

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

SHERRI L. KING



Winded
Sherri L. King

A Shikar story, set in the world of The Horde Wars series.

Vetiver Device bears the same burden as generations of Device women, protecting her tiny New England island from the Unnamed. Merrymint is a doorway, and Vetiver the key. The last of her witch bloodline, Vetiver calls to the elements to send help in fortifying the island's wards. She receives not only aid, but her destiny in warrior form.

Boreas of the Shikar heard Vetiver's plea through layers of worlds. She called to his Wind, and he answered, bringing with him a storm to close the doorway forever. As for Vetiver, Boreas will bind her lush, ripe body to his, fill her with intense carnal pleasure...and one day his essence. Transforming her into a warrior-witch to stand by his side as wife, lover, protector of the entire human race.

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WINDED

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As I begin this story, there is a tornado warning in effect and the wind outside is screaming. If that isn't a plot device, I don't know what the hell is.

Chapter One

The witch stuck her pierced tongue out at the face peering through the tiny slit in the lace curtains at the window. There was the faint, muffled huff of indignation—expected—and the neighbor’s curtains fell shut. From other houses along the small street, there were more eyes watching the small, dark-haired woman as she bounded up the steep stairs that led to the front door of her ancient, dilapidated Victorian-era house, but it was enough that she’d caught one Nosy Nelly in the act. The others could—and would—stare at her until her door closed shut behind her. It was the same routine every morning when she left for work and merely an encore when she returned.

In a lot of ways, the houses lining the street were so different from hers. On a dead-end road, her home was the odd man out, older, taller, more ornate than the others. As she walked to the bus stop at the end of the road each workday and back in the evenings, curious eyes watched her every step, as if the neighbors expected her to sprout horns or something.

If the house and its grounds weren’t so important, if the property hadn’t been in the family for generations, she would have given serious thought to moving. It was, after all, a buyer’s market. But she was stuck with it, with the responsibility it brought, and truth was, she adored it. It had character. The other cookie-cutter houses that had slowly come to occupy the acreage around her family’s estate had none. Neither did their owners.

Vetiver Device had loads of character.

When the door opened, Ball, her mutt of a dog who was as big as a Great Dane but covered with the curly, rough hair of an Irish Setter, bounded to meet her with a grin on his face. His muddy brown hair covered a powerful, solid body and he nearly knocked

her down with his enthusiasm, for in her hand she carried a brown paper bag—and he knew exactly what was in it.

“Baked fresh this afternoon.” Vetiver held the bag aloft as she unwound her fuzzy scarf from her neck to hang it on the ancient hatrack.

It wouldn’t have surprised her if Ball had stood up on his hind legs and taken the bag from her with his front paws. It wouldn’t have surprised her if he’d opened his mouth and said “thank you” before wolfing down the contents. Ball wasn’t like other dogs. For one thing, Ball had been in the family since, well, hmm...

Before the Mayflower.

He’d been her mother’s dog until Vetiver had her first period. And he’d been her grandmother’s dog until Vetiver’s mom had started her menses. So on and so forth, for as long as the Device women had been keeping journals, which has been since the year 1600 or so. He was loyal, faithful, intelligent and completely devoted to each female heir from the time of her sexual maturity until the next heiress blossomed into womanhood.

And he loved cod brain scones.

Vetiver worked at the oldest and most successful bakery in Merrymint Island’s tourist district. The New England island was tiny, connected to the mainland by one bridge only, or reached by ferry ride, but many went out of their way just to have a meal at The Nut.

Every Thursday the local fishermen would bring in their fresh cod—The Nut was famous for its fish sandwich Fridays and seafood stew Saturdays—and Vetiver used the castoff pieces to bake Ball his favorite treats. The heads, brains, eyes and cheeks of the poor dead fish would otherwise go to waste, and it didn’t hurt anyone if the customers’ mouths watered at the delicious aroma wafting from the hot kitchen, oblivious to its source. It helped sell the sandwiches by the dozens and that was all that mattered to the staff.

It also helped that Vetiver was ruler of the kitchen, and had been since she’d taken a job there at age fifteen. One glance at her tri-colored gray eyes and the locals knew her

for a Device. No one dared cross her, for more than one reasons. Which was fine with everyone, since she was indisputably the best baker The Nut had ever seen in almost one hundred and fifty years of operation. That, in itself, was a kind of magic—because more than one Device had ruled those same kitchens before her.

“Come on, they’re still warm.” The scones would stay warm for as long as she desired, but there was no call to point it out. Ball knew it as well as she did.

Vetiver nudged him to the side with her hip and led the way deeper into the house. The enormous kitchen was dimly lit by an overhead chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling, shining over a small, sixties-era café dinette. She set two plates, one for her and one for Ball, laid his scones out nicely for him—he was tall enough that he could eat from the table without the use of a chair, though no doubt if it had served him to pull back a chair and use it, he would have done so—and took from the bag her own dinner, wrapped in wax cloth. A huge pumpkin and raisin muffin roughly half the size of her plate, the second one she’d eaten today. Soft and sweet, dense and sticky, it was her favorite autumn delicacy.

The two dined in comfortable silence, listening to the wind muttering in the trees that surrounded the house and its grounds. The scent of nutmeg and pumpkin mingled with the savory aroma of Ball’s meal reminded her of years past. Good years, all of them. But how many were left? The world was getting smaller every day. There were too many people and not enough space for them all, especially not here on this very special island. The Merrymint of her ancestors’ childhood years was gone. In the place of forests, meadows and parks there now bloomed allotment housing and luxury condominiums.

It wasn’t easy, being what she was, doing all that she had to do, with so many curious eyes upon her. Strangers, newcomers, who didn’t understand why the Device family was so well respected in the community. City folk, her granny had called them. They had started filling the empty spaces of land during her childhood, so Granny had understood them better than Vetiver ever could. City folk—people who had no respect

for the mystical purpose of the land on which they planted their plain, pillbox houses and two-car garages.

Vetiver knew it would only get worse with each passing season. She owned less than twenty acres of precious land now. The house sat at the front edge of the plot, and it stretched out behind like a mighty arm, shielding the island from trespassers. Much of the property had been portioned off in her lifetime by her mother, who couldn't afford the taxes that kept skyrocketing higher each year. Eventually, Vetiver would have to sell some of the land too. Maybe. Probably. It was how the new world worked. Her family might be one of the originals in this country, but that legacy meant diddly-squat when the taxman came calling.

"Things could be a lot worse, right Ball?" she asked aloud, knowing her companion would have intuited her thoughts just as he had hundreds of other Device women over his preternatural lifetime. "They may call me a witch but they don't believe it. It's just a word to them. An insult. We know differently, and I'm better at finding money than Mom was." She winked at him and he smiled his toothsome grin, already finished with his dinner. "Still, it's not money that's the problem these days, is it?" She absently fingered a long, twisting lock of nearly black hair. "I could own half the island and there would still be overcrowding. I could stop wearing the piercings, the morbid clothes, the heavy eyeliner, but with so many new residents, someone is still bound to notice the *really* weird stuff and that would make my life hell. Better they just think I wear tri-colored contacts and enjoy the grungy emo look. Bah."

Ball shook his head, trod over to his water dish and took a deep draught. He didn't drink like a dog. He didn't use his tongue to lap up the liquid. Rather, he lowered his muzzle into the bowl and drew the water in much like a horse at a trough. Vetiver assumed that from his point of view, it was probably a more civilized way to drink.

A heavy sigh exploded out of her. "Why can't the neighbors just go on holiday for the weekend? There's so much to do, I'll have my hands full enough without having to worry about witnesses."

Outside, the breezes muttered. The trees seemed restless this evening too. They sensed Vetiver's maudlin mood and reflected it. She needed to think more upbeat thoughts before a real storm brewed. It had thus far been a relatively calm season and she didn't want to upset anything by brooding on things she couldn't change.

The equinox approached. She felt it looming, boiling in her blood with the threat it promised. It would be her second Warding ritual performed without her mother and grandmother beside her. She was a coven of one. Well, two, if she included Ball. *He* certainly would. Nonetheless, Vetiver was overwhelmed by the task ahead of her.

Now was a dangerous time. She needed to watch her step, even as she struggled to muster the power needed to bind the island against the evil just waiting in the wings to seize it. Vetiver had to be sure no one saw her, but more than that, she needed to ensure no one saw what she was keeping out of and off the land.

This was no solstice ritual. That was easy enough. It was more a celebration than a task or responsibility. A time of blessings. The autumnal equinox would test her limits. If luck held, the nosy neighbors who most liked to watch her every step would have something interesting to watch on television or something.

It was risky.

It would be an immense undertaking.

Someone would see.

A frown playing at her mouth, Vetiver took the dirty plates to the kitchen sink and washed them. She stared out the little square window over the basin. The glass was old, handmade, and distorted the view with the imperfections of a long-lost art. All of the windows in the house were original and they would never need replacing. Nothing in the house ever broke or wore down. Just to add a hint of normalcy, Vetiver let the paint peel on the outside and allowed the old iron fencing to gather some rust, just a few necessary cosmetic flaws that didn't need to be addressed. They drew curious eyes to superficial matters while more important work was being done right beneath their noses.

“What better way to hide than in plain sight?” her mother often said. “Let them look, let them wag their tongues, so long as their talk is all based on the lies we show them. The truth would frighten them and no matter how tempting it might be, we can’t shock them by revealing what we are.”

But her mother wasn’t here now. Both Vetiver’s mother and grandmother had died in a car accident. It was a strange twist of fate that two powerful women should be undone by one careless turn of the wheel. The drunken driver of the other vehicle hadn’t been hurt too bad – had even been discharged from the hospital that very night, with only minor scrapes to show for the great harm he’d done.

He had died in his sleep that night. It wasn’t Vetiver’s doing. Not directly. She’d wanted revenge, of course she had, but she’d been too mired in her sadness and mourning to have even dared.

Ball had avenged her family in her stead. When he’d told Vetiver – through the bond they shared – what he had done, Vetiver had felt oddly numb about it. She wasn’t glad for what her familiar had done, not exactly, but neither was she unhappy about it. It didn’t matter how she felt in the end, because killing the one responsible hadn’t brought her family back.

“Maintain balance,” Vetiver muttered, using an old, well-worn towel to dry off the dishes. Still looking out into the emerald darkness behind her house, she repeated the litany that had been instilled in her since birth. But the world wasn’t balanced and she was only one witch. How was that fair?

Ball leaned heavily against her, his shoulder pressing into her hip. She reached down and absently scratched behind his ears. “Let’s take a walk.”

Chapter Two

Vetiver waited until she was absolutely certain none of her neighbors could see her before she let Ball off his leash and took down her hair from its messy ponytail. Her curls spilled free, the wind tugging at them playfully until they were a storm cloud about her shoulders and back. It was chilly; of course it was, this deep into September. But she was untouched by the cold.

