strip her right then and there and take her in the sand. He was losing control.

I have to get her out of here.

With that thought, he pulled his lips from hers but retained his grip on her body, holding her fast against him. "Let me take you out of here," he whispered, hoping she would understand what he meant – hoping as he'd never hoped for anything that she would agree.

Danny gazed up at him, her pink, swollen lips parted, her gorgeous, strange eyes heavily lidded, her breathing quick and ragged, and Caige went a little crazy inside.

Please, he thought, pleaded – begged.

Danny nodded just once, and that was enough. Lucas fought the urge to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder. Instead, he grabbed her wrist in one swift, sure grip and spun her around to begin pulling her across the Festival grounds toward the parking lot and the motorcycle that waited there.

He never noticed the other men watching them. He couldn't sense them, couldn't see them, couldn't smell them. His entire world had become Danny, and he had no idea they were there.

Chapter Six: "Fire Burn"

Jason watched the werewolf pulling Dannai through the parking lot, and black magic infused his system, begging his mind and body to use it. "What do I have to do to you, Danny?" he whispered to himself, his tall strong form nearly trembling with pent up wrath. How many edicts did he have to declare? How many lies did he have to tell the oracle Lalura before she forced her young adopted charge to obey her commands and heed her warnings?

Jason turned from where he stood on the cliff top, looking down over the festival grounds. Beside him were three large men dressed in black. He addressed the nearest one. "Separate them and bring her to me before he can touch her."

"Yes sir," the man replied. He turned to his companions and the three of them vanished, leaving nothing more behind than the thinnest tendrils of charcoal smoke and the smell of Frankincense. Even that was caught by the sea-side breeze and lifted swiftly away.

They would know what to do. The Akyri were not magic users, strictly speaking. They weren't werewolves. But they were not entirely human by all standards either. The Akyri had lived for countless centuries alongside werewolves, and yet the latter had no clue as to their existence. They were very smart and very good at hiding. They depended upon the black magic of warlocks in what could only be described as a symbiotic relationship. In return for the power that wove through the fabrics of their being, the Akyri performed services for their warlock hosts.

A few of them had even managed to mate with warlocks over the years. Their offspring were terribly enigmatic creatures who normally went the route of black magic, keeping their other supernatural nature hidden from the world.

The Akyri would carry out this task in a manner that made it look completely innocent. Accidental. Then they would bring Dannai to Jason unharmed. And more importantly – unmarked.

In the meantime, Jason was feeling edgy. Danny's defiance and waywardness had been eating at him more and more of late. She'd grown into a stunning young woman, intelligent and kind and free. It was that very freedom that burned in Jason's veins. He wanted to take it from her. He wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything. She was a bird and he wanted to cage her. She was a witch – a very special one. She belonged with her own kind.

She belonged with *him*. He was the coven's herald. Her place was at his side.

Jason glared down at the parking lot where Lucas Caige's motorcycle had driven away moments before. He felt his green eyes darken, pupils expanding as the blackness within him begged to be release. Again, he denied it.

Leaving a strange popping sound in his wake, he vanished from the cliff top and reappeared in his tent. It was a actually one of the rooms in his mansion, disguised through the use of shielding magic. Its reinforced tent exterior was much nicer on the inside than it would have otherwise been. Rugs adorned the floor, a king-size bed took up one corner, and torches lined the log walls. He waved a hand and they leapt

to life, filling the tent with a sudden crackling light.

He then placed his hands against the lip of his work bench, leaned on his extended arms, closed his eyes, and sent out a mental call. There was a little witch on the festival grounds, a new and young one by the name of Brianna. She was only twenty. She had a cherubic face and short blonde curls and a plump little body that was capable of the most adorable suffering.

She wasn't Dannai. But he needed a release and she would have to do for tonight. He felt her answer his call at once, and Jason broke the connection to open his eyes.

He had company. He narrowed his gaze and remained where he was, his back still facing the tent's flaps.

"I know who you are," Jason said as he pulled off his black shirt and tossed it carelessly onto his work bench. Behind him, the visitor paused in the opening of the tent, and Jason could almost hear him smile. "And I know why you're here," he continued calmly.

"Very well," the man replied coolly. He had a deep, authoritative voice and a presence so strong, it heated the air around them. Jason turned to see the man slowly stride to a nearby chair and lower himself into it. "We'll forego the introductions." He had long blonde hair, sapphire blue eyes, and the build of a werewolf.

Jason slowly faced him fully, crossing his well-muscled arms over his broad chest. The light from the torches in the tent flickered across the thin sheen of moisture covering his own sculpted body.

The man's blue eyes flicked to the torches and back again. "You like to play with fire," he began with a slight smile. "And I'm guessing the young Dannai is as fiery a spirit as you've ever known."

"You want me to help you destroy Malcolm Cole," Jason interrupted, cutting to the chase. He knew damn well why the werewolf was sitting there in his tent. He shook his head, smiling his own cruel smile. "You're in over your head, Phelan. The Clan Council wants you dead. You abducted a marked dormant – the Overseer's granddaughter, no less. Killing Cole won't change any of that."

Gabriel Phelan grinned, flashing his infamous fangs, and then he sat back and draped his thick arms over the back of the cushioned chair. "Oh, I know," he said slowly. "This has nothing to do with the Council or even Cole. This is personal."

Phelan sat forward and pinned Jason with those deadly powerful eyes. "I know what you are, Alberich." He stood, as fluid and graceful as the stories of him told, and his gaze settled on the assortment of tools Jason had hung on the wall. "And I know your secret."

Jason's gaze narrowed. He said nothing.

Phelan glanced at him over his broad shoulder. "A woman like Dannai is hard to break. It takes patience and a deep understanding of both the female body and its psychological processes. I would offer a few tips to the task – however," he turned back to face the whips on the wall and then bent and threw open the top of a black

leather chest against the same wall. It revealed an assortment of restraints and manacles that Alberich used in his performances... and elsewhere. "I'm guessing that you already know many of them."

Jason was quiet for some time. He would not deny that his desires were darker than those of other men. And he knew that Phelan was a notorious master of the art. But the werewolf was hedging around his point and Jason's patience was wearing thin. "What do you want, Phelan?"

The powerful werewolf straightened and speared him with a hard look. Then he shook his head. "She will be the death of you." He smiled again and strode across the tent to the exit. There he stopped, turned back, and cocked his head to one side, his blue eyes glittering in the firelight. Jason noticed that they had begun to glow. "In the coming days, I will have use of a warlock," he said as he lifted the tent flap, revealing the night beyond. "Agree to aid me then, and I will rid you of Lucas Caige."

Jason stood stock still for several long seconds. He hadn't expected that. The alpha werewolf knew that he was a warlock. A thrum of power surged through Jason's strong body, preparing itself for the kill. It was a defensive reaction. However, he tamped it down and, on the outside he remained for all intents and purposes calm.

"I can smell the taint to your magic, mage. You can't hide it from me," Phelan said quietly. "I can even smell the Akyri on you."

Jason's skin burned. Black magic was riding him hard now. He wanted to lash out—to destroy. Phelan knew too much. He shouldn't have even known of the existence of such creatures, much less that Jason was dealing with them. He was getting far too close.

"But you've hidden it well from everyone else," the werewolf continued, completely unfazed by the danger that Jason could feel in his own green eyes. "Even the beautiful Dannai."

The warlock refused to be baited any further. "Are you threatening me, Phelan?"

Gabriel Phelan's smile never wavered. "Threats are not my way, Alberich. But I'm a man of many promises."

At that moment, he looked over his shoulder and the tent flap beside him was gently pulled to the side. A blonde head of curls peeked through and in stepped a tentative Brianna. She was dressed scantily, having put on a dance performance on the stage earlier that night. Her creamy white skin was smooth, her breasts milky mounds above a rather tight bustier.

Gabriel Phelan looked down at the girl and Brianna turned to gaze up at him. She was instantly trapped in his power. Jason watched as her jaw went slack, her eyes glassed over, and her hands fell submissively to her sides.

Phelan took a lock of her blonde hair between his thumb and forefinger and rubbed it admiringly. He bent and inhaled, no doubt taking in her scent. When he looked back over at Jason, his fangs had fully extended. His smile was truly villainous.

"How sweet," he said softly, dropping the lock of hair. "A welcome distraction, no doubt. But one such as this will never fight you enough to satisfy your needs, warlock."

With that, Phelan reached out, snaking his arm around Brianna's waist. He pulled her in against his chest and claimed her mouth with his, kissing her deeply.

Jason stood his ground, watching the scene through guarded green eyes. Phelan was an alpha and Jason had dealt with them before. This was not threatening behavior. It was an alpha's way. Rather, it was the *knowledge* that Phelan possessed that was absolutely threatening for Jason.

At the moment, the werewolf was simply playing.

After nearly a minute, Phelan broke the kiss and released Brianna. She sank to her knees before him, her head bent, her blonde curls obscuring her features. Phelan stepped around her and through the tent flap, looking once more over his shoulder. "Have fun, mage." He glanced down at the girl and then flashed Jason a predatory smile. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

With that, the infamous werewolf disappeared into the night, dropping the tent flap behind him.

Danny's inner witch would not stop screaming at her. This was dangerous. Caige had some kind of power over her. She was playing with fire – and she was no Alberich. She was going to get burned.

When Lucas touched her, it felt like everything around her was melting and, not for the first time since she'd met him, Danny was seriously frightened that she was going to accidentally let her shields down. He was too powerful for her; he made her weak. She was afraid of losing control. Losing either one of the shields would have been bad.

Danny glanced over Lucas's broad shoulder at the odometer – 97. He was taking them somewhere at break neck speed. As if he couldn't wait.

Danny shuddered. He was all adrenaline and hardness and danger. She couldn't help but wonder what he would do if he learned she was a dormant. She and Caige were already drawn to each other in some inexorable fashion. She had no idea why the attraction was so strong. There was no common ground for them to stand on; so why did they crave each other so badly?

And if he learned that she was not only a dormant, but had been dreaming about him? A delicious shiver ran through Danny when she thought of how he would react. She felt it deep down in her bones. He would claim her. There would be no stopping him. It was something she simply knew. Maybe it was the dormant in her; that secret, hidden part of her that understood the wolf. Or maybe it was just Caige and the wildness that surrounded him like wind in the night. She knew that he would take her and change her and she would be bound to him forever.

He was incredibly warm where his body was pressed so tightly against hers. Again, she wondered how hot he would feel without the leather between them that buffered her from his presence at the moment. Skin on skin. Danny closed her eyes and swallowed hard, suppressing a moan. She was beginning to ache for him. Her jeans felt deliciously tight and the bike vibrated maddeningly between her legs.

But then a wave of cold washed over her as she thought of her second shield.

How would Caige react if – no, *when* – he learned that she was a witch?

Because it was bound to happen eventually.

No, she thought stubbornly, her fingers curling into his shirt over his ripped abdomen. *He doesn't need to know. Not ever.*

But even as she thought it, she knew it couldn't be true. As if in defeat, she leaned forward and laid her cheek against the leather over his broad back. The only way to protect herself from the wrath he would most likely show her when he found out would be to run right now. Stop seeing him – leave this place. She would have to go somewhere far away, where he would never find her, so that she would never be tempted to make love to him. And her shield would never fall.

And he would never know.

Danny....

Danny's eyes flew open. A buzzing engulfed her. *Danny, we need you!*

Imani was calling her. There was fear in her voice; desperation. Danny's hair whipped about her face as she instinctively looked behind her at the disappearing strip of black and yellow. She turned and looked ahead again; the road was deserted but for them. There were no driveways on either side, no places to turn off – nothing.

Danny, you have to heal someone!

Danny thought fast. If she could just get out of Lucas's sight and his range of smell, she could use transportation magic to get to Imani's location. But right now, she was stuck. Her heart hammered hard as she racked her brain.

Suddenly, she leaned forward and put her lips to Caige's ear. The werewolf cocked his head slightly, turning toward her as if knowing she needed to be heard.

"I have to go home!" she said over the roar of the engine. "I forgot my medicine!" Imani had told her earlier that she'd lied to Caige about why Danny had passed out. Ima had told him that Danny had blood sugar problems. It was a good ruse and right now, she was clinging to it.

Lucas's grip on the handlebars visibly tightened. She felt a strange wave of power roll off of him; it was tangible. And then he nodded and was rocketing the bike forward at an even greater speed.

Danny sent a message back to Imani that she was on her way. Then she ducked her head behind Lucas, painfully aware at that moment that she wasn't wearing a helmet. Of course, she'd been around werewolves enough while helping them over the years to know that they moved so fast and were so powerful, Caige could protect her in a wreck. If they went down, Lucas would have his body in massive wolf form and wrapped around her in an instant for protection.

But that didn't make the fear any less potent. It was like climbing a wall while you were wearing belaying gear and safety ropes – your palms would still sweat. It was basic instinct. And it was reckless of him to chance being exposed like that. It was almost as if he wouldn't mind her knowing.

That was Lucas Caige. Reckless. Everything about him was untamed.

They came to a crossroads and Dannai realized she knew where she was.

Caige turned left, obviously having memorized the road system – and her address. Within two short minutes, they were pulling up in front of her house.

Danny waited a moment while Caige kicked down the stand and shut off the bike. Then he turned in the seat and helped her off. As soon as she had her legs beneath her, Danny ran toward the house. She didn't leave Caige an explanation, and she could almost feel the surprise and anger from behind her as she reached the door at a fast sprint and hurtled through it into the hallway beyond.

She knew it was rude – maybe even wrong. But she could feel that Imani was gone and the house was un-shielded; magic was radiating from everything.

Danny swore hopelessly, running a hand through her long black hair and turning in place. "Not again," she whispered. Without waiting for the horrible to happen, Danny closed her eyes and extended her powers, blanketing the house in a ripple of shielding magic. And just in time.

Caige's boot stepped over the threshold and touched down on the wood inside a second later. He was watching her as she turned in the hallway, breathing heavy. His dark gaze settled on her form like a brand as he let the screen door close behind him. "You okay?" he asked, his eyes searching and wary, his expression unreadable.

Danny thought fast again. "Yes!" she breathed, trying to look as innocent as possible. "I – I just can't remember where I left them. I think Imani moved them when I was sleeping and I –"

She didn't have to fake the wave of dizziness that washed over her then. She was taking care of three shields and, while it wouldn't normally be too much for her to handle in good health – Lucas Caige was turning her world upside down. His nearness did odd things to her. He made her weak just by being near her.

Danny's eyes closed and she found herself raising her arms and reaching for the wall as the world tilted around her.

Danny! Come now! Imani's voice rang out in her head once more, pure fear and desperation. At the same time, Caige's hands slid around Danny's waist to hold her up. His touch was electrifying; his fingers brushed the exposed skin of her midriff and she almost moaned with the pleasure.

Odin help me, she thought as Caige moved in and pulled her against him. She felt his lips at her ear. "I'm taking you upstairs," he told her. His voice was deep and thick with lust, but his tone was one of stark concern.

He lifted her easily into his arms and began taking the stairs two at a time. She didn't need to be carried, but she had a feeling that there would have been nothing she could have done to stop Caige from picking her up anyway. She almost cried with frustration. How was she going to get to Imani without giving herself away now?

Maybe Odin answered her – maybe it was just luck. But an idea occurred to her. As Lucas entered her bedroom and set her gently down on her bed, Danny pulled a bit of power from somewhere within herself, sapping strength from her body. She could only do it because she was already lying down. With the magic, she created a cacophony outside.

Lucas straightened and spun around as the din of a horrible five-car pile-up

emanated from the street in front of the house.

"Go!" Danny insisted hurriedly. "I'll get my medicine!"

Lucas didn't wait to reply. He was hurtling through the door of her bedroom and down the stairs in a near blur. As soon as he was out of sight, Danny closed her eyes. She let her dormant shield drop. Then she let her own personal magic shield drop. She only left the house's shield up – it wouldn't matter in a moment anyway.

With renewed strength, Danny pushed herself off of the bed to stand beside it.

"I'm coming, Ima," she whispered. And with that, she called forth the transportation spell that would take her to her best friend, raising her arms and welcoming the vortex. In the next moment, the world shifted around her, blurring color, sound and time.

When it stopped again, she was standing in a forest clearing.

"Danny! Oh, thank the gods!"

Danny spun around to see Imani kneeling beside the prone form of a child. The little girl must not have been much older than eight or nine – maybe ten, if she was small for her age. She had straight brown hair and very pale skin.

Danny was instantly running to the child's side, barely noting that other members of her coven were there in the clearing as well.

As she dropped to her knees beside the child and placed her hand to the girl's chest, she speared Imani with a hard look. "What happened?" she wanted to know. She could feel the child's life force slipping beneath her touch. Her heartbeat was erratic, slow and barely noticeable. Another minute and she would have been gone.

"She and her brother were playing on the cliffs," Imani told her quickly. "The festival is just over that rise," she turned and pointed and then faced Danny again. "The cliff face crumbled. Her brother is unconscious as well, but more stable."

Danny nodded and closed her eyes, needing all of her concentration now. She'd been able to locate the main injury in the girl's small body and there was internal bleeding. With a stark and sure purpose, she began the words of an incantation, soft and sweet; a lullaby of healing. In a few seconds, the girl's eyes were fluttering open. They were a clear, bright hazel beneath long, dark lashes.

"Hello Alice," Danny broke off from the spell and spoke to the girl. She'd gleaned the child's name as she'd worked. "You and your brother are going to be just fine," she said softly. "I want you to stay here with Imani," she nodded toward her best friend, "and don't move too much."

Alice slowly sat up and nodded.

"Where's the boy?" Danny asked. Imani hurriedly pointed her in another direction and Danny left them to run toward a group of her coven members near the opposite end of the clearing.

Sasha was kneeling beside the boy's unconscious form. He looked up as she approached and she nodded to him. He nodded back, a look of frank relief crossing his features. Danny placed her hand to the boy's chest. Again, she spoke her words of healing, and again the child beneath her gentle touch stirred and awoke. His eyes fluttered open; hazel like his sister's. Dannai smiled down at him. "Hello Max."

Lucas came to a sudden stop in the doorway of Danny's house as a surge of power washed over and through him. It was lightning-fast, there one millisecond and gone in the next. But it was real and it was strong and it smelled... like magic.

He straightened in the hallway and slowly turned toward the stairs he had just rocketed down. There was no further sound coming from outside on the street. The night was silent.

Caige's fangs erupted in his mouth; his body slid into fight mode. Something wasn't right. Without calling out to Danny, Lucas began to climb the stairs back up to the second floor. He moved with predatory stealth, not making a single sound.

He reached the landing and approached Danny's door. It was slightly ajar. He pushed it open with a slow, cautious hand. It was quiet inside. Lucas concentrated and listened. There was no breathing, no heartbeat. Nothing.

He pushed the door the rest of the way open and his wolfen vision took in the room's empty interior. Danny was gone.

But that wasn't all. Lucas's dark eyes widened and flashed red. There was the faintest hint of it, soft and lingering like no more than the promise of snow. Magic had an indescribable scent, and it was so weak here, he should not have been able to pick it up. But he did.

And then his world dropped out from under him when a second scent piggy-backed the first. It was even fainter than the magic – but he would have recognized it at half the strength. It smelled like heaven. *Salvation*.

It was the scent of a dormant.

Chapter Seven: "Disappearing Act"

"So what are you gonna tell Mr. Tall, Dark and Pissed-Off when you just happen to flash back into your bedroom after he ran outside and there were no cars in the street?"

Danny rolled her eyes and ran her hand over her face. Imani had a point and Danny was well aware of it. "Okay, I wasn't thinking very clearly. But you wouldn't shut up and the situation was dire. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"Not that!" Imani huffed, shaking her head. "Good goddess, girl, you had to know that this was going to take longer than that!"

"I had no idea there were two children who needed healing, Ima! I thought I would just pop in, heal someone, and pop back out!"

"And when you drained yourself so bad you wouldn't be able to keep up three shields?" Imani asked next, "What were you planning on doing then?"

"I don't know!" Danny yelled, not able to take it any longer. "Jesus, cut me a break! Like I said, I didn't know what else to do!" She dropped her head into her hands and tried to squeeze the pain out of her temples.

Ima held up her hands and sighed deeply. "All right, I'll give you that much. You were in a hurry. But now we have a problem, girlfriend. That alpha wolf you left alone in our house is now officially on to you. So... what's our plan?" she hedged.

They were sitting on a large stone in the clearing where Danny had healed the children. The kids had been walked back to the festival long ago and led to their parents with no one the wiser as to their accident – or the fact that Danny had healed them. The other members of the coven who had been in the clearing had returned along with the children, leaving Imani and Danny alone.

"Well..." Danny began slowly, leaving her face hidden behind her hands. "I was sort of thinking of leaving town."

Imani clucked her tongue and shook her head. "I know you're joking, girl. Because if you were serious, I'd be obligated as your friend to warn you that once an alpha werewolf catches the scent of a dormant, that kind of shit don't fly."

"Who says he knows about my dormancy, Ima?" Danny raised her head and squared her friend with a hard look. "I had that shield up to the very last. Worst case scenario, he knows there's something magical going on." Danny figured that the very fact that she had disappeared from her room and had yet to return would tip Caige off to *that* much. Either he would think she did it herself and was therefore a witch – or he would think that some magical beast appeared out of nowhere and absconded with her.

That thought almost made her laugh. *Almost.*

This was just too serious. If she hadn't been dreaming about him, it wouldn't be so bad. And it wasn't just the dreams. The truth was, she was so attracted to him, it felt almost like some kind of iniquitous sex virus had invaded her system. To her, Lucas Caige was that piece of seven-chocolate mousse cake with whipped cream that you got after a lifetime of dieting. He was tempting and that was putting it lightly.

"You're underestimating the wolf in him, Danny," Ima warned softly. "Don't put anything past him. We've worked with his kind for a long time. Would you put anything past Charlie?"

Danny thought about that. Charlie, or Claire, as most others knew her, was a very powerful werewolf. And when Imani put it that way, then *no*. She wouldn't put it past Charlie to figure things out eventually. Luckily for Danny, Charlie was already well aware of Danny's dormancy and had promised long ago to keep it a secret.

"No," she replied softly. "But I really was careful about that one. Still, the magic will be bad enough." She felt suddenly sad. There was a pain yawning to life inside of her and she didn't like it one bit. "I suppose he'll hit the road now."

To that, Imani said nothing. But if she had been planning on speaking eventually, she was saved the trouble. Boots crunched the cold grass and rocks behind them and both girls turned to see one of Jason Alberich's apprentices standing behind them. He was a tall man dressed in black, as was customary.

"Dannai, the herald wishes to see you."

"I'll just bet he does," mumbled Imani in such a quiet voice that only Danny could hear her. Danny shot her a glance half wary and half weary and then stood to follow the apprentice off of the cliff-top field. She didn't look to see whether Imani followed as well; she had so much on her mind in that moment, she almost didn't care.

When they reached the festival grounds, it was to find the celebration winding down for the night. The bonfire was down to the dregs of its once mighty flames and cars were pulling out of the lot in a long line. Their headlights cast a lonely light through the foggy night.

They reached the herald's tent and the apprentice held out his hand, gesturing for Danny to enter. Danny watched a few children being pulled by weary parents toward the emptying lot and then she ducked under the flap of Alberich's tent and went inside.

Jason Alberich had always had good taste in décor. The herald's tent was far from an ordinary living structure. It acted as a portal, more or less, to the rooms of Alberich's mansion. During the height of festivities, the tent could be found resembling the herald's work room, which Danny had only ever caught glimpses of since she was normally too busy to bother the wizard while he was working.

Other times, it was the dining hall and Alberich would invite the coven for a meal. It was a meeting room, a library, a bedroom. That last one, Danny had never seen.

At the moment, the interior of his tent was warm and inviting, and because Danny was a witch, she saw it as it truly was – far grander on the inside than the allotted space on the outside should have allowed. Any human mistakenly entering the tent would have seen nothing but white material, a dirt floor, and a few chairs.

What was really there, however, was what looked like the Gryffindor common room from Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry. The floor was a limestone and marble composite, the stone hearth crackled merrily, the round table was set with food and drink, and a black mastiff rested on a thick white rug beside a set of plush love seats.

Alberich sat in one of the seats, his tall strong form draped in the customary black of his station, his blonde hair stark in contrast. He glanced up at the entrance to the tent as Danny came in and his green eyes glittered with an unsettling mixture of keen intelligence and observation.

"You wanted to see me?" she said.

He nodded, lifted a goblet of some kind of drink to his lips and gestured for Danny to sit in the chair across from him. "Please have a seat, Danny."

The mastiff raised its head, sniffed in her direction, grunted satisfactorily, and then lowered its head and closed its eyes once more. As soon as Danny took her seat, a goblet matching Jason's materialized on the coffee table in front of her.

She glanced at it, wondering what it was. Her stomach was in knots, however, and she wasn't sure she wanted anything at all.

"Danny, I saw you earlier with the werewolf, Lucas Caige," Jason told her. Danny's head snapped up and her eyes cut to him once more. His green gaze was ever steady and unnerving. "Quite frankly, it concerns me."

"Why?" she asked, feeling a little sick.

"You know very well how Caige feels about us," Jason said softly, leaning forward to set the goblet down on the table. He rested his elbows on his knees, laced his fingers together, and sighed. "It's clear that you're keeping your true nature from him, or he would not have accompanied you to the festival tonight. What concerns me most is that you would hide who you are in order to satisfy the closed-minded whims of a werewolf." He speared her with a hard look for a second. "Would you care to explain your actions?"

Danny pulled her gaze away from his and felt her cheeks heat up. Jason's words swam around in her head. He was right. Caige's hatred of magic was notorious enough. "Not really," she replied.

"I see," Jason said. He sighed again and came to his feet. Then he paced slowly to the fire place, braced his arms against the marble mantle, and gazed into the flames. "I can understand your interest in such a man," he said softly. "Lucas Caige must seem the ultimate game to one such as yourself. If you can make him fall for you, you can make anyone fall for you. Is that it?"

"What? No!" Danny shook her head. "That's not it at all!"

Alberich glanced at her over his shoulder. "No?" he asked, never raising his voice. "Are you certain? Because I can't imagine what kind of future you could possibly think you'd have with a man who loathes our kind as much as he does." He pushed off of the hearth and turned to face her. "Caige can never love a witch, Danny, and you can't hide from him forever. There will come a day – *soon* – when he knows you for who and what you truly are." He looked at the floor and shook his head, closing his eyes. "I would spare you the ensuing pain."

Danny's head was spinning. Everything Jason was telling her was true. She knew it in her heart. And that heart was breaking already. She turned her face slightly away from him when she felt tears gather in her eyes. She couldn't believe this was hurting her as much as it was. And she didn't want Alberich to see that.

"Danny, what you just did to those children on that cliff was a gift more precious than any other witch has ever been given," he continued, his voice still soft, his tone gently beseeching. "To that end, I honestly know of no other witch in existence who has demonstrated the level of power you have over all. You are a boon to us, Danny. Your people need you. You realize this, don't you?" he asked, as if just to make sure.

Danny hated to answer such a question. Saying "no," would seem outright stupid, and saying "yes," would make her pig-headed. So, she remained silent. She didn't know whether she could trust herself to speak anyway. Her throat seemed swollen.

Alberich was silent for a long while and Danny was afraid he would realize she was trying not to cry. She listened as he moved around the love seat in which she was sitting until he was standing directly behind her. She could feel him gazing down at her, tall and powerful above her. It felt a little like being observed by Darth Vader.

Which was strange. Vader was supposed to be evil. Alberich wasn't evil – why would she compare him to such a character?

"I'm sure I don't have to remind you what will happen should you sleep with the werewolf," he said then, breaking the silence. Danny's heart skipped a beat. Her body went stiff. He was talking about her gift now – and how Lalura had warned her that if she slept with a werewolf, she would lose her ability to heal. Just like that, it would go *poof*. Gone forever.

"Is a man who despises everything you stand for really worth throwing something so precious away, Dannai?"

Danny's chest felt as if it were cracking wide open. She wanted to leave. She needed to be alone. Without allowing Alberich to see her face, she stood, her back still to him. "Is this all you wanted to speak to me about?" she asked softly, her voice nearly cracking under the pressure.

Jason waited several beats. And then he said, "No."

Danny held her breath.

"I don't want you to hate me for having to be the one to warn you," he told her. "The last thing I want is your scorn, Danny," he added softly. She heard his boots on the marble floor as he moved around her and came to stand before her. She looked up at him, knowing it was no use trying to hide the pain in her expression now. *Let him see it*, she thought. It doesn't matter.

But when she met his gaze, she was struck with another thought. *Anakin Skywalker*. She blinked. *Imani doesn't trust him. Why?* Jason Alberich was a very handsome and very powerful wizard. And he'd never been anything but kind to her.

He looked down at her and his own expression softened. The green in his eyes melted from emerald to jade, the hard cut to his features smoothing out as he raised his hand and gently cupped her cheek.

The sensation was somewhat startling to Danny. He literally played with fire, holding it in the palms of his hands – but his touch was cold. It wasn't what she'd been expecting. It was so different from the way Lucas felt. The werewolf's body felt as if it were always running a fever.

"I care for you, Danny," Jason whispered. "I always have. Can you not see that?" he asked, shaking his head. Danny's mouth went dry. She thought of Imani's warning. *Alberich has a thing for you. He has for years.*

By the gods, Danny thought. Imani had been right. Why hadn't Danny seen it before? Why hadn't she noticed? If the look in Jason's eyes at that moment was any indication of how he'd felt about her for the past several years, then Danny had been naively oblivious in the worst way.

Why?

"Whatever feelings you think you may have for this werewolf, please reconsider them. If not for me, then for you." Jason brushed his thumb along her cheekbone and his gaze narrowed in earnest. "And when you realize the mistake you're making – and change your mind – know that I will be here, Danny." He dropped his hand and took a step back. "I will always be here for you."

