



# FALLEN GODS

BEING A VAMPIRE DIDN'T  
MAKE HIM A KILLER... THE GODS DID.

A FALLEN CROSS LEGION NOVEL  
ALIYA DALRAE

# **Fallen Gods**

Aliya DalRae

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*For Renee, with love.*

*I don't know why you had to go, but I will miss you forever, my colleague, my partner in crime... My friend.*

*Rest easy, and fly free. Until we meet again...*



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And to Kirk, my immortal beloved.  
Thank you for showing me the true meaning of magic.

## Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)  
[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Visit Aliya](#)

[Also by Aliya DalRae](#)



## Prologue

*The cloud of mist was so thick, Erik would have sworn it solidified beneath his bare feet. He felt the damp fog upon his face, through the sparse beginnings of the beard on his chin. Wispy fingers tickled the clean-shaven sides of his skull and tangled in the cap of thick, long braids that fell below his shoulders. The touch was not comforting, exactly, but more a curiosity, as though Erik were being examined and admired. It did not, however, explain where he was or how he found himself floating in the clouds.*

*Some unseen force had pulled him from the pile of warm furs where he slept, lifted him up and carried him away from his home, his mother, from the very earth itself. He moved his legs, though it was not necessary, as whatever propelled him through the obscurity did so effortlessly.*

*Though the clouds were thick, a bright light surrounded him, penetrated the veil, and illuminated the path before him. The ethereal fog swirled around him, spiraled about his arms and legs, cradled his lean body in its surprising warmth. It pushed him onward, forever onward and upward, until he felt he must surely have died.*

*A dream, he thought, finally able to parse out the words in the tangled maze that had taken over his mind. There was no afterlife for his kind. Valhalla was reserved for the human warriors. Wherever the Primeval, the fathers of his race, had come from, he was quite certain they had not been created by the Norse gods.*

*Erik and his mother weren't the first Vampires to work in close concert with the Vikings, though the humans remained blissfully unaware. It was believed, by the Vampires at least, that the Viking's legendary berserkers were merely Vampires who lost control to their bloodlust in the middle of*

battle, but Erik wouldn't know. He had yet to experience his first raid, to fight in his first skirmish.

His mother preferred that they keep to themselves, their home on the outskirts of the village so their late-night living would not be easily observed. She was there for the raids, though, to earn their keep without having to hide in the shadows and steal just to stay alive. His mother was among the fiercest shieldmaidens in the village, and this ensured that not too many questions were asked. She fought beside the best of them, but while pillaging was a way of life for both species, the gods only smiled upon those of their own making.

The thought depressed Erik more than he cared to admit, and had plagued him since he was old enough to contemplate such things. It was harsh, listening to the Viking boys go on about how they would be the strongest and the bravest, how they would die in battle, a valiant death.

About how Odin would welcome them into Valhalla with open arms.

Had the Viking boys known he was of a lesser species, unwelcome in the House of the Slain, their relentless taunts would have been unbearable. As it stood, he was a bastard, Erik the Abandoned to his torturers, born with no father to a woman who had gone mad. Bodil the Insane, they called her, but he had only ever known her as mother.

Erik's head fell backward as despair overwhelmed his soul. She was the source of many arguments, the cause of many a fight. But did she not feed him and clothe him? Was she not there when he was small to chase away the demons that threatened the daylight hours? And did she not promise him that one day his father would return?

Stories, he reminded himself. She filled his mind with stories of a male who didn't exist. As he neared his thirteenth summer, he understood that she fed him those tales to give him hope where there was little to be found. In truth, she was forsaken by the male who had taken advantage of her and left her with a child in her belly. For all he knew, his father could be human, one of the Vikings who wasn't man enough to own up to his responsibilities. A male who would certainly never see Valhalla.

What felt like a hand rested upon the back of his neck, and supported his head with a loving touch. There was no other word for it. The feeling the touch imbued within him chased the despair from his heart and filled him with a profound sense of peace.

Perhaps it wasn't a dream after all. It felt real, to be sure. But if he were dead, then why did he feel so alive?