She had changed clothes before leaving the house, leaving behind the trendy layers of mall-purchased tops and silver-riveted jeans dyed the deepest black. Now she wore a loose shift of the softest handspun cotton, the same smoky color of her eyes—she was only truly comfortable in the clothes she made herself. Manufactured clothes felt too much like plastic and metal on her skin. Her arms were bare but for an old silver armband that she always wore high up on her left forearm—she was a lefty, so the band must be worn on her projective hand, her hand of power. She was also barefoot, the better to feel the soft moss and rich earth sighing beneath her sensitive soles.

Vetiver knew if anyone saw her now, they would never have believed she was twenty-seven years old. Right now she looked no older than a teenager—the Device women were renowned for looking far younger than their years, which would be nice when she was in her sixties but was more of a bother now than anything. People hardly took her seriously as it was, unless they were island natives who knew her family well enough to respect her for her name, at least. But she would never complain aloud. It was good to know she would age gracefully. Right now, though she looked young, she felt old from the weight of her burdens.

Her vegetable garden was dormant for the rest of the year, the harvest over and done. Her plot of cotton and herbs—always planted intermingled to give the puffy white fibers a cleansing scent—had already been tilled, the earth covered and enriched

by a good infusion of manure, fallen leaves and fertility spells read from her Grimoire. She visited each tree, checking to ensure none were afflicted by parasites or disease. And the deeper she wandered into their midst, the easier she could breathe.

The connection she felt to her land was strong. Its vitality fueled her own. She tended it well and it tended her, so that now her stress melted down from the top of her head, her shoulders, her rigid back becoming more elastic until it seemed her cares and worries seeped out of her feet and were absorbed by the earth. This island may legally belong to many, though really it belonged in whole to her and her bloodline. But it seemed that these remaining acres were the most sacred, and so she kept to her property line as she strolled with her dog.

The breeze of the season was what struck her most vividly; it was so precious and unique to autumn. Opening her mouth to taste the air was like biting into a crisp apple, with all its tart effervescence exploding on her tongue. The ground was still warm from summer, but only just, and the grasses were cool against her toes. Newly fallen leaves, already crinkled and brown from being shed of their mother trees, rustled like the sigh of a mummy's corpse being moved. The scent of evergreens now pervaded, the sweeter scent of all the blooming flowers faded to memory. The land was in transition.

Vetiver was in transition too. She felt this truth deep in her soul and wondered what consequence it would bring.

Ball watched her with a patient eye. He was always patient. The only constant in the world she could really count on. He gave the appearance of acquiescence, but in reality he always led the way on their walks. It wasn't that he was in front of her—he was always positioned carefully at her side—but Vetiver knew very well that he was guiding her.

Her guardian knew exactly what she was about tonight. And he knew the perfect spot to see the thing done.

She hadn't consulted her Grimoire, or the many others that had been handed down through the hands of so many Devices who had come before her. There was no need.

She'd read them all too many times to think she'd missed anything important. No, the spell she needed wasn't in those old, fragile pages. It was writ on the tissues of her own heart. It just needed her voice to lend it power, and one of the few pieces of land that still held a whisper of the ancient purity that had once been so plentiful in this New World.

Ball led her to one such place now. A large stone, as big as a semi, planted in the ground at an angle so that it created a sort of lean-to, was the only object in the wide meadow. Under the lee of the rock and along its sides, an enormous patch of eternally blooming night jasmine colored the ground. This was a spot of earth that no frost or snow ever touched. It was a sacred space. And the rock itself was one of the four keystones on the island—four large, standing rocks that had no business being where they were other than to keep watch at each compass bearing on the land.

Vetiver had never used this particular spot to cast her voice into the four cardinal directions.

She'd never dared.

It didn't bother her. She accepted the truth that she wasn't a powerful witch, or even a particularly talented one. But she was a daughter of nature and that was more than enough for her to be satisfied. She wasn't proud. Nor was she power hungry. It wasn't that she wanted more magic for herself now, it was that she *needed* it, to see her job done.

She felt a pressing need for haste. Something dark and threatening loomed on the horizon, just beyond her sight. A wild, hungry thing knocked at the wards on the island and Vetiver was afraid it wasn't a metaphorical beast. With such imminent danger at hand, it would take all of her strength and effort to keep the island closed to the evil that wanted in so badly. And even trying her best might not be enough. In the past there had always been more than one Device witch invoking the autumnal spells. It was a precarious time. The world in a state of change, from living summer to dormant winter, made all the wards tremble. It took a lot of power to ensure their stability.

The binding spells must hold. This island was more than an island. It was a doorway. And the door must remain closed. Because on the other side of the threshold there lurked a threat to all who lived here, a threat Vetiver felt like a hand around her throat. Squeezing.

Careful not to trespass on the delicate flowers, Vetiver skirted the little garden and climbed up the backside of the stone, until she stood on the ledge overlooking the meadow.

The wind picked up, bringing with it the perfume of the jasmine blossoms. It wasn't a gentle gust, but it barely touched her and only disturbed her enough to lift her hair and cool her face. She was perfectly balanced on the edge of the enormous stone. There was no chance Vetiver would fall, though looking out over the dusk-kissed blooms from such a great height gave her a moment of vertigo. Her heart pounded, blood singing hot in her veins.

"I need your guidance," she told the wind, the trees and the sky. "My people are gone. I am the last of my line. I know it isn't my place to ask for your help with this burden, but I'm afraid that I can't guard this land alone. The world is moving too fast for me to protect my own home, much less this whole island and everyone who's moved here." Her teeth ground bitterly. "I feel the weight of too many greedy souls to guard and these people have no wish to receive the island's protection. Or mine."

Ball moved behind her and Vetiver looked down to find that he had produced her ebony-handled Athame. He deposited the worn dagger at her feet, having secreted it out here somehow without her noticing.

This wasn't what sent a mixture of excitement and dread through her. It was the spectacle of his giant head lowered, his eyes burning bright in the gathering shadows, his unwavering study of the patch of flora below their leaning stone. Something in his stance warned her to be cautious and she responded immediately, without question. He wasn't telling her to stop. He merely suggested that she tread carefully on this strange, unexplored terrain.

Blood...send it on the Wind.

The words, Ball's gravelly words, seared themselves into her brain.

Ball always knew what to do in these situations. Moments of decision were never unsettling to him as they could be to Vetiver. Her companion was omniscient in so many things, it was second nature to her now that she listen to him without question. So she bent and took the blade in her left hand. "A payment in blood, then."

Such a price was demanding, but her need was great. She'd never performed a spell that required her blood, though she knew from the books she'd studied her whole life that they weren't entirely uncommon. Dangerous but not forbidden—Ball would never have suggested it otherwise. Because she wished to receive such a great boon, she would spill the blood from her receptive hand. She would bleed, pray and hope for the best.

"Please light my path." She let the words float out into the air and wrapped her right fist around the naked blade. She squeezed and twisted, flaying open her skin on the razor-sharp edge. A spray of blood, black in the night like tiny shards of jet, flew out into the air, raining onto the thirsty flowers waiting down below. "Show me the way. I am ever your servant."

But damn, did it hurt.

The wind howled louder. The scent of night jasmine grew strong. The blossoms bloomed larger. Vetiver held the blade doggedly, her blood flowing faster. The pain went deeper than the cut, touching her soul. But it was a pain she weathered, knowing the virulence of it signified a great shifting in the universe.

For a while she failed to notice the ground bulging at the base of the rock. It wasn't until the stone under her feet cracked right through that she was startled back to reality. Ball was pulling at the hem of her shift insistently. Wrapping the bloodied blade and her oozing hand in the folds of the cloth, she let him guide her down safely.

The earth groaned and Vetiver grew fearful. What had she done to upset the elements so? Ball was pacing, her heart was pounding in her head and the ground

shook so hard she was dizzy. The trees wailed. Her hair blinded her, whipping about her head, stinging her exposed skin. The armlet burned where it wrapped around her muscle, glowing like Venus in a clear night sky.

The bed of flowers bulged upward violently, a geyser of soil and broken blooms spraying high into the air. The scent of old earth clouded her senses. The breeze was now a dervish, tearing at everything in its madness.

Two fists thrust themselves up into the air, breaking out from the ground.

Vetiver gasped, then shrieked when arms followed. Ball stood between her and whatever it was being birthed from the ground, but it was little comfort. A dirt-caked head emerged, then broad, heavily muscled shoulders. As she watched, Ball pressing her back, a man sprouted in front of them. Fully formed, hair straight and long, cut sharply just above his broad shoulders, clothed in unusually fashioned raiment, he climbed out of the womb of earth like a golem fashioned of blood and soil.

His gaze glowed like fire. A faceted flashing of amber, citrine and golden sapphire, his eyes were gemstones that glittered in the shadows. The dark lashes that rimmed his eyes like kohl were thick, and the same dark shade of his hair. His skin would be bronzed, she hazarded a guess, though it was impossible to be certain, shrouded as he was beneath the grime and layers of cloth he wore like a *sherwani*.

Her eyes fell down the length of him—and there was a lot of length of him to assess—and it was then she noticed the torn and bloodied material on his right calf. As she watched, he stumbled and swore in a language she didn't recognize. Ball moved aside, giving her the freedom to choose to approach the man if she so desired.

Despite the dangerous aura he wore, despite the warning clanging in her head, her heart moved her to action. He had come at her behest, was wounded and bleeding on her land, and so she was bound to welcome him. It was her responsibility as a daughter of nature to tend his wound, no matter how threatened she felt by all that had transpired in the past few seconds.

Vetiver was beside him instantly, unhesitatingly. He was so tall—perhaps just shy of seven feet, whereas she was only a few inches over five feet herself—so it was awkward work, but she managed to position her shoulder underneath one of his and tilt her hip so he could take weight off his freely bleeding leg.

“Can you walk?” she asked, raising her voice to be heard over the raging gale. “It isn’t too far to the house.”

He looked down his nose at her, haughty and proud, and it was then she realized how stunning he was. Not beautiful, not handsome, but an exotic mixture of both, doused with an inordinate amount of power that made her feel like a novice by comparison. She was suddenly aware of her plain shift, smeared with her own blood, and of her wild tangle of hair. Her lack of makeup. Her bare, dirtied feet.

He said something in a language that touched upon the infinite wonder in her spirit. But she didn’t understand his strange, musical words.

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“What is this place?” Now he spoke in English, his words biting and faintly accented, his sharp gaze scanning the terrain. “It is so heavily warded. You should not be here, human, this is surely perilous territory.”

Vetiver frowned and put her left hand around his hips, her fingers tingling where they rested just below his waist. “These are *my* lands. I live here,” she said defensively. “The wards are mine. We’re safe here.” For now.

He attempted to rebuke her offer of help, shrugging off her hand so that he could put weight on his bad leg. Beneath his dark complexion, his face bleached white as pain struck him. He made no sound, merely slumped against her, taking her to the ground with the full bulk of his solid weight. Vetiver yelped as she lost her footing. But Ball was there, his shoulder ready for her to pull herself and the half-conscious stranger back up.

She felt Ball touching her mind, saw a strange vision that stopped her in her tracks.

“Shut up!” she told him, agape.