He turned away from her and made his way toward a small black wooden chest that rested on the mantle above the fire place. He waved his hand and the lock on the chest snapped open, the lid gliding up. Danny watched as Jason pulled something from the black velvet depths of the small chest. He closed his hand over whatever it was and made his way back over to her.

"I want you to have this," he told her softly, the look on his face an attractive mixture of discomfited reticence. He seemed unsure suddenly. As if she would reject the gift and he was taking a chance in giving it to her.

Danny looked down at his hand as he opened his palm. At its center rested a small, delicate pendant. The gold chain was very fine and at most sixteen inches long. The pendant itself was a single black diamond.

Or, at least, that what it looked like at first glance. But if it was, then it was incredibly valuable, because it glittered with stark radiance in the firelight and even without touching it and examining it, Danny could tell it was clear of imperfections or clouds.

"What... what is this, Jason?"

He smiled at her, flashing perfect white teeth. "I like the way my name sounds when you say it," he said. Then he took her hand in his and opened her palm, setting the pendant in her grasp. "It belonged to my mother and my grandmother before her," he said. "Every witch in my family line." Then he chuckled softly, closing her fingers over the necklace. "Oddly enough, it's utterly lacking in magical properties." He shrugged, his green eyes sparkling. "But it is quite lovely."

"But –" She stopped, bit her lip, and started again. "But why are you giving this to me?" she asked softly.

"Because," he said, pushing her hand down so that the pendant was firmly in her possession. "You would look beautiful in it. And because...." His voice trailed off. His gaze narrowed on her, becoming more thoughtful. "I've wanted to give it to you for a long time."

Danny swallowed hard and nearly choked. Jason Alberich had it bad for her. He

was giving her jewelry. *Oh goddess*, she thought. Jason deserved better than her. She respected him, but she had no romantic feelings toward him at all. He could have any woman in the coven – any *other* woman, that is. Why did he have to zero in on the one woman who could not return his affections – because she was falling hard for someone else?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Never accept jewelry from a man unless you were serious about him. It sent the wrong message. She held her hand up once more, unfolding her fingers to reveal the pendant. Jason glanced from her to the necklace and back again.

"I can't take this, Jason," she said. But before she could continue, Alberich stepped forward, closing the distance between them. She felt instantly dwarfed by his size and stature and her voice was trapped in her throat.

"Yes, you can," he said firmly. "And you will. As your herald, I'm ordering you to wear it," he told her, the hint of a smile on his lips the only indication that he wasn't actually giving her an edict. "Now turn around," he commanded, taking the pendant from her hand before signaling for her to turn her back to him. "And lift your hair."

She did as he told her, figuring that she could take all of this up with him later, when she was rested and fed and after she dealt with her feelings about Caige.

Lucas, she thought. He was probably on his way to Mexico by now, running from the crazy-ass witch girl who lied to him.

Pain arced through her chest at that thought. But she shoved it away and lifted her hair from her neck. She had a lot of hair and strands and locks always got loose. Jason didn't seem to mind. He waited patiently and then, when it was clear, he draped the pendant over her décolletage and clasped it closed at the nape of her neck. It was very cold where it rested against her collarbones and the hollow of her throat.

"Now go," he told her, gently grasping her upper arms from where he still stood behind her. "Go home and eat and rest," he ordered. "I can sense your weariness. You saved lives today." He released her and turned away. She could hear his voice become more distant as he made his way across the room. She turned to watch him go. "You are a very powerful witch, Dannai," he said, just before disappearing through an archway that clearly led to some other area in his mansion. "But even you have your weaknesses."

When Danny finally made it home later that night, it was to find all of the lights left on and the kitchen smelling like veggie Jambalaya. It was one of Imani's best dishes and Danny was starving.

She also had no appetite whatsoever, despite her starvation.

Imani was waiting up for her. She appeared in the hall as soon as the front door closed behind Danny.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Danny said. It wasn't really a question; she knew Caige wasn't around. The mansion was unprotected, free of all shields. If the werewolf had been near, a shield to hide its magic would have been erected.

"Yeah," Ima replied, her expression concerned, her deep voice soft. "Come here," she said and then moved forward to pull Danny into a warm embrace.

"I don't even know why I care," Danny mumbled into Ima's shoulder.

"Because you're a dormant and he's your big bad wolf," Ima said, chuckling softly. "You've been dreaming about him, girl. Any man worthy of a woman's dreams is gonna be hard to let go."

Danny pulled away and wiped at her eyes. "Think I'll ever get over him?"

"Who knows?" Ima said, cocking her head to one side. She gave Danny a long, appraising look for several seconds, and then her gaze slipped down Danny's body. Something wicked gleamed in her eyes and her sorry expression was exchanged for one with a bit more impiety. "But I think I may know of a way to help you along, sugar."

Danny's brows rose. A butterfly took off in her stomach and her body grew warmer. She knew that look.

Imani leaned forward and took Danny by the arm, turning to guide her down the hall and up the stairs to the bedroom. Danny fell silent behind her, her legs growing a little weaker with anticipation. She had to admit that though Lucas and Jason were each vying in different ways for her mental and emotional energy, Ima was perhaps the one person in the world who could take Danny's mind off of them.

At least for a short, delicious while.

Danny had barely drifted off to that sacred place between waking and dreams when something rudely jarred her from it, setting her heartbeat to rapid fire. She blinked several times where she lay, trying to clear her vision and adjust to the semi-darkness. The moon was low on the horizon and its faint blue cast barely managed to pierce the blackness. The windows were open a crack, allowing the slightest breeze to rustle the gauzy curtains. There was no sound but the thudding of her heart.

She'd been dreaming. She remembered that now. Her mouth was dry. She licked her lips. The dream had started out good. Lucas had been there... but then the *other* one had come.

Phelan.

A hard shiver ran through Danny and she shut her eyes, instantly grateful for the dormancy shield she once more wore. It was her security blanket now. With Lucas gone... there remained only one werewolf that she could successfully mate with. And she would rather die than let him touch her.

These thoughts raced quickly through her mind, melding together in the barely-awakened state of her brain. But they flew from her consciousness, leaving it blank and alert when a sudden, strange perception washed over her.

The house was quiet. But she wasn't alone in her room.

She tried to rise to a sitting position, a fresh scream bubbling up in her throat, but it was too late. The tall form against the wall rushed her with blinding speed, silencing her cry with a strong hand over her mouth. Her body was smothered in her attacker's weight and she barely had time to blink before her wrists were trapped in a single

steel-like grip. Without the ability to use her hands or speak any words, she had no access to her magic.

Not that she could have cast anything at that moment anyway. Fear was leaving a sour taste on her tongue and muddling any ability to think clearly. She thought she heard death breathing down upon her when her attacker leaned forward and growled against her lips.

A werewolf. She recognized the feeling now. It was an intense kind of power, a wave of harsh, animalistic might that made her legs go numb in her bed. The growl was low and long and rumbled like distant thunder. It was a quiet warning.

She tried to make out his face in the darkness, but the moon was behind him. She couldn't move. She couldn't think. She could barely breathe.

And then he was lifting off of her and taking her with him. He moved so fast, she was certain he would wrench her arms out of their sockets, but somehow, he managed to contain her without harming her.

Her mouth remained covered, forever denying her access to her spells, even as her wrists were captured behind her back. She felt more than heard the clicking of metal sliding into place and her mind registered the telltale signs of handcuffs being snapped shut. There were a few things she could do without having to move her hands or speak magic words, but at the moment, they eluded her.

She felt strange. Fuzzy.

Sick.

In the next instant, her body was lifted into a pair of hard, strong arms. They came around her like steel bands, smashing her to an equally hard chest. All the while, sound remained forbidden to her where his hand clasped so firmly over her lips.

She felt the earth shift, saw the room blur, and knew he was moving. It was a werewolf speed, too fast for a mortal to distinguish, and it was dizzying to witness. Instinct forced her eyes shut as the werewolf shot through the second story window and fell, taking her with him.

She would have screamed had she any breath. But the scream would have been absorbed and muffled anyway – and in the end, there turned out to be no need. Her abductor fell the two stories and landed expertly, absorbing the impact with both legs, keeping her from being jarred with the sudden stop.

Then he was moving again. Once more, his speed was too fast and Danny became instantly dizzy. She fought the dizziness, stubbornly trying to keep track of where he was taking her. She didn't bother trying to struggle. Strength-wise, she knew she had nothing on a werewolf, and her magic was AWOL.

The forest closed in on either side and Danny gave into instinct and closed her eyes once more.

Chapter Eight: "The Pledge"

Danny couldn't be sure how much time passed before the werewolf was slowing, but her shoulders ached from the position her arms were cuffed in and she had to fight not to tear up because she knew that if her nose got stuffy, she wouldn't be able to breathe. She felt exhausted, though she was positive it had only been minutes.

She finally opened her eyes when a shadow fell over her. They were in a cave. At least, that was what it looked like from her perspective. She could see a shelf of black rock above them and a gray-white opening of fog and ocean twenty to thirty meters away.

Before she could get a look at anything else, the werewolf was releasing her mouth and spinning her around, one hand wrapped firmly around her neck. She blinked and gasped in a quick breath before she was slammed up against the cold stone wall. She winced as the cuffs bit into her flesh, but he seemed to pull back just a little, affording her enough room that they didn't damage her.

And then her abductor's face was lowering to within an inch of hers.

Deep, dark eyes pinned her to the spot, their depths glittering with galaxies of untold secrets.

Lucas!

Danny's mind reeled at the sight of him and her heart skipped a painful beat. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Was she still dreaming? Was this a strange, cruel twist to her werewolf nightmare? She tried to say his name, but his grip tightened around her throat, crushing the sound before it could be made.

He shook his head, just once, slowly from side to side. "Not a word, witch," he warned. He must have seen the confusion in her eyes because the corners of his mouth turned up in a heartless sneer, revealing fully elongated fangs. He wasn't hiding his monster from her now. *He's not hiding....*

Because he knows, she thought frantically. *He knows I'm a witch. He caught the scent.* And that was why he didn't want her to speak. He knew she could use her magic that way.

She stared up into his harsh but handsome face and noted the way the shadows fell across his features, making them hard. He was radiating anger and it tore at her. *He hates magic.*

If Lucas knew that she was a witch, then he also knew that *she* was well aware of who *he* was. Lucas Caige was nearly notorious in magic-user circles. The former alpha had gone on a warlock hunt through all of Australia when his brother had gone missing and was declared by the Clan Council to be dead. Byron Caige had run afoul of a warlock. And that never ended well.

Regardless, Caige and his family were practically household names among witches and wizards everywhere. Magic users worked closely with the Council in many matters and there wasn't much the Council did that went unnoticed by coven heralds.

Caige knew what she was now. And he knew she was aware of who he was too.

There was no longer any point in hiding.

That said, it was clear he wasn't happy with her being a witch. So Danny was exceedingly grateful that she'd chosen to put back up her dormancy shield as soon as possible after her night with Imani. This was painful enough as it was. Allowing him to find out she was not only a witch but his dormant as well would be sheer hell.

"You're Dannai," he told her, hissing the words across her lips. "Dannai the Healer," he said, giving a harsh laugh and shaking his head as if disgusted with himself. "I can't believe I didn't see it before. But of *course*," he spat. "Danny is short for *Dannai*."

Despite his anger, despite his cruelty in this abduction, Danny felt at odds with herself this close to him. She had been enveloped with a cold and mind-numbing fear when he'd taken her from her room and she hadn't known who he was.

But now.... That fear had morphed somehow. She was no longer terrified. She was frightened, but it was a different kind of frightened. And he was doing things to her. She couldn't help but get lost in the depth of his gaze. She couldn't help but notice the way his grip had almost instantly eased up on her throat – as if he had only wanted to warn her and not hurt her. In fact, nothing he had done so far had caused her any real pain. He'd been gentle... in so far as an angry werewolf was capable of tenderness.

His body was radiating heat. She could feel it coming off of him in waves. It warped the air between them, chasing away the cold that had stolen over her. Her stomach felt heavy, her legs wobbly.

She glanced at his lips and the fangs that threatened so white and sharp behind them. He was beautiful. Even that most deadly part of him turned her on.

She looked back up into his eyes and felt a tremor rip through her. She wanted to kiss him. There. In that moment. It was absolute, stark raving madness.

Caige watched her in silence, studying her as if he could read every thought that raced through her mind. The harshness of his features seemed to relax a bit, softening ever so slightly. His brow furrowed. But his fangs remained bared.

"Why did you lie to me?" he asked her then. His tone was demanding, half growl and half question. "And be careful how you answer, Dannai," he warned. His gaze narrowed on her dangerously and he leaned in to finish the threat. "Because if a single syllable of incantation leaves these precious lips, I will choke the life from your body."

Danny listened to the sound of her own ragged breathing as he let up on her throat a little more and waited.

He doesn't trust me, she thought. I'm crazy about him and he hates me. He probably thinks I'm in league with a warlock and was luring him into some kind of trap. No wonder, she thought. No wonder he's looking at me like that.

But she wasn't in league with any warlock. She didn't want to lure him into any kind of trap. She just really liked him and she always had. And she hadn't wanted him to hate her right off the bat.

Why was she keeping these things from him?

"Because of this," she croaked out. Her voice was dry and weak, but she swallowed hard, cleared it, and went on. "Because you hate us so much, I was afraid of how you would react. I was afraid of *this*."

Lucas gazed down into her eyes for what seemed like an eternity. His expression was unreadable, and Danny began to fear the worst. He wouldn't believe her. What reason did he have to trust her now?

When he leaned in and she felt his thumb caress the pulse in her throat confusion ripped through her. "Why did you let me get so close?" he asked her. His voice had dropped and the growl was gone. He whispered the question across the tiny space between them.

And that was the question she couldn't answer. Not without telling him everything. She couldn't do that to him, not now. As long as he didn't know she was a dormant, he could leave – he could go somewhere else and be free. Couldn't he?

Danny remained silent and, when she could no longer stand the pull of his dark eyes, she looked away, feeling something within her heart crack wide open.

The silence stretched and the tension between them built until the air almost crackled with it. Finally, he released her completely and stepped back. Danny's head snapped up in surprise. She was still cuffed, but she didn't need her hands for every spell. His hand was no longer around her throat. Was he trusting her?

"Very well, witch," Caige said then. The hard angles to his face were back, and anger once more flashed in his eyes. His tall, strong form looked as hard as his expression, and it gave her a chill to see him standing there before her, looking like the very devil himself. "I have need of your services," the devil told her.

Danny blinked. *What?*

"You're a magic user and I just happen to need one," he went on.

Was she hearing him right? He wanted to *hire* her? After all of this? Right now?

He watched her steadily, most likely noting every perplexed emotion that crossed her features. "I want you to find someone for me," he said. "You're supposed to be the most powerful witch in existence. So, I doubt you'll have much trouble with this."

Danny realized that her jaw was hanging open and she snapped it shut. But she was still too stunned to say anything. Lucas Caige had kidnapped her from her bedroom in the middle of the night for no other reason than to hire her services as a magic user?

The world no longer made sense.

Danny gently tugged on the cuffs that bound her, just testing them out of curiosity. They held fast. She licked her lips and tried to ignore the ache in her chest; tried to ignore the man in front of her and all of the loss he represented to her in that moment. She could guess who he wanted her to find for him. The same person he had been hunting for decades.

"You want me to find your brother's killer," she said. Her tone felt flat and sounded even worse. Dead. She sounded dead inside. As she spoke, she avoided his gaze. Instead, she looked around the cave. Battery operated lamps had been set up

throughout the cavern, along with a space heater, blankets, and a large leather-bound chest that was closed at the moment.

"No," he replied simply, drawing her attention back.

Danny looked up at him. "No?" she repeated dumbly.

"No," he said again, shaking his head. And then he smiled and it was the cruelest smile she had ever seen on a man. "I want you to find my dormant."

Lucas watched her closely as he made the demand. It was so easy to read her now that he knew. She tried to hide it, just as she'd hidden everything from him, but his wolf was on to her now. There would be nothing she could do or think or feel that he wouldn't be aware of.

Earlier that day, when he'd caught the scent of magic in her bedroom, he'd been stunned. But that was nothing compared to how he'd felt when he'd sensed her dormancy. He'd known it was hers, not someone else's. It was a signature kind of scent. It was all her. And suddenly everything made horrible, perfect sense.

At first, he'd been furious. She'd played him. From the moment he'd laid eyes on Danny on the side of the road after his accident, he'd fallen for her. Her eyes, her lips, her hair, her laugh, her stunning, perfect body – it had reached in and captured him and made him forget. He'd forgotten about his restlessness. He'd forgotten about his brother. Everything about her had seduced him into a false sense of security. For a while, he'd even forgotten about the fact that he was an alpha – and somewhere out there was his dormant, waiting for him.

And then he'd caught that whiff of promise and it had her name written all over it – and he understood. Danny was beautiful and charming enough that any man would fall for her to some desperate degree. But with him it had been more than attraction. And now he knew why.

His heart hurt now as he watched the panic cross her beautiful features. It was a very real, physical pain. He could smell her friend on her. He knew damn well what the two women had been doing earlier that night. He was torn between wanting to have been there with them – and wanting to rip Imani Zareb to pieces for touching his mate.

My mate.

Fucking hell, Lucas swore internally.

He'd given Danny the chance to come forward about the fact that she was a dormant. He'd asked her why she'd let him get so close. It was her way out of the lying game she was playing. But she still insisted on hiding her true nature from him, despite the magic being out of the bag.

Lucas wasn't stupid. He could smell her desire on her. He was having the same effect on her body that she was having on his. Why was she still hiding from him? He could think of only one real reason. She claimed that he hated magic users and it was his hatred that kept her at bay. But she was more afraid of him than he was of her. That was patently clear.

Oh little Dannai, he thought coldly. Didn't the witch know that nothing stirred a wolf's blood like running prey?

At the moment, she was staring at him with wide kaleidoscope eyes. He loved her eyes. No one in the world had eyes like hers. They were stunning. He had to smile at the shock that registered in their multi-colored depths. He'd just told her he wanted her to find his dormant. He knew he was being cruel. He knew his fangs were out; he couldn't help it.

She'd brought it on herself and she was pissing him off.

"Y-your what?" she asked. He almost laughed out loud. She was far from stupid, but he'd pulled the rug out from under her and she was on unsteady ground. He had her between a rock and a hard place. Just where he wanted her.

"My dormant," he repeated calmly. "I can sense her here in this town," he went on, not exactly lying. "I've felt her from the moment I arrived. I know she's here and I know you can tell me where."

Danny swallowed hard; he could see her throat working. He wanted to kiss it. Hell, he wanted to sink his fangs into it and turn her and show her once and for all that she couldn't hide from him. Not any more.

"I-" she started to reply, but stopped herself and pulled her gaze from his again. The signs of her magic were all around her now. He didn't know how he'd missed them before. Only a witch of her caliber could have looked away from him in that moment. A werewolf's gaze was a powerful thing.

She closed her eyes, pulled at the cuffs behind her back, and then leaned back against the wall. She was most likely feeling overwhelmed.

Good, he thought. *Let this hurt. Let it kill her until she gives in to me.*

"I will pay you of course," he said, laying it on thick. "I'm more than familiar with the cost of this kind of thing." He straightened, walked casually to the trunk against one wall, and lifted the lid, throwing it open to let it fall. "Take what you want."

The interior of the trunk was filled with several things. There were provisions for "roughing" it. And there was money. Lots and lots of it – piles of paper bills, fresh from the bank.

Caige was a lot older than he looked, and he'd obtained quite a few valuables over the years. It didn't hurt that in Australia, before his brother had been killed, he'd been a bit of a gambler. A good one. So, before abducting Danny from her room, Lucas had made a withdrawal at the local credit union. He knew Danny wouldn't really be interested in it. It was there for show. This was part of the game.

He watched her expression as he revealed the money and wasn't disappointed to see several emotions cross her features. The first was surprise. The second was disappointment. The third was fear.

It was the second emotion that he'd wanted to see most of all. To Dannai, the money "proved" that Lucas was serious about wanting to find his dormant. Which meant that he was willing to let Danny go. And she didn't want to be let go. Her eyes made that perfectly clear.

It was another point in Lucas's favor, but he hid his pleasure behind a stony mask

and straightened once more. "Well?" he asked.

Danny's gaze slipped to the floor where he had placed thick rugs and blankets in case this "negotiation" of theirs took all night. Then she closed her eyes and licked her lips again. Lucas's gaze flicked to where her pink tongue darted out and his crotch felt tight. His right hand curled into a fist. She was trying his patience in the worst way.

"I can't," she finally said.

He felt the stirrings of victory rise to life deep inside. "Why not?"

She looked back up at him then and her gorgeous gem-colored eyes were luminescent with what looked like tears. "I can't because I already know who your dormant is," she admitted softly. It was barely a whisper.

Triumph swelled within Lucas, but the wet gleam in Danny's eyes stayed the emotion, holding it in check. He was done for – defeated by her, even as he had won.

Somehow, his body continued with the charade while his soul writhed in sweet agony. "Really?" he asked, crossing the cavern with long, slow strides. His boots echoed on the cold stone. She watched him come, a doe trapped in his headlights. "Why is that?" he asked, drawing out the pain.

He stopped a foot away from her and gazed steadily down at her. Her slim body was trembling; he could see it and hear it in each shaky breath she exhaled. Without waiting for her to answer, he slowly leaned over her, ran his arms around her, and grasped the metal that encased her wrists. She shuddered against him and he knew it wasn't due to fear. "Is there something you'd like to tell me, Danny?" he asked, speaking the words as a lover would, low and soft beside her ear.

"No," she admitted with a near sob. "I don't want to tell you." She shook her head and her long black hair cascaded like silk down her back. She wore a long-sleeved sleep shirt, form-fitting fleece pants and warm socks, but the collar of her shirt had slipped over her right shoulder, revealing a long expanse of smooth, tempting flesh. He'd never wanted to bite something so badly in all his life.

"But I *have* to tell you," she continued.

He pulled back just enough to let her breathe, but retained his grip on her cuffs. And then he waited. *Here it comes. Say it, Danny.*

It was a whisper, barely audible. "I'm your dormant."

With one swift yank, Lucas snapped the cuff's link in two and took her wrists in his strong hands. "I know," he growled, spinning her roughly away from the wall. She cried out as she lost her balance. He pulled her against his body and took them both to the rug and blankets on the ground. Lucas's arm caught their descent, cushioning their fall.

He caged her there beneath him, pinning her wrists to the floor above her head. "You walked into the wolf den, little witch," he hissed the words across her lips, listening to the ragged breaths she exhaled against his own watering mouth. The feel of her beneath him instantly ignited a fire within him and his cock was at once rock hard. His chest felt tight and his vision was turning. His gums ached around his great

white fangs.

"So now's your chance," he warned her, mere heartbeats away from losing control. "Use your magic on me now, Dannai. Kill me if you can." He squeezed her wrists for emphasis, just hard enough to drive his point home. He saw her wince and went on. "Or accept your fate, Danny." He speared her with his gaze, needing her to know just how serious he was. "Because if you let me live, I *will* claim you."

She stared up at him and, instead of the terror he expected to see as he delivered his ultimatum, he witnessed something else. Her eyes grew glassy, her lips parted, and her cheeks flushed.

There was no escape for her now. Her chance was over. She'd made her decision.

With that, he shoved both of her wrists into one of his hands, grabbed her chin with the other, and took her mouth with his. *Cocoa and vanilla and caramel....* He growled against her lips, knowing he risked piercing them with his fangs. He kissed her long and deep and hard and then pulled back just enough to hiss a single word across her lips. "Mine," he told her, barely believing he was saying it.

He was nearly incapable of coherent thought. The taste of her and the feel of her beneath him was overpowering. Before he realized what he was doing, he had her head turned, exposing the long column of her throat. He wanted to take her. He wanted to rip her clothes off and drive into her. He wanted to sink his fangs into her perfect neck and drink her in. He was going crazy.

He stilled above her, ready to do it.

But he also wanted to mark her. He wanted to see the lines of his claim trace themselves across her perfect flesh. He wanted the world to know that she was his. He wanted *her* to know that she was his. And for that, she would need his blood.

Danny moaned and then inhaled sharply beneath him as he rose above her, releasing her wrists and straddling her with fluid grace. A split second later, he was sinking his long, sharp fangs into the inside of his own right wrist. Blood welled from the wound, but he ignored it.

She watched through half-closed lids as he then took her right hand and pulled the metal of the cuff apart with easy werewolf strength. He then lifted her hand to his lips. He kissed the knuckles, his gaze never leaving hers. Then he turned her arm over and slid the sleeve of her shirt away from her slender wrist.

With a firm but gentle grip, he held her wrist before his mouth. Her breath caught as he exposed his fangs once again and didn't hesitate before he was sinking them into her arm. Danny cried out and arched beneath him, making his vision spike red once again and drawing another growl of need from deep within his chest. Whatever pain she felt as he marked her was quickly overshadowed by pleasure.

Slowly, he pulled his fangs from her wrist. He could have kept swallowing, kept drinking her in. She was sweet and precious, and having to stop was agonizing. But he reigned himself in and raised his right arm above her wrist. He held her fast, transfixed by the wonder in her eyes as she watched the crimson liquid pool beneath his self-inflicted bite marks.

He held his breath and could hear that she did the same as a single drop of his blood then dripped from his wound to hers.

Chapter Nine: “Black Magic”

Danny felt the drop of blood hit almost before she saw it. She inhaled sharply as instant heat claimed her wrist. It spread in a slow burn, climbing up her arm to her elbow and then her shoulder. She closed her eyes and shuddered as that heat raced across her chest to her stomach and then pooled between her legs.

And then the heat lessened, becoming a warm, comforting blanket that draped itself over her body as if protecting it. She opened her eyes and looked up at Lucas. He was gazing at her wrist, which he still held in his hands. His expression was transfixed, his black eyes glittering in the torch light. He seemed amazed; in fact, she couldn't see him breathing.

Slowly, he pulled his gaze from her arm and looked up. He let her go and she turned her wrist over. The double puncture wounds made by his teeth were gone. In their place, an intricate, sparkling black line had drawn itself across the inside of her arm. She had never seen anything like it. The design was so tightly woven, so labyrinthine, it was like a Celtic knot designed by diminutive fairies. It was impossible.

It was the most beautiful thing Danny had ever seen.

“I honestly thought...” Lucas let out a ragged breath, cutting himself off. His voice was hoarse with emotion. He closed his eyes, swallowed hard, and began again. “I never thought I would see it,” he told her. He opened his eyes once more and captured her gaze in his. “Not on anyone.”

Danny slowly lowered her arm and stopped breathing. There was a strange and eerie glow in the center of Caige's pupils. It was like watching oncoming headlights slowly break through a foggy night. She was paralyzed in that glow, unable and *unwilling* to look away.

Caige leaned forward, placing one of his hands on either side of her head against the rug-covered ground. She watched his fangs, hidden just behind his lips as he spoke to her. “Dannai,” he whispered, shaking his head in wonder. “You are the most precious woman in the world,” he said, breathless with what he clearly felt to be true.

He held her paralyzed in that enigmatic, eerily lit gaze as he leaned in until his lips were a hair's breadth from her own. She could feel his next words brush across them, heat and promise and torture. “And I'm the luckiest man.”

Danny couldn't hold back any longer. His mark, his nearness, and his power were driving her toward delicious insanity. She reached up and shoved her hands through his thick, silken black locks as he claimed her lips with his own. There was the tiniest hint of gentleness to the kiss and no more. He was demanding and hungry and his razor-sharp fangs pinpricked her lips as he drank her in.

A growl that felt like thunder rumbled up from his chest and enveloped her. It was almost scary. Lucas deepened his kiss, and she felt the tell-tale influence of his werewolf power transferring to her through it. *No fair*, she thought recklessly as he parted her teeth, opened her up beneath him, and delved deep. *She* was supposed to be the magic one.

But a werewolf's kiss was a powerful thing and, in the space of a heartbeat, she was brought to the brink of an orgasm. As she teetered on that edge and it threatened to rip through her, a deep, familiar voice sounded in her mind. Danny froze as Jason's words rolled through her.

I'm sure I don't have to remind you what will happen should you sleep with the werewolf, his voice warned, an echo to what he had told her earlier that night. *Is a man who despises everything you stand for really worth throwing something so precious away?*

Danny opened her eyes as Lucas suddenly broke the kiss. She stared up at him, but he wasn't looking at her. His tall, strong form had gone as still as her own and his gaze was skirting the flickering shadows of the cavern around them. His expression was changed; utterly different than it had been only seconds ago. He now looked wary, careful, and mean. His fangs were still out and his eyes still held that eerie glow, but now the angles of his face were sharp in contrast and he had a hungry, angry air about him.

"What... what is it?" she asked softly, catching her breath after his kiss had all but taken it from her. She felt the coiling need between her legs receding, melting away, and she could taste the disappointment in her mouth, it was so strong.

Caige slowly straightened above her and placed a single forefinger across her lips, shaking his head as if to signal that he wanted her silence. With immense and fluid grace, he stood, taking her hand and pulling her up with him. Slowly, he backed her up against the nearest wall and turned, shielding her body with his own as he continued to scan their surroundings.

Danny had no idea what was happening. Had he heard something? An intruder? "Magic," he whispered over his shoulder, keeping his eyes trained on the opening to the cavern. The foggy night had grown darker with the passing of the moon and now an unnatural stillness waited beyond the cave's entrance.

Danny frowned. Magic? But she was magic! Did he just mean that he scented *her*? She wasn't wearing her magic shield. The dormancy shield was still up, out of sheer habit and nothing else. But her magic was out there and highly detectable.