*With a stroke and a pat, the otherworldly hand released Erik, leaving him with a sense of loss. Fear licked at the base of his spine and he opened his eyes, only then realizing they were closed. Much to his surprise, the mists had cleared away and he now stood on a large dais of clouds. Afraid to move, but unable to curb his young boy's curiosity, he lifted a foot and tapped it on the hazy substance beneath him. Solid, indeed.*

*"Hello?" he called, suddenly unnerved at the thought of being alone. When no answer came, he called again, louder this time, as the urgency within him seeped into his voice. "Hello! Is there anyone there?"*

*"Fear not, my son. You are never alone."*

*Erik felt the words more than heard them. It was as if they were within his mind and all around him at once. Despite the reassuring message, he found his fears intensifying. "Who said that?" he cried. "Show yourself, or be known a coward."*

*A quiet chuckle filled the air around him, and Erik felt his cheeks redden. "In due time, my son. In due time. Until then, I leave you with a promise and a gift."*

*"You—what?"*

*"I promise that I will be with you, always. You have only to need, and I will be there. And when your time on Earth is through, I will welcome you to my Hall to spend eternity among the fiercest warriors to ever live."*

*"Who are you?" Erik cried again, his long braids slapping his shoulders as he whipped his head around in search of the male with the booming voice.*

*"And the gift," the voice said.*

*"Wait," Erik said. "Why? Why are you doing this?"*

*"Because," the voice replied. "It is what fathers do."*

*Before he could respond, electricity filled the air and Erik felt the emergence of an energy inside him, an indescribable sensation of power and strength. The air crackled around him and lightning filled the sky above the clouds, which made no sense.*

*A clap of thunder exploded in the air and he felt himself falling, falling, the speed of his descent increasing exponentially as the ground—the real ground—rushed up to meet him. A few seconds more and he would become one with the earth, literally.*

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One...*

*Erik woke with a jolt and sat up on his pallet, his quick movements causing the thick furs that covered him to fall to his waist. The cool air of winter prickled at the sweat covering his body, and he welcomed the relief even as he shivered in his damp night clothes.*

*His mother lay sleeping across the room and he wondered how she could not feel his distress. Then again, he wasn't a child in need of coddling. He could experience his first spark any time now, and he would officially be an adult.*

*It was only a dream, he reminded himself. A grown male had no want of motherly comfort for naught but a dream.*

*But why did his skin tingle so, as if he'd been standing too near a tree in a lightning storm?*

*And why did he feel like his entire world was about to change?*

## Chapter One

Viper checked his watch for the umpteenth time. Sasha should have been in the lab twenty minutes ago. This was the third time in a week she'd been late, and it wasn't like her, at least not that he'd noticed when she first arrived at the Legion Compound.

Perhaps he'd been too soft on her since the battle with the rogue *Kurai Senshi*—that fabled race of Vampires who turned out to be far deadlier than the stories implied. The Dark Warriors, as they were known, had given the Legion a near ass-whipping. Those who survived had been lucky, and he gave credit to Sasha, who had held up well enough. But now she was getting complacent, which meant he wasn't being properly surly. He'd have to ramp up the grrr-factor and set her back on track.

Initially, Mason forcing him to work with her pissed him off. Not because she was a female—there were tons of smart females in the world, some who could put even him to shame. This female, however, was a Sorceress, and he drew a solid line at working with anyone of that race. Of course, the Warlord wasn't interested in his lines, and Viper lost that argument before it really got started.

For the better part of the last year, Viper's work centered around finding ways to circumvent the magical obstacles presented by their newest foes, specifically the Fuhrmanns. That was one family of Sorcerers with serious issues.

The ordeal with the *Kurai Senshi* was a nice distraction to all that same ol', same ol'. In the end, though, other than the few bad eggs who attacked the Legion Compound, the KS turned out to be allies rather than enemies. Now, it was back to the Sorcerer grind. There was no doubt in any of their minds that Ulrich Fuhrmann would be back to avenge his father's death. That meant it would be up to Viper, and ultimately Sasha, to make sure no more

Legion personnel died.

That whole deal with the Seer, Victoria, and their own Jessica Sweet last month was proof that another round of Sorcerer-based bullshit was just around the corner. Victoria swore she simply wanted to get to know her granddaughter, but nobody was buying that crap. They all knew she and Fuhrmann were connected. It was only a matter of time before the Sorcerer, himself, showed up in Fallen Cross again, and turned everything inside out.

Fortunately, Jessica and the kid made it through unscathed. Viper didn't even want to think of the tsunami of destruction Jessica's mate, Raven, would have wrought had either of them been harmed. Had it not been for his twin, Nox, Raven would have destroyed the compound when Jessica disappeared. If she or the child had died?

Viper shook the thought from his mind. Reality would have been much, much worse than his imagination, and he so didn't need to go there. He looked around the lab, thankful that he had this space to call his own. Ever since the females started showing up, the Legion Manse had become a lot more complicated. This had always been his man cave, so to speak, his place to escape when Legion shit got too real, but he needed it now more than ever.

Viper smiled. Calling it a "space" was a bit like calling the space shuttle an airplane. The place was huge, encompassing nearly the entirety of Sub T Level 2, deep in the belly of the manse. Tall cabinets lined the walls and ten by four workspaces sat at five-foot intervals down the center of the room, each representing one of the many experiments he had underway. A door on the wall opposite the entry led to a full bathroom, kitted out with an industrial shower and a couple of lockers where he stored extra clothes and a shit ton of weapons. He even had a cot folded up in the corner for those days he couldn't seem to find his way down the hall to his suite.