Then, not waiting for a response she had no patience for, she resumed her forward motion as a misty rain began to slowly fall. It was only the power of the armlet she wore that enabled her to drag her heavy passenger to the safety of her home. That and Ball's great muzzle, nudging them forward out of the oncoming rain that followed the closing of her back door.

But the vision Ball had sent her lingered, and it terrified her.

It was the picture of a tiny, perfectly formed baby girl. With eyes like amber fire and dark waves of hair the color of Vetiver's own.

Chapter Three

Boreas eyed the little witch as she tended his wound.

Despite the fact that she herself had an injury on her hand, she took only a moment to ease her own discomfort with a strip of cloth to stem the slowly oozing cut. He didn't have to ask how she had hurt herself—it was plain she had broken a powerful binding spell. He would never have been able to pass through the doorway if she hadn't.

The pain on his bleeding calf had disappeared the moment her fingers touched it. He was dizzy from the Daemon venom swimming in his veins and from being so close to this enchanting creature. Sitting in her bed now, the woman perched on the edge near his foot, he could smell her woodsy, earthy scent on the patchwork quilt, a mixture of exotic herbs and spices that teased his every sense to hungry life. So he let her fuss over him, because it suited his own desires at the moment.

The paltry wound wasn't truly in need of her ministrations. It would heal on its own and indeed was already healing quickly. But he needed her to touch him. He wanted her to get accustomed to the feel of his skin beneath her delicate fingers. She would soon have more of him to touch, and for a surety he would leave no inch of *her* flesh unexplored.

How magnificent she was, this exotic creature. Delicately human yet aglow with an inner magic so vibrant it almost hurt him to gaze upon it.

Against all instincts that warned him away from human women, Boreas had claimed her the moment he'd seen his Wind playing through her inky waves of hair. She didn't realize it yet, but her Familiar did—Boreas clearly read in the beast's phosphorescent gaze that he acknowledged and accepted the inevitable union between Boreas and his mistress. Not that Boreas was asking permission. The witch was his, plain and simple.

She'd whispered to his Wind.

He was a Foil Caste Shikar, which meant he was master of the blade. But he was a rare multi-Caste, able to bend the element of wind and storm to his will. It spoke volumes that it was this woman's voice that had reached him through his element—she was as unique as he was. By her blood, spilled willingly, she was tied to him now, whether she realized it or not. She'd invited him in.

It had all happened so fast, this volatile attraction, this sudden need, not just to claim her but to *own* her. Perhaps Boreas should have been wary. But he wasn't. It felt right. Their meeting had not been coincidence. It was fate. Inevitability. She had been made just for him. Waiting just for him. And he for her.

"What are you called?" He scanned her from the crown of her shiny curls to the delicate lines of her face, hesitating on the ripe, raspberry lips long enough that his cock hardened into a lance, then he dropped his gaze down over her shoulders to the thick armlet she wore.

Now *there* was an object imbued with great magic. It resonated with the different gifts of a hundred witches. This woman's uncanny ability to speak through his Wind was not the least of her gifts.

She glanced at him, her multi-hued eyes vague, as if she wasn't sure what he was asking. A tiny pink gem glinted just below the left corner of her bottom lip.

"What is your name, woman?" He was lost in her strange, witchy eyes. They were so unique—unlike any he'd ever seen. The outer ring of color was crystalline aquamarine, the inner ring a much darker smoky gray, and the ring around her black pupils was iridescent, like quicksilver. It took great effort to break free of her exotic gaze and then he was caught up in admiring her other delightful charms.

Her raspberry mouth pursed and he wanted so badly to lean forward and lick it, taste its sweetness. But he found the discipline to wait. He wanted her name on his tongue before he took her beneath him and made her his.

"Vetiver," she answered tersely, wiping a medicinal-smelling antiseptic on his already-healing lacerations. "Vetiver Device."

"I am Boreas." The pride of his ancestry inflated his voice. "Of the Shikar."

She frowned but her gaze was on her work, not on his face, as he'd have preferred. Her nose wrinkled at the odor of the liniment, and he saw another pink gem in her right nostril. "Shikar?"

"Your people might know us as Elementals. If you know us at all." Still no shock or awe from her. "We are a race apart," he elaborated, watching her expression, studying her every feature. "We live in secret. But we fight to protect the Territories of mankind. An alliance against evil forces."

She only nodded, as if this were not an unusual revelation. And Boreas realized that, being what she was—a human of great knowledge and preternatural ability—she wasn't ignorant of the secrets hidden in every corner of the universe. Yes, she was a human, but more than that, she was a witch. Even now she was whispering spells over his injury, hurrying its healing along nicely. She naturally accepted the unexpected, the mysterious and the divine.

Vetiver was the first human he'd ever encountered with whom he could be completely himself.

No secrets. No lies.

Total liberation.

A deep, rigid tension he'd not even been aware of relaxed itself within him and he found it easier to breathe. The air seemed sweeter, the colors around him more vibrant, the blood in his veins alive as never before. The paltry ache of his wound ebbed away. He was intoxicated by this new wonder.

He eyed her luscious mouth, pursed now in concentration, and found himself wanting to taste her. To discover the flavor of her lips, her tongue, her very breath. That she could call him through his Winds—he'd heard her plea for help even through the layers of worlds that separated them—was proof enough she was meant for him. He'd

been semihard from the moment her husky, sensual voice had rung through his ears. Now he had a feverish need for her that intensified with every breath he took.

He swelled with elegant pain. She was so ripe! So lush.

"How did you get hurt?" she asked, breaking the fugue of lust that had overtaken his senses.

He scowled. It was a good thing she was still bent over his wound, else she would have been frightened by his expression, of that he had no doubt. But the scowl wasn't for her—it was directed at himself. "I was careless," he said tersely.

She looked up at him then, but didn't pale at the fierce look on his face as he'd expected she would. This thrilled him. By all the gods that ever were, Vetiver Device did not fear him. Warriors had cowered beneath his glare. He was fascinated by her bravery.

"Well, I didn't think you would have done this to yourself on purpose," she said impudently. "I'm just wondering what animal has venom like this. It doesn't respond to my medicine, but I dispelled it easily with the right words of power. It's supernatural in nature."

"It is indeed," he confirmed, pleased by her intuition. "The venom comes from the claws of a Daemon. It caught me just as your call reached me through the zephyrs."

Her fingers jerked on his leg and he wondered if he had managed to frighten her at last.

"I heard your whisper on the air and I will admit, it distracted me. The Daemon was wily and took advantage while it could."

"The Unnamed?" she whispered, casting her smoky-gray eyes to her Familiar. Some silent exchange was shared between them, making her shudder visibly. Then she shook her head slightly. "There's still time." She looked back at Boreas and finished tying a strip of bandage around his leg, jerking perhaps a little too hard than was necessary on the last knot. "What happened to the, um, the creature?"

"I killed it."

"Good," she said in a clipped voice.

Boreas didn't like the sudden tightness around her pert mouth. There was an overwhelming need driving him and he did not deny himself—he reached out and smoothed the tension on her lower lip with the pad of his thumb. He'd forgotten the last vestiges of dirt on his hands and saw the few specks of soil left behind with some dismay.

So he leaned forward and licked the dirt away.

Vetiver gasped. Her breath played over his tongue, filled with the warm flavors of nutmeg, vanilla and pumpkin, and he grew hungry for a deeper taste. He was a warrior who took what he wanted, when he wanted it, and now was not the time to be timid.

There wasn't much of it left, time.

The tumult approached. Not just in the air outside her home, but in the very core of the island itself. If Vetiver didn't realize it yet, she soon would. He must seize the moment if he was to have any chance at the prize.

He grabbed the sides of her head in his hands and pulled her face closer, branding her lips with the searing passion of his kiss. There, between his palm, he held all that she was, all her memories, thoughts and desires, and found he wanted to know each and every bit of her as well as he knew himself.

He plundered. He pillaged. He claimed ownership. He had her breath in his mouth, in his head like a breeze, and craved more. He drew her gasps deeper into his lungs, laving the roof of her mouth with his tongue, reveling in every nuance of her lips, which seemed perfectly fashioned to fit against his.

The thick, curling tendrils of her hair wrapped around his fingers like vines. Her tiny hands were on his shoulders, her fingernails exquisitely sharp, digging into the tunic he wore, testing the muscles beneath.

He sucked her upper lip between his. Tilted her head in his hands and sipped every exhalation into his being. Needing more, needing it now, he lowered one hand to her generous tits and squeezed one firm globe.

Then his world exploded into emerald green, blinding him, searing his eyes.

He twirled, flying up off the bed, flipping in the air and landing on the balls of his feet. Spots danced in his vision, his eyes watering madly. But he was ready to face the threat that had caught them unawares and interrupted them so rudely.

"You dick!" Vetiver snarled, falling off the edge of the bed onto the floor—witch she may be, but her reflexes were still human. But when Boreas moved to help her, she spat at him like a cat. "Back off. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Boreas blinked away the burn of the light—*her* light, by Grimm—and frowned. "Do you not enjoy kisses then?"

"Kisses, yes." She gained her feet and faced him, holding out her left hand in front of her like a shield. Indeed it served her well as one, for it glowed near as bright as a neon sun. "Not suffocation. You were robbing all my breath, what kind of kiss is that?"

As strong as he was, Boreas could not abide sunlight. Very few of his people could, and even those lucky few were limited to short periods of exposure only. This light emanating from her burned like stinging nettles. He felt a surge of fury bubbling inside him. How dare she spurn his advance? She had kissed him back; he'd felt her tongue play against his most willingly. Now was not the moment to be coy, damn her. "You liked my taste."

Vetiver's swollen mouth gaped. She scoffed, rolled her eyes and put her right hand on her hip. "Whatever. But next time, when you 'kiss' a girl, don't suck all her breath down. Humans need to breathe." She looked at her Familiar and scowled. "What is it, Ball?"

The hulking brute stared at her, huffed and left the room.

"Fine! Leave me to fend for myself, you traitor. He should have asked first. He shouldn't have smothered me!"

The Familiar didn't respond in any manner Boreas could detect.

Now Boreas felt a burning heat suffuse his cheeks and he fumed, waffling between shame and indignation. "No one has ever spoken ill of my kisses before. Many a female would attest to my skill."

"Oh really?" Her features twisted. "How many—wait, never mind. That's none of my business." The glow of her left hand was waning, dimming, dying out. She used it to pinch the bridge of her nose, as if she were suffering a headache. "Don't get your panties in a wad. I'm not saying you're a bad kisser, Boreas. You're a good enough—"

He was on her before she could finish speaking. He put his arms around her waist, lifted her up against him and kissed her.

This time, he breathed *into* her.

This time he filled her with the danger of his Winds.

This time there was no caution in his kiss. No restraint. He gave as much as he'd dared take before, unleashing the squall inside him, letting it rage into her, unchecked.

This time her arms went around his neck as she held on in the gale and kissed him back just as hungrily as he kissed her. Unafraid. Uninhibited. His gale did not threaten her.

Vetiver was his equal.