Had he simply gotten too close to her? Did he not like the way it smelled? Sudden anger rushed into her veins, singing her blood like fire. "Did you catch a

whiff of something nasty, Caige?" she asked, feeling suddenly and almost inexplicably rancorous.

In front of her, Lucas froze, his broad back visibly stiffening at her question. Very slowly, he turned to face her. There was a new and different kind of wariness in his expression now.

"I knew you despised magic, but to let me get this close and then spring your hatred on me is beyond cruel," she hissed. Her body was shaking. She couldn't explain it. She was just absolutely furious. A part of her wanted to lash out at him. Another part of her wanted to flee before she could do him any harm.

Lucas said nothing. His gaze carefully traveled across her face and then flicked to her neck. There, it paused for the slightest instant before he was once more looking into her eyes. Danny wondered what the hell he was looking at. What was he looking for? She couldn't read his expression. All she saw in the depths of his dark eyes was suspicion.

Of course, she thought. He probably thinks I put him under a spell. Did he honestly believe that there was no way he could have liked her on his own? Did he hate her kind that much?

Suddenly, all she wanted to do was get away from him.

With something that sounded like a sob of pain, Danny tried to push past him to make her way to the exit. But Caige easily caught her wrist, his grip tight over the intricate mark on her arm.

Danny whirled on him and attempted to rip herself free. He easily held on, still saying nothing. "Get away from me!" she yelled. She could feel her eyes watering even as Caige's mark and his touch both sent warmth racing through her body once again. It infuriated her. It was wholly unfair that he could make her feel this way about him while he loathed her.

"Let me go!" she hissed.

Caige's jaw was clenched and his dark eyes flashed with something sinister. He bared his fangs, shaking his head. "Not gonna happen," he told her simply. Danny watched as he zeroed in on the large trunk filled with money and supplies against the wall and began to pull her in that direction.

Whatever it was that he had in there, she didn't want to be a part of it. "I said," she growled, lowering her tone as she released a sharp tendril of her magic, "let me go." With that, a thin bolt of electricity shot from her arm and into his hand.

Caige hissed in pain and jerked his hand away. Danny hastily took advantage of her window of opportunity and rushed for the cave's entrance. But Lucas was hot on her tail. She could feel his own power surrounding them both; it was hot with determination and black with fury.

"Danny!" he barked, his voice hoarse with werewolf rage.

She ignored him, trying desperately to think through the emotional pain and physical confusion he was creating within her. *Transport yourself.* She wasn't even sure whether it was her own voice that spoke the command in her head, but she was grateful for the hint.

She reached the entrance, just as Caige's fingers gripped her right shoulder, jerking her to a rough halt. Danny closed her eyes and the tears that had been building within them spilled onto her cheeks. As Lucas spun her around to face him, she whispered a few choice, quick words, and willed her magic to engulf her.

Lucas had sensed it like a cold touch across his back on a hot summer day. It was suddenly there, breathing down his neck and his wolf reared its head, all fangs and claws and defense mechanisms. He'd broken the kiss and scanned the cave's entrance, ready to fight – ready to kill.

Lucas stood, taking Danny with him, and then backed her up against the cave wall, wanting nothing more than to protect her. Whatever was in that cave with them would have to go through him to get to her. She was purity and goodness and he would die before he let it touch her.

But he was so focused on the intrusion, he made a paramount mistake. She'd wanted to know what it was – what had caused the sudden change in him. Without thinking, he replied, "Magic."

It hadn't been just magic. What made his hackles raise and crawled across his skin was something far more sinister. It wasn't just magic he had sensed. It was dark magic.

Black magic.

And it was all around them.

It swelled across his body, feeling like a sticky, smothering red tide, and then Danny's voice spoke behind him. "Did you catch a whiff of something nasty, Caige?"

Cold, hard realization shot through Lucas. In that instant, he knew what he'd done. He realized his mistake. And he understood what was happening.

His heart sank into his stomach as he slowly turned to face his marked mate. She was so beautiful standing there, her back up against the wall. Her gorgeous black hair had been messed up in their tousel and it framed her face in silken, haphazard waves that begged to be touched. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips were temptingly red, swollen where his teeth had threatened them during his kiss.

But her narrowed kaleidoscope eyes were shooting sparks. She looked more than a little hurt in that instant. And positively furious.

It's not her, he told himself. *It's not Danny*. He felt it in his heart; Dannai was the Healer, a giver, the kindest and most trustworthy witch in the world. She was his dormant and she wore his mark and he knew, as surely as he could scent sickness or rain or blood, that there was not an ounce of evil within her body.

But dark magic was pulsing around her like a beating heart, enveloping her in its smothering sway. Controlling her.

"I knew you despised magic, but to let me get this close and then spring your hatred on me is beyond cruel," she hissed at him. He could see her body trembling under the cocktail of emotions drugging her up. Her words hurt, but the stench of black magic lessened the blow. He knew they weren't really coming from her.

Lucas searched her face, wishing he could read her mind – wishing he knew more about the way magic worked. His body tensed, preparing for a fight, even as his gaze traveled across her beautiful features to the curve of her chin and finally to the tiny black diamond pendant that sat in the hollow of her throat.

He had noticed it before since the first time he'd seen her, she'd been wearing a different pendant. But he had dismissed this new one as nothing more than a delicate and fetching piece of jewelry. He realized his mistake now, as the dark magic surrounding Dannai seemed to center on the seemingly innocent gem. It rested there against her precious flesh and fairly seethed with maliciousness.

Lucas knew he'd messed up with Dannai by telling her that he'd sensed magic. But it wasn't this bad a mistake. That diamond was feeding her anger. He couldn't help but wonder where she'd gotten it; she hadn't been wearing it the day before. Who had she seen between then and now?

Just as he considered reaching forward and ripping the pendant from her neck, Danny was moving. He heard the sob of pain that she could not contain as she tried to brush past him toward the exit, and his hand shot out almost of its own accord. He couldn't let her go. He *wouldn't* let her go.

His fingers wrapped around her wrist, sliding over the intricate lines of his sparkling black mark. He gripped her tight, drawing her to a sudden halt. And as he did, he felt the air swell once more with insidious influence.

She tried to pull away. "Get away from me!"

Lucas bit his tongue as the world turned slightly red around him. His mate was fighting him – trying to escape him. The wolf inside of him prepared for the hunt while the man in him noticed the shimmer of unspent tears in her gorgeous, multi-colored eyes. His heart cracked a little and his grip on her arm tightened.

"Let me go!" she hissed.

His wolf bared its teeth. His gaze narrowed. "Not gonna happen," he swore to her as he began to look around the stone lamp-lit room. Magic pulsed through her body beneath his touch. She needed to be restrained again. If he didn't immobilize and silence her soon, she would let loose with that magic and he would be helpless against it. It was what he hated most about magic. He was defenseless in the wake of it.

The cuffs that Lucas had originally used on Danny were now snapped in half and useless. But he had an extra set in the trunk. Just in case. He located the trunk against the wall and headed in that direction, pulling an unwilling mate with him.

She suddenly stilled in his grip and the air grew inexplicably colder. "I said," she told him through gritted white teeth, "let me go."

Lucas had no warning before the shock ran through her arm and into his hand. It felt like touching the sun and the white-hot power shot straight through his body, arcing up his spine and into his head, zapping his teeth in his gums. His heart fibrillated and he jerked away from her, hissing with the brief, sharp agony of it.

She took the opportunity to bolt, barely giving him a chance to recover from the shock as she headed straight for the cavern's dark entrance. A rumble of fury rode

like thunder through his chest. "Danny!" he called after her. His tone had lowered, becoming animalistic. His wolf was emerging and he was unable to stop it. His body moved, automatically switching into chase mode. He reached her just as she was coming to the cave's opening, his fingers finding purchase in her tender shoulder. He spun her around, ready to rip the offending necklace from her body.

But in that instant, she spoke a single arcane word and the smooth curve of her body began to waver beneath his grip. Lucas growled, wanting to deny what was happening with every fiber of his being, but he was helpless against it nonetheless. Danny's form warped, flashed – and was gone.

A breeze cast itself into the cave's entrance, wafting salt air through the space where Danny had stood half a second ago. Lucas stared down at his empty hands, his breathing harsh and heavy in the cold night air. The scent of dark magic lifted with the wind, dissipating like fog on a sunny day.

But it was still there. It was inside of him now, eating him up. Someone was trying to take Danny away from him. And someone was succeeding.

Lucas threw back his head and howled into the night as the change flashed over him. A blinding light washed out the interior of the cave, and when it receded, a massive black wolf stood at the cavern's entrance. The wolf growled low and long, baring rows of sharp, predatory white teeth. His glittering, glowing eyes peered into the darkness. And then it crouched low and its incredible muscles bunched before it bounded out of the cave, its body blurring as it bolted headlong into the waiting night.

Danny hadn't even known where she was going when she muttered the word that would transport her from Lucas's cavern to some other destination. When she flashed back into existence in the middle of the redwood forest, she found herself falling to her knees, suddenly and inexplicably drained of much more power than transportation magic normally drained her of.

Immediately, she was letting her dormancy shield drop to make up for her waning strength. She knelt in the damp Earth, the smell of mushrooms and mold and wet bark assaulting her senses. She shivered violently and looked down. She was still only wearing her pajamas and the temperature seemed to have dropped, seeping into her body and licking at her bones.

Danny closed her eyes and tried to steady her breath. She wiped impatiently at the wetness on her cheeks and found her hands curling into fists. Her body wanted to break down and give in. Right there, right then, she just wanted to curl up and cry. She was a dormant who was marked by an alpha werewolf who didn't love her. Was there a more hopeless position to be in?

By her reasoning, she had every right to surrender to the pain roiling inside of her in that moment. But she was lost and she was alone and she was literally feeling ill. She couldn't believe the horrid turn her life had taken over the last hour. She needed to get home. She needed Imani. She needed the sweet oblivion of sleep.

With more determination than she thought she possessed, Danny forced thoughts of Lucas from her mind and tried desperately to concentrate on her power.

She could feel it there, curling in and around her, but she frowned when it felt weaker than it should have. The tendrils were wispy and light and thin, like spider webs. Why? What had she done? She'd even dropped her dormancy shield. Why was she so weak?

A slight queasiness rode like a wave through Danny's body and she stifled a sob. She honestly didn't have enough strength to cast another transport spell. It was either walk out of the forest on her own or wait there for someone to find her.

The cold and the damp and her instinct told her to get up and walk. But logic and reasoning told her to stay right where she was and wait. And despite the desperation licking at her from all sides, logic won out.

Danny slowly backed herself up against a tree and once more concentrated on clearing her mind. Again, she located the fingers of her magic. They were so faint. She had enough power to make a fire and that was about all. It was incredibly baffling to her how little magic was there, but in that moment, she was just grateful that she had even that much.

"I need fuel," she whispered. She pushed herself to her feet and looked around in front of her, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She searched for a few minutes, managing to locate several twigs, bunches of lichen, and a few larger logs. There weren't many logs in the redwood forest, as chopping down trees was obviously strictly forbidden. But nature had its way here as it did with the rest of the world, and trees did eventually die.

Danny collected what she could and cleared a space in the small clearing around her. She placed the damp objects at the center and knelt before them, taking a deep breath. The materials were wet and not at all combustible at the moment; she was going to have to use some power to dry them out. And then she'd have to strike true with the flame, as she wasn't sure how many tries she would get.

Danny closed her eyes, focused her power, and hoped for the best. When she heard the rewarding sound of crackling and popping, she opened her eyes again and exhaled. "Oh thank the gods," she whispered. The campfire burned bright, instantly warming her surroundings.

She leaned in and held her hands before the flames, willing their heat to chase away the chill that had invaded her body.

A wolf's howl cut through the night in the distance. Danny froze, her head snapping up in the direction from which it had come. She already knew it wasn't a normal wolf. Not here. It was a werewolf. She wondered if it was Lucas.

And then another howl answered the first, this one coming from behind her, in the opposite direction. Danny's heart rate sped up. Two wolves.

Two werewolves.

The second howl came again, definitely different than the first. It wasn't that it was lower or even louder – but it was wrong. It sounded like a challenge, long and mean. Danny didn't want to consider who it might belong to, but the warning prickle from Caige's mark and the heavy thudding of her heart told her all the same.

The fire that burned so bright before her sent billowing black clouds into the

slowly lightening sky of early dawn. It was a beacon to her location. And her dormancy shield was gone.

She was a sitting duck and the wolves were on their way.

Chapter Ten: "Misdirection"

Danny tried to tell herself that though it felt like a year, it had probably only been a few minutes since she'd transported into the forest. The fire would continue to burn bright, keeping the cold at bay, so it wasn't that she was necessarily uncomfortable. It was that the howls were coming closer.

How fast could a wolf travel?

A normal wolf could move very quickly if it wanted to. A werewolf would move much, much faster. She knew from experience that some wolves traveled faster than others. Malcolm Cole actually blurred to the human eye when he moved. Charlie wasn't far behind him.

The howl came again, this time what must have been only a mile away, when Danny's head snapped up at an entirely different and much closer sound. A twig snapped and she whirled around to face the source of the noise.

"Danny?"

Jason Alberich stood at the edge of the clearing, his hand trying to block some of the light of the fire from his eyes. He was blinking a little, trying to get a closer look at her. He seemed unsure.

"Jason?" Danny jumped to her feet. "What –" She was too shocked and she swallowed the rest of the question only to begin again. "How are you here?" she asked, bewildered.

Jason dropped his arm and stared at her with wide eyes. "I performed a scry to find you when Imani came to me, telling me that you were missing," he told her. "What the hell happened? What in the world are you doing in the middle of the forest in your pajamas?" he asked, his gaze skirting down the thin clothing she wore.

"Oh, Jason," Danny breathed, waving his question away. She was too wholeheartedly relieved to want to discuss the issue right then and there. What she really wanted was to go home, take a long hot shower, and curl up in an oversized fleece. "I can't believe you're here," she whispered.

Alberich stared at her for a moment more, his stark green gaze clearly confused. And then he seemed to come to his senses. He straightened, swallowed hard, and took control. "Let's get you home," he said decidedly. "I'm assuming that since you haven't done so already, you can't transport. So, come here," he told her.

The wolf howled again, closer. Danny jumped a little and Jason's green gaze skirted to the forest and the unknown beyond. He shrugged off the black sports coat he was wearing and looked back down at Danny. She needed no further urging.

She rushed toward him and he held up his jacket in order to drape it over her shoulders. The warmth instantly penetrated her damp clothing, chilled skin and stiff muscles. A part of her wondered whether it might send the wrong message, but the weary part of her didn't care, and she wrapped her arms around the coat, hugging it close to her body.

"Take my hand," Jason told her, offering her his. She took it. Again, she was struck with how chilly his touch was despite the warmth of his jacket and the relative cold of her own right hand.

Jason muttered the quick incantation that would transport them, and Danny closed her eyes. She always closed her eyes when she traveled this way; it made her dizzy otherwise.

A few seconds later, she felt the world go still around her. It was like stepping foot on solid land after being at sea. She opened her eyes and glanced around. They were in Jason's mansion. Candles in sconces lined the walls along with tapestries of the finest silk.

Danny felt a chill go through her so hard, it hurt her skin. She glanced down at her hand, still held firmly in Jason's grip. Then she looked up into his green eyes. "Jason, why didn't you take me home?"

He waited a moment before answering, but released her hand. She could feel the reluctance in that slow slip. He wanted to hold on.

"It's obvious that you aren't safe in your home at the moment, Danny," he told her softly. He took a step back as if he could sense that she needed the room. "Imani came to me to tell me that your bedroom window was open and you had vanished without a word of warning." He looked down at his large sports coat where it covered her pajamas. His gaze burned as he cocked his head to one side and arched a brow. "Would you like to tell me what happened tonight?"

Not even a little bit, she thought as she shivered, regardless of his jacket and the fire burning in the massive marble hearth against one wall. *He hates Caige*. She thought of the werewolf and her abduction and the mark that Lucas had left on her arm, and her heart dropped into her stomach. *Oh gods*, she thought desperately. As if thinking of the mark activated it, she could feel it tingling against her arm now. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was just all too real.

Without thinking, she covered her right wrist with her left hand. Jason did not fail to notice the gesture, and at once Danny realized her mistake.

Without a word, Jason came forward and reached for her arm. Danny pulled back. It was a reflexive movement. Jason stopped in his tracks and straightened. He seemed to consider her for a moment, his expression melting from slight surprise to slighter disappointment to being unreadable altogether. His black clad form towered over her now and his green gaze darkened, his pupils expanding and pinning her to the spot.

Danny felt her heartrate speed up. Jason Alberich had never looked at her like that before.

"Danny," he said slowly, softly, "show me your right arm."

It was a direct order, given to her by her herald. No witch in their right mind would disobey the herald of their coven. And yet... Danny stood there, breathing quick, shallow breaths, and considered doing just that.

"Jason, please try to unders –"

"I won't tell you again Danny," he warned her. He had yet to raise his voice. Jason Alberich had never raised his voice, as far as Danny knew. He was the very essence of calm and collected, just as his father had been before him. His tone, his very

presence, carried enough influence that it brooked obedience and had done so since he was a teenager.

However, this time his calm, low tone brought about a different reaction in Danny. Against all logic and reason, she found herself wanting to fight him. To deny him. She didn't want him touching the mark on her arm and she didn't want him telling her what to do. She was tired and hungry and confused. It had been a long night.

So, instead of saying anything at all, Danny simply removed her left hand from her right arm and turned away from Jason. If she had to, she would walk home from here. Wherever "here" was. No one knew exactly where the herald's abode resided. It was kept a secret and had been for generations – since the witch trials and the inquisition had ripped a chasm in the world's reason. It was done as a precaution.

Danny swore internally and hugged herself once more.

Several seconds of tense silence followed in which Danny's skin became increasingly more sensitive by the almost abrasive quality of the magical space between her and Alberich. She could feel his power all around her. It came with the territory and had always been there. Jason was an incredibly strong magic user. But now his power surrounded her like fingers of fog, licking at her – warning her.

She could feel him come up behind her, as quiet as a prowling cat. She hugged herself tighter and waited for what she knew was coming. She had no idea why she was so afraid to let him see Lucas's mark. She knew he didn't like Caige and she knew he would be disappointed in her. But so what? He wasn't her father. He couldn't punish her. Could he?

And then he was so close the tendrils of his power wrapped around her like a shroud, enveloping her in a cocoon of his will. She shivered, feeling the hardness of his chest against her back.

He leaned over her until his lips were beside her ear. He remained silent and she froze in his embrace as he slid his hands down her arms until his fingers wrapped possessively around her right wrist.

Danny shut her eyes tight, but she didn't fight him. His touch felt both tender and brutal as he raised her arm and slid her sleeve back, exposing the sparkling, shimmering knot that wove itself intricately across the inside of her wrist.

She wasn't sure what she was expecting then, as she imagined him gazing upon the telltale mark of domination. But it wasn't what he did. Very slowly, he lowered her arm, retaining his grip on her wrist. With his other hand, he cupped her chin and turned her head so that she was facing him over her shoulder, her eyes still shut tight.

"Open your eyes Danny, and look at me," he commanded softly.

Danny did so. There was no reason not to. She opened her eyes and gazed up at him, at once struck by the tenure in his jade green irises. "How did this happen?" he asked her, his cold fingers still holding her face in place.

She swallowed hard and remained silent. She just wasn't going to tell him that she let Lucas Caige straddle her, sink his fangs into her, and then mix his own blood with hers. She wasn't going to admit that she had let him do it all because he had turned her into a wanton vessel of need beneath him. There was no way she was

admitting any of that.

"I see," Jason said, his green eyes glittering but giving nothing away. His lips were so close to hers, Danny couldn't help but imagine them lowering to her own. It was a natural thing to think of when a man was as close and as overwhelming as Jason Alberich. But the increased tingling of the mark on her arm made her feel guilty for the thought nonetheless.

"You let the wolf do this to you, didn't you?" Jason asked. His thumb gently brushed against the skin on her cheek; a lover's touch.

Danny nodded. She wasn't feeling like herself in that moment. The swell of willpower she'd experienced only seconds earlier that had given her the strength to turn away from Jason was all but gone now. It had been lifted and carried off on some sort of secret, magical wind. And now Jason's piercing, powerful eyes were getting to her. He was subjugating her with them.

And she liked it.

No, she thought. I've never liked Jason that way. What's wrong with me?

Jason smiled a slow, knowing smile and shook his handsome, blonde head. "I wouldn't have pegged you for the submissive type, Danny," he whispered, leaning closer now so that his words brushed across her lips. Danny's breath hitched, her heart hammering. "I've known you were a fighter since we were children, playing together by the sea. I *should* know," he continued calmly. "I've had a lifetime of practice in reading women."

Danny's head was swimming now. Jason was solid at her back and his arms were strong where they held her. His words confused her and enticed her. They were like mini-clues and sweet nothings and deadly warnings all mixed together, and she couldn't make sense of any of them because he was inside of her now. She was under his spell.

"But I could have been wrong," he told her, and his grip on her chin tightened almost imperceptibly, as did his hold on her wrist. "Because it would take a submissive at heart to lay beneath a werewolf and allow him to mark her up in this manner. Especially when she was so capable of fighting him off. Because she was a witch."

Danny blinked. Jason's tone had changed and the swell of his power was receding, at once allowing her head to clear. She replayed his last words through her mind, making certain she'd heard him correctly.

When she was sure, she felt her jaw drop open a little and saw Jason's gaze narrow in answer. He bared his teeth, still holding her tight, but clearly angry now. "Were you that hard up, Danny?"

Danny gasped and instantly found the strength to jerk out of his embrace. When she did, he took a step back and the world seemed to come crashing in all around her. It hit her hard. Dizziness caused it to spin and tip and she stumbled back, reaching out to steady herself on the expensive leather sofa behind her. Still, she was mad enough – filled with enough righteous wrath – to form the words she wanted to say. "How dare you?" she hissed.

Jason's expression was once more impassive and unreadable, but his eyes were sparking emerald fire. "Well, that answers the question of why a witch of your caliber wasn't able to transport out of Patrick's Point state park," he told her, his tone hard and unrelenting. "Clearly his domination is draining your powers already."

Danny had been prepared to release a barrage of epitaphs onto her herald, which probably wasn't a wise move in and of itself, but at his latest comment, she grew still. A cold, hard logic settled in around her like ice water and she froze beneath it. She couldn't help but recall the warning Lalura had given her about sleeping with a werewolf. Jason had echoed it not thirty hours ago. And now, here she was with Lucas Caige's mark on her arm, feeling more than a pint low in the magic department.

Could the warning have been true? Could Imani have been wrong? Was Lucas taking away her powers?

Oh no.

"You're figuring it out now, aren't you? Finally," Jason said, his tone starkly disappointed. "Now that it's too late."

Danny felt the floor melt beneath her as she gazed down at the black sparkling mark across her inner arm. It was so beautiful. She'd never seen anything like it. *And it's killing me*, she thought numbly. *Lucas is killing everything I am.*

The world tunneled and Jason was there in an instant, gathering her into his dark embrace. "I'm sorry, Danny," he said, the harsh tone of his voice completely gone now. He lowered her to the rug beneath her and knelt beside her, still holding her in his black-clad arms. "It's not too late," he told her, shaking his head. She looked up into his eyes and noted the determined set of his jaw. "There are ways... we can get you out of this."

"What ways?" she whispered.

It was a while before Jason replied. His fingers lightly brushed a lock of her black hair from her forehead. Then his eyes caught hers again and held them. "The mark of an alpha werewolf can be removed."

A shock of fear, hard and strong, rushed through Danny and she stiffened in Jason's arms. She knew all too well how a werewolf's mark could be removed from a dormant. It required the work of a warlock – and it was incredibly painful.

"Shh," Jason held her tighter and again shook his head. "Not that way," he assured her softly, obviously noting her sudden terror. "No." Something dark flashed across his eyes, there one second and gone in the next. He paused for a moment before continuing. "There's another way," he told her. "The mark will disappear when Lucas Caige is dead."

Lucas stopped in the damp clearing and raised his head, scenting the air. In a flash, he regained his human form. It was instinctual, he guessed. In the world of predators and prey, it was a good idea to be as tall as your enemy when he finally approached you.

"I have a message from our master," came a calm voice from the shadows of the clearing's tree line. Lucas watched as a man stepped out of those shadows and nodded toward Caige, almost respectfully. "He knew you would come here," he said as he gestured to the area around them. This was where Dannai had been only moments before. Lucas knew this because he could still smell her here. The space was filled with vanilla and chocolate and caramel and fear.

"And he wants you to know that this will be the last time you hunt for the Healer," the man finished.

"Really?" Caige asked. "Good to know."

There was a heartbeat where they seemed to size each other up, and then the two men met in snarling combat. Their bodies collided with fierce determination and Lucas felt himself flash from human to wolf and back again. He had never before gone up against an Akyri. The demon-like creature felt like a ghost overlapping a body formed of sinew and bone and spikes. He was impossible to get a visual handle on; his shape flickered and shimmered, testament to the magic upon which he fed in his symbiotic relationship with Jason Alberich.

So Lucas closed his eyes and used his other senses instead. Those were more than enough to make up for the confusing sights he now blocked out. In a matter of a few painful, blood-soaked minutes, Lucas had ripped the Akyri's fangs from his forearm, shoved his own claws through the demon's torso, and thrown his opponent's lifeless body against a tree trunk.

The Akyri slumped to the ground and remained motionless. Lucas allowed his form to once more solidify into its human shape and took a deep breath. He knew that in a few seconds the Akyri's body would shimmer one final time – and then disappear. He almost felt bad. The demon had only been following his master's orders. There was no personal animosity involved. He was a pawn in a game of kings and it had been no contest.

But as he watched his fallen opponent indeed begin to shimmer and vanish, Lucas's senses once more went on high alert. Earth crunched beneath a boot behind him. The smell of Akyri became thick in the air.

With a sinking feeling, Lucas took a deep breath and turned around. Four men draped in the black of their kind stepped from the shadows and into the clearing.

It was going to be a long night.

"Make up your mind, warlock?"

Jason ignored the saber rattling that he knew was going to come from the infamous werewolf he was meeting and casually brushed a fallen leaf from the sleeve of his black jacket. After what he considered a sufficient amount of time, he took a deep breath and looked up, at last meeting Phelan's blue gaze.

Gabriel was watching him with an amused air. The alpha werewolf was leaning against a massive redwood, one leg propped up on the trunk, his thick arms crossed over his broad chest. His eyes glittered like sapphires and a hint of fang peeked from beneath his lips.

"What exactly is it you want from me?" Jason asked, feeling decidedly impatient. While it was true that he wanted Lucas Caige dead, he didn't like the idea of owing Phelan for anything.

Phelan pushed off of the trunk and began to pace, his gaze on the ground. This was the same clearing that Jason's magic had trapped Dannai within only hours earlier. The same clearing in which Lucas Caige had successfully fought off five Akyri.

The black diamond necklace Jason had given to Danny was working beautifully – he was able to control the flux of her magic through the rare stone, and even influence her emotions to a certain degree. Unfortunately, there had to exist a seed of a feeling already within her for him to feed it and build upon it. And so, while he was able to make her feel distrust and anger toward Caige because she already possessed a niggling doubt about him – he had been unable to stop the werewolf from marking her. Lucas Caige's influence had been stronger than his own in that moment and Danny had sincerely wanted to bear the mark nearly as much as Lucas had wanted to give it.

Still. All things considered, the plan had been evolving well. The mark on Danny's arm served to further Jason's lie concerning her powers and the mating of a werewolf. And as far as getting it off of her was concerned – well, he'd planned to kill Caige anyway.

However, when he'd learned that all five of the demons he had sent after the alpha had failed in killing Caige, Jason had realized just what it was he was up against. Lucas Caige wasn't what Jason had expected. Truth be told, the warlock was no longer certain that he could handle the alpha on his own. In fact, he was almost certain that he *couldn't*.

He also hadn't planned on just how angry it would make him to see another man's brand on Danny's body. He'd almost lost control with her. He'd almost let the charade drop. It was unlike him to lose his cool.

It was the hard, cold combination of his wrath and the failure of his Akyri that spurred him to finally take Phelan up on his offer. It was why he was here now, meeting with the notorious alpha werewolf. If anyone could kill Lucas Caige – it would be him.

"As a warlock, I'm sure you're familiar with the spell required to remove a mark from a dormant's body," Phelan said, glancing up and shooting Jason a meaningful look. A smile tugged at the corners of the werewolf's lips as he looked away once more and went on. "But I do wonder whether you're aware of what it takes to turn a made wolf... back into a dormant."

Jason's gaze narrowed. His blood pressure rose, but he hid his reaction well. On the inside, he was being positively flooded with cortisol this night. No one was supposed to know about the dormancy spell. No one was supposed to know that such a thing was even doable. "It isn't possible," he lied calmly.

Gabriel chuckled softly and stopped his pacing less than a yard away from Jason. Jason could feel the air around him crackle as if the werewolf's power were

clashing with his own.

"A warlock, an Akyri, and the offspring of both," Gabriel went on as if Jason hadn't spoken. "That's what I need," he said, "and when you join the ranks, warlock, that's what I will have."

Jason felt his blood beginning to chill in his veins. The idea that someone other than a magic user – and a werewolf, especially – knew how to do such a thing was outrageous. The dormancy spell was one of the warlock community's most closely guarded secrets. Secret one: Warlocks could revert a made wolf into a dormant. Secret two: Warlocks weren't often killed by their enemies because their enemies believed it necessary to rip out a warlock's heart in order to destroy them and that wasn't easy. However, silver bullets could also kill a warlock. Secret three: Some warlocks, if strong enough and aided, could even bring the dead back to life. These were furtive, undisclosed, cloak-and-dagger truths that warlocks had hidden from the rest of the world for centuries.