The armaments in the lockers were just a sampling of the firepower the lab contained. But the *pièce de résistance*, the cherry on top of his nuclear sundae, was the enclosed shooting range at the far end of the room. It was completely soundproof, with a wall of high-grade bulletproof glass that separated it from the rest of the lab.

Viper enjoyed all the science-y stuff he did for the Legion, but his first love was and would always be munitions. While he'd spent a lot of time developing ways to protect himself and his brothers from various forms of weaponry, including some of the magical variety, he couldn't deny that giddy feeling he got when he blew shit up.

Shaking off the shiver of excitement that rocked him when he thought about his toys, he grabbed some supplies from one of the cabinets and carried them back to the workstation near his desk.

He'd set Sasha up at the table behind his, just so he could keep an eye on her. If he were being honest, it was because he *liked* keeping an eye on her. She was tall, and willowy like most Sorcerers, but her drugstore-bottle brown hair and chocolate contact-covered eyes made it too easy to forget exactly who and what she was.

*Like you've forgotten who and what you are?*

Honesty was overrated.

Viper dismissed the entire line of thinking and focused on the fact that his cock didn't seem to care about her heritage, which created a whole other set of problems. The way she tucked her hair behind her ear when she concentrated on a particularly difficult task, or how she taunted him without fear.

And the scent of her... gods, how she smelled, like the air before a violent thunderstorm, all ozone and power.

Viper felt himself harden in his leathers and he cursed the female for having that effect on him.

The dreams didn't help, either, erotic shit that had him changing his sheets every night. The feel of her, the taste of her.

"Fuck."

If he didn't stop thinking about it, he was going to have to go to the bathroom for a quick jerk-off, or he'd never get through the night.

He powered up the laptop on his workstation and pulled up the results of the previous night's calculations. Math was easy. Factoring in the magic was where things got tricky.

He had to admit, Sasha's knowledge in that respect was invaluable. Before her arrival, he'd had to wing it, his own powers being limited and his knowledge that of the hunt and peck variety. It also happened to be a secret, and one he'd kept to himself for the entirety of his life, if for no other reason than he didn't really know what he was.

Sure, his mother had said, insisted really, who his father was, but it was another load of crap from a female known to be psychotic. She was a hell of a shieldmaiden, though, so the nearby Viking clan kept her, and ultimately him, around.

And yeah, the other Legion Warriors had asked him his particulars: who,

what, where and all that. But how exactly does one such as him introduce themselves? *Hi, my name is Viper, I'm a Leo, and, oh, yeah, my mom says I'm a demigod.* It was embarrassing, never mind that he, himself, questioned the veracity of it.

Memories of the *other* dream crept out of the pit he'd shoved it into upon waking. A dream of a dream of a dream, it was all a tangled web of crap and he was better off thinking of the Sasha dreams than he was going down that rabbit's hole again. His mother insisted it had been real, that Odin had come to him in that dream and revealed himself to Viper, but a) the voice never claimed to be Odin and b) his mother was insane.

That left him with no explanation for his special *gift*, though. It was what it was, and did it really matter whether it came from divine genetics or some kind of Vampire mutation? Not to Viper, it didn't. To him it was a source of pain, and one he'd rather keep buried in the past.

He shouldn't be ashamed, and he knew that. Not of the power, nor of the destruction it had caused. Viper wasn't the only stray pup Mason had recruited when throwing together this ragtag group of Warriors. The fact that they had morphed into the incredible fighting force that existed today was a result of Mason's genius more than the abilities of any one Warrior. Merlin's Dark Warrior status might make him the exception to that rule, but for the rest of them? Raven, the horrible beast of yore; Harrier, the insufferable half breed; Tas, the only turned vamp among them; and Viper with his unexplained magic and questionable paternity? They were a motley crew thrown together by a master artist into a mosaic of deadly abilities beyond compare.

He'd been vague when Merlin asked about his prior experience with the *Kurai Senshi*, but Viper knew it wasn't his incomparable vampiric abilities that got him through that night in Bangkok all those years ago. There was power within him that, even now, he had no idea how to control. It got him out of a helluva lot of scrapes, though, so he never really considered it until Mason found him.

Now it was all he could do to try and harness those powers to use them for good. Or you know, when he wanted to blow shit up.

He'd gotten lucky with the rogue *Kurai Senshi* last month. That situation nearly cost him his arm, but Sasha was there to scrape him off the ground and see that he received the medical attention he couldn't magic for himself. Then she'd run off to take care of Oz, but that didn't bother Viper in the least.



Nope. Not one single bit.