Chapter Four

A tempest lashed through the maze of the Device home. It tore open the doors, sent papers flying, overturned an easy chair. It whipped Vetiver's hair around them, but left his hair untouched. It tugged at her dress, played across her bare skin like a thousand hungry fingers, but it ignored Boreas completely. He stood in the eye of it. Unmarked.

It was his magic.

She could smell his signature on the gust, filling her head with images of lust and carnality. A mixture of damp, green, growing things. Shelled nuts left to cure in the hot sun. Dark, rich soil, fertile for planting. Freshly cut trees, sticky with sap. Sweet herbs. The cold signature of spring water bubbling up from a granite well. The acrid bite of ozone before a lightning strike. The far, shady hearts of unexplored forests smothered in moss. This perfumatory intoxicated her.

But it was his kiss that held her spellbound.

Where before he'd taken her breath, now he breathed for her. He filled her with his essence. Imbued her with his power, making her a part of his storm, not just its target. His breath reached down into her and awakened every erogenous zone she possessed – and some she'd been completely oblivious to before this.

Her neck fell back in a swoon that melted her whole body to pliancy. Boreas' lips moved to scorch a trail down her jaw, before raining a volley of kisses on the curvature of her throat. He was pressed to her, full length, leaving no doubt in her mind just how determined he was to go beyond kisses and breezes.

The heat of his skin seared her nipples until they became hard. Until they ached. Her breasts felt heavy, swollen. Just as he was swollen. His cock was prodding the vee of her thighs in a thick, solid extension of his desire. The muscles on his chest were dense and strong, the bulge of his biceps roped and rigidly flexed. Though her feet

dangled several inches off the ground, he showed no strain in holding her, keeping her tightly imprisoned in the cage of his arms while his whirlwind lashed her, whipped her, pleased her.

Her toes curled. His Wind massaged her breasts, buttocks and legs. It draped her shoulders with layers of tickling, teasing coolness.

Vetiver was thrown into the vortex of such exquisite sensuality that she almost came when he pressed his hot lips to her madly beating pulse. He drew her hypersensitive skin between his teeth, stinging her. He sucked hard, marking her. This delicious pain hit a reflex inside her body, squeezing her womb. The breeze lifted her legs and Vetiver eagerly wrapped them around him, hooking her ankles in the small dip at the base of his very long spine, just above his clenched buttocks.

He put his hand under her bottom and pulled her closer.

It was all she could do to not to gyrate against him. Her swollen vulva rested on the ridge of his desire. His length pressed against the seam of her labia and she was instantly damp behind the trivial scrap of her satin panties. The pressure was enough to make her crave more. She tightened her legs. The flexing of her thighs felt exquisite, so she tightened them further.

His first kiss had been a warning. This kiss was a promise of forever. And ever.

She never stood a chance.

He ground his hips into hers, rooting deeper between her legs. She might as well have been naked. He almost entered her through their clothes. His lean hips undulated in circles, dancing them together in swirls upon the floor with his agile footwork. She couldn't help it, she moved with him, rolling her hips.

All the while, the gale ravaged across the island, through her home, around her limbs and hair.

Then Vetiver was on the bed again, this time flat on her back, her buttocks on the edge of the mattress with her legs still locked around him. He leaned over her, a dark

cloud of hair, a volcanic glow of amber eyes, and brushed the curls from her face with his fingertips. "How do you like my kisses now, woman?"

She gaped, dumbstruck. Was he just doing this to prove a point?

But it seemed he required no words from her, just the response of her body to his. He slowly tugged the tiny straps of her dress down her shoulders and pushed the material over her breasts, down to her waist, freeing her to the touch of his hands. He cupped both breasts and used his thumbs and forefingers to twist and tug her nipples until they were long and stiffly pouting.

He licked his lips and bent his sleek head to her, drawing one nipple tightly between his lips while he tended the other with his free hand. His hair was a cool wash over her sweat-dampened skin and she gloried in it.

Boreas ground into her, as insatiable as his Winds, untamable as his storm, it didn't matter that she was still half dressed. He pumped his hips between the wide spread of her legs and rubbed himself against her until she was moaning in short, gasping notes of desperate pleasure.

His hot lips moved to her other breast, the wet nipple left behind suddenly cold and bereft without his tongue playing over it. But now he drew a nipple so deeply into his mouth it seemed he would swallow her breast whole, like a plum too ripe and juicy to bite, but too sweet to waste.

Her heart dropped at his feet, only too eager to let him have his way. She'd never felt so naked. So raw. And he wasn't even inside her yet.

But he *was* inside her. In her head. Her spirit. Inside her cunt and womb. He flew into her like his breeze, blowing away all caution. All reservation and doubt. Baring her. Readyng her for total domination.

Leaving her no choice. It was succumb, surrender, submit. Slave to his pleasure. Her pleasure. Servant to his desire. Her desire. Vessel for his need. Their need. She would be his or she would cease to exist, it was that simple. Without this, without them, half of her was dead already.

She was soaking wet through her panties, dampening the front of his trousers. So close to release. To jumping off a cliff she'd never guessed could exist, into an abyss that would bind them in shadow forever...

There was a ringing in her ears.

"Wait," she gasped.

Boreas pumped his hips against her and she saw stars dancing at the edges of her vision. His mouth sucked her nipple noisily.

There would be no going back after this. She felt it in the domineering air he wore like a crown. He was relentlessly staking his claim on her...

"No!" she yelled over the roar of the tempest and the roar of the blood in her veins. "I am Vetiver Device, of no small power, and I will not be owned by you or any man!" She shoved at him, feeling the armlet burn low on her biceps, branding her skin as it awoke with her sudden rage.

He ignored her, sucking her breast deep into his mouth, his fingers bruising her hips where he held her still to accept his movements between her legs.

She put her fingers in his hair, felt a moment's hesitation—his hair was so silky it made her ache, made her want to give him all of her, tore away her will—but she shoved the weakness aside with a curse. "I belong to myself. You will not dominate me!"

The fire in the armlet zinged down her arm, lighting up her hand like a white dwarf star.

Boreas roared and jumped back, out of her light. The side of his head where her projective hand had touched was red and angry. Vetiver sat up and straightened her clothing with her right hand. It was awkward work, but she was too intent on this new and amazing talent she'd unearthed inside her, too curious about why her light should hurt an Elemental like Boreas and grateful that she had some weapon against him.

Boreas panted. His loose trousers did nothing to hide his desire. His cock was alarmingly large, clearly swollen, tenting the damp material at his crotch—damp from her body's eager response to him. "I would have you as my equal," he growled. "It is your own stubborn nature that makes you feel threatened by what brews between us. There is no time to woo you gently. And you are not one for soft-spoken promises and light caresses. You are a woman of prodigious passions. I felt your response as keenly as my own."

There was a ringing in her ears. "We have other things to think about..." She knew the excuse was lame before she started talking. She wanted him so badly it scared her.

That was the real problem. It scared her.

The ringing in her ears wasn't abating. If anything, it seemed louder now that her head was clearing of the crimson haze of pleasure, frustration and anger.

"Do not run from this, Vetiver. You called me, remember?"

"It wasn't a cosmic booty call," she snapped, though the faint image of a baby flickered in her head. "I need your help."

"And you will have it." His voice turned cryptic. "And me as well."

Ball came bounding into the room, growling low in his throat. Vetiver spared him a glance and experienced a frantic urgency that had nothing to do with the shifting of her world in Boreas' embrace.

"Those are weather sirens." She turned eyes wide with dazed fright to Boreas' stoic features, still ruddy from passion. The ringing in her ears was the wail of the early warning system of an incoming gale. Already she knew Boreas enough that she could read the answer to her unspoken question in his eyes. But he spoke the words anyway.

"My hurricane waits on the ocean, not far off the coast."

A hurricane? Vetiver shot to her feet, reeling. "Well stop it! We have to evacuate the island first." Then it dawned on her. This was how Boreas would help her. With the island mostly vacant, no one would interfere with the Warding ritual.

"All humans cower before a storm. They are already on the move," he confirmed. "The bridge to the mainland will see them all to safety if they are not too stupid to linger."

Ball huffed and paced. Something else nagged at Vetiver, deep within the corners of her mind. Something wasn't right. And she wasn't seeing it yet. But it was there, lurking. And it was bothering Ball, too, she could see.

"The equinox isn't for two more days," she reasoned. "You can't maintain a storm for that long without garnering too much unwanted attention to this place. I can't afford that—this business needs to be as secret as possible."

Boreas tilted his head, lending him a predatory air. His eyes blazed. "The cyclone doesn't need two days to serve its purpose."

Ball growled again.

Vetiver swallowed down a sneaking suspicion that made her skin crawl. "But then everyone will come back before I've had time to perform the ritual, making the evacuation pointless. Unless..." She faltered, eyeing him. "What are you planning, Boreas? What are you going to do with my island?"

His indigo lashes blinked slowly. "You called me, witch. I came." He smiled, a sly twist of his full lips that made her nipples stiffen. "This island is no longer yours to guard. Are you not grateful so weighty a burden is lifted?"

She gasped. "No!" Ball nudged her side and she shoved his head away impatiently. "My family has kept watch over this island for over three hundred years. This is our land—"

"The land belongs to itself. As you belong to yourself—don't deny it, you just said the words. The land will not be owned by any mortal. It warrants that much respect from all, but most especially from a magical being like yourself. It knows the role it plays—a doorway to evil—and it understands that it can no longer be sealed shut. It is over."

Before she knew what she'd intended, Vetiver threw out a surge of light from her hand. But Boreas anticipated her lash of anger and had crossed to a far corner of the bedroom in the blink of an eye. "Damn you!" she cried, her light dying. "You can't do this! You cannot take what's mine."

"It is done." He enunciated each word with a step in her direction, until they stood toe to toe. "You are the last of your line. I heard you speak the words. You cannot be the sole custodian of so great a responsibility. Anything could happen, an accident, an illness, and you would be gone. Your protection would be gone. You are too fragile to risk. The land knows this and so should you."

"Then help me," she pleaded. "Stay with me and help me set the wards. Don't destroy it because I had a moment of weakness. Give me a chance."

"What do you ward against? Do you even know?" His teeth were bared. "What fears do you have that would spur so vibrant a woman into wasting her life protecting these sheep who disdain her efforts?"

It seemed he knew her every secret. She was ashamed now that in her moment of despair, she'd called on him. She was alarmed at what she feared he meant to do now that he'd been called forth.

"What do you ward against," he repeated, towering over her like a threat.

"You know," she said faintly.

"I know, yes. I know well what you fear. But do you understand what you face? Tell me what you protect these people from, Vetiver Device? What frightens you so much that you broke a binding spell to summon me?"

Her hands were fists at her sides and she brought them up now to pound on his wide chest. "The Unnamed! This island is a doorway to their world and if I don't set the wards, bind the gates shut, then they'll spill out and consume everyone."

"You have known this all your life but you wait this long to call for aid?" He scoffed.

"I wasn't even sure help would come if I asked," she admitted desperately. "And until recently, I've had help. But my mother and grandmother are dead. I'm not strong enough alone."

His features hardened. "Now I am here. And my hurricane will see an end to any threat."