The dormancy spell seemed tame compared to the others. But it was guarded for a reason. And this reason was what sent ice cubes into Jason's bloodstream. Gabriel Phelan was right. The spell required the participation of a warlock, an Akyri, and the offspring of both. What he had failed to mention was that during the casting of the spell, one of the three would die.

Chapter Eleven: "Behind The Curtain"

"There she is," came a soft voice. Danny would recognize it anywhere. It was that sweet, soulful kind of voice that rumbled when it laughed, could hit any note it tried, and added a winsome quality to every shared and spoken dream. Danny opened her eyes and stared up at her best friend through the haze of sleep that draped itself like a fog over her bed. She blinked a few times and it cleared.

Imani made a half-chuckle sound and shook her head, brushing a lock of Danny's hair from her forehead. "Girl, you just wasted six of my nine lives. I don't appreciate that," Imani told her. She waited a moment, stared down at Danny for several long heartbeats, and then asked, "What happened? You just disappeared and Alberich wouldn't tell me anything."

Danny frowned and slowly sat up. She still felt very weak. With a sinking heart, she realized that only a portion of her power had returned while she'd rested. "Lucas came to the house," she told Imani. "He sort of... kidnapped me."

Imani's brow rose sharply. She lowered her head and gave Danny a disbelieving look. "He what?"

"He picked me up and carried me out the window – don't ask me how – and then ran with me until we got to this cave somewhere in the seaside cliffs nearby."

A long, silent pause.

"Oh?" Imani finally said. There was another drawn out moment of silence in which she was no doubt trying to digest the information and figure out whether or not Danny had somehow sustained brain damage. And then Imani took a slow, deep breath and straightened where she sat beside her on the bed. "Okay. I can actually believe that 'cuz I've seen the way he looks at you." She nodded and cocked her head to one side. "So what happened next?"

Danny told Imani the whole story. She left out a few minor details that she felt were less important than others, such as the fact that Danny had basically behaved like a wanton slut around the werewolf, and stuck to the important stuff. Nevertheless, Imani's expression became more and more troubled as the story progressed.

Finally, Danny lifted her arm and shoved back her sleeve to reveal the mark Lucas had left there. Imani whistled low, pinched the bridge of her nose to stave off what was clearly an oncoming headache, and shook her head.

"Shit, girl. You're in the thick of it now."

"Jason didn't tell you anything at all?" Danny asked as she lowered her arm.

"Huh-uh," Imani said. "He brought you home, told me to stay here with you, and then started covering the house with every single ward in existence, plus a few I didn't even *know* existed. Not a living soul's gonna make it in here without our permission."

Danny felt strange. She had the oddest sensation of being hollow. It was like there was this vacuum forming where her heart had been moments ago. It hurt and it was empty at the same time. Was that possible?

"Jason thinks that the mark is weakening me," Danny whispered, glancing down at the black symbol across her wrist. "He thinks this is proof that if I sleep with Caige,

I'll lose my ability to heal."

"Why would he think the mark is weakening you?" Imani asked, frowning.

Danny felt the vacuum over her heart grow bigger. "I couldn't even transport myself home," she admitted. "I still don't feel completely back to normal. How long was I asleep?" Maybe she just hadn't had enough rest.

"It's about noon now," Imani said as she gave Danny a strange look. "Jason brought you in early this morning."

"So I slept five or six hours and I'm still drained."

"You're drained? You really don't feel your power?" Imani asked, clearly troubled by something she didn't seem able to make sense of.

Now it was Danny's turn to frown. "Not all of it. Why?"

"Because I can feel it. It's all around you, just like it always is, and it honestly doesn't feel any different than normal."

"That makes no sense," said Danny. She looked at the mark on her arm, and then raised her gaze to focus on a snow globe on the dresser across the room. She willed it to come to her. It gracefully lifted off of the wooden surface and sailed through the air until she caught it in her right hand. Then she stared down at it and willed the ballerina inside to become a dancing pirate.

The figurine's hair shortened, it grew a black three-pointed hat, and one of its eyes blacked over. However, by the time that Danny began to feel out of breath, it still wore a tutu above its peg leg.

"Wow," said Imani. "Seriously?"

"Sorry," whispered Danny. "I gave this to you for your birthday, didn't I?"

Two out of three aint bad, Seth thought as he contemplated his odds of remaining alive once the dormancy spell was completed. Of course, his chances for survival were actually much better than sixty-six percent. They were one hundred percent. He was a magic user as well as an Offspring, after all. In fact, if he had to wager as to which of the three of them would die by the final chant: himself, the warlock, or the Akyri, he would bet on the Akyri. There was no way that Jason Alberich wouldn't be prepared for the dangerous effects of the spell. The warlock herald was one of the most powerful among his kind.

It was the Akyri who would have nothing to back him up. If anything, his dependence upon a warlock's power for survival would seal his doom. All Jason had to do was leech the sustenance back out of the Akyri and the creature would weaken. Then the dark magic of the spell would naturally choose the demon for its sacrifice.

Seth smiled, not bothering to hide his fangs. He glanced toward the shop windows as he passed them by and stared into the darkness beyond. It was late; everything was closed. He let his eyes shift, focusing first on the background, and then on the reflections upon the glass itself.

There were a lot of misconceptions held by the human race. It was so easy to feed a human a lie. And once a lie spread, there was no killing it. No amount of evidence to the contrary would ever weaken its insidious power. Some lies were

more dangerous than others. The worst, most dangerous ones had been around for as long as humans could record history.

Others were less dangerous and a touch younger but incredibly influential nonetheless. Seth studied his reflection for a moment and considered some of these. For one, he wasn't supposed to *have* a reflection. Yet, there it was, staring right back at him through eyes an eerie, stark indigo blue in a handsome face that appeared much younger than it should have.

By another, he shouldn't have been able to move around the streets earlier that day beneath the partly cloudy skies, falling leaves and cooling temperatures. By all rights and misconceptions, he should have crisped as black as Cajun gator on a stick within his first few seconds of sun exposure.

But that was the human belief system for you: conveniently, *fatally* flawed. Silver bullets didn't kill werewolves, they killed warlocks. Wooden stakes were more dangerous to Akyri than they were to vampires. Holy water didn't do squat to anyone. And wolfsbane was just a weed.

Actually, in all fairness, the sun exposure versus vampire legend wasn't exactly wrong. It was just that it failed to take into consideration special conditions. The offspring of warlocks and Akyri were termed *Offspring* by those intelligent enough to recognize their existence. However, the plain truth of the matter was that they were vampires. Without taking the proper actions, those vampires would fry in the sun like eggs on a skillet, which was a little unfair considering warlocks and Akyri could both walk in daylight. Fortunately, each and every vampire alive carried warlock blood in his or her veins – and for the most part, they used that blood to construct shielding spells around them.

The Offspring had never revealed themselves as vampires, of course. Seth chuckled softly as he considered this. If warlocks felt that their dormancy spell was a closely guarded secret, they had no idea what a true conspiracy was.

Werewolves found the scent of an Offspring confusing, frightening and off-putting, but they didn't know why. Warlocks could feel power coming off of Offspring, but it was a strange kind of power to them; unnamable. Some Akyri were able to symbiotically feed off of Offspring, but it was uncomfortable for them – a little like eating fruit on the verge of going bad. So, they usually opted for warlocks as their partners instead.

For their part, vampires went along with their "Offspring" title and the enigmatic anonymity that came with their existence. They revealed nothing. They weren't stupid. Knowledge was power and it was a power that the vampires wisely wished to keep in their own court.

Seth paused when he reached the front door of the building that housed his loft. As he always did, he raised his head slightly and scented the air, searching for any indication that an enemy had been near the keypad beside the door. However, the air smelled only of salt and seaweed and incoming fog.

Seth waved his hand over the keypad. The proper number sequence initialized,

and the locking mechanism within the door slid back with a heavy *shhhh-thunk*. He stepped inside, gave the lobby a cursory search, and shut the door firmly behind him. The lock once more slid into place.

Seth rode the 1950's elevator to the top floor, got off, and unlocked his loft door in the same manner that he had manipulated the keypad downstairs. A simple wave of his hand and he was entering his apartment, then once again closing the door behind him.

The air in the massive open space smelled of floor wax and fresh paint. Seth liked cleanliness; it was an OCD trait with most vampires for some reason and that was the reason for the wax and paint.

The windows across the vast, open room were open to let in the fresh Sea breeze coming off of the bay. It was a necessity for vampires to live in a moist environment. When Seth had reclined on his leather sofa to watch the first episode of True Blood, he'd had to smile at their quip about New Orleans being a haven for their kind. The fact was, New Orleans ~~was~~ a haven for vampires. The air was heavy with thunderstorms and bayou and vampires *loved* it.

On the other hand, you wouldn't find a single blood sucker in Vegas. Or anywhere in the Southwest for that matter. Dry air didn't agree with vampires. If one was stuck in such an environment for any significant length of time, their feeding needs doubled, and that was dangerous. It wasn't a good idea to leave a trail of dead bodies in your wake. It was so much more difficult to avoid detection that way.

Along the coasts; that was where you would find the Offspring. Living there, a vampire was capable of existing on one feeding a week. There were a lot of big cities along the coasts. These cities were notoriously dangerous. Vampires were at least in part responsible for this danger, though they honestly didn't make as big, or as *creative*, a homicidal dent in the population as humans made themselves.

A third misconception humans held about vampires – besides the belief that they didn't exist in the first place – involved the ever infamous bite mark. Luckily for the Offspring, their feedings left no mark whatsoever. As soon as a vampire's fangs were pulled from their victim's throat, the pair of openings disappeared. Again, Seth figured that if they'd wanted to, they could have allowed the mark to remain on a victim's neck, but the inherent magical will a vampire possessed made sure that the notorious evidence vanished without a trace.

Victims had to be disposed of properly. Fires were convenient. "Drownings" were a go-to. Coroners didn't waste time investigating cause of death if it seemed rampantly obvious to them from the outset. So, vampires did their best to make sure that was the case.

Now Seth gracefully eased himself into the leather love seat that sat across from the large windows in his loft and pondered the day's events.

Gabriel Phelan had an itch to scratch and he'd stepped over a plethora of lines in order to get at it. Charlie St. James had been in Phelan's sights for a decade and a half. He was obsessed with her, to put it lightly. Unlike it would have for any sane

werewolf, the fact that she had not only been marked by another alpha, but claimed and turned by him as well, hadn't lessened Phelan's resolve to obtain her.

The alpha werewolf had somehow learned about the warlocks' dormancy spell and now he fully planned to use it. Seth had no problems with helping Phelan in this. He was getting what he wanted in return, and he certainly wasn't afraid of dying during the casting of the spell. As he did in everything, Seth had taken precautions in this manner. He would be safe. And by the time the spell was completed, the lovely Charlie would be a dormant once more.

Lucas used his left hand to pour the Everclear from its bottle into the glass. He wasn't left-handed, but his right arm was currently out of commission. He considered just swigging from the bottle, but he knew that if he did, he wouldn't stop until the damn thing was empty, and then he would have to remember to buy more for next time. And there was always a next time. So, he filled the glass to its brim and set the bottle back down.

Then he took the glass, turned, and made his way to the couch across the room. He would have liked a fire to rest and heal beside, but building one required both hands. As it was, he had to limp to the couch and then ease himself into its leather with a grimace and a set of gritted teeth. His fangs had not receded. His eyes had not stopped glowing; he could feel them heating up his face from the inside out.

Normally a werewolf healed almost spontaneously. Human-dealt wounds disappeared from a werewolf's body within seconds. But Akyri were a poisonous, other-worldly lot and the injuries they inflicted were of a more insidious nature. It would be a good hour before Lucas retained the full use of his mangled arm and probably another one before he felt completely back to normal.

At the moment, he was an injured animal suffering from a lot of pain and a hell of a lot more anger. When the first demon had attacked him, he'd admittedly been confused as to what "warlock" it was who wanted him dead. At first sight of the Akyri, Lucas's old brain had kicked in and he'd automatically assumed the attack had something to do with his dead brother. Maybe the warlock who had done Byron in had come back to finish the job by taking out his kin as well.

But then the Akyri had told him about the "Healer," and there wasn't a werewolf alive who didn't know who that was. Lucas had to admit that he'd never exactly warmed to the idea of the Council turning to magic users for help, but the Healer herself was a legend. She had saved a great many lives, and in Lucas's opinion, that made her something more than a simple witch. He'd always figured that if he met her in person, he would nod with respect, be diplomatic if distant, and at least treat her with the deference she deserved.

He never imagined he would become bound to her and wind up branding her with his mark. Dannai was the Healer, and there was a warlock out there somewhere who felt he had as much a right to claim her as Lucas. That was bad enough. What was worse was the fact that Danny was marked and the warlock was sure to find out. What would happen to her then? Would he hurt her?

Would he kill her?

Lucas had gone back to her house after the fight in the hopes of finding that she had used her magic to go home. But there was no sweet scent of dormant; Danny was gone. So Lucas had shifted into wolf form and loped back here, to the house he had just purchased in Trinidad.

Now he felt restless and wrathful. He needed to find his mate. He needed to know that she was safe. As he reclined in the leather chair and stained it with blood, he downed the liquor in his glass and wished it could do a hell of a lot more for his pain than it was.

A thought occurred to him.

The Healer was known to work with Lily Kane and Claire St.James. The three of them were some sort of super trio that stopped really bad things from going down before they had a chance to do so. Lily was the seer and the one who comforted the intended victims. Claire, also known as Charlie, was the muscle and clout, the enforcer of the bunch. Danny was the Healer.

Lucas straightened in the chair and lowered his glass. If Lily was a seer, maybe she could help him find Danny. Lucas used to work for Cole and Charlie was Cole's mate. Lucas pulled himself out of the overstuffed chair and made his way to a drawer where he kept his cell phone. He pulled the phone out of the drawer and speed dialed a number. This may be a long shot, but Cole could get to Charlie and Charlie could get to Lily. Lucas's stomach knotted with pain and worry. He could use all of the help he could get.

Lily jerked out of sleep with a start, instantly waking her husband, who had been laying beside her with an arm thrown possessively over her waist.

Daniel Kane rose in the bed, bracing himself on one strong arm as he instinctively searched the room for danger and pulled his wife closer to him. He always did this when anything pulled him out of sleep. "What is it?" he asked, his voice softly rumbling. He watched the shadows in the room and didn't look at her.

"Another vision," she told him, running her hand over her face.

Now Daniel looked down at her, and she removed her hand to stare up into his blue, blue eyes. "Who was it this time?" he asked, his deep Louisiana accent wrapping around her like black velvet. "You need to go again?" Lily noted the tighter tone of his latter words, but it was an improvement. The fact that she, Charlie and Danny went off into the great unknown to fight mega bad guy humans had never settled well with Daniel. He had issues.

Daniel was an alpha male in the extreme; he'd been born that way. To complicate matters, he'd lost too many people he loved in too few years and now his defense-o-meter was in the red zone twenty-four seven and frankly, it sometimes made him an asshole. At least on the outside.

Lily knew a different man underneath the wolf suit. She'd coaxed that man out of hiding over the last few years, but it hadn't been easy and if she hadn't been the most single-mindedly determined human being on the freaking planet, she probably would

have been the first werewolf to go before the Council in order to ask the Overseer for a divorce from her mate.

Fortunately, Daniel really loved her. He had since high school. It had been one of those lightning-strike kinds of things that left him quietly in awe of her. And the fact of the matter was, she felt the same about him. She most certainly loved him back. If she hadn't, she never would have given him their child. Their son, William, had been named for Daniel's uncle, who had been murdered by the same maniacal Hunter who had once kidnapped Lily and tortured her.

William was sometimes the white fluff between the two Oreo halves that were Daniel and Lily. Amidst the stress of Daniel's job as police chief of Baton Rouge and Lily's job as the Council seer, their marriage was a constant roller coaster ride that Lily was fairly certain other werewolf couples didn't have to endure. But all they had to do was stop and look into each other's eyes or pick up their infant son, and they remembered how they truly felt about one another. It gave them the strength to keep going.

Still, Daniel didn't like the idea of Lily putting herself in harm's way by taking on these rescue missions with Charlie and Danny. He didn't like it one bit. Once he'd realized that his wife wasn't going to stop doing it any time soon, he'd begun to try to deal with it. It was a work in progress. These things just took a while.

"I don't know," she told him honestly. She didn't know if she was going to have to leave again. This dream had been different from the others. First of all, it hadn't been about a human, as it usually was. It had been about Dannai. What did it mean when a precognition that normally would send the three of them running to help someone was suddenly about one of the three?

The other thing that was different about this vision was that Danny didn't seem to be in danger. It was just that she was... *kissing* someone. And though she seemed to be enjoying the kissing, it felt wrong. Lily couldn't shake the darkness of the dream. It was one of those dreams that directly nicked the neural synapses that set off a surge of adrenaline though there seemed to be no obvious reason for the reaction. It was as if Danny wasn't supposed to be kissing that man.

He's dangerous, she thought. She tried to picture him now, to bring back a solid image of his memory. Tall, black clothes, light blonde hair. That was all she could remember.

She fingered the pearl on the small gold chain she wore around her neck and Daniel's gaze followed her fingers. She knew he hated the necklace. It had been a gift from Dannai two months ago. The magic pendant allowed her to transport to the scenes of her visions. She turned it slowly between her thumb and forefinger now and wondered whether she should try to find her friend with it.

The dream had been so vague. What if she allowed the necklace to transport her to Danny's location – only to find that she was walking in on a tender moment between Danny and her new boyfriend? Danny would probably be happy to see her regardless, and she would of course forgive the interruption, but Lily would feel like an idiot.

"Tell me what you saw, cher" Daniel urged softly. She noted the troubled expression on his handsome face and realized that he'd tuned in to her confusion and indecision. "What's goin' on?" His gentle drawl coaxed her into a state of submission. It always did.

"It was Dannai," she told him. "And I don't even know what the dream means, but it felt strange."

From the other room came the sound of an infant softly mewling. Lily glanced in the direction of the hallway beyond the door. Daniel's gaze flicked toward the door as well, but only for a brief moment before he was once again pinning Lily beneath the weight of his gaze. "Like bad strange?"

"Yeah," Lily admitted before she could give it too much thought. "Yeah, I guess so."

Daniel pondered her response for a moment and she could almost see the wheels spinning in his head. And then he nodded. "Okay then," he said as he pushed himself up and gracefully stood beside the bed to peer down at her. As always, he looked edible in his mussed blue-black hair, his inhumanly perfect physique, and his pajama bottoms. He moved to his leather jacket where it lay over the back of a chair nearby and pulled his cell phone from its inside pocket before returning to the bed to hold it out for her. "Then what do you say we give the Healer a quick call?"

Lily looked at the phone and experienced a moment of relief. She released a breath and nodded. "Thanks," she said, pushing herself into a sitting position. It was a definite improvement for Daniel to be aiding her in something involving Dannai or Charlie. He was really trying hard. And she was grateful for it.

She took the phone from him and placed a gentle hand on his cheek. The blue in his eyes lightened at her touch, sparking ever so slightly to life with werewolf magic. She smiled and brushed her thumb across the strong line of his jaw. Daniel instantly responded by cupping her face in his hands. He leaned in.

In the other room, William began to cry.

Before her, Lily could feel Daniel stiffen into stillness. For once however, Lily let the baby cry, ignoring him long enough to place a gentle kiss across her husband's lips.

Chapter Twelve: "The Dirty Trick"

Danny closed her phone and put it back on the kitchen table when it immediately began dancing on the table top with a second ring. She frowned and picked it back up again, flipping it open and placing it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Danny, it's me, Lily."

"Lily! I just got off the phone with Charlie!"

"You did? Are you okay?" The worry in Lily's voice was evident.

"I'm fine," Danny assured her friend. "Why? What happened?" She immediately thought of children trapped in dank garages or women huddled on the corners of dirty mattresses, and Danny's blood began to pump furiously through her veins.

"Nothing," Lily quickly replied. "It's just that.... Wait, why did Charlie call you?"

Danny blinked. Lily wasn't going to let her change the subject. "Lucas Caige called Malcolm Cole – and Cole spoke with Charlie. And Charlie called me."

There was a generous pause while Lily no doubt ran this through her head again. "Lucas Caige is the alpha who used to work for Cole. Right?"

"Yes."

"The one whose brother was killed all those years ago – in Australia? By a warlock?"

"Yes."

"Danny, what's going on? I'm coming to see you – " The line clicked and Lily's voice cut out for a second. Then she said, "Charlie's on the other line."

"I know," Danny said, trying not to smile. "She's on her way here too."

It was a few short minutes before both Charlie and Lily flashed into the living room of Danny's house. Charlie was with Imani, who had transported to her location in order to bring her back. The marks that represented the curse on the inside of Charlie's wrists would transport her to the scene of a soon-to-be murder, but it was useless if Charlie wanted to get somewhere innocent, so she'd needed Imani's help in this case.

Now the four of them pulled out chairs around the kitchen table as they hugged and greeted one another. Danny had hot water boiling for tea; it was a cooler Fall day and the fog had rolled in thick. Flames crackled merrily in the fire place and cookies had been set out. This may be a strange and frightening situation for Danny, but there was no reason she couldn't be a good host. In fact, cookies could only help.

The four friends talked for an hour or so as the morning wore on and sky grew darker with impending storm. Normally, fog would burn off in the afternoon, but there was a strangeness to the air now. Something was brewing.

"So, you're a marked mate," Charlie said, failing to hide her smile as she raised her brows and gestured to the tattoo on the inside of Danny's arm. "And with Lucas Caige, of all people." She shook her head, whistling low. "Girl, you're in over your head," she chuckled.

"Tell me about it," Danny moaned. Caige was a lit match and a rogue; it would be hard to find a more dangerous alpha, though Charlie's mate was one of the few who

qualified. But it wasn't Caige that was bothering her. It wasn't him *specifically*. In fact, every time she thought of him, her body betrayed her in its reaction, even while her mind told her he was a mistake because he hated magic.

She still wanted him, despite everything. What really bothered her was the fact that she was just as cursed as Charlie. She was marked now – and she could never follow through with the rest of the mating. If she did, she would lose what remained of her magic. Danny was sure there were worse and less fair atrocities taking place in the world at that moment somewhere, but she couldn't personally give them heed. She felt like the world had crapped on her.

"Okay," Lily said, her voice the sound of reason in the room. She was used to taking charge like that, Danny reasoned. It was the social worker in her. "So, just to get this all straight again, let me review. Lalura has always told you that mating with a wolf would make your powers go away –"

"Yeah, but I'm not sure about that," Imani interrupted, reiterating what she had already told them about her suspicions where Jason was concerned. "I think Alberich was feeding her that story."

"Obviously not a story, Ima," Danny said, sighing. "I'm weaker than I've ever been."

"But you didn't sleep with a wolf, Danny," Imani said, her tone one of placation. "Did you? No. You just got marked by one. I think it's sort of strange that you're already losing your powers. You don't think it's a little odd?" Imani turned to the other two girls at the table.

Charlie shrugged. "You know, Imani has a point. I remember that when Cole marked me, I was pissed, that's for sure. And he had Caige's help too – I owe him one," she said. "But I also felt stronger and faster and more powerful than I ever had before. Not to mention more...." Her voice trailed off and she shrugged again, blushing.

"Horny?" Lily filled in, grinning widely.

Charlie nudged her with her elbow and chuckled. "Yeah, that." She turned back to Danny. "So it does seem kind of strange that you would grow weaker instead of stronger."

"It's not strange if it's the first step in me losing my powers," Danny said. "It could be the half-way point. A warning."

There was a silence around the table as they all seemed to consider this again. And then Lily spoke up once more. She addressed Imani. "Ima, tell me about your herald. You said you think he had something to do with the warning Lalura gave to Danny?"

"Yeah," Ima nodded. "I wouldn't put it past him for a second. He's a good herald as far as taking care of the coven is concerned and he's definitely powerful. There's no denying that. But he's had power since he was a child and I think he knows how to abuse it." She shot a glance toward Danny. "And he's had it bad for Danny for ten years."

Danny rolled her eyes. "So he has a crush on me. That doesn't mean he's turned evil."

Imani made a derisive sound. "Honey, that aint no crush. That's a full on obsession. I can't believe you don't realize it."

"Obsession?" Charlie and Lily asked at the same time. They'd both dealt with men who had been obsessed with them, and the looks on their faces were enough to relay that they didn't like the idea.

"Okay, he's not as obsessed with her as Phelan is with you, Charlie," Imani admitted quickly. There was no man alive who was obsessed with any one woman the way Gabriel Phelan was with Charlie. That right there was one scary-ass fixation. The infamous werewolf was bent on Charlie's domination and would settle at nothing less than complete enslavement of a woman who had already been mated to the man she loved, Malcolm Cole.

Charlie nodded, her face having gone a tad paler than before at the mention of Phelan's name.

Imani went on, however, obviously determined to make her point clear. "But he's obsessed all the same. I've seen the way he looks at you," she said, turning to Danny again. "That man's got it bad, girl. And the way he was holding you when he brought you home? And the shields he put all over the house?"

"What kinds of shields?" Lily asked.

"Protective shields – mostly against alpha werewolves. But there were other spells he used that I didn't recognize. It was like he knew someone would be coming for her."

"Caige?" Charlie asked.

"Probably." Ima shrugged.

"Okay, okay," Danny finally said, holding her hands up in defeat. "So he has a thing for me. I know. I can tell too. But that doesn't change the fact that he was right. Something is happening to me. I can't control my magic and it started with this mark. How do you explain that?"

There was another pregnant pause around the table, punctuated by the distant sound of rolling thunder. Finally, Lily leaned forward, placing her arms on the table and lacing her fingers together. Her gold eyes speared Danny with an intelligent, inquisitive look. "Tell me what Jason Alberich looks like."

Danny took a deep breath. Jason Alberich was a very handsome man; there was no denying that when she really thought about it. It was just that she'd known him for so long and he'd always just been either a childhood playmate or the herald's son or the herald himself. He'd felt both out of her league and too much of a friend to be thought of as anything more.

"He's tall," she said. "He has light wavy blonde hair and green eyes." She paused here and glanced at Charlie. "A lot like Cole's eyes, actually."

Charlie raised a brow, then nodded. Malcolm Cole had very stark eyes.

Danny looked down at the table top and went on. "He's buff," she said, feeling strange now that she was describing the man in detail. The more she pictured him,

the more she realized how handsome she was. “Like perfectly built,” she said softly. “Strong chin, broad shoulders, wears black like all of the heralds do. He looks good in it.”

When she looked back up, it was to find all three women looking at her very closely. Imani’s expression was frankly worried. Lily’s expression was calculating. Charlie seemed to be somewhere in between the two.

“That’s the man from my dream,” Lily said, breaking the silence. “You were kissing him.”

“He’s put a spell on you,” Imani blurted, her gaze narrowed. “I swear to the goddess he has.”

“Oh, come on,” Danny said, rolling her eyes. But even as she denied the accusation, she realized that there was a niggling, tickling sensation at the back of her neck. It was like a Spidey sense. And it scared her. Not that she was about to let Imani see that.

“I’m dead serious, girl. You don’t think I’m serious? I would bet money on it.”

“Do you really think that your herald would do something like that?” Lily asked calmly. She was ever the in-control investigator, just trying to get the facts straight.

Imani shot her a serious look and gave her a hard nod. “Absolutely. I saw the way he glared at the mark on her arm.” She turned to Danny. “I still think that Jason is behind all of this somehow.”

“If so, then you’re a brave girl for saying as much out loud,” Lily nodded to Imani in respect.

That’s true, Danny thought. For Imani’s sake, the witch had better hope she was wrong because a wizard of Jason’s caliber possessed the ability to scry on anyone at any time and if he really was behind Danny’s loss of power, then he wouldn’t be opposed to spying on them.

A hard chill went through Danny and the mark on her arm tingled threateningly. She glanced down at it. “I don’t know what to think,” she admitted softly.

“Okay,” Charlie said, leaning forward now to match Lily’s position. “Then I’ll tell you what I think.”

All three of the other girls turned toward her. She gave it a second before continuing, obviously straightening out her thoughts before giving them voice. “I think you’re a dormant who has been marked by a man who seems to care a great deal for you. He’s been nothing but good to you since you met him. Am I wrong?”

Danny thought of the things he’d said in the cave – when he’d told her he smelled magic. She tried to summon up the anger that had spiked through her at that time, but it wasn’t there any longer. And the truth was, she couldn’t really remember what it was about the words that had really pissed her off. He’d said he smelled magic, but what did that mean? Maybe he’d simply meant that he smelled someone else – some *thing* else – and that it set off alarm bells in his head because it meant they were no longer alone. If that was the case.... Could it have been Jason he’d scented?

She ran a hand over her face and shook her head. “I’m so confused.”

"I know," Charlie said. "Let me finish." Charlie took a deep breath and went on. "Like it or not, Danny, you're stuck now. There are only two ways I know of to get a mark off of a dormant and neither one is worth considering. And even if you could, you would still be a dormant – you would have to wear your shield for the rest of your life or risk being bait to every werewolf you came across." She paused here, allowing the meaning of her words to kick in. "So, whether it means a loss of your power or it's actually your herald doing the damage, the outcome is the same. You have to take it to the next level. You have to let Caige do to you what you both want him to do."

At these words, Danny blushed furiously, her stomach grew warm, and her body felt heavy. Her heart began to race as she pictured Lucas and the things she wanted him to do to her. She imagined that she smelled leather and aftershave and her throat grew tight as she recalled the dizziness that swept over her when he drew near. So close....

But then she saw a pair of green eyes. They cut through her reveries like jade ice, slicing through her images of Lucas and dissipating them like smoke.

"What happened to your Mjolnir pendant?" Lily asked suddenly, changing the subject. "I don't think I've ever seen you without it before."

Danny blinked and glanced down, as if she would be able to see the pendant that now hung around her neck. She remembered that Jason had given her a new one – but she couldn't recall what had happened with her old one.