That was another thing about Sasha that rankled. The Primeval had kept her prisoner for centuries, away from her people, and yet still she had a handle on all that magic like she was raised by the godsdamned Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Viper leaned back on his stool and scrubbed a tattooed hand over his close-shaved skull. He didn't have Jessica Sweet's visions, but he sure as hell had a bad feeling that things were about to go sideways.

Which begged to question. Would he be able to figure out a way to get the Legion out of it—again?

And, how did Sasha play into it?

## Chapter Two

The sound of her footsteps echoed through the empty halls as Sasha ran from the elevator to Viper's lab. Her alarm failed to wake her again. Now, the sun had long past set, and she was beyond late for her shift working with the Vampire Legion's munitions specialist. Say what you would about the Warrior's fighting skills and creative genius, patience was not one of his virtues. He would be furious with her tardiness.

She slid to a stop in front of the lab's entrance, took a deep breath and a moment to smooth her shoulder-length brown hair, all in an effort to calm herself. Though she'd been living at the Legion Manse for a couple of months, she had yet to ditch her previous disguise. She didn't really know why she continued to dye her white-blond hair dark, or why she wore the colored contacts to conceal her pale blue eyes. Perhaps she still wasn't comfortable with being the only person of her race on the Compound.

The thought of flaunting that telltale coloring, a signature trait of her people, and the negative attention it would draw from Soldiers and Warriors alike, played upon her insecurities. It was kind that the Warlord allowed her to stay with them, and, other than her boss and a few of the other Warriors' mates, most had been more than welcoming.

It wasn't lost on her, though, that she did and would always share genetics with the Vampire Race's mortal enemies, the Sorcerers. Specifically, Ulrich Fuhrmann, who had sworn vengeance upon the twins, Raven and Nox, and who cared not how many individuals he took down in his quest to rid the earth of that pair of Vampires.

If she allowed herself to think about it, perhaps her continued "disguise" was simply a means of fooling herself into believing she was someone who deserved the kindnesses she'd been shown.

Ulrich Fuhrmann was the real reason she found herself in Fallen Cross,

Ohio, in the first place. If being a Sorceress wasn't enough to make certain Vampires think poorly of her, knowing she was the daughter of their mortal enemy would certainly give them pause. That was one tiny little fact she had yet to share with her generous hosts.

Sure, she'd proven herself useful during the battle with the renegade *Kurai Senshi*. However, she doubted anything she'd done to date would cancel out her ancestry. She was the spawn of a Sorcerer who had caused a tremendous amount of pain and suffering, costing one Soldier his eye and many more their lives. And that was just her father. Her grandfather had been even worse, or so she'd heard.

Still, the Vampires weren't unreasonable. She had no doubt at least some of them would forgive her her parentage. What they might not be able to see past, however, was the fact that she was using them. The only reason she was there at all was as a stepping stone toward finding her father.

She'd missed the chance to introduce herself when he'd stumbled upon her quarters in London, and she vowed, should she ever find him, she would not lose her nerve again. Really, she thought, could he be as bad as the Vampires suggested? He'd created her, after all, and despite the horrible things Primeval Magnus had forced her to do, she thought herself to be fairly noble, in heart, at least, if not in prior deed.

The one thing she knew about Ulrich Fuhrmann was that he would not give up until he had exacted his revenge upon the twins. And so, with ears to the ground, or whatever the digital equivalent was, she did what she could to be useful to her current hosts. At the same time, she continued to keep a vigilant eye out for any news that her father had returned to fulfill his vow.

That news had come by way of an app that Merlin had been kind enough to show her. She'd spent quite a bit of time with the Tech Warrior/*Kurai Senshi*, learned all she could from him regarding modern tracking methods, all under the guise of curiosity. It was how she knew her father was on his way.

Merlin thought she was simply interested in knowing if others of her kind were nearby. What she learned, though, was that Ulrich Fuhrmann had purchased an airline ticket and would be in Ohio by the night's end. She had no doubt the Legion was also privy to the information. All she had to do was find him before they got their hands on him.

And when she did, she would let him know he had a daughter.

The door swung wide, and Sasha jumped as much from surprise as her

own guilty conscience.

“Are you going to stand out there all night or do you think you might come inside and get some work done?”

Viper stood with his hand on the edge of the door, blocking her actual ingress into the room. He wore his normal uniform of black leather pants and a leather vest over an old Black Sabbath t-shirt, one of an assortment of vintage rock and roll concert shirts in his apparently endless collection. Lean muscles filled out the shirt and pants, and a mass of tattoos peaked out from beneath his sleeves and above the shirt’s collar.