"Boreas, if I can set the spells, the island will be safe again." She thumped his chest once more.

"Until the next celestial event approaches and demands new spells from you," he pointed out ruthlessly. "You cannot do this alone forever. The power needed to see it through must be immense. You would burn out quickly."

"That's why I asked for help!" she yelled. "Just lend me your strength."

"It will not be enough. My magic is not like yours." He caught her fists. "I am a Shikar. Killing Daemons is my purpose. Protecting humanity is the responsibility of all my people, one we do not take lightly. You are but a lone witch and a human. So much has been asked of your bloodline already. Too much is asked of you now. Your job here is done."

"I can do this." But Vetiver knew from the determination she read in his gaze that she was grasping at straws. "I just need to divert everyone's attention, so there's no chance I'm interrupted at a crucial moment."

"Vetiver, if this island is a doorway, you are the key that keeps it locked. The equinox is a moment when all locks turn against the key holders. I am the storm that will splinter all doors into dust, rendering them useless." He peered into her, through her. "There are always three spells to bind, three spells to break. You broke one when you spent your blood and invited me here through the keystone—"

Vetiver jerked her hands, but he held fast. "No. I won't let you do this."

"Two remain," he continued relentlessly. "It is only a matter of time before they are rendered sterile now that the first and most powerful is broken."

Ball was barking. The gale was loud enough now to nearly drown out his wrath.

“I will protect you,” Boreas promised, bringing her fists to his lips. “But the island will fall. Before the equinox is upon us, this land will rest beneath the waves.”

Ball threw back his head and howled just as every window in the Device house exploded outward.

The floorboards cracked, splintered and flew up in a geyser of debris.

Chapter Five

Hell was unleashed in her home. Vetiver Device had never dreamt such a sight and for a moment she feared she'd lost her mind. But she had read the myths in her ancestors' Grimoires. It was only years of intense study that kept her sane now, as the horrifying monstrosities crawled up through her broken floor and lumbered toward her, fangs dripping, obsidian claws as long as bayonets, flesh rotting and smelling of damnation. There were five that she saw, but the endless reverberation of their growls warned her there could be many more.

The Unnamed were earthbound at last. And on her watch.

Vetiver tasted failure like sour milk on her tongue. It stained her heart with the resignation that her island was indeed doomed. She hadn't known she was breaking any bounds when she'd asked the island for help. In her rash ignorance, she had allowed the Unnamed a way through.

Ball's fur quivered. He stood between his mistress and the closest monster—its flesh bubbling and weeping thick, tar-colored pus—and his body swelled to an enormous size. His bones cracked. His form morphed as spines erupted along the length of his back. His fur fell away, exposing a reptilian hide of scales. His eyes bled crimson rage. A belch of flame erupted from Ball's snarling mouth, catching the monster before it could strike Vetiver, launching it into the air, through the ceiling of the room, a hurtling ball of fire that screamed with the voices of a thousand lost souls.

Vetiver was frozen in fear, but Ball's rough lizard head herded her from the room. Meanwhile, Boreas himself had transformed. His hair whipping around him like a typhoon, blazing white-blue blades erupted from the tips of his fingers like claws, which he used to slice their attackers. He ran, bounced one foot off a wall, flipped to the

side, landed behind one particularly brutish foe and cut him in half with one swipe of his hand.

He moved so fast, Vetiver could only see this small glimpse before Ball had pressed her out into the hallway.

But here they met with more danger. Just one Daemon, but it was so massive it blocked the entire width of the hall, cutting them off. Ball breathed fire but the Daemon roared, its fetid breath holding the jut of flame at bay. Vetiver couldn't think, much less plan an attack, but it seemed her heritage sang rich in her blood this night. Her body turned of its own accord. Her hand reached out, grabbed a teardrop paperweight on the old, narrow buffet. It was made of crystal—a heated mixture of sand, quartz and lead oxide, a mélange of natural materials that seemed to nudge alive the magical center of her.

Vetiver felt her body as if she were apart from it. It was a lightning rod, along which the mysteries of the universe raced, imbuing the paperweight with immense power.

Her hand felt as if she'd doused it in liquid nitrogen.

Her bones felt as if they were made of something radioactive and her skin thrummed madly around her skeleton.

Her hand hefted the paperweight, which glowed a vibrant green, and threw it into the Daemon's open, snarling mouth.

The Daemon's head exploded.

Ball looked back at her and Vetiver shrugged, wide-eyed. "Just go with it. I am," she said through numb lips. Together they raced to the front door, she and her dinosaur Familiar.

Outside, the earth vomited up more of the creatures. But Vetiver vaulted over the porch railing, her bare feet slapping onto the wet grass. She would have run then. But something in the ground gave her pause and she stopped still.

You may be the last of your line, the trees whispered. *But you are not the least*, added the rocks. *You are a Device*, the soil murmured. *You are our daughter*, all the voices of nature chimed, in a chorus that drowned out any lingering fear or doubt.

Vetiver felt her heart soar and, with the aid of all the elements of nature on her side, she faced down the advancing army. The wind picked up, the rain fell harder and thunder shook the sky.

With a smile playing on her mouth, she felt the whole of her body light up like the day.

* * * * *

Boreas was frantic. He'd lost sight of Vetiver in the fray. He'd also lost count of how many Daemons he'd dispatched. There was a pile so high around him it was impossible to gauge an exact figure, but there were dozens at least. He knew if he didn't burn their hearts to dust they would rise again, but he had no time, he had to find Vetiver first.

Had they taken her? He felt his heart stop, terrified by the idea of what they would do to her when they caught her. Would they eat her, like they did the majority of their prey? Or would they take her prisoner as they had at least one other powerful psychic in recent years?

He would tear the world apart at the seams if they had her. He would not rest until she was returned to safety, even if it required absolute destruction of the planet.

Boreas charged from the bedroom, shouting her name. He sent his Winds to search and blew the walls apart like rice paper.

The house was in ruin. Vetiver was nowhere to be found inside. He exploded out the front door like a cannonball, sending timbers and debris about him like toothpicks.

What he saw tripped him up, stunned him, and he landed hard on his knees, unmanned before the spectacle unfolding in front of him. But he was too stunned to care about his disgrace. He was undone.

It was a siege. Pure and simple. The goal, the prize, was the witch. And his witch was standing her ground.

Boreas wanted to shout at her to run. He wanted to throw all of his power to her, to lift her up and away from danger. But he couldn't speak. He couldn't move. He could only watch in disbelief.

Vetiver was blazing, alight with a savage power that humbled his own.

She was glorious.

And without mercy.

Her entire body shone as bright as a dying star, blotting out every shadow the beasts might have found shelter within.

Boreas was blinded and had to turn his face away from the heat baking off Vetiver in suffocating waves. But in the short glance he'd managed, he saw the fierce warrior grin stretching her lips. The twenty Daemons rushing her. The reptilian form of her Familiar at her side, aglow with his own fire dancing beneath tough scales. The image was seared into his mind's eye, engraved on his heart.

Her courage was breathtaking.

Her magic was terrifying to behold.

The sun was anathema to Daemons. More so than it was to any Shikar. Vetiver's very form had become their greatest enemy.

In doing so, she had become the greatest weapon against the Horde that Boreas had ever dreamed of. She'd been created for this battle. She had been born to fight this war.

At his side. His mate. His equal.

The Daemons screamed as their bodies were set alight. Eyes watering, Boreas couldn't stop himself from once more bearing witness to this wonder. The monsters' flesh bubbled. Their eyes exploded. Their bones crumbled and their voices faded, died. As quickly as they'd risen, they'd fallen.

All that was left behind was ashes, heavy and wet from the rain, sinking into the grass and soil.

The heat ebbed, the light dimmed, and Boreas looked at the woman he vowed would belong to him forever. He breathed her name. "Vetiver."

Her multi-hued, smoke-gray eyes were silver and still bright, wide in her delicate face. The piercings in her face were glowing red and little tufts of steam floated up where the rain sizzled on her bare shoulders. Her dress was plastered to her body, wet and transparent, revealing all her lush femininity.

His breath stilled in his lungs and lust thickened his shaft, tightening his sac. He wanted inside of her. Now.

With a short, bewildered laugh, she pitched forward, unconscious.

Boreas caught her before she could hit the ground. He was almost afraid to touch her, but when he did her skin was merely warm, not scalding as he'd feared. He lifted her up in his arms and carried her into the trees behind her home, Ball keeping pace with him, tendrils of fire curling about the corners of his mouth.

When he'd carried her to the keystone where she'd first called him, the only safe place he could think of, he placed her gently on the broken blooms scattered over the ground and tucked her beneath the shelter of the boulder. He eyed the beastie that was her Familiar. "Can you go back and destroy the bodies in the house so that I can stay with her?" he asked in a low voice, barely louder than the blitzing air, afraid of drawing attention should more enemies be lurking close.

Ball huffed, as if such a request were insulting to his great talents. Still, he turned and raced for the house, leaving his mistress in Boreas' protection.

Chapter Six

Vetiver awoke to see her house engulfed by fire.

There were better ways to greet the dawn.

Her head was in Boreas' lap. His hand was stroking her hair and he, too, was watching the spectacle of her home – the last tie to her heritage and family – go down in a blaze of glory.

The sun had not yet breached the horizon, and with the storm still raging, the clouds dense overhead, it would not touch the island today. The wind was still up, the trees bending at alarmingly sharp angles, but none of it touched them where they rested underneath their shelter of granite. The ground was still littered with blooms from where Boreas had sprouted – had it only been last night? – and the freshly overturned soil was a strong scent in her nose, but not strong enough to blot out the acrid odor of her burning home.

It was over.

Everything she owned consumed by hungry flames.

Everything that had owned *her*, that held her to this place, was torn away; dead roots to a tree that would bear no more fruit.

The Grimoires, the antiques, the heirlooms, the foundation of her life and the lives of so many of her ancestors, all of it transmuted to ash in but a few hours.

She couldn't help but feel a little lost.

Who was she now? A woman without a home. A witch without a purpose. Her New England island was doomed to a watery grave. And she had nothing save the dirty clothes on her back and the silver cuff she'd managed to keep secured on her arm.

All that remained of the Device family wisdom now slumbered in her memory. Long days of study at her granny's knee, Ball at her mother's side while she went about making a poultice for some friendly islander. Sleepless nights spent worrying over the next Warding ritual when she'd inherited her powers, and Ball along with them. The sudden loss of her mother and grandmother, the comfort she'd taken in all they'd left behind for her. The many tears she'd shed as she had worked hard to memorize every spell her mother had written, every recipe her grandmother had saved during the course of her long life, the better to help them live on when the time came for Vetiver herself to give birth to a Device girl child.

If only she had known the hand of fate was guiding her down this path, she would have secreted the Grimoires away, off the island, stored away for her descendents.

It was a strange legacy, stranger still to be cast loose from the moors of the responsibilities that had accompanied it. It was all Vetiver knew.

And now it was over.