"Yeah..." Imani muttered, her brow furrowed. "Where did you get that?" she asked, gesturing to the black diamond.

But before Danny could reply, the house shook. It was as if a tremor shot through it, and the area around them warped as the magic shields Jason had placed on the home bent and then straightened again. Lily and Charlie both bolted out of their chairs, instantly crouching low as their fight instincts kicked in. They were seconds from flashing into their wolf forms; already, their eyes were glowing in warning.

Danny and Imani rose slowly from their seats, responding to the new threat in a different manner as their magic spanned out around them like feelers. Danny was again struck with her weakness; she could normally span much further than this.

The tremor and warp came again, this time strong enough to send Lily and Charlie into their wolf forms. There were two flashes, nearly simultaneous, as Danny and Imani stumbled back in the wake of the boom.

A third tremor shook the mansion, giving the four women no time to react. This time, the wards Jason had placed on the home not only warped and bent – they broke. Several more flashes crackled around the girls and what looked like pixie dust began to shimmer in the air around them, falling like rain.

Within seconds, the shimmers had disappeared as well.

Danny's heart slammed hard against her rib cage, beating fast and heavy. She stood as Imani did, with her hands out, her eyes scanning the kitchen around them, her ears pricked for any sound.

When no more sound came, she exchanged a look with Imani. Before they could head toward the front door, their two wolf companions loped off in that direction first,

their hackles up, their throats growling low.

Imani and Danny quickly followed after. However, once at the door, both Lily and Charlie stopped. Charlie raised her head, sniffing the air. In the next second, both women were flashing back into their human forms. Immediately, Charlie reached for the door and threw it open, stepping out onto the front porch.

Danny rushed to catch up, the rest of them filing out onto the porch after her.

In the front yard stood some of the most powerful people any of them had ever known. Malcolm Cole was there, his green eyes flashing, his gaze locked on his mate with the usual mixture of pride, possession and hunger. His second in command, Jake, was there as well. A few feet away stood Jessie Graves, who was both a rare and powerful Sentinel and Charlie's guardian. Beside him stood James Valentine, Lily's guardian. Daniel Kane stood on Valentine's opposite side with several members of his pack; some were plain-clothes detectives, others were still dressed in the uniforms of police officers. They looked like they could all strip down and pose for a Playgirl calendar, but Danny knew they were each incredibly dedicated and capable cops.

Interspersed throughout the group of werewolves were people that Danny had never seen before. But the magic radiating off of them was more than enough to mark them as witches and wizards. In front of them all were the two men who literally took Danny's breath away. One was Charlie's grandfather, the Council Overseer and the single most powerful werewolf in existence.

The other was Lucas Caige.

His dark eyes were narrowed, his head lowered, his tall, strong frame radiating a stark determination and anger. The mark on her arm burned with both pain and pleasure, a warning laced in bliss. Her breath caught in her lungs as he parted his lips, exposing the fangs of his wolf.

The others followed suit. Every single wolf there bared his teeth. Their ire was up, their defenses at the fore. The air rumbled with thunder – and something else.

"We need to talk," Lucas said, his voice a menacing growl. "Now"

"Holy shit, girl," whispered Charlie beside her. "That is one serious alpha."

Danny tried to tear her gaze from Lucas's long enough to look over at her friend, but she couldn't. He held her fast in his sway, melting her to the spot until she was stuck and fighting to breathe. She watched in helpless fascination as he slowly left the Overseer's side and strode toward her. Every single step he took was a threat, a warning, a promise. Thunder rolled closer and lightning split the sky a mile away.

Lucas's boot touched down on the first step of the porch, sounding loudly in the thick silence. Danny wanted to step back. She wanted to run and hide – and she wanted him to get to her faster, rip her clothes off, and take her upstairs to her bedroom.

An eternity later, he stood before her and the other girls had backed away. Just a little. She knew they wanted to be supportive, but he was her mate. And he was a wolf. And he was mad as hell. There was little scarier than such a creature.

"You have no idea what kind of trouble you're in, little witch," he said as he closed

the distance between them and towered over her. "But I'm going to show you. And I'm starting with this." In a move so fast, she literally could not follow it with her eyes, Lucas reached up, wrapped his fingers around the thin chain at her neck, and yanked hard.

There was yet another flash, this one red and black, and Danny felt as if someone punched her in the chest. The wind was knocked from her lungs as she was thrown violently backward. She went sailing through the front door of her house and kept going until she hit the wall that divided the living room from the kitchen. The impact was painless; just a thump and a noise and a crashing around her as paintings fell from their posts on the walls and shattered on the wood planks or tiles.

Danny hit the ground and *then* the pain came. But through the haze, she realized that the air had once again become thick with the feel of magic. She could feel her power there now, all around her. It surrounded her, swelling like an ocean tide. Slowly, she pushed herself up and into a sitting position, and then felt her neck. The pendant Jason had given her was gone and inexplicably, the Mjolnir necklace was back in its place.

Lightning split the sky, this time piggybacked by immediate thunder.

Chapter Thirteen: "Chameleon"

Lucas pushed himself up onto his hands and knees and shook his head. He hadn't been expecting that kind of reaction from the pendant. If he'd known, he wouldn't have pulled it off.

"Danny..." he coughed. It hurt to talk. He had a broken rib. He could feel it hitch as he tried to breathe. Whatever had happened to him must have been worse for her. He had to find her....

Lucas raised his head and surveyed his surroundings through the tips of his black hair. Every one of the wolves around him was down except for The Overseer. Alexander Kavanagh, Charlie's grandfather, was just coming to his feet, his fangs pronounced, his ice blue eyes glowing like fire-lit glaciers. Waves of angry power were rolling off of the man.

Lucas watched as Kavanagh straightened, peered around the grounds, and then blurred toward the sprawled form of his granddaughter, who was laying on the ground several yards from the front steps of the porch.

Daniel Kane, Jessie Graves, and Malcolm Cole pulled themselves up next and Cole joined the Overseer beside Charlie's slowly waking form. Police chief Daniel and his men surrounded Lily Kane as she slowly rolled over where she'd hit the ground beside the tree line. Lucas pulled his gaze from their forms, stumbled toward the porch steps, and fought his way up them once again. Danny was inside.

His body still ached from his battle with the Akyri and a few of the wounds had opened up again beneath the magical blast. He ignored the pain, got to the top, and shoved through the front door.

Dannai, the Healer, was standing tall and strong beside the kitchen archway, her hands glowing where she had them both pressed to her mid-section. Her kaleidoscope eyes were closed, and she was whispering. She was healing herself.

Lucas had never been struck harder with the inherent strength of the female race than he was in that moment. He'd never been more in awe of a woman as he watched his mate heal her own wounds. In a few moments, her hands ceased to glow and her eyes opened once more. She looked up at him, capturing his gaze in hers. Thunder rumbled outside and a silent understanding passed through the space between them.

"How did you know?" she asked softly.

Lucas leaned against the door frame beside him. He couldn't help it. Relief flooded his system at Danny's well-being, and with it came a receding in the flow of his adrenaline. As it left his bloodstream, pain took its place.

"Jason Alberich is a warlock," he told her. "After I spoke with Malcolm about you, I called the Overseer. Something about the situation wasn't sitting right with me. I told Kavanagh what..." he trailed off and glanced down at the mark on her arm. His heartbeat sped up at the sight of it gracing her perfect skin. She was his. "What had happened between us," he continued, "and about the Akyri attack –"

"The Akyri attack?" Danny asked.

Lucas nodded. "Yes. Sent by Alberich." He stopped there to allow her to digest

this information. He knew it had to be a lot to take in. But the pendant proved him right, all on its own.

"Kavanagh suspected the worst and contacted another coven's herald. That herald contacted a seer." He pushed off of the wall and slowly started toward her. To her credit, she didn't retreat, despite how scary he knew he must look. He'd been threatened and beaten and his marked mate was being hunted by another man. He wasn't in a good mood.

"Alberich is a very powerful warlock, Danny, and he's obsessed with you."

Danny cringed and started to hug herself. Lucas continued toward her. "He was using the pendant to control your power." He shook his head. "And probably your mind, to some degree. But this goes deeper. There's more involved than Alberich and his determination where you're concerned." He stopped before her, once more towering over her despite her own tall, slim form. With a tenderness that utterly belied the raging need he felt to finish the job then and there and turn her into a made wolf, Lucas cupped her face with his palm and brushed his thumb across her cheek bone. She closed her eyes, shivered beneath his touch, and raised her own right arm to hold his hand there. When she did, he noticed his mark was beginning to glow like star dust.

"He's made a deal with Gabriel Phelan," he said.

Danny's multi-colored eyes flew open, her lips parting with shock. "Charlie!" she gasped. "He's after Charlie, isn't he?" At once, her gaze was torn from his as she peered around his tall form for any sign of her close friend. But he knew that Charlie was safe with her mate and Lucas wasn't done yet. This talk with Danny had long been coming, and every werewolf outside would defend his right to have it with her.

As Danny tried to brush past him, his hand shot out and snaked beneath the edge of her t-shirt. He wrapped his arm around her, spanning his fingers across the taut flesh of her abdomen to pull her to a stop. He wasn't stupid. She was marked. There was a sexual submission making its way through her body that couldn't be denied. All it would take was his nearness, his touch, and she would give in to him. He knew it was working when she swayed a little on her feet and the softest of moans escaped her perfect, pouty lips.

"She's fine," he told her softly. "She's with Cole."

She accepted his answer easily, all hint of resistance fleeing her form. He didn't let up. He turned into her and pulled her up against him, curling the fingers of his other hand around her neck to gently tilt her head back. She let it drop against his chest, her body trembling beneath his touch.

"How... did you get past Jason's wards?" she whispered, her eyes once more closed.

Lucas smiled a dark smile. He caught the sweet scent of her arousal and his cock jumped as blood rushed into it. He gazed down at her perfect features where she rested against him, trapped in his embrace, and shook his head. "It was the Overseer," he told her as his fingers gently caressed her throat, pulling her deeper into him. "The herald Kavanagh contacted told him that the shields the warlock raised

were meant to keep out men – *any* men.”

He chuckled and the sound rumbled through his chest and into Danny. He felt her shiver again, and he responded by moving his hand so that the tips of his fingers brushed the tops of her jeans, edging easily under the denim material. “But get enough strong alphas together, add a little offensive magic, and a shield like that doesn’t stand a chance. One by one, they come crashing down.”

“He’ll know,” she breathed raggedly as her fingernails curled into the tight denim over his the muscles of his thighs.

Her response to him was stark and incredible, and it was awakening the monster inside of Lucas. He bent over her until his lips were beside her ear. “Let him know,” he told her. “Let him come.”

With that, he tightened his grip beneath her chin, tilted her head back further, and claimed her lips with his. He kissed her long and deep and he wasn’t afraid to allow a little of his werewolf power to seep into her through it. Danny was a fighter, and her magic could destroy the both of them if she let it. He wanted her docile. He needed her to listen. And he also couldn’t help it. She was making him nuts.

By the time he finally pulled back, he was painfully hard and had all but forgotten about the threat that lurked all around them. If he could have had it his way, he would have picked her up and taken her to her bedroom. Forget the talk.

But the scent of dark magic still hung heavy in the air – and Phelan was out there somewhere too. So Lucas slowly broke the kiss. “Hear me out, Danny,” he told her, whispering the words across her lips. Her lids were half-closed, revealing just a hint of the starkly colored rainbows in her eyes. “I don’t hate magic. I don’t hate *you*,” he said. “In fact, I am quite fond of you.” He smiled as he said this, and though his fangs were out, he knew she wouldn’t mind. She was a big girl, well familiar with the ways of werewolves. She was also a clever girl. Without Alberich’s magic messing up her mind, she would be able to think for herself. And in her heart, she knew they were meant to be together. If she hadn’t, she never would have let him mark her. The little witch would have fried him in his boots instead.

“I could so easily learn to love you,” he chuckled. Hell, he was pretty sure he already did. “And I want you to give me that chance. I want you to give *us* that chance, understand?” Lucas held tight, scorching her with his gaze. He wasn’t going to let her go until she agreed. Maybe he wouldn’t even let go then.

It took a few seconds, but Danny finally nodded. Just a little. “Yes,” she whispered.

Lucas’s smile broadened, his body thrumming with victory. It felt good. In fact, he could have sworn that his wounds were healing faster now. He barely noticed them any longer, which probably meant they were nearly mended.

“All right then,” he said, the fingers of his hand caressing the smooth, taut skin across her stomach. “We need to get somewhere safe.” He let her go, slowly and reluctantly, and she straightened. When she could, she turned to face him.

Her cheeks were still flushed and her eyes were still shining bright, but she was

composing herself, pulling down her shirt and fingering the tiny gold pendant at her throat. "I need to check on Imani and the others," she said, her voice hoarse with slowly receding desire.

He nodded. She cleared her throat and turned away, heading toward the front door. Lucas took a slow, deep breath and tried to get his body back under control. Then he followed her outside.

Everyone was on their feet now. The lot of werewolves and magic users was gathered a few yards from the front porch. No one was speaking.

When Lucas and Danny appeared at the front door, the Overseer turned and pinned him with a hard look. "We'll head back to Council headquarters," he said. His edict brooked no room for argument. Lucas nodded his consent and reached for Danny's hand.

She let him take it.

Jason's grip on the edge of the polished mahogany table tightened. He could feel the telltale pulse in his power and knew that the wards he'd placed around Dannai had fallen. But he was trapped here, in this meeting of dark, dangerous minds, and there was no way in hell he was going to show any weakness by letting on that something was troubling him.

As it was, he had no fewer than three separate shields thrown over himself. It was simple self-preservation. In company like this, the weak and the bleeding were picked off and fed upon by the rest. Any chink in the chain link fence of his defenses would be noticed and utilized and he would fall. This high up on the ladder, such a fall hurt. In fact, it was frankly fatal.

Around the expensive table sat six others. Two were warlocks, one of which the dark and dangerous Lucas Caige would surely have been interested in meeting. Three were vampires. The sixth was the Akyri king. Jason made seven.

"I believe one of us would like to adjourn the meeting early," said one of the vampires. He did nothing to hide his true form here, amongst his peers. His irises glowed red, his teeth were pronounced, and the nails of his hands where he had them calmly intertwined atop the table were long and pointed. "Troubled, Alberich?"

"Always," Jason replied calmly. He met the vampire's gaze head-on and unflinchingly.

Several beats of impressive silence passed before the vampire finally smiled.

The Akyri king spoke up next. "No matter," he said, his voice sounding like an echo in the large stone chamber. "I believe we are finished for now. Are we not?" He glanced at one of the vampires, a man who was seated at the head of the table and whose very presence Jason had to admit was stifling.

The vampire nodded just once. "Meeting adjourned."

The Akyri king nodded in return and gracefully stood. His dark eyes settled upon each of them one after another. "My queen awaits."

He turned from the table, offering them all his back. It was an unbelievably gutsy act. Almost every one of them could have benefited from the man's death. But of

course, they did nothing. And the king walked calmly out of the chamber.

Jason's insides were boiling with impatience. He stood next, pushing his chair away from the table and claiming his full height. With nothing more than a nod toward the others, he called up his transportation magic and left the room in a word and a flash.

When he flashed back into solid form in the front yard of Danny's two-story house, Gabriel Phelan's men were waiting for him. Jason glanced at the empty house with irritation, and then turned to regard the werewolves. There were four of them. Their presence felt odd; normally werewolves gave off a nature-like vibration, neutral and wild. But these wolves felt shrouded in something more. It was less chaotic and a lot darker.

"Your boss told me that he could kill Caige," Jason said, his tone laced with disappointed malice. The shields were down and Danny was gone. To make matters worse, the air reeked of werewolf power and magic. Other covens had been pulled in. That meant that word was now out about Jason being a warlock.

There would be nothing but battles for him from here on in.

"Phelan wants to speak with you," one of the men said. "He said that you would know where to go."

Jason felt his gaze heating up as the cold fires inside of him began burning their way to the surface. He needed to release some anger and soon, or he would blow. "Very well," he said. But before he flashed back out in another show of transportation magic, Jason allowed a bit of his wrath to escape. It raced from Jason's form in a blue-white trail of fire, licking at the ground as it sped toward a random werewolf.

Jason had no idea who the man was, and he didn't care. But he felt a bit of relief and satisfaction at seeing the man's form engulfed in flames before Jason once more flashed away.

Gabriel Phelan was reclined on the leather sofa of Jason's mansion when Jason popped back into existence. The werewolf was utterly unperturbed by the show of magic. Jason's ire rose instantly at the obvious invasion that the werewolf's presence indicated. How Phelan had managed to not only find the mansion, but get in, was beyond the warlock. It was painfully clear to him by now that the man he was dealing with was not to be taken lightly.

"Did you kill them?" Phelan asked just before he took a sip from what appeared to be a glass of water. Jason knew it was Everclear. It was just about the only thing a werewolf could drink if he hoped to glean even the slightest buzz.

Ah, he thought. *The werewolves*. Phelan was talking about the four wolves who had met him in front of Danny's house only seconds ago. They had felt strange to him, almost like dark magic, but not quite. It made sense now. "Let me guess," he said as he made his way to a love seat opposite the alpha and plopped down into it. "You no longer trust them and want to be rid of them."

Phelan smiled a disarming smile, his blue eyes twinkling in the light of the overhead chandelier and the crackling fire in the hearth. "Something like that."

"Then I'm glad I only killed one," Jason admitted. "They're your problem, not mine."

Phelan chuckled softly, took another drink from his glass, and then placed the glass on the coffee table before him. The werewolf leaned forward, placing his elbows on his legs and casually clasping his hands before him. "You gave the Healer an artifact that allowed you to extend your magic so that it encompassed her," he said. It wasn't a question, but Jason knew that it was more or less meant as one.

He nodded.

Phelan went on. "I want you to do the same for me."

"You want me to give you a diamond pendant?" Jason asked incredulously. "I really don't like you that well."

Phelan's lips twitched, but whether in amusement or irritation, Jason couldn't tell. "I want you to place a shield over me. The same kind the Healer has been using her entire life."

"A dormancy shield?" Jason asked, cocking his head to one side. "You been hiding something, Phelan?" This was too much fun.

"In fact, I will be," Phelan replied, obviously refusing to be baited. Instead, he stood and Jason tensed, ready to unleash the barrage of magic that was just about clawing his insides to shreds with the need to be let out.

But Phelan only smiled down at him – and then began to change. At first, it looked as though he were surrounded by water, and the water had begun to warp. But then there was a flash, not unlike the flashes werewolves experienced when transforming into their wolf selves. When the light faded, Gabriel Phelan the alpha werewolf no longer stood before Jason.

Danny did.

Chapter Fourteen: “Mirror, Mirror”

The Council headquarters weren't small, by any means, but they weren't set up to house so many different alphas at one time, either. The thing about alpha werewolves was that they couldn't cross into one another's territory without permission. Each of the werewolves there would have gladly given permission to the others – but their defenses were up and their powers leaked out of them like faulty electrical wiring.

Every now and then, one of them found it impossible to walk through a certain door or go down a specific hallway. It was beginning to get ridiculous when the Overseer finally told them all to get out, but to take enforcers with them and to stay in constant contact with the council.

Danny had been planning to transport herself and Lucas back to Trinidad, as had Imani, when the Overseer told them that they were in no uncertain terms to waste any of their magic. He swore to them that they would need it. And that boded very ill. The one thing he did ask Danny to do was put back up her dormancy shield. He pulled her aside and told her that she was an incredibly tempting subject for too many werewolves at that moment and that he needed every one of his men to be focused. She was a distraction.

Danny gladly threw the shield back up.

Then the Overseer ordered them all to find rental homes in the area and procure them. Council headquarters was located just north of Portland, Oregon, in a massive complex overlooking the Pacific. Danny couldn't have been happier to leave. The atmosphere at headquarters was more tense than she'd ever seen it. Gabriel Phelan had turned up the heat, adding warlocks and who knew what else to the pot. What was brewing was something nasty and Danny wanted out of the kitchen.

A world-wide edict had been issued. The Overseer wanted Phelan brought down. Werewolves were flying in from other countries to tend to the task. Airports were being monitored in case Phelan decided to leave, though they all knew it would do little good. Phelan was a shape shifter as well as a werewolf. Some werewolves possessed special, different abilities – and that was his. He could assume the form of anything or anyone he wanted and wear their scent as well. A more dangerous man they had never come across, and it didn't look as though he was going to back down until he got what he wanted. What he wanted was Charlie.

It wasn't only the werewolves who were suddenly up in arms either. Jason Alberich, one of the most powerful wizards any coven had ever known, had been revealed as a warlock. Danny felt a hollowness in her chest when she thought about this. She and Jason had played together as children. He had never been anything but good to her.

As Lucas wound his way through the streets of a Portland suburb, Danny leaned into him from behind, let the bike's vibration ease up into her body, and closed her eyes. She couldn't help but go back in time.

She remembered her tenth birthday party. Lalura had never really known when Dannai had actually been born, so she'd celebrated her adopted daughter's birthday on her own favorite day – Halloween. As luck would have it, it had turned out to be

Danny's favorite holiday as well and when she was old enough that Lalura told her to pick any day she wanted as her birthday, Danny decided to keep it as it was.

On her tenth birthday, Jason Alberich, son of their herald, presented Danny with a jack o' lantern piñata. Only, this one was different from the store-bought kind. Its hollow eyes and mouth glowed, as they would on a real carved pumpkin. It was magic of course. Jason had always been very good with magic; it came to him naturally, especially anything involving fire.

Danny hadn't wanted to break it open. It was so beautiful! But Jason, already taller than the other children, and already dressed in the black of his father's office, smiled at her with his green eyes and insisted she hit it as hard as she could. So, she let him blind fold her and hand her the bat.

He was gentle when he spun her around, and she remembered now how he had leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Go for it, Danny."

Once she was sure he was out of the way, she pulled the bat back, sent out her mental feelers, and swung with all of her might. There was a popping sound and a vibration hummed up her arms. Danny dropped the bat, ripped off the blind fold, and stared in wonder as the piñata – now cracked neatly in half and wide open – released a whirlwind of butterflies.

They were the colors of rainbows, each of them different, each of them stunningly beautiful. They glowed like fairies as they spun around the witches and wizards at the party and the younger children squealed with glee. Danny had never seen anything like it. She remembered staring up at them, her jaw dropped open, her eyes as big as saucers in her head.

And then, when the butterflies had at last begun to take up residence in the tree from which the piñata was tied, Danny chanced a glance at Jason. He'd been laughing, his green eyes shimmering, his smile genuine.

Later, he had approached her and told her that he didn't want her to think he'd forgotten about the candy that normally goes in a piñata. "I don't want you to think I gyped you," he said jokingly. "So when we go Trick-or-Treating tonight, you can have my bag."

Now Danny felt something akin to tears gathering behind her closed lids. She couldn't believe she'd never seen it before. How could she have missed Jason's interest in her? It had always been there. It was so obvious now.

He'd always been watching over her. She remembered him saving her from bullies once. She'd been in a private garden, having a verbal battle of wits with a group of twelve-year-old wizards who were trying to prove boys were better at magic than girls. Danny had been trying to keep her calm. She felt her magic there and she could have used it, but Lalura would have had a stroke. Seemingly just in time, Jason had appeared in the garden's entrance, laughing his head off. "You boys have no idea what you're dealing with," he chuckled, shaking his head.

When they turned and attacked him with all of the petty spells they could think of using, he simply vanished. And reappeared behind them. When they turned to rush him, they found their shoelaces tied together. It had taken nothing – absolutely

nothing as far as what Jason Alberich was capable of – for him to scare them off.

Danny squeezed the tears from her eyes and felt them dry on her cheeks. She hadn't seen Jason's interest for what it was because she hadn't wanted to. It was as simple as that. She was a dormant, deep down in her blood. Subconsciously, she must have known that her place was with a werewolf. Not a wizard.

Not a warlock.

Behind Lucas and Danny, a second and third motorcycle kept pace. Riding them were the enforcers that the Overseer had insisted remain with each of the alphas at risk. Danny thought of them now and the fact that they were probably alpha werewolves by their own right. How were they hoping to cross the same property threshold as Lucas?

Then again, if a werewolf was renting a place, did that make it his? Or did he have to own it? She tried to remember whether hotel rooms counted as an alpha's property – it would have been a good indication of the extent of the rule. But Lucas was an expert rider and the bike was easing away her ability to worry. To think.

So Danny let it go and simply held on tight. It was wonderful to have an excuse like this to do so. Lucas's body was so hot. As always, he radiated heat like a furnace, and she found herself wondering what he would feel like between her –

Danny's eyes flew open. She swallowed hard. The mark on her arm tingled as if it knew what she'd been thinking and was laughing at her. *Thor help me*, she thought. She was fast becoming lost to the very real, very thrilling reality that Lucas Caige would one day very soon take her to his bed. There was no avoiding it. There was no going back now. She'd been dreaming of him. He had marked her.

He always smells good. It floated through her mind on a whiff of aftershave and leather, teasing her senses and bringing her nerve endings to life. His heat protected her from the misty cold of the oncoming autumn evening. It threatened to cling to her, dampening the ends of her long black locks. But Lucas was there, a wall of heated muscle, his strong hands easily gripping and manipulating the handle bars, his black boots notching the gear shift with practiced, fluid ease. He was the epitome of manliness.

I'm dating the leader of the pack, she thought with a smile. It was true, too. She knew all about Caige's past – where he'd come from, what he'd been before. Everyone knew. The murder of his brother was infamous.

Before coming to the states to escape the pain Australia held for him now, Lucas Caige had been the alpha of his own very impressive pack. And anyone who caught a glimpse of him in his black leather would have guessed right if they'd placed the entire pack as bikers. They were.

Now he was alone, a wild card, unpredictable and shut off. Except that he wasn't closed off to her. He never had been.

Danny inhaled deeply, breathing in his scent until it filled her up completely and her arms tightened around the hard muscles of his trim waist. In response, she felt him cover her hands with one of his. He wore gloves, but she could still feel his

warmth through the leather.

In another few minutes, the three bikes were pulling off of James Street and into the driveway of a small single-story rental across from a large park. The neighborhood didn't look rich, but it wasn't the hood either. It was more or less a perfect location to hole up for a few days while the Council and the different covens figured out what to do about Alberich and Phelan.

Lucas helped Danny off of the bike and then followed suit while the enforcers made their way to the front and back doors of the house in order to check for traps and scent the place out. Danny watched a muscle tick in Lucas's jaw as he waited for the enforcers to do their jobs. He didn't like the idea of someone else fighting his battles for him, she could tell. But he held back and played it safe.

For me, she thought. He wouldn't be this careful if it wasn't for me.

The first enforcer reached the front door, paused, and raised his head. Danny figured he was probably smelling the air for any sign of "bad guy." Obviously satisfied that no bad guys had been anywhere near the house, he lowered his head and spoke into the ear piece he wore.

They're like the secret service, she thought. Front guy was most likely talking to back guy: "I'm going in." His hand gripped the door knob and twisted.

A blinding flash of light preceded the sound of the blast by a millisecond, but it was the sound that hurt the most. Danny felt it in her bones, in her core, as it ripped through her and sent her flying. She was airborne forever it seemed. And then there was another flash, like a second bolt of lightning, and Danny's body came down on something soft. She bounced and rolled over, her eyes shut against the pain, her lungs struggling to open and take in air once again.

The ground could feel like a freight train even though it wasn't moving if *you* were going fast enough. Lucas felt the train connect, move through him, and crush his lungs to his spine. All sound vanished in the wake of the blast. He smelled something bitter and the damp of the earth beneath him, but nothing moved in the absolute silence for a several long moments. And then his lungs exploded outward and his head began to pound and he forced his eyes open. He was face-down on the sidewalk in front of the park. He could see the squished remains of bubble gum in the crack a few inches from his face. He counted the blades of grass pushing through another crack.

And then he forced his arms beneath him and pushed. As he did, reality came crashing in on him. All at once, he realized what had just happened. Some how, either Phelan or Alberich – or both – had learned where Danny and Lucas would be going, and they'd gotten there first.

Lucas raised his head and peered across the street toward the house he'd just been blown away from. Its smoking shell billowed angry red flames and black clouds. A body lay in the front yard. It was massive and bald and Lucas immediately recognized it as belonging to the enforcer.

He scanned the area, picking up every detail as he got his legs beneath him and shoved himself to his feet. "Danny!" he called, his voice hoarse in the slightly crushed

passage of his trachea. He couldn't see her. He spun in place, searching the tree line, the street, and the sidewalk in either direction. "Danny!"

Panic bubbled up inside of him, a fear he'd only ever known once before in his life. It was ugly, sinister, and slimy. It reeked of adrenaline and cortisol and darkness. A bomb had just detonated. He and his mate had been trapped in its wake.

Where was she? He felt the inside pocket of his leather jacket, checking for his phone. His mind was split in two directions; he needed to call the Overseer. But the phone was crushed; he could feel its dead, cracked weight beneath his palm.

"*Danny!*" he bellowed at the top of his sore lungs.

And then it drifted toward him – the softest, sweetest, most promising scent he'd ever smelled. It was the scent of magic, faint but there. Danny's dormancy shield. He held tight to it and followed it, breaking into a run through the trees behind him and into the leaf-strewn clearing of the park. She was laying on her side, her long black hair fanned out around her like a silken halo. She wasn't moving, but he could see her chest slowly rise and fall – she was alive.

Of course, he thought as he sprinted across the grass and leaves and slid into place beside her. Her shield would have fallen if she were dead. He knew she was strong enough to wear it even while unconscious; it wasn't the first time she had done so. But nothing remained when a person died.