Bronze eyes glared out of a chiseled face, all sharp cheeks and firm jaw. His wore his hair trimmed tight to his skull, leaving his mouth, full-lipped and a touch too wide, to be the only thing one might consider soft about him. Of course, Sasha had little room to make comparisons as far as that went, despite the endless days of lost sleep she attributed to the dreams of the very male standing in her way. Dreams that inevitably ended with that gorgeous mouth all over her body, those luscious lips in places she had only ever experienced in those nocturnal fantasies.

Her face heated as the most recent dream replayed itself a little too vividly in her mind. It was, in fact, the reason she’d slept through her alarm. It had felt so real, and the last thing she wanted was to wake before she reached her climax. A climax brought on by that clever mouth.

Sasha frowned, as she often did when thoughts of her centuries-long imprisonment invaded her new life. Even dreams of such pleasures were among the many things denied her while enslaved by Primeval Magnus. The chastity belt had been the first thing to go.

She shook the horrors of her past from her mind, and instead returned her focus to that mouth. Currently it was set in a hard frown as its owner glared at her from across the threshold.

“Sorry,” she stammered, and pushed herself past all that long and lean standing in her way. She gasped as her breast brushed against his chest, sending a rush of warmth to the area his mouth had occupied in her dream. She hurried into the lab, but stole a quick glance over her shoulder.

Was that... a smirk?

She blinked as he turned to close the door. When he faced her again, Old Hardass was back, reminding her that her dreams were nowhere near the reality she lived, working as she did with this Warrior night after night.

“Apologies, my lord,” she said with a slight bow. She knew the address

would anger him, but his low growl gave her a moment to regain her balance. “My alarm failed to wake me.”

“Christ on a cupcake. That’s the third time this week,” he muttered.

“Yes, I suppose it is.” Darn it. “I must see about retrieving a new one from town before I retire in the morning.”

“Do that,” he said, then slid past her in that serpentine way of his. If nothing else, he was aptly named.

Sasha smoothed the black tee she’d taken to wearing while at work, then reached for the lab coat she preferred to Viper’s leather vest. “Are we still working on the cloaking device for Master Jonathon?”

“I’ve got that,” Viper said. “I want you to start on something new.”

*Joy*, Sasha thought. One never knew what *new* would involve when it came to Viper. She could hardly wait to find out.

## Chapter Three

Thursdays were fast becoming Tas's favorite night of the week. Sure, he enjoyed his twice weekly Tai Chi classes with the newly recruited *Kurai Senshi*, but they simply couldn't compare to *this*.

While teaching the young Dark Warriors to find their center was rewarding, Tai Kwan Do with the older *Senshi* was more hands on, more... how to put it? More rewarding.

For instance, at that very moment Tas was flat on his back and firmly straddled by five-foot nothing worth of KS female, one whose grin was damn near as wicked as her roundhouse kick. The smile alone could easily have something to do with his opinion of Thursday night karate with the *Kurai Senshi*.

Sure, Jun attended his Tai Chi classes, but that didn't afford him the opportunity to get up close and personal the way they were now.

He nearly always chose her for demonstrations, and she was a willing participant. He didn't even mind that ninety-nine times out of a hundred he ended up on the losing end of the demonstration. Which was to say he ended up on the winning end, if one considered his current position.

He'd like to say he'd taken to wearing the jock strap and cup as an attempt to hide the inevitable erections close contact with the tiny Warrior elicited. However, that would only be half the truth. The first time she jacked him in the nuts made the safety equipment mandatory for his personal protection. He'd lain on the ground in the fetal position, incapable of sucking in a single ounce of air. When he managed to open his eyes, there she was, that satisfied smirk on her heart-shaped lips. And damned if his own heart didn't do a little flip.

Did she apologize? Not a chance. Tas doubted she carried an iota of regret about anything, but that was part of what intrigued him about her. She was so

damn tough, and it wasn't an act. She absolutely had the skills to back up her attitude, and it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

Once he could breathe again, he threatened her life if she ever deballed him again. He even managed to sound a little angry about it, at which point she bowed to him and promised to go easy on him the next time. And because of his complete trust in her, or lack thereof, Tas had gone straight to the Legion Soldiers' supply room and grabbed the aforementioned protective gear.

"Is that what you had in mind, Master Tas?" Jun said sweetly, her arm cocked in preparation for a lethal front punch to Tas's throat.

"Perfectly executed," he said. "You can get off me now."

Her evil grin turned into a pouty frown, and she sat down on his stomach—hard. "You take the fun from everything," she said. The extra bounce to his gut was totally intentional, but then there was the dismount. That was the only way he could describe the way she swung a slender leg over him before she stood and brushed the seat of her gi. And he got to watch it from the best seat in the house. Gods, it was so worth it.

Tas scrambled to his feet, thankful for the extra padding in his front, the low hang of his gi top and the thick black belt that held it into place. "That's it for tonight," he said, to dismiss the class, but he only had eyes for her. "Practice, and I'll see you all here next week."