She sat up and looked at Boreas. This strange, electrifying man who had swooped into her life, with hell close on his heels. She didn't blame him. What had happened was destined. She'd felt it when she had first come here to call upon the elements for their aid, though she hadn't understood it at the time. Nor did she feel bitter that it was she who had been chosen to enter this fray and meet the Unnamed foe their family had feared for so many centuries.

What she felt was a confusing mix of defiance against her lot, resignation to it, anticipation of what might await her next and a deep appreciation that she had this strong, fearless warrior at her side to help her weather the storm he'd brought to liberate her.

"Will more of them come?" she asked, her voice husky from sleep and roiling emotions.

"Not while the sun is up." His voice was a deep rumble, music to her ears after the cacophony of the night.

"But won't the clouds give them cover?" She looked at him pointedly. "You seem just fine out here."

"They cannot abide *any* amount of sunlight. The clouds protect me, not them."

The air screamed around them as if in agreement. "What about when night falls?"

"If the island remains, they will come," he said simply.

"So the wards are broken."

"Not all." He looked at her. "Breaking through this," he patted the rich earth beneath the great stone that sheltered them, "was the first spell undone. I believe the destruction of your house was the second."

Vetiver didn't want to ask, but needed to anyway. "What is the third?"

"You." His eyes glowed in the darkened shadows of the tempest. "The magic in your blood."

"So I'll just leave."

"And in doing so, you will completely unbind the island. The Daemons have your scent, they will hunger for your strength. They will never stop hunting you, Vetiver." His amber eyes regarded her solemnly. "They will flow out through the portal like an unbreakable tide."

"Then I'll kill 'em," she said, raising her head proudly. "You saw what I did to them. What I can do."

"And look at what it cost you. You've been asleep for hours. I couldn't wake you. Neither could your Familiar. You were exhausted, and those were but a few Daemons you faced. Their true numbers are unimaginable. From all you've said, from what I've seen, they have been waiting for generations to consume a Device witch and all the power she offers. You have proven a feast worth fighting for. They will not waste this opportunity to pluck you ripe from the tree."

"I'll kill every last one of them before I let them overrun my land," she swore. "Ball will help me. You have no idea how strong we can be."

"You won't have to be strong. The island will sink and the portal between worlds will be closed." Boreas' preternatural gaze darted out toward the darkest clouds in the sky then back to her. "My storm will drown it out."

"No, Boreas." Vetiver shook her head, pursing her lips against a sharp pang of desperation. "Please. It doesn't have to be like that."

He caught her chin in his hand. "How beautifully you plead. And how dearly I would love to give you all you wished." In his eyes there lurked an apology, but stronger than that was his will to follow through with what he had started. With what *she* had started when she'd called him forth. "But in this I cannot compromise. Now the doorway is opened. Daemons will come. You know the people of this island. What would they do if they were exposed to such danger? If they learned that every dark fairy tale was real? That monsters like Daemons roam the darkness? Normal human beings cannot fathom such mysteries without being driven to acts of madness, you understand this."

Vetiver swallowed. Damn him, he was right. Most people couldn't handle living next door to a girl with strange eyes, morbid clothes and body jewelry. No one she knew would understand or accept the very real conditions of living amongst supernatural monstrosities that dined on flesh and supped on blood whenever the sun set below the shoreline.

There would be chaos in the streets.

The Unnamed were evil. But human beings were violent. Often times they could be cruel. Combine all three ingredients and the recipe spelled apocalypse with a capital *please*. Life wouldn't be worth living in a world like that.

"What should I do?" she asked, pleading. "This life is all I've ever known. What can I possibly do now?"

"Accept fate. And move on with me." He reached for one of her hands and threaded their fingers together.

Vetiver caught her breath. His skin was warm. His grip strong. And he was lovely.

"You called. I came." He smiled, as if it were all so simple. Maybe it was. "You desire me." His gaze fell to her breasts and she felt her nipples respond immediately. "I desire you. We can fight side by side, ensuring the legacy of your bloodline. None of your efforts here need go to waste."

She felt a thrill, but one last vestige of reality intruded. "It won't work." Would it? He wasn't even human. How could they ever really be together? Desire was one thing. He was talking about a whole new way of life.

"You are a warrior like none I've ever seen." He challenged her with his gaze to be courageous. "The war I fight is your war too. It is only the battleground that will change, my little witch." He brushed a kiss over her knuckles and bared his white teeth in a smile.

Vetiver conceived every carnal promise lurking in the deep pools of his amber eyes and realized she wanted all he was offering and more. "I'm scared," she admitted.

"I will keep you safe, Vetiver. No harm will come to you." He tugged her hand and pulled her across his lap, swooping in for a kiss.

Vetiver put her hand in the silky hair at his nape and pulled his head down for another kiss. This time, for the first time, she put all her feelings into the meeting of their lips. All her fears—of him and all the emotions he inspired within her. All her doubts—of her future, the new and unmapped path wide open before her bare feet. And all of her desires, because she *did* want him, more than she would have ever dreamed possible. These emotions flavored her kiss, and she tasted the need and pleasure in his mouth generously returned.

Vetiver pulled back and grinned at him, then jumped up and raced away, knowing he would give chase, thrilling to the danger of this ardent hunt. Gusts whipped her hair and she let it fly behind her like a cloud of ink, racing into the trees she'd known all her life. The woods welcomed, opening a path that would not impede her. No thorn would touch her. No root would trip her. Though this land was doomed, it knew her and loved her still.

Boreas played the game, letting her hear his footfalls behind her while he chased. Vetiver laughed and rain drenched her like a refreshing shower, even as it stung her skin until she was rosy. The sky rumbled with thunder, the ground beneath her feet trembling in answer. Anticipation rent the air with a static charge.

That wavering image Ball had shown her, of a girl child with Vetiver's hair and Boreas' eyes...it tugged at her, propelling her, exhilarating even as it frightened.

If this was to be her last run through the forest, Vetiver swore it would be a memorable flight. She whispered to earth to lend her speed. She greeted each tree by name as she passed and bade it farewell. Thorn and brush grew swiftly at her murmured command, hindering Boreas' pursuit, eager to join the play.

If Boreas wanted her, he would have to fight for her.

No witch worth her broom would settle for less.

Vetiver would not settle for less. Boreas was a warrior used to domination. She would show him that no Device witch, especially this one, was easily dominated. He may tame wind and storm, but *she* would never be tamed. Vetiver Device was awakened in her full power and it rivaled that of any Shikar, radiating from within.

And so she ran. Not to flee. But to celebrate the destiny that chased hot on her heels, enjoying the calm before the clamor.

Chapter Seven

A gust lifted her. This was no rogue breeze from the hurricane about to make landfall. Boreas had sent it to slow her down. Vetiver laughed merrily and turned into it, using it to gather even more speed, trumping his move. But he had more tricks up his sleeve, more winds to send her way.

Her body twirled, whirled, all motion. She looked down to find she was running in midair. The ground inches below her bare toes. As if ascending a flight of invisible spiral stairs, she went higher with each step. The earth fell away. She was no longer tied to it.

A particularly strong puff tore her clothes from her body. She was naked to the storm and to the eyes of the male hunting her. All that remained of her former self was the heavy armlet, but it slept and offered no assistance to her plight.

Boreas caught her just as she cleared the canopy of trees. Looking down, she realized this was exactly where he wanted her.

This was where they would join.

In the event horizon of his typhoon, he marked her as his own. And Vetiver Device, last witch of Merrymint Island, let her warrior have his way, because in doing so she was having her way too.

His arms caged her. His chest to her back, he pressed a hot kiss on her bare shoulder. Raw lust made her muscles tense. Her heart was beating so hard she was certain he could hear its drumming over the roar of the hurricane.

He ran his palms down her stomach. Lower. Her skin was slick from the rain, hot from her run. One of his hands insinuated itself between her legs, while the other curved around her waist. He turned their bodies round and round in midair, until she

was dizzy with more than desire. His clever fingers slid between her legs and probed until he discovered her wet, aching clit with the rough pads of his fingertips.

Boreas turned her to face him. He, too, had shed his clothing, all of his sensuous, exotic skin bare to her gaze. He was bronze all over, hairless chest heavy with muscle, abdomen firm and ripped, a perfect six pack above the line of muscle that led in a downward vee to his loins.

His cock was thick and long. The crown of his erection was wide, round and rouged with his surging blood. His sac was heavy and tight beneath the base, which was wider than her wrist, and much thicker around. She felt a thrill of danger. To take him, she would have to be pliant and ready or it would hurt.

She was already pliant. Wet. Swollen. Eager. Any pain would be a pleasure and he would stretch her so tight she was already panting with eager anticipation for the experience.

He lifted her up with his zephyr and settled her over him. She willingly opened her legs and wrapped them around his waist. His cock probed her slit, and with his hands buttressing her ass, he smeared himself in her silken moisture.

“You’re hot as flame,” he growled, biting her mouth in not so gentle nibbles.

“You’re as hard as stone,” she gasped, licking his full bottom lip.

She felt the head of his cock positioned at her entrance and knew a brief moment of doubt. But he tore through it, as he tore through what slight barrier remained of her virginity, and claimed her as none had dared before.

Vetiver would have screamed. But Boreas stole her ability to breathe, much less cry out. He moved deeper and she realized with a start that he wasn’t even halfway inside her yet. It was all she could do not to swoon.

With one mighty thrust he seated himself inside, every last inch filling her whole being. Her vision swam. He rained kisses on her face and sipped at tears she’d not even known she’d shed.

There was no more pain. Now there was only the slow burn of desire.

“Move,” she shamelessly demanded. “Move, damn you.”

“Wait a moment,” he cautioned with a small, pleased smile playing about his lips. “You are new to this. It would punish you to advance in haste.”

But Vetiver wanted haste. A beautiful, dark wonder bloomed inside her and it demanded that he move. It wanted friction. It wanted to burst out in full release.

She started to gyrate her hips, squeezing her sheath around him, moving for them both. Boreas snarled a curse and gave up all protests, gifting her with hard, fast thrusts that wrung tiny screams of ecstasy from her lips. Her breasts bounced in his face as he moved faster, harder, and he caught one of her nipples between his teeth and gently tugged.

This in turn tugged some magical nerve inside her, making her clutch his hair in desperation as her cunt squeezed hard around his fullness then let go in a pulse of wet, dripping heat.

Vetiver heard her own sobs above the din. Her eyes were shut tight of their own volition, as her body rode through a passionate release like none she’d ever achieved with the aid of her own hands. This was worlds different from any sexual contact she’d conceived possible.

Her body was fluid around his hardness.

His skin was hot as fire against her, melting her, making her soft and wet. Pliant like wax, molten like lava.

She felt her release rain down over his shaft like honey and felt no shyness, no shame. With Boreas there was no room for such emotions. Only room for more passion.

He moved faster. Harder. She came again. Her nipples quivering like blueberries beneath frost, her pussy slurping ravenously at his impaling girth. Every breath moved through her like a shudder. Her lungs were on fire. Her heart swollen with joy.

He pressed his face between the pillow of her breasts, kissing, licking, biting.

She came again.