"Danny," he whispered as he placed his fingers to her throat – just to make sure. Her pulse was there, strong and even. He carefully rolled her onto her back and looked her over. There was a rip in her jeans across her thigh, but the smooth, tanned skin was intact beneath it. Her long-sleeved thermal shirt hugged her trim waist and perfect breasts, and seemed to be completely undamaged by the blast. The only other sign that she'd been in its wake was the smoky smudge across her left cheek.

Lucas gently pulled her into his lap, resting her head against his thigh. "Danny, baby, answer me," he said, cupping her face in his hand and brushing his thumb across her cheek bone. If she had a concussion, she could heal herself, but she would need to wake up and concentrate to do so.

"Baby girl," he whispered, brushing her hair from her forehead. "Wake up, Danny."

Danny's long lashes fluttered and her eyes blinked open. Her lips parted and she exhaled, moaning softly with the effort.

Lucas peered into her kaleidoscope eyes and looked for any sign of concussion. But her pupils were the same size and they were focused on him. "You okay?" he asked, wondering if anything was broken.

It was a few seconds before she replied, but finally she licked her lips, blinked, and nodded. "Yeah," she said. "What happened?"

"I'm guessing Phelan happened," he said, nearly spitting the name out. "He would know the enforcers would open the door first. Either he was trying to scare us or prove a point, or get rid of our extra guard. In which case, we need to move." He couldn't call for help and Danny didn't seem to have a phone on her. He needed to

get them somewhere far away and then find another phone. Or let Danny use her magic. But not here and not now. They needed to get out fast.

He began to stand, pulling her gently up with him. Then he bent to lift her into his arms and carry her, but she shook her head and gently shoved his hands away. "No," she said. "I can walk. Let me walk."

Lucas considered her a moment. She swayed for just a second and then straightened, standing strong on her own two feet. Obviously, she wanted to feel the ground solid beneath her. He could understand that. It helped clear away the dizziness. "Okay," he said, still watching her carefully. "Give me your hand."

He took her hand in his and turned to face the smoldering house across the street. If any of the three bikes were still in working condition, he was going to put Danny right back on it and drive her the hell out of here.

Lucas hurried back across the street, pulling Danny close behind him. She kept up well enough and when he pulled up one of the fallen bikes and began checking it over, she stood off to one side, her gaze locked on the fallen enforcer in the yard, her arms wrapped around herself. He glanced up at her, back at the dead werewolf, and lowered his head. A normal blast wouldn't have taken out an enforcer. It would have hobbled him and possibly even scarred him where the fire was concerned. But it wouldn't have killed him.

This explosive was made by someone who knew exactly how to kill a werewolf. Lucas had dealt with these kinds of bombs before. It had "Hunter" written all over it, which only served to back up his guess that Phelan was behind it. Humans had been hunting and killing werewolves for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. These humans believed that werewolves were nothing short of demons and purely, unequivocally evil. These humans were called Hunters. And they had a leader.

Unbeknownst to them, their very leader was no other than the most notorious, *truly* evil werewolf in existence – Gabriel Phelan. *It goes to show what humans know*, Lucas thought morbidly. And it was a nice, pretty notch on the bedpost of irony.

The bike was in working order. *Strike a point for the good guys*. Lucas stood, waved Danny over, and got on the bike. She got on behind him, and once she'd wrapped her arms tightly around him, he started it up and pulled out of the driveway.

Chapter Fifteen: "The Knife Trick"

Danny felt hands on her arms, lifting her gently. She still couldn't breathe and panic began to set in like a flash. But then she felt a weight press gently to her chest, followed by a cold tingling that infused her skin, bone and muscle, seeping into her lungs. A second later, her lungs relaxed, opened up, and she drew in gulps of air.

She forced her eyes open only to be greeted by a blurred, over-bright world.

"Shh," came a deep voice. "Give it a moment."

It was Jason's voice.

Danny froze, her heart hammering, her lungs still greedily sucking in life-bringing oxygen. In fact, she thought she might hyperventilate. But confusion was wreaking havoc on her senses. Up and down were skewed, past and present were mingled, and all she could see was the enforcer's hand turning the doorknob on the house's front door.

"You're okay," Jason told her.

Danny shut her eyes tight and considered using magic to heal herself. But she didn't feel damaged. In fact, she felt absolutely fine other than the blurriness.

"It will pass," Jason said. "Open your eyes, Danny."

Trying desperately to control both her breathing and her heart rate, Danny licked her lips and forced her eyes open once more. This time was a little better. She could make out Jason's dark outline – and the flickering of torches along a wall. She blinked a few times and they came into focus. As did Jason.

"Where am I?" she asked, feeling the softness of a mattress and what felt like crushed velvet beneath her. "Where is Lucas?" She glanced around, and now that she could see, she realized she was in a room she'd never been in before. It was vast and dark and lit by fire. Torches lined the room in sconces, the walls were carved stone, and there were only two pieces of furniture. One was a chest. The other was a four poster bed.

Danny bolted into a sitting position, shoving Jason back out of the way. He moved back, allowing her room. "Where the hell am I?" she demanded, yelling now. "What happened to Lucas? What did you do, Jason?" She scrambled to the edge of the bed and watched Jason warily as he slowly stood, his expression unreadable.

Danny shot off of the bed and gained her feet, wondering how the hell she could be in one piece, much less feeling as fine as she was, after a blast like that. She knew it must have killed the enforcer. She swallowed hard as she thought of Lucas and how far away they were from the house when the bomb had gone off.

Had he made it?

"I'm not the one responsible for the blast, Danny," Jason told her calmly. He held his hands up at his sides, a show of innocence. "I'm only responsible for pulling you out of it before you hit the ground," he said, "and for the fact that you're breathing now."

"That's impossible," Danny insisted. She knew what he was now, and warlocks couldn't heal people. In fact, no witch or wizard could heal people... except for her. She was it.

“Oh?” he asked softly, raising a brow.

Danny blinked. Actually.... Warlocks did have one *particular* ability. Some of them could manipulate your body, control it through touch. It was rare, but a gifted warlock could cut off a person's air supply, speed up a person's heart rate, or even cause all of the neurons in a person's brain to fire at once. Normally, they used this power toward their dark ends. Warlocks were known to even get creatively nasty with it once in a while – using it to manipulate a lover's responses in bed.

Danny never would have imagined a warlock using it to help someone. But just because it hadn't been done didn't mean it wasn't possible. And apparently Jason had just proven that point.

Danny touched her hand to her chest, sensing the remnants of Jason's magic now edging away like sand down a slide. In a few moments, it was gone. “Why?” she asked, not understanding.

“I would do anything to protect you,” he told her, his eyes more green than she had ever seen them. They were like emerald seas, shimmering in the torchlight. His tall frame was, as always, draped in black from his black boots and jeans to his black sports coat. He turned from her then, his gaze slipping to the stone floor, and paced away from her. His arms, he crossed over his chest, and Danny experienced a race of anticipatory fear at the sight of the black material stretched taut over ample muscles. She wondered where she was – and how she was going to get out.

As a reflex, she tested the waters of her powers, searching for transportation magic that could get her out of there in a hurry. But that particular magic wouldn't answer. It simply wasn't there. Everything *else* was there. She could have painted the walls pink, put out the torches, and morphed the chest against the wall into a pony if she'd wanted to. Or, at least she *assumed* she could. If they were magical items, then her powers would be up against Jason's, and that was a contest she didn't want to be in. But her ability to zap out of space and time and arrive somewhere else was gone. She wasn't leaving this room unless she walked out of it.

“Why?” she asked again, referring to why he had saved her. She wanted to know everything then and there.

Jason stopped and gave her a side-long glance. “You already know.”

“You think you love me,” she said. Her voice sounded dull and dead. It was fear making it so heavy. “Is that it?”

Jason regarded her for a long time in silence. Danny tried to keep her wits about her. She was being eaten up inside though. Jason's eyes were like frigid fire. He was a study in contradictions. He played with flames, but his touch was cold. He made her cry with fond memories, and he scared the crap out of her.

She thought she had known him. She had always considered him a friend. But Imani had never trusted him. And maybe she was right. Because it turns out that Jason was working with Gabriel Phelan and Phelan was the most evil creature on the planet. The things he had done to Charlie were unspeakable. And he would do them again and again – if he could.

If Jason had been helping him in *any* way.... Danny's hands curled into fists at her sides.

She knew that Lucas wasn't dead. The mark on her arm was still there. If he were dead, it would be gone. It was the only thing keeping her from blowing her lid and letting loose with a wave of her magic. Or her fists.

Finally, Jason turned away from her again without answering her. He slowly paced to the large black leather trunk against one carved-stone wall and gazed down at its closed lid. Danny wondered what was inside.

The mark on her arm began to tingle. She glanced down at it and a thought occurred to her. "How are you able to touch me without Lucas's mark hurting me?" she asked, realizing that he had put his hands on her after she'd "escaped" Lucas in his cave the night before. Once a dormant was marked by her mate, she wasn't supposed to be touched by other men. It was a really crappy, really unfair security measure that thousands of years of nature had seen to inflicting on dormants. Nature must have figured that even though an alpha would do everything necessary to protect his mate from danger, any extra little measure would help.

"Magic, Danny," Jason replied easily. He sounded almost bored. He tossed her a slightly disappointed glance. "You shouldn't have to ask." And then he turned back to the trunk and crouched gracefully down beside it. His tall, strong body moved as a cat's would, and Danny had to admit once again that Jason Alberich was a very charismatic man. He was handsome, wealthy, and powerful beyond most people's imagination. If she had been any other witch in the world – any other woman at all, for that matter – he would have been an incredible catch. But she wasn't anyone else, she was Danny.

"What happened back there?" she asked now, only wanting him to explain what was going on. She felt so confused. Her stomach felt tight. "Was it Phelan who planted the bomb?"

"Yes," Jason said, without looking up. He calmly pressed the buttons on the latches of the trunk's lid and they popped open. Then he stood once more, leaving the lid down. This troubled Danny, adding to her confusion and fear.

"What's going on?" she asked, beginning to fidget under the angst riding her.

Jason turned to face her again. "What exactly are you referring to, Danny?" he asked, frowning slightly in a way that reminded her of a psychiatrist sizing a patient up for a dose of medication.

"Lucas said that you tried to kill him. That you sent Akyri after him." She stopped talking when he took a step toward her, his boot echoing ominously in the enclosed chamber. Her gaze skirted past him to the walls. There was no door. Her heart skipped, but she went on. "You're a warlock."

"I won't deny that I'm a warlock," he said, shrugging as if it were nothing. "I was born this way. This is where my power has always resided." Another step. "But as to whether or not I tried to kill Caige...." He stopped and cocked his head to one side. "Who will you believe, Danny? A man you've known your entire life and is now your herald? Or a werewolf who despises our kind?"

"He doesn't despise me," Danny insisted softly.

Jason shook his head. "No one could despise you, Danny. It's simply impossible. But I doubt that someone like Lucas Caige could ever really learn to love you, either."

Danny opened her mouth to say something when a slight wave of dizziness washed over her. She put her hand to her face, feeling suddenly a tad feverish. "What do you want from me, Jason?" she asked wearily. For the second time that week, she was struck with the helplessness of her situation. She was a dormant who had been dreaming of two men. One was evil, the other may be wrong for her. And the second had marked her. Had any woman in history ever been between more of a rock and a hard place?

"I want you to give me a chance," Jason told her. Another step closer; she heard his boot echo. "Give *us* a chance."

Danny's eyes flew open and her hand dropped. Those had been Lucas's exact words. Hadn't they?

Jason continued to draw nearer – and there was nowhere for Danny to go. She hopelessly glanced around the room once more. No windows, no openings, no escape whatsoever. Were they underground? She imagined that Jason had created this room long ago, or maybe it had been here since the days of the inquisition, created by a herald several centuries past as another safety measure. A secret hide-out. Perhaps it was part of his mansion.

When Jason finally stood before her, Danny realized that her breaths were quick and shallow, her heart was racing, and she was feeling dizzy again. She really didn't want to look up at him; she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze. It was just too unnerving. He was too dominant, his power too potent.

But Jason was having none of that. The warlock curled a cool finger beneath Danny's chin and tilted her head until she had no choice but to look into his eyes. What she saw there terrified her. Again, she tried to call up a transportation spell; the words were on her lips. But they were unaided and fell dead before she could speak them.

Jason shook his head. "This room is protected from transport spells like yours," he told her as if he could read her mind. "My transport magic is the only kind that will breach these walls."

Danny exhaled sharply. Her lip quivered and, unfortunately he noticed. His green gaze shot to her lip and his thumb brushed the plump flesh with a tenderness that felt like the calm before the storm. "Jason, let me go," she pleaded softly.

His only reply was to shake his head.

"I will fight you," she told him, a promise softly spoken. It was enough.

"I know," he said. "I want you to."

Lucas caught the scent half a second too late. There was a strange warping sensation around the bike and he squeezed the brakes, but by the time the other alpha's scent wafted over him, Lucas felt the cold point of sharp metal shoved between his ribs.

It pierced his lung and kept going, sliding straight through to his heart. His grip went limp and the bike slid out from beneath his grasp, taking him down with it.

The world became a scraping, sliding, grinding mess of metal and screeching sound and tumbling skies. He felt tiny pin pricks of pain and hard, bone-deep thumps that jarred and moved him along, but there was no other sensation.

As he finally slowed, rolling to a stop in some patch of earth that fast grew wet beneath him, his mind worked with startling clarity. He realized what had happened. Danny had been abducted in the blast. Gabriel Phelan had taken her place.

And now he was torn and twisted, just like Meatloaf had foretold.

Lucas gritted his teeth as the pain finally came. It was so far down, so at the center of who and what he was, there was no agony in existence like it. It was his heart, the thing that kept him alive, that was ruptured and broken. It writhed and bled and pulled from his lungs a gurgling, horrid bellow of pain as its werewolf make-up began to force it into mending.

I have a broken heart, he thought. In Alice's wonderland, it would have been funny.

A boot crunched the ground beside his head and Lucas opened his eyes. *After all that*, he wondered. *I can still open my eyes*.

"It does my soul good to see you this way," came a hated voice, cruel and cold and dominant. Lucas could make out his boot in the grass and the hem of his jeans. "Especially since you owe me. Your witch stole my car." The alpha chuckled. "And you put a dent in my Bugatti."

Lucas's mind was working too well for the state his body was in. At the mention of the Bugatti, he remembered the driver who had run his bike off the road several nights back. It had been Phelan. He'd been there all along.

"But all good things must come to an end," Phelan said.

Lucas saw him move then; it was a blur of motion until it connected with his mid-section. Phelan's boot broke what ribs had remained intact and ruptured some other organ within Lucas's body. He felt it pop just before his vision began to tunnel inward.

"That's it, Caige," Phelan's voice was muffled. "Kick the bucket like a good boy. Three's a crowd." He laughed then, harsh and deep. "Though I bet little Danny would make the most wonderful sounds while taking it up both holes. Maybe I'll find out. She owes me, after all."

Lucas's gaze flashed red and he knew his eyes were glowing. Daniel Kane's eyes glowed like sapphire headlights when he was angry. Malcolm's glowed green. But Lucas's had always gone straight to blood, demonic and different, as wild as was fitting for the nature of his soul.

When Phelan raised his boot again to finish the job, Lucas found the strength to roll. Pain assaulted his senses and tried to pull him under as bones cracked and scraped together where their jagged edges were snagged inside of his body. But he was healing. It wouldn't come nearly fast enough, but it was happening.

Phelan followed him, his tall form moving with the inhuman speed and strength

for which he was famous. But Lucas had Danny's kaleidoscope eyes plastered to the inside of his brain. He saw her and felt her and smelled her vanilla and caramel and chocolate and his heart stopped mending because it was healed. As Phelan reached down to grab Lucas's jacket front, Lucas pinned the man's hands to his own chest and jerked to the side.

Gabriel Phelan had been training to fight for years. No one even knew how long he'd been doing it. Charlie had been his student at one point, and she had to be one of the best fighters the Council had ever known. Definitely the best female fighter.

Gabriel? He was danger, living and breathing. The man was pain incarnate, and he proved that now as he seemed to infer what Lucas was planning and cut him off half-way. As Lucas twisted, Gabriel twisted with him, leapt over Lucas's fallen form, flipped in the air, spun, and slammed his fist down onto Lucas's chest.

The world went black for a moment. It receded like a turtle in its shell and the red and the darkness swam in all around him. He shoved at it, pushed at it, flailed at it with every ounce of his consciousness – until dust moats swam in his vision, but so did the waking world. He remained conscious, barely, and only to catch Phelan preparing for another attack.

He couldn't move out of the way this time. His lungs were both trying to heal and the agony was immense. His body wouldn't respond fast enough.

But it didn't need to. Phelan brought his arm back – and it was caught in a pair of strong hands. Lucas blinked, wondering whether he might be imagining what he was seeing. But Malcolm Cole's deep British accent sliced through the space between them, confirming his very real existence.

"I think we've had just about enough of you," Cole said before he yanked Phelan back and shoved his fist forward at the same time. There was a loud crack and another blur and once more, Lucas could not make heads or tails of what was happening around him.

So, he shut his eyes. For the time being, though it didn't make any sense that Cole was actually there, it seemed the heat had been taken off of Lucas and his body could heal. All around him were the sounds of struggle. The scent of werewolves assaulted his senses and he realized there must be more out there; at least one of them female. He could hear flesh hitting flesh and grunts of pain and anger, but he let them go – he let it all go – and concentrated on his own aching, throbbing, bleeding form.

The lungs repaired themselves next and his bones began to shift back into place. It was nauseating, it hurt so bad. Once they were in place, Lucas swallowed hard, amazed that he'd managed to keep down the bile that had spilled into his esophagus.

Little by little, his body became whole once more, and he found the strength to push himself up onto his arms. He was weak, though. He'd lost a lot of blood and couldn't return it to his body. He lifted his head and opened his eyes. The world tilted just once and then settled down into its normal, level self. Malcolm Cole and Gabriel Phelan were fighting several yards away. Around them were the signs of their

supernatural struggle. A few trees had been toppled, the ground was disrupted in chunks and gouges, and blood stained their clothes.

Lucas watched as Cole knocked Phelan up against yet another tree that cracked beneath the impact. He had the handle of a dagger in his fist; Lucas could smell his own blood coming off of the blade and knew it was the one that Phelan had shoved into his side. But Cole curled his hand around it – and then shoved his fist into Phelan's neck, keeping the blade well away from Gabriel's flesh. "That one is for Charlie," he hissed as he pulled his fist back and prepared to strike again. Phelan's teeth gritted, his eyes squeezed shut, and his body went rigid. Cole had crushed his windpipe and broken his neck. "And this is for everyone else." With that, Cole blurred, shifted the dagger in his right hand, and plunged it forward.

He didn't bother with his neck, however, or even his heart. Cole's aim was cruel and perfect and he had obviously been harboring a vicious amount of anger toward Phelan, because the blade entered Phelan's left eye and kept going, piercing the back of his skull and sticking him to the tree trunk behind him.

Cole stepped back. Phelan spasmed once and went still, a heavy dead specimen held aloft only by the strength of the bone in his head. Cole watched his opponent die, and then he turned to face Lucas, who was now standing once more, weak but healed. Lucas looked on as the green glow in his friend's eyes died down into a cloudy jade.

"You okay?" he asked Malcolm.

Cole didn't answer for a moment. Finally, with a slight glance backward toward the werewolf behind him, he nodded. Lucas caught movement in his peripheral vision and glanced over to see Lily and Daniel Kane making her way across the street. Daniel had his hand firmly wrapped around Lily's arm and Lucas almost smiled. No doubt, she had wanted to join in the fray and he'd had to try very hard to keep her out of it.

Lucas nodded at Daniel and the cop nodded back. There was more movement behind Lucas and he turned in time to see three enforcers draw closer across the small clearing. They nodded at him and he nodded back.

"How did you find me?" Lucas asked, turning back to face Cole.

"Lily had a vision so we tried to call you," he replied. "Your phone was dead."

Lucas glanced at Lily Kane, who finally ripped free from her husband's grasp and ran toward both him and Cole. "Are you okay?" she asked, turning from one alpha werewolf to the other. It was just too cute.

"I'm fine," Cole replied. "But he's weak. He'll need blood."

"You look like you could use some too," Lily told him, her gaze traveling over the mess of his clothes with wary observation.

Cole apparently couldn't let that go. "You offering, luv?" he asked. Lucas tensed. Daniel Kane was less than ten feet away. *He's either insane or very brave*, Lucas thought. Probably it was a little bit of both. After all, he'd just killed Gabriel Phelan and the blood lust was no doubt still riding his body hard. He had yet to force his wolf to heel.

For her part, Lily had blanched a little, but the gold fire sparked to life in her eyes and she narrowed her gaze. "In your dreams, Cole."

"It's Malcolm, sweetheart. Will you never learn?"

"Enough," Daniel said between gritted teeth. He stepped between them, turning his back to Cole in order to give his wife a warning look. Lucas was impressed. The alpha werewolf looked bored and impatient, if anything. Maybe the cop in him was clicking into place. Or maybe he'd just gotten used to this kind of shit from his wife and Malcolm Cole. The past often had a hard time laying down to die.

"You'll drink from us," said one of the enforcers. He was huge, as was normal for an enforcer, and he looked as though he wasn't going to accept any arguments from anyone in the clearing. Lucas had no idea who he was and he didn't care. Alberich had taken Danny, and Lucas needed blood. He leaned against a nearby tree as the enforcer rolled up his sleeve and approached him. His partner approached Cole and shrugged off his sports coat so that the alpha could drink from him as well.

Lucas hoped to God that no humans were looking in on the scene because if they were, rumors of vampires were going to spread through the community of Oregon like a tidal wave.

Chapter Sixteen: "The Turn"

"I want you to."

The words had barely been spoken before Jason's hand slid to the nape of her neck and grasped the hair there. Danny hissed as he yanked her head back, exposing her throat. He smiled down at her. His lips were a mere hair's breadth from her own. "Fight me, Danny. Give me an excuse to tie you to my bed."

He claimed her lips with his own and Danny's breath was sucked from her lungs. His grip on her hair tightened and his other arm slid around her waist to pull her hard up against his chest. At once, she was overwhelmed by him. Her mind screamed for her to use her magic, but her body was no longer under her control. Jason's warlock power subjugated it, taking it prisoner.

His lips parted her own and his tongue delved deep. He tasted like ice that burned her tongue. Like alcohol. And she was getting drunk. Heat was spreading across her neck, her chest, and lower. Need awoke and uncoiled deep within, responding to his dark ministrations with perfect precision.

No, she thought. *This isn't happening.* But it was.

Until it wasn't, because Jason was suddenly yanked away from her and thrown across the stone chamber. Danny's eyes flew open in time to follow his black clad form where it hit the opposite wall amidst a low, reverberating growl and a flash of light. She blinked and stumbled, falling onto the bed behind her as a massive black wolf with red glowing eyes slowly stalked the warlock.

Jason got to his feet and stared at the wolf, disbelieving. His broad chest rose and fell with quick, angry breaths and his head lowered in a wrathful glare. He speared the oncoming wolf with green eyes that began to glow, calling to mind the sun on an iceberg. "Caige," he hissed at last. "Using the seer's necklace. It's the only thing that could have made it past my wards. Smart wolf."

Danny frowned. Lucas was using Lily's necklace – the one that Danny had made for her months ago? It carried with it Danny's own magic and was linked to her. That was how Lucas had made it past the shielded walls and found his way to her. The necklace had simply known where to go.

Just in time, she thought guiltily and with more than a touch of terror. She'd almost given in to Jason. She'd almost lost herself in all that he was. She gripped the soft velvet sheets beneath her fingers and looked down. Black bed clothes. She swallowed hard. The darkness, however delicious, was still darkness.

Across the room, the wolf sprang toward Jason and Jason evaded his giant form, dropping and rolling and coming to his feet once more. A ball of fire erupted in the space between them and shot toward the wolf, but Lucas was too fast in his wolfen form and easily dodged the oncoming blaze.

Again and again this happened and the air in the chamber began to heat up with magic and a slight dip in oxygen. Finally, Lucas's stance changed. He crouched low and Danny tensed. The attack came fast – a blur of midnight colored fur. But Jason knew well that it had been coming. A column of fire erupted around his boots and

shot toward the ceiling, engulfing him in its crackling, roaring flames. It was only there for a second – split and gone.

When the flames evaporated, the space where Jason had stood was empty.

Lucas landed on the other side of the empty space and spun, flashing back into his human form. His eyes still glowed red. He looked like a demon standing there, dressed in black leather and dried blood, his fangs pronounced, sharp and deadly, his eyes burning like the fires of hell. Danny found herself involuntarily scooting back on the bed.

Lucas caught the movement and his eyes were instantly on her, scorching her to the mattress upon which she sat. He seemed to gaze at her forever like that, burning her up inside and out. And then he raised his head, just a touch, and asked, “Did he hurt you?” His voice was harsh and grated, roughened by the wolf he no doubt barely held in check.

Danny quickly shook her head. “I’m okay,” she assured him. *Sort of.*

“No you’re not,” he told her simply. He took a step toward her and once more, the sound of a stalking boot echoed in the warlock’s chamber. Danny’s breath hitched. “You’re vulnerable,” he said. “You’re prey.”

“W-what?” she asked, suddenly feeling a little angry. *Prey?* Her? She was the Healer! She was magic incarnate! Imani had even told her so!

“You can’t fight fire with fire, little witch,” Lucas told her, lowering his head to sear her with his smoldering gaze once more. Another step. “Jason Alberich has known you your entire life. He knows how you think. He knows every power you possess. He’s been watching your every move for two decades.” Two more slow, calculated steps. “You can’t defend yourself against him, Danny,” he assured her with a small shake of his handsome head. “Not yet.”

A chord of hard, scary anticipation thrummed through Danny, roaring in her ears. She felt heavy suddenly, and a little numb. She could have asked him what he meant. She could have feigned innocence. But she knew all too well what he was talking about. She might not be able to fight Jason’s magic with her own. But she might have a better chance at defending herself... as a wolf.

And once she was turned, Jason might back off. She doubted it, but stranger things had happened.

Lucas took another step and closed the distance between them. He stood beside the bed, his towering, terrifying form staring down at her with relentless determination. Danny couldn’t move when he slowly bent over the bed, a predator caging her in, and placed his hands on either side of her against the mattress.

She could hear her own ragged breaths now; there was no controlling them. She knew what was coming and she wanted it. It scared the hell out of her and it thrilled her and there was nothing else in the world in that moment but Lucas Caige and the thought of what he was about to do to her. *Do with her.*

His knee came up next, taking his weight. He was moving over her, a cat prowling across the bed. She moved back; an instinctive reflex that wound up centering her in the bed with Lucas right above her, a wolf fresh from the fight – eyes

on fire.

She could barely believe this was happening. Here? In this room?

But of course here. Because as far as the wolf in Lucas was concerned, it sent the ultimate message. He was taking his mate in his enemy's bed. There could be no stronger meaning than that.

"I'll let you have one last chance, witch," he told her, speaking expertly around fangs that promised wicked pain – and pleasure. "Kill me now," he said, repeating what he had told her when he'd marked her. "Because if you don't, I'm gonna do bad things to you."

But it was obvious that he never intended to give her one last chance. Not at all. Instead, he supported his weight on one hand, the muscles in his arms flexing in a way that hypnotized Danny. He cupped her chin with the other hand and lowered his lips to an inch above her own. "You're mine, Danny. You always will be."

He imprisoned her with his gaze, holding her fast beneath him as if he'd wrapped her in chains. She couldn't look away. "I know," she whispered back.

And then he was very gently, very softly kissing her and Danny felt his fangs against her lips. He was tender, and his teeth belied that tenderness. It was one of the most intensely erotic dichotomies she had ever experienced. He was an animal, a monster, her lover – he could have ripped her to shreds in seconds. He had killed men. Who knew how many? And he was trapping her here now, on this bed, and there was no escape for her. But he was gentle.

She felt herself go wet with her helplessness. The mark on her arm heated up, sending waves of anticipatory pleasure up her arm and across her chest. Her nipples hardened under the sensation, drawing a gasp from her that Lucas swallowed as he deepened the kiss, pressing in, taking more.

His hand left her chin, trailed down her throat, and squeezed gently before moving to the collar of her shirt. His fingers curled over the delicate collar. He broke the kiss, pulling away to capture her gaze in his once more. A beat passed between them. She held her breath.

And Lucas ripped the shirt open. Again Danny gasped, arching her back under the assault, but Caige was there, his long, hard body meeting her and lowering her back down onto the mattress. His lips claimed hers once more, this time prying her open with determined hunger and delving deep. She felt a growl move through him, a vibration of thunder, and the heat from her chest coiled and shot down through the rest of her body.

She felt warm air caress her breasts and knew they were bare. She was exposed to him and he wasn't stopping there. He pressed harder, devouring her with his kiss as his hand made its way to the waistband of her jeans and grasped it tight. His gentleness was leaking away, making room for his wolf.

For a heartbeat, she feared he would rip them open – that would hurt. But he seemed to possess some remnant of sense as he opened her up before him. With a care that seemed in stark opposition to the animal that raged just beneath his fevered skin, Lucas popped the button and unzipped the jeans. Danny was drowning

in the sensations flooding her. Her skin prickled and tingled and felt hot. Her core ached and throbbed, slick with need. Her lungs drew in quick breaths over and over. Her heart raced like a rabbit's and her throat let loose a cry of surprise and longing as Lucas's hand slid into her jeans and under the elastic band of her underwear.

So *hot!* she thought with a moan of pleasure-pain. Lucas's fingers were like embers, searing her, branding her where they pressed in heated trails through the curls over her mound to the silken juncture of her legs. Her hands curled into the soft sheets beneath her, gripping them tight as if she needed to hold on for dear life. He slid lower, pushing her jeans over her hips as he went, bearing her to him completely and shamelessly. With practiced ease, he rose without breaking the kiss and the brands of his fingers were momentarily lifted. She missed them at once as air rushed in and chilled her tender flesh. She moaned against his lips, a small sound of longing, and he growled a nearly heartless chuckle in response.