The block of Dark Warriors bowed to him, took a step back as one, then dispersed to go and do whatever *Kurai Senshi* did throughout the night. Other than training, Tas still wasn't sure what that consisted of. The Legion spent their nights patrolling Fallen Cross and the surrounding towns and cities, keeping a lookout for ferals on the best days, Sorcerers and other nefarious creatures on the worst.

But the KS weren't his concern, not really. He'd just hit it off with Master Jonathon, and their friendship led to the offer to teach the young *Kurai Senshi* a way to find calm within them when, for most of them, their entire lives had just been sat on their ears. Finding out one was born a carrier of the Shade was probably the worst thing that could happen to a young Vampire.

Then again, one could argue that being turned into a Vampire was one of the worst things that could happen to a human, but Tas had only his own frame of reference for comparison. Fallen Cross wasn't exactly teeming with changed Vampires. As it turned out, they were as rare as white peacocks, perhaps even more so.

But that and five dollars might get you a fancy cuppa joe at the coffee shop on the corner. Speaking of which...

“Jun,” Tas called.

The female was already halfway across the field, but she turned and waved in response.

“Hang on,” he tried again, and he trotted after her to catch up. Surprisingly, she waited for him, but when he reached her, he hadn’t a clue what to say. “Want to get some coffee?” he asked, that being the last coherent thought in his head before he realized she had gone.

“Dressed like this?” she asked, sweeping a hand in front of her to indicate her karate gear.

“Go change if you want. I’ll wait.”

“And you?” She stared at him as if she expected him to change clothes right there in front of the gods and everybody.

But Tas only grinned. “Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I’m always prepared for anything.”

“I have heard this about you,” she said, then turned and started back toward the barracks.

“Was that a yes?” Tas called. Excitement fluttered in his belly as though he were a schoolboy about to go on his first date.

“Five minutes,” she said. “Right here. Do not be late.”



## Chapter Four

Viper watched the Sorceress don her lab coat. She slipped both arms in and arched her back to shrug the thing onto her shoulders, inadvertently pushing out those pert little breasts before she covered things up with the coat's wide, white lapels.

"Damn it," he muttered, and he averted his eyes to spare himself any further southern discomfort.

"What was that?" she asked, as she settled into her work station.

"Nothing," he snapped. It occurred to him that it was a good thing he had no desire to pursue the female. He wasn't nice by nature, but with her he seemed to take it to another level. Hardly the attitude a male would take were he interested in wooing a girl. Which he wasn't. At all.

Not wanting to follow that line of thought any further, he pushed it aside and returned his focus to the business at hand.

"Mason asked me to come up with some new defenses for combatting Ulrich Fuhrmann. And by 'me' I mean 'us.' Word is he's about to be local again and we want to be ready for anything he throws at us."

When Sasha's back stiffened, Viper raised an eyebrow. "Is this going to be a problem for you?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "Why would it be?"

The hesitation was brief, miniscule really, but it was there nonetheless. All thoughts of erotic dreams starring himself and this female vanished like a raindrop in the sea.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, venom dripping from every word. "Sorcerer? Sorceress? If fighting this guy is going to be an issue, you need to tell me now. We need to know we can trust you, Sasha. If you're not a hundred percent down with this, then I can't have you in here."

Her face fell and she looked up at him with those wide brown eyes. “But... but you need me. You need my magic.”

Viper pushed away the desire to know what her eyes looked like without the contacts. Right now, only one thing mattered. “Magic I can work around,” he said. “What I need is your loyalty.”

Her mouth set into a hard line and she clenched her jaw before answering. “My loyalty is with those who saved me. That is, with Mason. With the Legion.”

It wasn't lost on him that she hadn't named him personally, but he supposed it would have to do. The truth was, if they were going to go up against Fuhrmann again, they needed the edge only another Sorcerer could bring. Could he work around the magic? Yes. Would it be as good as hers? Not even close.

He glared at her a moment longer, his eyes boring straight into her defiant stare, then he turned and walked away.

“Fine,” he threw over his shoulder. “But if I find out you're lying, if you betray the Legion,” *If you betray me*, “I'll kill you myself.”

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*Well, wasn't that a fine kettle of fish*, Sasha thought. It was as if he read the thoughts from her mind upon opening the door to her. Had her lie been convincing enough, or did he see right through her?

And really, she had no intention of betraying the Legion, per se. In fact, in her daydreams her father would be so glad to meet her that he would hear her pleas and give up on his vendetta against the Legion. Pipe dreams? Perhaps, but at least it was her intention to try and get him to see reason, to leave Fallen Cross and never look back.

She would go with him, then, to learn from him all the things she missed out on, not having her parents there to teach her. She wasn't ignorant about her magic, but it was nothing compared to what she would have learned had she had the benefit of their tutelage.