Her body felt bruised. But he wrung more from her, pumping his hips furiously as they climbed higher into the stratosphere. Vetiver felt no chill in his arms. No lightheadedness in the thinner air, because he breathed into her, feeding her oxygen when she needed it, let her moan and cry when she had enough in her lungs to spare.

His hair was smooth in her fingers. His muscles taut and firm. His body mighty and strong.

He rolled them, until she lay on her back on a pillar of air and he towered above, pumping his hips, arching his back, dripping sweat over her upturned face and throat.

Something urgent seemed to spur him into action. His face went slack, his body shuddered. And just when she fell into another climax, he jerked his cock free of her pussy and spent himself into the air. His cum spurted in an arc that glittered as it fell. He put three fingers inside her, letting her ride them as they both came and came and came.

Chapter Eight

Hours passed. It felt like moments only.

The clouds served as their bed. Boreas gathered a dense canopy to protect them both from the sun, and though they still hovered beneath the black clouds, no rain or hail touched them. They were a part of the sky but also separate.

Over the edge of her celestial bower, Vetiver could see her island, so far below them, floating like vibrant green jasper in a sea of churning gray water. There were few cars on the mainland bridge. It wouldn't be long now...

Boreas shared the secrets of his life with her. She told him of her life on the island, of the stigma of being an outcast, of the rich pride she felt despite the hardship and work of protecting her home and its oblivious inhabitants.

He told her that she could be like him. That it was dangerous. But that it was possible. His seed was the key. It would either poison her, kill her...or transform her into a new and powerful being. A Shikar.

Lying behind her, Boreas trailed his fingers over the curve of her hip. "You would make a magnificent warrior. I only wonder what Caste you would be reborn into."

Vetiver shivered. "How many are there?"

His palm slid over her belly. "Four major. I am a Foil Caste, master of blade." He showed her, a *snicking* sound the only warning as a glowing, white-blue blade shot out of his index finger. She swallowed a gasp. The blade disappeared just as quickly, sliding back into his digit with a whisper. "But there are a great many numbers of minor abilities. For example, I am one of few who can manipulate wind."

"Will you care what Caste I become?" she fretted. "Are there prejudices between the different types?"

He chuckled. "There are no prejudices. And I care only that your Caste does not override your natural magical abilities. Though from what I've learned, the humans who have transformed thus far do not really change too much in that regard."

"Change me now," she whispered. "Let's fight the Daemons together and run them from my island."

Boreas' hands stilled on her. "I will not risk it. I only know that the few successes we've had in transforming human women involved the presence of a Traveler Caste. I will not lose you because I am too eager to claim you. And I want you to have more time to decide."

"I don't need time —"

"You cannot sway me. We will wait until you are safe with me, in my world, with my people, before we attempt such dangerous magic." He paused. "And you can always choose to stay a human."

Vetiver, however, understood that she had no reason to stay as she was now. Everything had changed for her, in one night her world was turned upside down and inside out. Vetiver figured, why not go that extra mile and truly become his partner? She would become a Shikar. She would fight with Boreas and his people. It was as he'd said; the war was still the same. It was only the battleground that would change.

She would change with it and be stronger for it.

His mouth was at her ear now, gently feathering soft kisses against the shell of her ear. "Do you think you could ever love me, Vetiver Device?"

Vetiver froze.

"I knew the moment you spoke to my Winds that you would be mine. But your heart is your own. To gift to whom you will." He squeezed her upper arm in his hand, which had grown hot, fevered. "I would hope you gift it to me, someday."

She swallowed, speechless.

"I vow to keep it safe." His sweet words were soft in her ear. A breath, no more. "I would treasure it. Love me, give me your heart, your devotion, and I would be your slave. Ask for the moon, I will see that you have it. All that I am will belong to you. Everything I have to offer, you need but ask. If you would only love me, I would never want for anything else."

Her heart thudded in her chest. He wove a spell over her with words that she had no wish to silence. But what could she say that would explain all she felt now? It was too soon to love him, it had to be. But the thought of telling him anything but "I love you" made her soul hurt most painfully. So she didn't say anything.

It was her only defense. It was her last vestige of independence.

She could give him her body. She could give him her passion. Her excitement at the prospect of a new life. She could devote that life to fighting a war at his side. That much was easy—she'd always lived her life in the service of something greater than herself. But to give her love to this man—nay, not a *man* but a different *species* of male—seemed reckless.

Are you not a child of nature, wild and strong? The air practically slapped her in the face with the question. And the accusation, *Did you not heed your guardian, who gave you a glimpse of what the future could bring if you would but trust in your destiny? If you do not believe this is the hand of fate at work between you, what do you believe?*

She believed in herself. Change was inevitable, but so much of it at once was overwhelming and difficult to absorb. It was too fast.

She didn't like the taste of her will caving in.

But to love him...

To truly love him...

Now that would be a potent magic.

Vetiver caught her breath when his lips nibbled at her ear, whispering in his foreign tongue words that sounded like silk in the water, like blooming flowers. Love. To love Boreas would be as wild and empowering as being in love with storm and gusty

weather. She would not halve her heart by gifting it to him, but double it by gaining his in return.

He vowed to worship her if she would have him. He had given her all the power in the world with those words, putting everything he had on the line. She had given nothing.

She turned to search his gaze. Therein was the answer. He was not so confident or arrogant as he waited for her to say something—anything. His feelings were bare and defenseless to her whim. In his eyes she read the very real truth that, if she wanted, if she were cruel, she could wound him, crush him, throw him to despair. One word and he would break.

“Do you love me, Boreas?” she murmured, touching the long line of his jaw. “Can you love a human and a witch?”

“I can love you, Vetiver,” he rasped, grabbing her fingers and kissing them. “Only you. And I would love you as no human male ever could.”

“What if I wanted to stay human?” she pressed. “Could you still love me then?”

His gaze darkened, but the tenderness remained. “That would be your choice.” Then he pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes, his long kohl lashes a curtain against his high, proud cheekbones. “Though I would someday love to see our babe in your arms, I would love you no less for your decision. You will always be my witch.”

A lone, diamond-brilliant tear escaped the corner of his eye. In its shine Vetiver saw an image of the child they might create together and knew all her reservations were for nothing.

She *could* love him. So easily. Because he saw her for what she was and instead of shying away, finding her strange or wicked or worse, he gloried in it. Because she could be herself with him, all the way. Because he was brave and powerful and beautiful, she could love him. Because he so clearly already loved her, she loved him already too. And because she was destined to love him, she’d loved him all her life, long before they’d met. Waiting for him without even knowing what she was waiting for, or whom.

Because they were meant to be together, she loved him. Two mighty bloodlines joined. Two hearts made one. It was that easy. And that incredible.

"I will carry your baby, Boreas," she said, and kissed his nose gently. Then, whispering, she told him what she had only just allowed her own mind to accept. "Ball already told me our firstborn will be a girl."

His eyes flashed open.

"You've seen what he is—he's been with my family for generations." She smiled sheepishly. "I'm not saying he speaks out loud, but he let me know when I first brought you home that this would happen. I didn't want to accept it. That you would father our daughter, the next Device witch. His future mistress. But when Ball is certain of a thing, it always comes to pass."

Boreas pressed a hard kiss to her mouth and tangled his hands in her heavy hair. "I would have you choose me because your heart led you, not because your Familiar forecasted our union."

Vetiver giggled and snuggled closer to him, pressing her breasts to his warm, muscled chest. "The decision is mine. Made before I even knew the options." She sighed. "I will love you, Boreas of the Shikar. I will birth your children. I will be your Shikar wife. But you have to say the words first."

He frowned, the question plain on his face.

"Say you love me," she prompted. "Say it, let me hear it sing through your voice."

His handsome features smoothed out. He leaned in, kissed her mouth, parting her lips with his tongue and wrapping the words around hers, using his language to seal his vow. She felt the words slide around her mouth, knotting gently around her tongue, tasting of tender daisy blossoms.

She worked the words around her lips before returning them, first in his strange language then in her own. "I love you too." It was the most powerful spell she'd spoken in all her life.

The result was the magic that trumps all others; true, destined love and a passion never ending.

Chapter Nine

“Come lie among my clouds.” Boreas swept his arms wide and silvery white wisps gathered closer. Like a bubble bath in the sky. “Rest your head.” He gathered for her a pillow of downy mist.

He spread her dark waves of hair across the iridescent vespers. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Her exotic eyes, like no other human’s, flickered from gray to silver and then to a whisper of dark lapis. Her lashes were long and spiky, damp and thick. Black around her wide gaze.

It was his wish now to prove to her how deeply she moved him. How she had reached down into his proud heart and torn away all but the wish to spend the rest of his existence with her. Learning all there was to know about her. Being surprised by her, as he had been when he’d seen her face down a force of monsters with the courage of a hundred battle-hardened soldiers. More than anything, he wanted her to know what her love meant to him.

How it transformed him.

Made him a greater person.

How it unmade him, and reforged him into something more than he could ever hope to be without her in his life and his heart.

Face to face. Heart to heart. He lifted her leg and draped her calf over his hip. His fingers found her wet, hot and slick. Ready for him. But he wanted more than to just bring her physical joy. He wanted to show her, prove to her that he was worth all she was sacrificing.

He employed his breezes to kiss and caress every inch of her body. He breathed warmth into those breezes, let them massage her love-stretched muscles. They even

moved gently between her toes. Because this was his element. He was master of every atom, and he used them all to tease and knead and tempt her flesh to quivering need.

The breeze worked like fingers against her scalp and she moaned. He liked the sound of her pleasure, so breathy, so husky, from deep in her abdomen. Her gasps told him better than words that he was doing his job well.

He wanted her to crave him. To require him. To be unable to live without him touching her like this.

If she craved him half as much as he needed her, then they would be well met.

He rolled them in a coverlet of clouds. When she was atop him, he entered her, sliding inside with a long, low sigh from her lips. She wrapped around him like the tightest, hottest sleeve of silk. The juices of her desire were like hot wax melting down over him. He rolled until they were once more on their sides, knowing this position would tease her pussy in ways she'd never dreamed possible.

Her body shivered, her sheath moved over him like an earthquake, and he nearly came inside her.

But he knew the risk and knew his restraint now would pay off later. He wanted to come inside her so much it made his teeth hurt, but he flexed every muscle in his body to hold back the tide of his release. It would be worth this agony, to wait, to hold himself steady.

She sighed into his kiss. Her raspberry mouth swollen and wet from so many kisses, but each one felt new and undiscovered. Each one a treasure and a gift. He sipped her breath, careful not to be too greedy, not one to make the same mistake twice and frighten her with his ardor.

He breathed into her, whispering every endearment he knew, in every language he knew. He rocked into her, slowly at first, holding her with his arms around her shoulders and lower back. But when she undulated her curvaceous behind, he couldn't help but move faster between her quivering thighs.

The scent of their sweat mingled with the clean ozone scent of rain. The herbal-rich perfume of her skin and hair and breath intoxicated him. The floral scent of her cunt made him dizzy when it reached him and the soft, wet sounds their bodies made pushed him to the edge of his self-control.

She sang a chorus of moans. Sighs. Whispers and cries.