Distantly, she heard something hit the stone floor beside the bed and she knew it was her clothes. She was stripped, laid bare before him.

She cried out against his lips when the heat of his hand was suddenly back on her. He pressed, parted the curls once more, and his fingers brushed her clitoris. She bucked beneath him and he ate her cry, as his fingers moved on until they slid over the slick opening beneath. Some ancient, old-brain instinct puppeted her body and she tried to move away, to escape the probing insistence of his searing, expert hand. She closed her legs and he laughed darkly, deep in his chest. It rumbled through him just like his growl and she gasped as she felt his strong knee press between her thighs, prying them apart.

The rough material of his jeans scraped her skin, tempting and taunting her with the fact that she was naked beneath him and he was still fully clothed. She desperately wanted to remedy that. She thought of how she had dreamed of him and fantasized about him – Lucas Caige, the biker, the werewolf, the rebel – and there was no way in hell she was going to deny herself every inch of him here and now.

As Lucas got her legs apart, Danny put her hands on his chest and pushed hard, almost slamming her hands against him. The zipper and hard angles of the leather armor hurt a little against her delicate palms and Lucas paused above her, clearly concerned that she was in pain and not the good kind.

Danny took the opening and caught him slightly off guard. She shoved again, just enough to finally break the kiss and allow her to clear her head. Lucas pulled back with a snarl of warning, and Danny shut her eyes tight. If she looked up into his burning red irises, she would be gone for good. She forced herself to ignore him and his overriding dominance and instead concentrated on her own body – on her magic.

With a whisper that shook slightly through her swollen lips, she willed his clothes away. It was such a small spell. It was all she wanted.

The atmosphere above the bed changed, growing thicker and hotter and Danny opened her eyes, half afraid of what she would find when Lucas realized she'd just used magic on him. Again.

But when she looked into his gorgeous face and saw him smiling a sinful and

nefarious grin, sharp white fangs and all, her fears disappeared. Emboldened, she allowed her gaze to trail across his strong, perfect features – his cheek bones, his lips, his teeth, his chin, his neck....

Danny stopped breathing and went still beneath him. No dream could have done him justice.

Lucas rose slightly up and shoved one hand between her back and the bed. Goddess, she thought as she took in the corded muscles of his upper arms, his shoulders and his sculpted chest. They tapered to a hard, trim waist replete with six pack. *Holy fuck...*

She wanted to touch it.

So she did. The ridges of his body rose and fell between her traveling fingertips. He felt like steel thinly encased in velvet.

Lucas rose again, pulling her up with him, and sat back on his legs, pulling her flush with his body. The shredded remains of her shirt cascaded to the bed, leaving the tanned expanses of her flesh to glow beneath the fire light from the torches.

At once, the heat rolling off of him enveloped her. Her legs, he had parted so that he now sat between them. And she realized her mistake. With no clothing left between them to protect her any longer, the thick, hot evidence of his lust pressed against her slick opening. Her eyes went wide as his heat seared her. But when she tried to retreat, he reacted, moving with determined and relentless speed. His hands wrapped around her wrists, holding her fast, and his gaze narrowed.

She could hear her own ragged breathing in the warm, quiet air of the torch-lit chamber. She could hear her heart hammering at her ribs. And she could hear his own thunderous rumble, low and long as he lowered his head, scorched her with his red eyes, and smiled. "Play with fire, little witch," he warned her. He yanked hard and fast and she slid forward so that the tip of his manhood slipped past her defenses. She gasped, cried out, and he lowered his head to her collarbone. "You get burned."

She felt his fangs scrape along the skin over her bone and then nibble threateningly at her throat. He released her wrists then and wrapped one arm around her waist. With his other hand, he grasped the hair at the nape of her neck, and bent her back to once more claim her lips in his own.

This kiss was mean – and wonderful. He drank and took and claimed and gave nothing back. She became a vessel, an instrument beneath him, trapped by him in blissful surrender. One of his threatening fangs finally managed to pierce her lip and she tasted blood. It burst across her tongue, heated iron and magic. Lucas went still above her, a rock of a man almost humming with unspent energy. She had half a second to think coherently.

And then he was rolling with her, grasping her around the waist so that he was on his back beneath her and she sat on top of him, a sacrificial goddess on an altar of solidified fire. Slowly – so slowly – he broke the kiss. Danny gazed down at the slight red tinge to his lips; she was transfixed, stunned, burning up.

He laid back then and gazed up at her with unspoken command. His eyes held

her there above him, moved her, moved her, and forced her to slide deeper into him as if he'd spoken the order aloud. She was chained, captured in that gaze, and she did as she was told, relishing in the sensation of near pain that he caused as he slipped slowly into her, stretching her inch by inch, little by little.

An eternity later, he was inside of her, filling her completely, and she was afraid to breathe. But he would allow her no respite. She felt his hands on her slim hips, gripping tight, once more branding her inside and out. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back as he lifted her – and lowered her.... Again.

And again.

A thin sheen of sweat covered both of their bodies by the time he rose, hard and hungry as ever, and kissed her again. He released her hips, hugged her close and turned with her once more. Danny felt the sheet beneath her back and made a helpless sound as Lucas lowered himself over her and let his weight sink fully into her, going deeper than she would have thought possible. It hurt. He was so big.... And she wanted more.

Danny was so lost in the feeling of him within her, riding her slow and strong and steady, she barely registered the fact that he'd turned her head to the side, exposing the long column of her throat. She was pliant beneath him, a slave to his every touch, every whim, ever skilled manipulation.

And then his lips were at her ear and his hand was cupping her breast, his thumb brushing the taut nipple so that she arched against him. "Little witch," he murmured, seemingly as lost in what he was doing as she was. Again, his fingers teased her nipple, harder this time. She gasped and he drove into her, meeting her movements and forcing her into the bed beneath her. "My little witch."

She inhaled sharply and then cried out in surprise as his grip on her hair tightened and his teeth pierced the taut skin of her neck. He sank in hard and fast and deep, taking her with his teeth as he'd been taking her with his cock, and Danny went rigid as an orgasm ripped through her, eliciting a second cry from her throat.

She felt him pull, and swallow. He pulsed within her, smoldering and tight and solid, and he pulled again. Another swallow. The bed tilted beneath her and began to rise. She felt it defy gravity, heard a wind pick up from nowhere, and noticed the dust motes of magic floating around them in the air. Lucas drew back and drove into her again. She felt her nails find purchase in the hard muscle of his back as his teeth pressed deeper into her throat – he wanted more.

Another pull and another swallow and her core squeezed him tight, ringing him over and over again as a second orgasm rolled through her. She was growing weak, splendidly, deliciously weak.

He drank slow and long and held her there beneath him, a prisoner on a floating bed, as his body took hers and made her his. He continued to ride her, a constant, magnificent punishment that took her to the edge of a third climax and kept her there. She could feel it edging closer and knew it would hurt. She wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

But Lucas denied her the release, holding her over that precipice with his

were wolf power, controlling her with cruel efficiency. And then, as he pulled on her blood one last time and took his final swallow of her precious life liquid, he rose above her and drove into her with renewed and resolute force. She felt him spear her to the core of her soul and watched through half-closed lids as he withdrew his fangs from her throat, threw back his head, and roared. The orgasm hit them both with precise and pitiless force, rushing through them on a wave of blissful agony that drew the harshest of cries from Danny's throat.

It seemed to last forever. But after an eternity, the torches finally flickered and danced back into stillness, the wind died down, and the bed settled into its place on the stone-carved floor. Lucas lowered his head and she could see that his eyes no longer glowed. And still her body rode the ebbing tide of pleasure uncoiling within it. Long before she'd fully regained her senses, Lucas had lowered himself beside her and gathered her into his strong arms.

She felt him between her legs, still lodged deep within her, and numbly, she realized that he was still hard. *Unbelievable*, she thought weakly.

He nuzzled her neck, placing the tenderest of kisses upon the marks he'd left there. The sensation was both painful and promising, and she drew in a quick breath under the touch. When she did, she felt Lucas move inside of her.

Then the air around them began to buzz.

Lucas rose; pulling out of her with a painful, horribly harsh sensation. She gritted her teeth, missing his fullness at once. But there was magic in the room, and it wasn't her own.

She noticed the change in Lucas instantly. His eyes once again flashed into red fury and his teeth were bared, but not in lust. In fury. In warning.

It didn't matter.

There was a flash of light, a strange and slightly unpleasant pulling sensation, and Danny closed her eyes. She felt Lucas's body shielding her own, and then the world solidified around them once more.

"Oh shit," came a male voice. Danny blinked. She recognized it. *Daniel Kane*?

"Crap," came another voice. "Give them some room."

Lucas moved above her and the room they were in came into focus. As did the faces of the werewolves and witches surrounding them. The Overseer was there – and so were Charlie and Lily. Daniel Kane and a few members of his pack were there. Imani was there, along with Sasha from their coven. It hit her, all at once, that she was stark naked and laying beneath an equally naked Lucas Caige on the carpeted floor of a room at Council headquarters.

Her magic seemed to know what to do before she did, because in the next instant, she was speed-casting another short and sweet spell and clothes flashed to life over both her and her lover's bodies.

Lucas sat up, his red eyes once more fading into the star-lit darkness that was their normal color. He gazed down at her and offered her his hand to help her sit up as well. His expression was unreadable. At least, it was at first. But she knew what he was thinking. It wasn't the fact that they'd somehow been magically whisked away

from a warded room and into the Council headquarters that concerned him. It wasn't their untimely arrival that was foremost on his mind.

He'd bitten her. He'd taken her. The deed had been done and there was no going back now.

Lucas Caige had turned her.

She could feel it happening even then. The world smelled different. It felt different. It sounded different. It was as if someone had flipped a switch – and her senses had come to life.

Beside Lily, Imani shook her head, her chocolate brown eyes glittering with knowledge. "Your weird-ass eyes are glowing, sister," she said softly. She smiled then, and gently punched Danny in the arm. "You *go* girl!"

Chapter Seventeen: *"The Spell"*

The bonfire was burning hot and high now, its flames causing the hooded figures standing around it to cast long, wavering shadows across the ground. Seth looked from the warlocks to the single Akyri standing off to one side, and then to the body laid out on the stone slab before the fire.

The werewolves had buried it in a shallow grave, no doubt planning to go back later and retrieve it in order to burn it to ash. That was how the Council disposed of its evidence – leave no trace. But werewolf ash would do Seth little good, so he'd located the shallow grave and taken the body himself.

Gabriel Phelan's tall, normally strong body had seen better days. Malcolm Cole must have had a wealth of fury built up toward him to have inflicted the damage he had. The fact that he had defeated Phelan at all was impressive. But he hadn't just defeated him; he'd taken him completely out of the game with a dagger through the eye. Seth had to smile as he paced around the altar looking down at the torn and broken remains. He sort of wished he'd been there to see it.

But no matter.

Cole had done him a favor. For months now, Gabriel Phelan had been supplying Seth with a steady run of werewolf blood. It was something no other vampire had ever attempted due to the fact that vampires wanted to remain under the radar and out of the Council's eye. Thus far, no one in the werewolf community knew that vampires even existed.

True, young Charlie had seen Seth's eyes glow red a few months ago. And she'd seen his fangs. But it had been broad daylight and she'd had no idea what he was – probably still didn't. Granted, the Overseer might have put two and two together and hazarded a guess that he was the offspring of an Akyri and a warlock. But as of yet, the fact that the Offspring were vampires was the world's best kept secret. Or one of them anyway.

Gabriel Phelan had gone rogue three months ago when he'd attempted to take a marked dormant from her destined mate. Seth had pounced on the opportunity to strike a deal with the wayward, notorious alpha. In exchange for his services as a warlock, Phelan would provide him with blood.

Every few nights, Phelan would allow Seth to feed from one of his men. What Seth had never told him, but what the alpha had figured out on his own anyway, was that once a vampire fed from an individual, a certain amount of influence remained. That individual was never the same. Depending on how strong the victim's will was, he or she could be controlled to some extent by the vampire who fed from them. Phelan no doubt concluded this when he caught the remnant scent of tainted blood or magic lingering around the fed-from wolves.

As a result, Phelan and Seth had been playing a very silent game of cat and mouse. Phelan continued to provide wolves – but wolves he no longer trusted or that he considered weak. And Seth would drink from them. And then Phelan would kill them. For two and a half months, Seth had been both building up a resistance in his blood, and changing it at the same time. It was making him very strong in many

different ways.

However, thus far the only wolves he'd fed from had been betas. They were strong, but they were second tier. Phelan's death represented an opportunity he'd never thought he would have. A chance at an alpha's blood.

Gabriel Phelan never would have agreed to this on his own. At the moment, though, he didn't have a choice – and that was what plastered the smile to Seth's handsome, youthful face. Seth's gaze slipped to the medallion Phelan now wore; it hadn't been there when he was alive. Seth had placed it there. It was a simple crystal, however it was perfect in its clarity, and it was hollow. It would serve as a phylactery, a "Vessel," as warlocks called it, for the vitality that would give Gabriel Phelan back his life.

Seth glanced up at the sky, judging the position of the moon in its setting of black. Fog rolled across the ground and interrupted his view, but he waited patiently. When it was gone, he nodded and raised his arms. The warlocks surrounding the fire turned to him as one.

It's another fault of human nature and its expectations that a difficult or powerful spell should be complicated or require hours of prostrating or mumbling and hundreds of ingredients thrown into some sort of cauldron. Non-magic users knew nothing about magic. It confused them and eluded them, and so they strove to make it out to be as confounding as possible. It made them feel less stupid.

The truth was, many of the most powerful spells in existence were some of the most simple. All it required was the will, the right word or two, and a being strong enough to cast it. In this instance, it would have taken several beings strong enough to withstand the pull of magic. Fortunately, Seth's constant intake of werewolf blood had fortified him in this manner as well. His magic was stronger, as was the rest of him. The other warlocks were present as a precaution; it wouldn't do to awaken the power and not feed it. Messing up on a spell like this was a very bad idea. In the unlikely event that Seth should fail – the others would pick up where he left off.

Seth closed his eyes and concentrated. He reached out for the power his mother had given him through birth and felt it answer his call. The night grew silent as the animals in their trees and in the ground sensed a change in the air. The fire crackled furiously, bothered by something on the breeze. The fog cleared around them, roiling back as if by forces unseen, and the moon shone brightly into the fire-lit clearing.

Seth opened his eyes. He felt them glowing hot in his face; the world had been cast into red. He spoke a single, powerful word and the earth shook beneath them. There was a popping sound, followed by a sonic boom that traveled through the ground – and the bon fire coiled in on itself. It seemed to condense, growing smaller and hotter, tighter and brighter. Until, finally it was reduced to a spinning stream of blue-white light that hovered for a moment above the charred sticks and logs – and then shot toward the crystal that hung on a leather strap around Gabriel Phelan's neck.

It entered the crystal as if through a funnel. The crystal began to glow. The light grew brighter and brighter until at last, the fire that had been raging moments ago

was completely put out, and the crystal's light became too bright to see.

Seth shut his eyes, knowing what was happening without having to look. The light would flash once, blinding anyone foolish enough to still be watching. And then it would die down and what would remain was a crystal pendant that pulsed with the beat of its wearer's heart.

Seth waited as the flash infused his shut lids with a wash of red. Then he opened his eyes. As he'd been expecting, the crystal around Phelan's neck pulsed with a steady and strong blue-white light. Gabriel Phelan was completely healed. He looked now, in this temporary sleep, as he had in life. Seth had performed the spell before. He knew that there was always something, even if it was very minor, that would be visibly different about the Raised. However, at the moment, there didn't seem to be a single thing different about Phelan.

Seth stepped back from the altar and waited. The warlocks surrounding the smoking, put-out fire also waited, equally silent. After several long minutes, Gabriel's lips parted. Seth raised his head.

Phelan drew in a hard, harsh breath that filled his lungs and arched his rigid body away from the altar. And then he opened his eyes and slowly settled back down, his broad chest rising and falling in a slow, even rhythm. Seth watched him carefully for several long seconds and then steeled himself to move closer to the altar. The newly Raised could be unpredictable at times. It was all of those neurons within their brain reconnecting at once. There were often aftershocks.

Ah, there it is, he thought as he gazed down at the handsome, perfect visage of the notorious alpha werewolf. *There* was the small difference, the sign that things were changed. Gabriel's right eye was as blue as ever, cold as frozen sapphires. But his left, where Malcolm Cole had fatally pierced him, was green. Emerald green. It was fitting. Cole's eyes were green, and he'd been the one to take Phelan's life.

"You're more resourceful than I imagined," Phelan said, staring up at the warlock who stood beside him. "I was having a good dream," he added. And then he smiled, flashing his sharp fangs. "You interrupted it."

"I can imagine," Seth retorted softly. He felt a wave of weakness then, a consequence of the spell's draining power. But he hid it well and stepped back once more. "Welcome back," he said, his tone cold.

Phelan sat up, glanced around the clearing, and then turned to land Seth with an enigmatic look. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes, which had always been uncomfortable to meet due to the power behind them, were even more so now. At one time in human history, they would have been considered the eyes of a demon.

"I'm assuming you have some clever reason for wanting me alive," Gabriel said as he leapt off of the stone platform and landed on his boots with unnatural grace. His clothes were new; Seth had replaced the torn and tattered remains of his garments before bringing him back. It wasn't that he cared whether the alpha werewolf was dressed well; it was that the Raising spell worked better when evidence of a person's death was removed.

"The terms of your existence have changed," Seth told him, wanting to set out the ground rules right away. "You're alive because I have brought you back. You will remain alive as long as I do and as long as I do not wish you otherwise." He stopped and glanced at the pulsing crystal around Phelan's neck. "I would also take very good care of that crystal if I were you."

Gabriel Phelan regarded him in silence for a moment – and then he threw back his head and roared with laughter. "How long have you been waiting for an opportunity such as this, Offspring?" he asked, chuckling through his words. "If you were a woman, you'd be wet."

"And you would no doubt have me in chains," Seth retorted coldly. And then he sighed. He was so weak. "Don't die again any time soon; I'm tapped out in that department. To that end, I need blood and this time, I will take yours."

Phelan didn't seem to miss a beat. "Of course you will," he replied, his different colored eyes glittering in the moonlight. "Try not to come in your pants when you do," he said as he began to roll up the right sleeve of his button-down white shirt.

Seth had to smile at that. Taking the werewolf's blood was bound to be a pleasurable experience, even if it wouldn't be enough to replenish the raising power he'd used. It would still feel good – not necessarily because Seth was fond of the alpha in any way, but because the blood was so powerful. However, there was only one being on the planet who could possibly bring Seth to a state of ecstasy. And she was out of reach. For now.

Gabriel gave him an enigmatic smile and held out his arm, wrist-up, his hand fisted.

Seth looked once into his eyes – and then struck without further ado. He blurred into motion, knowing he would move too fast even for the werewolf to follow. His hands wrapped around the alpha's wrist as he sank his fangs into the pulsing vein beneath.

Gabriel's crystal warped with a strong, erratic pulse as Seth pulled hard on the Raised alpha's blood. He knew it wouldn't kill him, though. Nothing would now. Nothing would kill Phelan but the destruction of either Seth because he was the warlock who had raised him – or the Vessel he had placed around Gabriel's neck.

Phelan's blood was exactly as Seth had imagined it would be. It was what he ultimately needed most. With the blood came the werewolf's power. He could feel his cells morphing, warping, taking on a different nature. Gabriel Phelan possessed one of the most valued abilities among not only the werewolf community, but any supernatural community in the world. He was able to change forms.

And now Seth would be able to as well.

Beside him, he felt Phelan falter, swaying ever so slightly. He smiled against the man's wrist, thoroughly enjoying the fact that he was reducing the infamous werewolf in any way. Phelan leaned against the altar behind him, but he didn't pull away. He was too strong. Too proud.

Fool, Seth thought. He pulled his fangs from Gabriel's wrist and let him go. Phelan lowered his arm and calmly rolled his sleeve back down. Before the material

covered the area where Seth had bitten him, he saw the red puncture wounds disappear.

"What now?" Phelan asked.

"Now we finish what we started and perform the dormancy spell." Seth casually wiped the extra blood from his bottom lip and turned away from him to face the tree line across the clearing. "Right on time," he said.

Jason Alberich stepped out of the shadows, his eyes smoldering jades in a very handsome, incredibly pissed-off face. He said not a word and strode toward them.

Seth turned and flashed Phelan a grin. "A deal's a deal, after all."

Charlie fidgeted nervously across the room from her mate. The marks on the insides of her arms were heating up. She could feel them working beneath the leather bands she wore. She chanced a quick glance at Malcolm and the enforcers he was speaking with. They'd just finished briefing Lucas and Danny, whom an entire coven of magic users had barely managed to pull out of the warlock's private chamber. Transport magic hadn't worked, but retrieval magic had done the job by focusing on Danny's brightly pulsing essence and yanking it out. Now Malcolm was squaring away remaining defense details, making sure everyone knew where everyone was, that sort of thing.

He was a very bright man, her mate. His mind was always working. She admired him for a moment more and then turned toward the floor-to-ceiling windows behind her. It was night, but the moon shone bright and her werewolf vision was able to make everything out with crystal clarity.

The Oregon coast stretched out in either direction, cold, wet, misty and beautiful. Charlie normally would have been transfixed by it. However, right now she was horribly preoccupied. Carefully, she peeled back the edge of one of her leather bracers and peered underneath. The mark was growing redder.

Any minute now, she would be zapped out of the Council's guest room and sent to the scene of some horrible, bloody crime that hadn't yet happened. Normally, Dannai and Lily would meet her there and the three of them would handle the trauma together.

However.... Danny was in danger. There was a warlock out there who was obsessed with her. Charlie knew all too well how terrifying that could be. There was no way she was going to call on the Healer to leave the safe haven of the Council headquarters with Alberich on the loose.

Lily, on the other hand, Charlie wouldn't be able to stop from coming if she decided she wanted to. She was a seer. If she happened to have a vision about this particular crime scene, then she would want to help. At the moment, Lucas Caige possessed the necklace Danny had made for Lily that would allow her to travel to and from sites like this. But Lily was stubborn and she would certainly demand it back.

Not that Caige would necessarily comply. Or that her husband Daniel would let him.

Charlie took a slow, shaky breath and let go of the leather band, returning her

attention to the shoreline that beckoned beyond the glass. *I could be on my own this time*, she thought. Not that she couldn't handle it alone. It was just....

She turned and glanced again at her mate, and as always, she marveled in the absolute power of him. He was so tall, so strong, so gorgeous. And he'd killed Gabriel Phelan. She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe that her worst enemy, her worst nightmare, was no longer a threat. It hadn't quite hit her yet.

Phelan's death took the heat off of her. But Malcolm wouldn't see it that way. He would never stop worrying about her, taking precautions, being domineering. It was his nature and he did it because he loved her endlessly.

If she was going to help whoever it was that was in danger – and the increased burning on her wrists said she was – then she was going to have to do this alone, without anyone at headquarters being the wiser. Especially Malcolm. *I have to go somewhere to be alone*, she thought.

She turned away from the windows and Malcolm looked up, breaking his conversation. She was always the first thing on his radar. A rush of pride went through her at that thought. Sometimes it was still difficult to accept that he was hers.

"Gotta pee," she said, shrugging shyly.

Malcolm smiled and turned to the man in front of him. "Where's the restroom?" he asked. Though his accent was ever British, he had at least grown used to calling it a restroom and not a water closet years ago.

The enforcer pointed through the doorway by which he stood. "Third door down on the right," he said.

"Thank you," Charlie said and brushed past them. As she passed Malcolm, his magnetism caused her to slow. His power wrapped around her as if clinging to her. It always happened, and though it still made her mouth water slightly and her eyes glass over, she was getting used to it.

She did her best to ignore the pull of him and hurried out of the room – but not too fast. It wouldn't do to raise suspicions.

Once she made it to the restroom, she turned and locked the door behind her. It was out of habit more than anything. She wondered at the existence of the locks, in fact. Any werewolf could easily snap them, but she supposed they were there as a courtesy more than anything else. If someone turned the knob without remembering to knock, the lock would simply remind them that someone was inside.

Pain shot up her arms and Charlie gritted her teeth, trying her best not to make a sound that would draw the attention of any of the werewolves nearby. They could hear anything. Especially Malcolm. If she so much as hissed in pain, he would be breaking down the door.

Charlie moved past the first few stalls and then stumbled as the world tilted. She quickly righted herself, straightening as the pain engulfed her and the bathroom washed itself in red. The flash temporarily blinded her, as it always did, and she closed her eyes against it.

When the light behind her shut lids began to fade, she could make out the

sounds of nature around her. The air felt damp with mist. The Earth was soft under her boots. Scents wafted toward her: salt, wet ground, mushrooms. Magic.

Gabriel Phelan.

Charlie's eyes flew open, but her shock came too late. The man was already standing before her, towering over her, gazing down at her through alien eyes. One blue. The other green.

She tried to reel back, at once so filled with repulsion and terror and disbelief that her heart felt trapped in her throat. But Gabriel's hands came up like lightning like always, blurringly fast. She gasped and cried out as his fingers clamped around her wrists, drawing her up against him.

"Welcome to the party, Charlie," he said. His demon eyes promised things that turned her stomach; his cruel mouth turned up every so slightly in anticipation. His jaw was set, his gaze hard, and when he spoke, she could see the fangs between his lips. "We couldn't have started without you."

"Impossible," Charlie whispered, her voice shaking uncontrollably. She couldn't help it. Her entire body was quaking. She was going into shock or something. This wasn't real. Maybe she was dreaming....

"Sorry sweetheart," he said. "No time for chit chat. I'll catch you up later." Gabriel stepped back, taking her with him. It seemed to be no effort to him; it never had. He turned and pulled her along beside him despite her struggles, and panic bubbled up inside of her, familiar and acidic. She couldn't think straight under its assault. She couldn't concentrate enough to fight effectively.

Gabriel hauled her past the remains of a smoking bonfire and at least a half dozen hooded figures in black. Nausea roiled in her belly, hot and horrid. At their feet lay a helpless human woman, trussed up and gagged. And Charlie understood. They'd been planning to kill the woman – to torture her – in order to get Charlie into the clearing.

If she hadn't been petrified, it would have brought to mind all sorts of questions about time and continuity and quantum physics. But as it was, she could barely keep conscious beneath the fear riding her.

Gabriel tossed her toward a stone altar, where three other men waited. One of them caught her in his strong arms and held her at arm's length, staring down at her through green eyes entirely too much like Malcolm's.

"Jason Alberich," she whispered, knowing him at once. The smell of black magic was all around him, and traces of Danny's lighter scent still clung to him from when he'd cornered her in his chamber. Did he know that Lucas had turned Danny? Charlie swallowed hard, her mind spinning.

She should have been able to take a few heads off by now. She should be fighting, whirling around, striking out with everything Gabriel had ever taught her. But for some reason, she was immobile staring up at this man with his beautifully, horribly green eyes. *What's wrong with me?* She couldn't even look away.

"An interesting fact about warlocks that few people know," Gabriel said from behind her, "is that certain warlocks can control a victim's body through touch." He

moved closer; she could hear him closing the distance. She could feel his power lick at her as he came to stand directly at her back. "Even yours, Charlie."

In front of her, Jason Alberich broke eye contact with her and peered at the man over her head. "I want Caige dead by sunset tomorrow," he hissed. The venom of hatred slipped through his words loud and clear. His anger lashed at her, almost physically – almost hurting. *He knows*, she thought. *He knows Lucas turned Danny*. Little else could cause a wrath like this.

There was a beat of silence and she could imagine an unspoken promise passing between the two men.

"Put her on the altar," came another voice. She recognized it at once, though she'd only ever heard the man speak a few words. *Seth*. The warlock who was something more. Alberich spun her around and lifted her – and she was helpless to do anything to stop him. He had absolute control over her; she felt lucky that he was allowing her lungs to draw breath.

He laid her down on the large stone altar and kept his hand gently, ominously pressed to her chest. She went limp, her arms at her sides, her legs half-bent, her heart hammering. She gazed steadily up at the moon-lit sky and hated Jason Alberich. She hated Gabriel Phelan. She felt her own power inside of her, swimming beneath the surface, rallying at its inability to let loose and do damage. She could take every one of these bastards down. Or die trying.

Instead, she was unmoving and defenseless, a sacrifice on an altar before four very evil men. She couldn't even speak.

"I have to say I hate seeing you this way, Charlie," Gabriel said as he and the others came to stand around the altar and stare down at her. "But I promise, sweet heart," he continued, "as soon as the spell is completed, you'll be free to fight me to your heart's content."

She got a good look at all of them now. She could move her eyes at least. Jason, she'd already seen – dressed in black, his blonde hair and green eyes in stark contrast to the dark clothing. Gabriel wore a white shirt, the top three buttons undone. untucked over blue jeans that hugged the trained, powerful muscles of his legs. Opposite them stood two other men.

One was Seth, the warlock with the red glowing eyes that she had decked two months ago when he'd been helping Gabriel in Las Vegas. She'd hated him then. His long black hair was the color of night with highlights that matched the indigo of his dark blue eyes. They stood out in an angelic face the color of alabaster. Tall, pale – he looked like an angel, and when his blue eyes began to glow red, he looked like a *fallen* angel.

His magic was insidious. She remembered it well. She wanted to deck him again.

Beside him stood a man she'd never seen before. There was nothing particularly notable about his appearance other than the fact that he, too, was dressed in black. He said not a word and watched her with quiet, shielded eyes.

For a moment, Charlie thought she might throw up right there in her mouth and drown on it. She was that scared. But Alberich seemed to sense her terror – and in the next moment, her nausea was lifted. Control, indeed.