So, why did she feel like she'd just taken the first step in burning the finest bridge she'd ever set foot upon?

Viper stood at his work station, uncharacteristically facing the front of the room rather than having stepped around to the other side so he could watch her like a hawk. Now that she thought about it, did he ever really trust her to

begin with? Or had he “allowed” her to work there only because Mason had forced her upon him?

She had a hard time believing that, though. Even Viper would be hard pressed to deny her contributions to the cause. There had even been a moment or two when she thought she’d actually *seen* him, the real Viper, and not this hardboiled dictator that he presented to the world, especially to her.

She started to say something, to convince him that his faith, and Mason’s, was not displaced, to reinforce the lie, but the door opened before she could formulate the argument.

She couldn’t help the smile that lit her face when Merlin and Martin entered the lab. Merlin was about six feet tall, small for a Warrior, his body lean verging on thin. He tucked a lock of long, black hair behind his ear and winked at her as his almond-shaped eyes—a few shades darker than Sasha’s contact lenses—met hers.

In contrast, the Soldier, Martin, was tall and well-muscled, his white blond hair shorn high and tight on the sides while the longer bangs fell haphazardly into his grey-green eyes. They were a striking pair, and it still amazed her that by looking at them one would never know that the smaller Vampire, Merlin, was the deadlier of the two.

Every time she thought about that dreadful night with the rogue KS, of the death and destruction, she had to remind herself that this happy couple was the incredible good that blossomed from the indescribable loss. They were proof that if you truly loved someone, you would fight to your dying breath for them. Lucky for all of them, they both lived to tell the tale, and the love on their faces was proof that it was all worthwhile.

“Hi Sasha,” Merlin said on his way to Viper’s desk. “You doing okay?”

“Sure,” she replied, ignoring the scowl on her boss’s face as he turned toward the pair. “Another day in paradise.” The eye roll was accidental, but it made the males laugh so she didn’t worry that Viper wasn’t in on the humor.

“You guys here to distract the help or did you need something?” Viper barked.

Merlin turned his back on the male and threw an eye roll back at Sasha.

She bit her lip and turned away, unable to hide her grin otherwise. Deciding not to antagonize Viper further, Sasha busied herself with the work on her desk and left the others to discuss whatever business brought them there.

“Mason asked us to come down and see how things are going on the stuff

you're working on for the Fuhrmann situation," Merlin said. "Any ideas yet?"

"Somebody was late again this evening, so we haven't really started brainstorming. Wait... Didn't we just leave that meeting, like, an hour ago?"

Sasha saw the frown Viper threw her way from beneath her lowered lashes and she clamped her teeth together to prevent herself from making a comment she might later regret.

Martin elbowed his mate, who was apparently in a very good humor, and said, "Merlin's just giving you shit. We're here for the *Kurai Senshi* cloak. You said it was ready?"

"Nearly," Viper said. "I just need to..." He picked up an item from his desk and fiddled with it a bit, then handed it over to the Soldier. "That should do it. I've texted the instructions to Jonathon. If he has any questions, tell him to call me."

"Will do," Merlin said.

"What's the word on Fuhrmann, anyway?" Viper asked, before the pair could make their escape.

Sasha's spine tingled at the mention of her father, and her ears perked up as she struggled to appear completely uninterested.

Merlin and Martin shared a look, then Merlin glanced her way. "His flight was due in about an hour ago. Tas and Perry were at the airport waiting for him, but he never got off the plane. They checked in just before Martin and I left Mason's office. The boss is not happy."

"I imagine not. What happened? Bad intel?"

Sasha recognized that as the dig Viper intended it to be. Merlin was a tech genius and as far as Sasha could tell, he was rarely wrong about anything. This miscue had to be rankling him, Viper's comment a giant slab of salt in the wound.

"No, it was good intel. His name was on the flight manifest. He apparently checked in but never got on the plane. Or he got on and slipped out again prior to takeoff. There are at least a dozen other possibilities. You want me to list them?"

Sasha's heart fell to her stomach. Her information had come from the same place as Merlin's, and she had been anxiously waiting for that flight. Knowing her father wasn't on it, wasn't *here*? Sasha schooled her face to hide the disappointment that swept through her.

Viper ignored Merlin's question and responded with one of his own. "So,

what's next?"

"He's here," Merlin insisted. "I'd lay money on it. The flight was a red herring, but he won't be able to hide from us for long. We know why he's here. We'll just keep looking."

"I'm on duty tomorrow night," Martin added. "I'll check in with Frank and see if he's noticed anything, have him keep an eye out. He's seen the guy before, so he knows what to look for."

*Frank?* Sasha looked up, having forgotten that she was pretending to ignore the conversation. Fortunately for her, none of them paid her any mind.