Her nipples were like plump, firm berries sliding over his chest. Her throat was a soft, tender offering to his lips and tongue. She was a feast.

Her skin was soft and smooth. Her hair was liquid silk, wrapping around him like a gossamer web of darkness in the breeze. Her fingers roamed over him, squeezing his buttocks, kneading his shoulders, clutching him like tendrils of a vine that sought the sun.

He pulled her closer still. They were one solid being. Two souls made one.

He cried out, unable to hold back any longer his need, his joy, his exquisite pain. Throwing himself into her depths, he rode her hard and fast. When she was keening high in her throat like a songbird, he knew she was close. He pressed his pubic bone into hers, and felt the first deep, tight tremors in her pussy begin to rain down through her.

He roared with triumph as she screamed her joy to the heavens around them.

It was a close thing, but as the last pulsations of her body squeezed his length hungrily, greedily, he pulled free and spurted his seed on the sweet curve of her belly. His cream drizzled over her pale skin, like icing on a delicious cake.

Afraid that it might shock her, he only just barely refrained from licking it off her sweet skin.

His witch was panting.

He was panting. For the first time ever, he knew what it was to be winded.

He kissed her red lips, licked them, played with them as her glazed eyes slowly regained their focus and clarity.

He tucked her head beneath his chin and held her as the world flooded below.

* * * * *

A distant crash drew her from the edge of rosy pleasure. With a gasp, Vetiver leaned over the edge of her cloud and saw the outer swell of the hurricane as it swallowed up the border of her island.

"Ball is still down there!" she exclaimed.

"He will be fine." Boreas soothed her, rubbing his palms over her rear, which was conveniently tilted up while she leaned over. "Think you he cannot travel through the portal to my world to escape the gale? Think you he has not already done so?"

Vetiver still fretted.

"Shh," he comforted, kneeling behind her to lick her pink slit with his long, agile tongue. He grasped her buttock in his hands and squeezed, sipping her labia between his lips, flicking his tongue in and out of her sticky sheath.

Vetiver moaned, forgetting everything but the raw lust that gripped her tightly. She pressed her tits into the soft dampness of the cloud and lifted her hips even higher to give him a better taste. He rewarded her with long, languorous kisses, carnal kisses, devious strokes with his tongue from her clit to her anus.

When she was sobbing with need he rose up behind her, a god of the sky, and impaled her with his long, thick cock. The friction burned. His girth stretched her thin. His length penetrated so deeply she gave a little scream that was half fear, half exhilaration.

Where before he had fucked her then passionately claimed her, he now made sweet, slow love to her.

His mighty phallus slid in long, sure strokes. Whenever he withdrew, it was only until the very tip of him was left inside her, and he waited until her body squeezed him greedily, begging for his thrust, before sliding back in to the hilt.

It was gentle. It was wet and sticky and messy and it was lovely.

But Vetiver wanted more. She begged for more.

And Boreas chuckled, moving in that slow, tormenting rhythm, in no hurry to end this sweet interlude as his storm slammed into the earth below.

His hands roved up and down her back, over the curve of her ass, the sides of her thighs. He grabbed a fistful of her hair and oh so carefully, masterfully, turned her head to meet his lips again and again. The pressure of him moving deeper inside her was maddening. His restraint made her crazed. She tried to wriggle her hips, determined to force him to pick up the pace and ride her harder.

He slapped her ass, leaving a delicious sting where his palm met flesh, and she cried out, her body clamping down on his. Her entire body shuddered. And when she found release, it was the sweetest experience of her lifetime.

She pulsed around him, feeling him still inside her while she found her pleasure. The muscles of her womb thirsted for his cum, but he held it from her, for her safety. For now. When she moved, pumping her hips like a mindless animal, he kept her safe from harm and let her work herself higher, let her pussy slide around him like a hungry mouth until she was sated, falling limp into the cushion of their cloud.

Boreas slid out of her, straddled her rear and wrapped his fingers around his shaft. He pumped his hips over the dip of her spine, and she glanced with dazed eyes over her shoulder to witness his carnal pleasure wash over her in a pearly spray as hot as lava. He groaned, his eyes shut tight, his jaw clenched, his lips parted around gritted teeth. His creamy ejaculation glistened on her skin, pale and beautiful in the silvery light.

She arched her back like a cat when he rubbed his cream into her skin. It tingled where it touched her, reminding her in no uncertain terms how it would someday feel when he spent himself inside her.

Vetiver wanted to drink his cum. There would come a day, and that day would be soon—she vowed it silently—that she would suck him dry with her thirsty lips. And then she would ride him until his sac was tight and drained of all he had to give.

Below, the eye of the hurricane moved over Merrymint.

“Come, dearest,” Boreas said, still catching his breath with some effort. Eyes still alight with the ecstasy of his release. “The doorway lies open. We will pass through now, before the hurricane and the ocean closes it against us.”

He lifted her in his arms and flew them down to earth. The eerie silence over the land held long enough for Boreas to carry her through the opening in the ground beneath the stone that had seen his entry into her world. As the darkness closed over her, the roar of the cyclone resumed, consuming the island and the threat it presented to all mankind.

“Goodbye,” Vetiver whispered, crying already as Boreas swiftly took them deeper into the caverns that led to his home.

She didn’t stop crying until he had laid her in his warm bed – a real bed, not clouds as she’d half expected, but an incredibly plush mattress and thickly piled blankets – and Ball shoved his nose in her face, licking away her tears. He was back in the familiar doggie shape she knew best. He harrumphed and sat on the bed, nearly unseating her.

And that quickly, her sorrow abated.

Nothing mattered so long as she had her family with her.

Boreas and Ball, they were her family. Her world. They loved her, witch that she was. And she loved them, her Shikar warrior and her shape-shifting, immortal guard dog.

The tears dried, forgotten, and Ball smiled at her as if to say, *I told you everything would be all right.*

And everything *was* all right. It was better than all right.

Everything was perfect.

Epilogue

Vetiver handed the case to Boreas, watching him closely to gauge his reaction. He opened it and whispered the words she had taught him before lifting the gun. “It feels...” He shuddered and dropped it as the gun suffused with a vibrant emerald glow in response to the magical words that had awakened it.

“Sorry.” Vetiver grabbed the gun just before it struck the ground. Her agile reflexes still astonished her. She whispered the words to dim it. “I did warn you.”

“It still surprised me,” he admitted, eyes wide on the weapon that, by her command, no longer glowed. “It was warm, almost hot, but there was no pain.”

“It took some time, but I made certain it was Shikar safe. Now if any of the others who use these weapons run out of ammo, they can rely on its light to protect them. It will burn any Daemon it touches. The gun itself can be used to cut like one of your Foils when it’s lit up against an enemy.”

Vetiver was now a Shikar, transformed by Boreas’ semen mere days after they had arrived here. Ushered through the death of her human form with the aid of Emily—another former human turned Shikar, a Traveler who had shown her the way back from oblivion, to awaken in her husband’s loving arms. Reborn, Vetiver Device was still a child of nature, able to walk in full sunlight—so few other Shikars could claim the same ability—and she used that to fuel her other natural abilities that had only grown stronger with her transformation.

Imbuing weapons with the power to burn Daemons to ashes had quickly become a passion of hers. After coming here with Boreas, Vetiver had become determined to prove her worth to his people. She’d cast wards on every border of their underground city. Attended births, acting as midwife in most cases, crafting protection charms to

hang over the newborns' cribs, whispering spells over their innocent heads to help them sleep and dream sweetly.

In secret, she'd spent almost all her free time in the armory, casting spells on every weapon to protect its wielder from harm. This gun was the culmination of many experiments to create the perfect magical weapon. It was, essentially, portable sunlight.

So much had changed. And yet so much still remained the same. Blessedly so. She still guarded against the Unnamed. But now she protected more than an island. She helped protect the world. Vetiver's personal Grimoire bulged with newfound knowledge, recipes and incantations to aid her and her fellow warriors in battle. She'd already rewritten most of the spell books lost to her house fire. She had ensured the legacy of the Device bloodline would live on. Here. In the world of the Shikar.

And now it was time to prepare the way for a new witch to come.

The firstborn of her union with this amazing warrior slumbered now deep in her womb. Soon Vetiver would ripen with the growth of her daughter. And as expected, Ball, in his way, had already begun to transfer his allegiance to Vetiver's child, a warrior-witch he would one day guide and protect as he had guarded so many others over the centuries. Vetiver didn't mind this defection. It was supposed to be this way, she knew.

Boreas and her Familiar were fast friends. And the Shikar people hadn't batted an eye to the presence of a dog that was not a dog, but so much more than words could explain. The Shikar children especially adored Ball, and he them, letting them pet him, coo at him and call him "Baw" in their innocent tongues. He roamed the city at his leisure, though he never strayed far from Vetiver's side. While she carried his future mistress, he was still her best friend. Still her treasured companion. He would never really leave her, even when Vetiver's daughter became woman enough for him to serve. Ball was as constant as the turning of the world.

And Boreas, too, was never far from her — he was, in a word, insatiable.

But then, so was she.

They were equal in their endless passion for one another.

“Can you do this with other weapons?” Boreas asked, clearly eager to see more like the gun.

Vetiver smiled, pleased with herself now that she saw how his eyes were alight with this new invention. “Oh yeah.”

Boreas grinned and drew her into his arms. This time the gun hit the floor, but Vetiver was too distracted to be relieved that it wasn’t loaded. Her mate’s lips commanded her full attention now. His hands wove a spell over her body that no magic could ever rival.

This time when he took her breath, she let him. It was not a theft, but a loan. And when he gave his breath in return, she filled her lungs with it, drawing him inside her, fueling her cells with his essence.

When he filled her with his flesh, it was as if they were discovering sex for the first time, every time. He filled her now, stretching her pussy tight around the urgency of his cock.

He took her standing. He took her lying down beneath him on the floor of their sitting room. He fucked her from behind, bending her over the foot of their bed. He made love to her with Vetiver on top, guiding her hips in a gentle, slow rhythm.

When she came, he came too, filling her with the scalding-hot wash of his seed. His cum. So silky and creamy. They climaxed too many times to count, until his cum dripped down her thighs like honey.

Their sighs traveled on the air, a slight breeze playing through the rooms of their underground home. Miles above, the world moved on, growing smaller every moment. But Vetiver was happy. Her world had grown, expanded to enormous wonders that surprised her every day.

She was a witch. But she was not a lone witch anymore. Boreas was with her. Ball never far. Their child slumbered inside her, weaving spells with her tiny, barely formed fingertips along the walls of Vetiver’s womb. And though the world was fraught with

danger, Vetiver Device was where she belonged. Safe and loved by the lord of wind and storm, who had swept into her life on a hurricane wind.

About the Author

Sherri King lives in the American Midwest with her husband, artist and illustrator Darrell King. Hailed by industry officials as an e-pub phenomenon, Sherri is the author of critically acclaimed series The Horde Wars and Sterling Files, as well as the horror lit-erotica, *Venereus*. She is currently at work on *Traveler's Kiss*, book six in The Horde Wars.

Sherri welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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