Seth raised his head and peered at his companions one at a time. Then, in a voice as cold as death, he said “Let’s get started.”

Chapter Eighteen: "The Bullet Trick"

He couldn't stop staring at her. It was like being a boy again and catching his first glimpse of a Playboy magazine from under the sink in his father's bathroom. What he'd seen had caught him so unawares and had been so beautiful, he'd stayed there on the bathroom rug, slowly moving through the pages, his eyes glued to airbrushed curves so perfect, they were unreal.

He remembered wanting to touch them. Hell, what man, what *boy*, hadn't? His fingers had twitched with the desire. It was worse now. Lucas felt a muscle in his jaw tick. He ran a fierce hand through his hair. *Christ*, it was worse.

She was so beautiful. She'd been stunning before. But now? She was a made wolf, and the transformation had intensified the already magical qualities of her being. Her long black hair shimmered with an otherworldly silkiness. Her skin glowed as if misted with gold. Her lips were a slightly deeper red, plump and perfect for kissing. And her eyes.... Someone had turned on a light behind the rainbows, illuminating a set of peepers so breathtaking, every time she looked up at him, his lungs froze mid-inhale.

He hadn't left her side. He couldn't. He wanted to kneel before her, worship every delectable inch of her, take her in his mouth again and again. He was lost in her. His mate. He felt as if he'd bitten off more than he could chew. How had he come to be the lucky one?

"Lucas?" She spoke his name; a whisper on an angel's tongue. She was looking up at him, a concerned expression on her lovely face.

"Caige." A man's voice cut through his thoughts, stalling his day dream. He pulled his gaze from Danny's and glanced across the coffee table. Daniel Kane sat on the couch opposite him, Lily beside him. She was reclined, at last, having just gotten her son to sleep in a crib in the adjoining room. She wore a loose sweater that hung open over one bare, tempting shoulder. Her long golden hair spilled over it, brushing her skin like silk on silk and setting off the gold in her eyes. Her husband's hand was on her thigh, gripping just tightly enough to declare ownership. It was an alpha thing. And Lucas didn't blame him.

Kane was watching him with the wary, observant eyes of a cop who missed nothing. "We lost you again, cuz'," Kane drawled, his Southern accent thickly draped over every word. "Would you like us to leave the room?" His blue eyes sparkled with quiet laughter.

"If I said yes, would you get the hell out?" Lucas asked, lowering his gaze, which he could feel smoldering at the very thought of being alone with Danny again. The alphas were all trapped once more in the Council headquarters and it couldn't have come at a worse time for Lucas.

"Not likely," said Kane.

"That's okay," said Imani, who had been standing by the windows, looking out over the darkened coast beyond. She turned from the windows and smiled at her best friend. "Danny doesn't mind the extra company, do you girl?"

Danny's lips parted, her eyes glassing slightly. A thrum of sexual energy moved between the girls; Lucas could almost see it. *Magic*, he thought. He couldn't help but recall the scent of the other witch all over his mate after the two of them had been together the other night. He went very still beside Danny, watching her like a hawk. His heart rate sped up, and his cock stiffened in his jeans.

Imani left the windows and strolled closer, her hips swinging seductively, her eyes pinned to the Healer. "In fact," she purred, "I bet I can make her forget you're all here." She smiled, exposing perfect white teeth in a predatory, sexy as hell smile. She glanced over at Lily, whose slim form was still reclined easily on the sofa, her long legs propped up on the coffee table. "Lily will help out, won't you, honey?"

Lily's lips slowly spread into an *I'm game* smile, her own perfect teeth glistening white beneath the overhead lights. Lucas couldn't believe what he was seeing. What he was hearing. Daniel Kane had gone utterly still beside his wife – and his sapphire eyes were glowing.

But Imani wasn't finished yet. She came to stand beside Danny, curling one long finger beneath the woman's chin to tilt it slightly back. She gazed down at her best friend in stark hunger. "So what do you say?" she asked the room softly. "Any of you boys feel like taking me up on that bet?"

Lucas was finding it hard to breathe. The atmosphere in the room had shifted, growing thicker and charged. In the blink of an eye, the men in the room had become predators. They were ready for a fight, preferably in the bedroom.

And then Imani's sexy smile widened into a shit-eating grin and she chuckled. Lily threw back her head and laughed, joined in the next instant by Dannai, who shook her head. "Boys," she said. "So predictable."

Lucas had to seriously fight the sudden urge he had to pick Danny up, throw her over his shoulder, and find a room where they could be alone for three hours. He would fucking show her predictable.

The door to the room slammed open behind him and he and Kane came to their feet at once, all thoughts of sex taking a back seat. Malcolm Cole stood in the doorway, his eyes glowing hot, his gaze scanning the inhabitants of the room.

"Where's Charlie?" he demanded with a growl.

Just then, Lily stood beside her husband. Kane turned toward her as she swayed on her feet. He caught her easily. "Cher?"

"Oh no," she whispered. She looked from her husband to Danny, where Danny was now coming to her feet beside Lucas.

"What is it?" Danny asked, her eyes wide. "Is it Charlie?"

Lily's expression looked both helpless and desperate. She looked over at Malcolm, the tall, the strong, the killer. And she let out a breath that was half harsh sob. "Yes," she said, clutching her flat stomach with what must have been one of the worst visions she'd ever had. "And that's not all."

Charlie knew that he would only have enjoyed it and that it would have been pointless, but at that moment she wished with all her might that she could at least

speak again so she could beg Gabriel not to do this.

Please, she thought desperately. Hopelessly. *Please don't take this from me.*

Above her, three men passed around a dagger, slicing open their palms and allowing the blood to pool in their hands. "Your eyes are so beautiful when you're frightened," Gabriel told her. He was the only one who hadn't cut himself. The other three raised their wounded hands above her and Jason Alberich began to speak. His free hand, he still held to her chest, keeping her immobile through his evil touch.

The warlock's words were foreign to her. His deep voice had changed, taking on a strange echoing quality. It sounded infernal; fundamentally wrong. She felt his words surround her and move through her and as they did, they left trails behind them. They were trails of weakness, dizziness, and most disturbing of all – pleasure.

No, she thought. *God, no.*

But God wasn't listening because Alberich continued to speak and strange music began to echo through Charlie's head. It was her own music, slowed down, mesmerizing, a drum beat that matched the beat of her heart. She felt her eyes closing beneath the persuasion of his malevolent lullaby.

And then she felt a touch at her throat and she forced her eyes open once more. Alberich had shifted his contact with her, cupping her neck so that the man beside him could have access to her chest. Gabriel watched her carefully over the sway of the music in her ears, the music around her. Alberich continued to speak while Gabriel curled his fingers around the neckline of her shirt. A tear in the fabric – and it kept going. He ripped the shirt from her body with slow, precise cruelty, never freeing her from his dominating gaze.

He straightened, slowly sliding his hands away, but his eyes continued to hold her captive as a drop of blood hit her chest. She felt it, not only on her flesh, but deeper. It wasn't a pain so much as a deep, thrumming knowledge that things were changing. It scared her. It tore at her heart. Another drop fell and her lips parted. She felt Alberich brush his thumb across the pulse in her neck and a wave of his control washed over her, taking what was left of her strength.

She closed her eyes. The world seemed to stop turning. Time slowed down.

The third drop hit her chest.... And the world retreated. She could no longer smell the Earth or the mushrooms or the sea. Her body felt heavier than it had for months. Slower.

Distantly, she heard something heavy hit the ground. She couldn't care enough to wonder what it was. Her eyes were wet behind her closed lids.

"It is done."

Alberich removed his hand so that he was no longer touching her. At once, Charlie felt her will rush back to her, infusing her body with strength and control. But it was half of what it had once been. And the only move she made was to open her eyes, releasing the tears that had built there. They poured over her cheeks and trailed into her hair and Gabriel Phelan smiled down at her.

"Did you really think I would ever let you go, Charlie?" he asked her softly, wiping

the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs as a lover would.

She didn't answer. There was no point. He'd won. She felt Cole's influence slip from her. She was no longer a made wolf. That magic had been taken – reversed. She didn't know how they had done it, but they had.

"I hate you," she whispered, meaning it as she'd never meant anything.

"I know," Gabriel said, his smile never wavering. "But I can break you of that."

"I suggest you turn her now," said Alberich from where he stood beside the altar.

Seth was still there as well – but the fourth man, the one she hadn't known, was gone. On the altar to her right rested a bloodied dagger. The men around her obviously had no fear of her using it against them to any successful degree now that she was a dormant again.

"He's right," Seth agreed. "Cole will never stop hunting you. You're taking too much of a chance."

Gabriel considered Charlie in silence for several long seconds. And then his gaze hardened. "They have a point, sweetheart." With that, he reached down and grabbed her by the throat with his right hand, jerking her up off of the altar.

All of Charlie's instincts awoke in that moment. She may not have been Cole's mate any longer – but she would die before she became Phelan's. With one hand, she grabbed Phelan's wrist and held tight, using his strength as leverage. She pulled back and raised both of her legs then, leveling a kick at his broad chest. She struck with all of her strength, knowing she would probably only have the one chance.

The impact knocked enough of the wind out of him that he loosened his grip on her throat and she was able to slip out of his hold. At the same time, she reached down and grabbed the dagger the men had left on the altar.

She raised the knife. Alberich and Seth realized a split-second too late what it was she was planning; she could see it dawn in their eyes. With a single hard thrust, Charlie plunged the dagger into her own chest, piercing it through to her heart.

It was somewhat of a relief to use transportation magic, even if she was having to take a bunch of werewolves with her. It was more difficult, but it was an affirmation that she was still who she was supposed to be, despite the fact that she'd been turned into a werewolf.

However, the small victory of the sensation was grossly overshadowed by the havoc that fear was wreaking. The world felt *off*. Lily's vision had thrown a shroud over them all, and the fact that Charlie had actually disappeared from Council headquarters only reinforced their overriding sense of doom. Danny had the sensation that she was moving through a nightmare. Would it ever end?

Gabriel Phelan was alive. Danny couldn't believe that the possibility this would happen hadn't crossed her mind before this. Jason was a warlock. He was working with Phelan. The fact that the werewolf was once more breathing meant that Jason was much more powerful than any of them had thought.

At first, it had made her wonder why he hadn't fought harder in that stone chamber when Lucas had come upon them. He'd left so quickly.... Why? But now

she knew. He had other obligations. He had a promise to keep.

A promise to a warlock was a binding thing. Their deals were unbreakable.

His presence and his blood were needed as the third component in the dormancy spell. She'd heard of the spell once long ago. But she had thought it no more than legend, like so much of the world's thoughts on magic.

She was wrong – and now Charlie was a dormant.

Danny had never seen a werewolf in the kind of state that Malcolm Cole was in at that moment. It was indescribable. Even his father-in-law, the Overseer and grandfather to Charlie, was in a calmer state than Cole was, though not by much. And the Overseer might only have been better at masking his wrath. Kavanagh had responsibility to keep him sane at zero hour. He had an entire community to lead.

Cole was only thinking of Charlie, and it showed. He was uncomfortable to be anywhere near due to the kind of negative energy he was exuding. His eyes had gone from green to red. Danny knew it was possible and had seen it a few times when an alpha wasn't able to turn his mate fast enough, but it was rare. Perhaps worst of all was Cole's silence. It was absolute. He had turned in on himself.

Lucas was almost no better. The fact that Charlie was in danger meant that nothing was going to keep Danny from running headlong into the fray and he knew it. She could sense an indecisiveness about him. He was toying dangerously with the idea of tying her up, locking her in some room somewhere, or even knocking her out so that she couldn't go after one of her closest friends. She could almost read the thoughts behind his eyes. But he knew none of those things would work where she was concerned.

She was a witch.

Danny doubted that this situation was going to do much to ease Lucas's transition from magic hater. She imagined that he felt helpless. Again. Just like he had when magic had taken his brother, Byron from him all those years go. In the course of a few minutes, he'd gone from her lover and mate to the leader of the pack. The loner, the one in black, the angry, bitter wild card. Only this time it was worse because he had something to lose.

"When we get there, stay behind me," he'd told her. It wasn't a request, it was a command, and she had bristled under it.

"Lily said that Charlie was bleeding in her vision. She'll need me," she replied through clenched teeth.

"She's a werewolf, Danny," Lucas told her. "She can heal herself."

"Not this time," Danny insisted. She knew it was true. She felt it in her bones. Charlie wouldn't be a wolf any longer. Dormants didn't heal the way werewolves did and even though Charlie was also a female-born werewolf, the horrible unfairness of it was that female borns didn't heal as their brothers did either. Only the males healed quickly. The females even scarred.

Lucas hadn't said anything else. He'd simply straightened and she had watched as his black eyes flashed red. He knew that Alberich was just waiting – just *waiting* – for Danny to show up. They were walking right into their own ruin.

And now she was here, in this split instant between one world and the next where her magic surrounded her like a cocoon, white and yellow and pink and shot through with pixie dust. A blink of an eye and it would be gone and she and the men she was transporting would arrive at their destination along with the other witches, wizards and werewolves who were making the journey.

Danny spoke the final words of the spell and lowered her hands. She opened her eyes as the world solidified around them, hardening into the dark greens and blacks of a night time forest. Danny had no time to gain her bearings before the other transport spells delivered council and coven members into the clearing amidst flashes of magic.

A few seconds later, the light died down and Danny blinked.

Instantly, a roar of harsh, inhuman sounds went up around her, shocking her senses into stark clarity. Every detail hit her at once: small clearing, burned out bonfire, the hooded figures of warlocks, the overwhelming smell of magic both light and dark, and Gabriel Phelan and Jason Alberich beside an altar where Charlie had just thrust a dagger through her own heart.

Danny watched as the dormant's hands slipped from the handle protruding from her chest and her light blue eyes began to close. All around her, men were flashing into wolf form, blasts of energy were heating up the night, and good and evil were meeting in battle. Gabriel Phelan wrapped his arms around Charlie, his expression one that Danny had never seen the notorious alpha wolf wear before. With slow and tender care, he pulled the dagger from her chest.

Then a massive gray wolf with red eyes was leaping on Phelan, and Gabriel was flashing into wolf form as well. He let go of Charlie when he did – and Jason caught her.

But his green eyes weren't on the unconscious form in his arms. They were on Danny, whom he stared at across the field of chaos between them. Danny saw his lips part and heard his softly spoken words, despite the rumble of madness all around them.

"Come here and save her, Danny. I won't stop you."

Danny didn't have a chance to process the words before there was another flash beside her and another giant black wolf was loping across the clearing, jumping over other struggling bodies as he made his way with supernatural speed toward Alberich.

Jason's handsome face slowly smiled. He spoke a single word and vanished – taking Charlie with him.

"No!" Danny and another, deeper voice screamed. Danny spun to see Malcolm Cole, his human form smoking in several places, his lip bleeding, his knuckles scraped nearly to the bone. The alpha shoved what must have been the third or fourth warlock to attack him off of his prone body and tried to rise. The warlock was dead, but another quickly took his place, instantly casting up another dark spell. They were going after him with a vengeance. Either they could sense his overwhelming anger and knew him to be the greatest danger, or they were acting on Phelan's orders.

Most likely, it was the latter. Cole's red eyes burned as he again flashed into wolf

form, dodged a bolt of power that shot from the warlock's hand, and rushed toward him, teeth and claws wickedly bared.

Charlie's demise hung over Danny like physical weights, making it hard to think and act. But she had somehow steeled herself to cast a spell of her own to help Cole when a hand slid over her mouth from behind, silencing her.

Her captor didn't say a word, but she knew who he was anyway. Jason's darkness was all around her as he pulled her back from the crowd and toward the tree line. She realized then, in that moment, that he must have been wearing a shield all his life just like she had. Hers was to hide her dormancy. His was to hide his evil.

They made it to the tree line and Jason pulled her through and into the relative quiet on the other side.

"Let her go."

Danny felt Jason freeze behind her. She could feel every muscle in his body tense, his arms tightening around her where they held her against his chest. But an ominous, promising sound pricked the night. It was the sound of a handgun being cocked.

Jason slowly released Danny, stepping back. Danny turned around. Jason's green eyes speared the darkness, locking onto Lucas's tall form. The black leather clad alpha werewolf stood several yards away. His left hand was relaxed at his side, but his right hand held a shining silver automatic with steady, determined calm. It was aimed at Jason's heart.

"You're fast, warlock," Lucas told him. "But I'd be willing to bet my life that a bullet is still faster."

Jason watched him carefully. "You might be right," he admitted softly. "But a bullet will only slow me down. I'll simply transport away, heal, and come for you Caige."

Lucas's hard expression didn't change. He wasn't fazed. "If these were normal bullets, you probably would," he said. And then he smiled a wholly nasty smile. "But they're not."

What's going on? Danny wondered. *What kind of bullets are they?*

But Jason's face had blanched. His expression was just a touch less sure and angry and a lot more frightened than it had been a second ago.

"You forget that I studied your kind for decades," Lucas said. "I know more about you than I care to." The sound of a bullet leaving its chamber split the night and Jason's tall body jerked once beside Danny. She jumped as a second shot was fired.

And Jason Alberich, the warlock who had played alongside her as a child, hit the ground.

Chapter Nineteen: "The Prestige"

Lucas slowly lowered his weapon. He was a good aim; he'd had years of target practice. He had taken the warlock in the heart with silver bullets and he had no doubts that Jason Alberich was dead.

Danny remained motionless, frozen to the spot. Lucas studied her with a careful eye. She was trembling and might even be going into some kind of shock. He wanted to strip off her clothes and hold her against him beneath the hot spray of a long shower, but at the moment, she was going to have to be the tough little witch he knew she could be. Because Charlie wasn't dead, not yet, but if Danny didn't heal her soon, she would be.

"Danny," he said as he strode across the space between them, jammed his gun in the back waist band of his jeans, and took her face in his hands. "You need to heal your friend."

"Wh-where is she?" Danny asked, swallowing hard and blinking up at him.

Lucas turned and pointed to a pair of blue jeaned legs sticking out from behind a nearby bush. Danny instantly pulled away from him and raced toward Charlie's unconscious form. *That's my girl*, he thought, following on her heels.

Charlie's skin was so pale it was nearly translucent against the strawberry blonde shock of her silken hair. Blood was just beginning to stop pumping from the open wound in her chest. Lucas could hear her heart beat, but it was so faint, so soft, even his werewolf ears barely picked up the sound. She'd done a number on herself.

She would rather have died than lived with Gabriel Phelan.

"Charlie," Danny breathed, sobbing softly. The Healer placed her hands over the wound on her friend's chest and closed her eyes. She spoke her words of magic and her palms began to glow, their light and warmth spreading from beneath her touch. Lucas watched as it infused Charlie's body, lighting it from within. It had entered her heart and now moved through Charlie's bloodstream, repairing her from the inside.

In a few seconds, Danny sat back on her heels and removed her hands. Charlie remained still where she lay. She looked like a China doll there in the grass, so terribly pale.

"She's healed," Danny said, her voice still quavering, "but she's lost too much blood." She raised her wrist to her mouth then and Lucas caught his first glimpse ever of his mate's new, white fangs. They were beautiful. But she was planning to use them to pierce her own wrist and Lucas leapt forward, barely stopping her in time.

"No," he told her, grasping her wrist and lowering it. "Let me." He could already sense Danny's weakness from having cast the transport spell on so many werewolves and having healed Charlie's mortal wound. She was exhausted. There was no way he was going to allow her to kill herself by sharing her blood as well.

"No," came a deep voice from behind them both. Lucas spun to see Malcolm Cole standing at the tree line. He was covered in blood, his clothes were torn and scorched, and even as they watched, a gash was healing across his exposed shoulder. But his red gaze was on Charlie. "I'll do it."

No man in their right mind would have argued with Cole's right to give Charlie his blood in that moment. Lucas nodded at his old leader and pulled Danny up and away from Charlie's body. Cole knelt beside his mate and raised his wrist to his lips. His fangs pierced fast and true, instantly drawing powerful blood from his veins.

"Make sure she swallows," he said without taking his eyes off of Charlie. Lucas realized he must have been talking to Danny – who could probably manipulate Charlie's throat with her magic.

Beside him, Danny nodded and moved forward once more. Cole lifted Charlie into his arms and rested her head on his legs. Lucas could see the pain etched into his handsome features. There were unshed tears in his red eyes. He'd been reduced to a monster – and then a crying one.

But he placed his wrist to Charlie's lips and gently pried her mouth open. The blood pooled in Charlie's mouth and Danny touched the woman's neck. Charlie's throat convulsed.

Lucas heard her heart beat once, harder than before. Another swallow and it beat again. "That's it, luv," whispered Malcolm as he bent and placed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Lucas noticed the sweat that beaded on the alpha's brow, and yet Cole remained steady and still with determination. It had to be hurting him in so many ways to give up what he had left inside of him after the fights he had just been in. For a werewolf, giving blood was an incredibly intense experience. He must have been in his own private hell.

What seemed like an eternity later, Charlie moaned and then coughed, and Cole removed his wrist. Charlie's blue eyes fluttered open, her heart beating strong once more. But she wasn't smiling. She didn't look relieved. She looked terrified.

"Gabriell!" she choked, her eyes wide, her heartbeat now kicking up a few notches. Malcolm held her tightly to him, his fingers brushing the hair from her face. "Shh," he told her. "He's not here, luv. He's dead."

"No," she insisted, shaking her head and trying to sit up. "He's not dead!" Cole wasn't letting her go anywhere. He held her fast and peered down into her eyes. Lucas heard her heart skip a beat and settle down; Malcolm's power was rushing over her. She was a dormant again; he had more influence over her now than he had before.

"Yes he is, Charlie," he told her "He *is* dead. I swear to you, luv." Charlie swallowed once, and relaxed in his embrace. Cole turned to glance over his shoulder at Lucas.

There were messages in that gaze. They were stark and meaningful.

Lucas turned to Danny and instructed her to stay where she was until he called for her. She may have wanted to argue with him, but she knew he was right. She nodded and Lucas left the second clearing in order to make his way back to the first one.

The snarling and bursts of magic had died down a lot; the men were obviously falling one by one on both sides. Lucas readied himself for what he would find when he entered the field, but the sight that met his eyes stopped him cold nonetheless.

Gabriel Phelan was indeed dead. He lay at the base of the altar where Charlie's grandfather had attacked him, the crystal he had been wearing around his neck shattered. Lucas knew it had been the Vessel that held his life force. He knew this because he'd spent a very long time learning everything he could about warlocks after the disappearance of his brother.

But that wasn't what took Lucas's breath away.

As he stood there, the last of the sounds of struggle passed and half a dozen flashes turned wolves back into men. They were proof that the wolves had won this round, but Lucas paid them no heed. He couldn't.

Boots moved slowly across the blood-drenched earth and Lucas felt Daniel Kane step up beside him. On his other side, Jessie Graves approached. They too were quiet. All eyes were trained on the two men who lay by the altar upon which Charlie had nearly killed herself. One body belonged to the twice dead, once-risen Gabriel Phelan.

The other belonged to Alexander Kavanagh. The Overseer.

They'd all known it was pointless. It had been the destruction of Phelan's Vessel that killed them both. There were no wounds to heal, there was no life left to save. But Danny had fought several pairs of hands with fierce determination and finally, they'd allowed her to kneel beside the Overseer and press her palms to his chest.

It had been one of the most heart breaking things any of them had ever seen. Danny had no family. She'd been raised by Lalura, an older and wiser witch within their coven. But she'd never had a father. This man came as close as any man had ever come to filling that role. And he was also Charlie's grandfather.

Now Charlie had no family either. Danny hadn't wanted her friend to suffer that loneliness, but there was no helping it. Kavanagh had died taking out the man who threatened what he treasured more than anything else in life and in fact life, itself.

When enough time had passed, Danny allowed her hands to drop and stood back up in time to see Charlie coming into the clearing with Cole at her side.

Time slowed down and the world silenced itself. Charlie looked into her friend's eyes – and then her gaze slid to her grandfather's prone form.

That had been hours ago.

Now Lucas led Danny from the front steps of the Council headquarters toward the motorcycle that sat waiting at the end of the drive. The sun was just coming up over the tree tops; the tide was slowly ebbing away. The early morning was quiet.

Behind them, in the grand building that housed the most powerful werewolves in the world, Jessie Graves had just been pronounced king. More or less. He'd earned his position as the new Overseer – and no man had ever wanted it less. He had steadfastly refused at first, until the members of the Council were at last able to make him recognize that the Overseer had been training him for just such a position. It was even in Kavanagh's will.

That was what had cinched it for Graves when nothing else really would. He couldn't bring himself to dishonor Kavanagh's memory by refusing something that the

former Overseer had plainly wanted in life.

And so it was done and Daniel Kane and his wife had gone home and Malcolm Cole had absconded with his mate to some place private and quiet.

Charlie was a dormant again, but the good news was that along with her made-wolf blood, the gypsy curse she'd born on her arms had also disappeared. She accepted it with ambivalence that weighed more heavily on relief, and not one person she knew would have blamed her. The curse was gone and it was never meant to have been hers in the first place.

Once Charlie had some time to mourn and could put the death of her grandfather behind her, Cole would turn her once more. As far as Lucas was concerned, the green-eyed alpha werewolf was looking forward to it. There was no way to hide that kind of desire.

Lucas approached the bike of black and chrome and righted it, kicking up the stand and gracefully swinging his right leg over to mount it. Danny waited beside the bike, her hands tucked into the pockets of her black zip-up hoodie. She watched him in enigmatic silence for a moment and he wished he could read her mind.

Her multi-hued eyes sparkled in the morning light, almost glowing with their inherent and potent mix of magic.

Finally, Lucas smiled and gripped the handle bars. "Get on, baby doll."

Danny considered the gentle command and then cocked her head to one side. "Why should I, Lucas Caige?"

"Because, little witch, you and I have a lot of getting to know one another to do," he told her. "And I doubt you want me to start doing it right here in front of Council headquarters."

"I could turn you into a frog," she teased, her eyes twinkling.

"You could," he admitted, feeling his own face crack into a grin. "But then you'd be carrying around a frog all day long. You know you would think I was too cute to just leave me sitting here."

Danny threw back her head and laughed; the sound like magic to Lucas's ears. Hell, it *was* magic.

"Maybe," she said through her laughter.

"So why don't you save yourself the trouble," he said, "and get on?" He put the key in the ignition and turned it, never taking his eyes off of his mate. The bike roared to life with a twist of his throttle and rumbled beneath him, a steel beast ready to run.

Danny didn't say anything further. Instead, she gave him a sweet smile of surrender, put her arm around his shoulders, and mounted the bike behind him.

Lucas took a pair of shades from the inner pocket of his jacket and put them on. And then he leaned into the bike, twisted the throttle, and drove them both toward the rising sun.

Epilogue

The bruises will go away, he told himself. They always did. But he was so tired. She'd drained him to the point of breaking him this time – or, at least that had been her goal. She was relentless.

This was never ending.

He'd been in this hell for so long....

Light shafted through the chamber and onto the bed, piercing his eyes. He blinked against it and rose as far as the chains would allow him to. He recognized her curves in the doorway at once.

"Little wolf," she purred, striding across the chamber toward him. He tensed; he always did. No matter how many times she manipulated him and used him, he would never grow used to it. He would always fight her.

She tsked him for his reaction and cocked her head to one side. "Relax," she said, smiling so that he could see the fangs she used on him again and again. "No need to struggle right now. I know you're weak. I have a surprise for you," she told him. Then she turned toward the open doorway and nodded to a guard. The guard nodded back and left. "Father found him dead in a field, but fortunately for him, he had only just been killed," she said, turning back to face him.

He watched as the guard came back, accompanied by another. Between them, they dragged a bound man dressed in black. There was the smell of black magic upon the prisoner so potent, he couldn't believe the man had actually allowed himself to be captured.

"Oh, he didn't allow us to do it," the vampire said, obviously having been reading his mind. "He put up quite a fight once we raised him, didn't you, Jason?" She laughed when the man speared her with his cold green eyes. "He wasn't thinking straight. After all, he should know that as long as I possess this," she held up her hand and a crystal on a leather string dangled from her forefinger, "I possess him." She glanced over at the warlock again. "The poor thing is love torn. But I'm going to make him forget all about it."

Then she turned back to the bed and he felt her power pour over him. *No*, he thought. His inner voice growled, *Get the fuck out of my head*.

Her only response was to smile wearily and shake her head. "It hurts me how little you trust me, even after all of this time, Byron." She sat on the edge of the bed, and he tried to move back, but the infernal chains held him tight. No man-made chains could hold him. But this woman and her power and her family and their chains had held him for fifty years.

"Then let me go," he told her, his deep voice filling the chamber. It should. He'd been very strong once. Very strong. "The last thing I want to do is cause you pain," he told her, flashing his own fangs.

"Now, now," she said, shaking her head reprimandingly. "You know I could never let you go." She leaned over and he tried not to flinch when her fingers brushed a lock of his long black hair from his forehead. "You're perfection. I wanted you the moment I

laid eyes on you." She smiled. "And daddy got you for me."

Byron wanted to vomit.

"Now, you should know," she told him then, leaning back as if she could sense his disgust and was hurt by it. "I brought Jason here for you. You see, the woman he loves happens to be your brother's mate."

Byron froze at the mention of his little brother.

"And Lucas wouldn't be enjoying her right now if he hadn't put a silver bullet through Jason's heart." She seemed to consider something a moment and her gaze became distant. "He's very smart, your brother. Very resourceful." Her expression took on a longing cast and Byron's gut clenched.

"Leave him alone," he told her. It was a warning. It was a desperate plea.

The vampire princess turned back to him, her cold violet eyes taking him in from head to toe. "Oh I will, my love," she promised him, licking her red, plump lips. "On one condition."

The End.