"That's your homeless dude, right?" Viper asked.

"Well, he's not *my* homeless dude," Martin said. "And he's more like a confidential informant. He has a knack for sniffing out the strange and unusual. He'll know if Fuhrmann's back in town, or if the ferals show up again causing trouble."

Their conversation continued, as Sasha took the disappointment at learning her father had not been on his flight and pushed it down. All she had to do was find this Frank guy before the Legion did, get him to trust her, to contact her the minute he learned anything. And then...

"You trust him." Viper's sharp words, more statement than question, pulled Sasha from her musing.

"I do," Martin replied, solemn, automatic. "With my life."

Viper stared at the younger male for a moment, his bronze eyes narrowed into thin slits. "That's a lot of faith to have in a human," he said, his distaste obvious even to Sasha. Could there be a race the Warrior hated more than her own?

"It is, but I stand by it."

The tension sizzled in the air, and Sasha couldn't help but wonder why Martin's relationship, as it were, with a human would have her boss acting snippier than usual.

"Thanks for the cloaking device," Merlin said. He stepped between the other two males, a gentle hand on Martin's arm as he turned him toward the door.

"No problem," Viper said.

They waved at Sasha before closing the door behind them, leaving her to deal with this new information and a now-agitated Viper. Viper in a good mood was insufferable, but an agitated Viper? It was going to be a long night.



## Chapter Five

The Vampire's invitation came as a surprise to Jun, but not an unwanted one. Her hopes for such an occasion had begun to wane. For weeks now she had attended these beginner's classes in an effort to gain Tas's attention. Perhaps regain was a better word, as she had felt his eye upon her from the day she arrived.

That was before she joined him on that little skirmish between Tas's Legion and a brood of ferals who had kidnapped one of their females. Jun had not been prepared to meet her brother that night, had expected she would have to work hard to get into Tas's inner circle where her traitorous sibling hid himself away.

The idea of fighting next to the blond changeling from Australia seemed like a fun way to gain his good graces. Her plan was to charm him, impress him, seduce him if she had to, sleep with him if she must.

But then, just like that, the object of her mission stood next to her instead. They fought side by side, and she recognized herself in him, in the way he held his sword, the way he moved. Later, she would convince herself that it was because they were trained by the same person, by Takeshi, that they were so alike. And she nearly believed it.

In her meditation, she knew the truth. There was a moment, *that* moment when she had been so caught up in battle, in the killing, that all she could think about was how she was fighting the wrong people. She did not remember raising her sword to Katsuro, was only aware when her sword clashed with his. That was the moment that she knew him as her own flesh and blood. She looked into his eyes, black as her own as they were both filled with the Shade, and she saw herself staring back at her.

Had Tas not walked in at that moment, there was no telling where things might have led. Would they have continued the battle? One would never

know.

Unfortunately, now the element of surprise was gone. She had struck at him, and it was a killing blow. Had he not blocked her sword, she would have avenged Takeshi and she would be home again, back in Japan where she truly belonged.

Instead, she sat in a coffee shop with a male who was not even born Vampire, drinking coffee that tasted more like a decadent dessert.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

Jun raised her eyes at the sound of his voice. It was an agreeable voice, a soothing baritone with a pleasant accent, though his vowel pronunciation was like none she had ever heard before. She found it fascinating and... attractive.

“That is such an odd turn of phrase,” she said. “Why would you offer money for such a thing?”

Tas smiled at her, and his cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. “You’re not wrong,” he said. “You seemed far away just then. I wondered where you’d gone.” He tapped a finger to his head. “Up here.”

“My thoughts were of our first battle,” she replied, honestly.

“Between you and me?” he asked, and his lips curled into a pretty smile. Not a word she would often use to describe a male, but for this one with his flowing blond hair and his sea green eyes, she knew of no word more fitting.

Jun snarled, more at herself for her train of thought than at his question, but the smile fell from his face, nonetheless. She offered a short bow of her head. “Apologies,” she said. “I did not mean to offend. And no, not that one, although I remember the results of our first sparring match were much the same as all the rest.”

“Not all,” he said, and the smile was back, if a bit more sheepish, less radiant than before.

“Most,” she said, and allowed the soft smile playing at her lips to reach her eyes. It was enough to bring the light back to his face, and she silently chided herself for the relief she felt. “My thoughts were of the night we battled the ferals. How is the female, if I may ask? And the child?”

Tas leaned back in his seat and grabbed a quick sip from his venti cup before setting it back on the table. “Good,” he said. “They’re both good. All of them. Raven barely leaves the Compound any more, probably wouldn’t at all if Jessica didn’t boot him out now and then. They’re healthy and happy, though, no thanks to Victoria.”

“She is a relative, though, is she not?” Jun still did not understand the



dynamic with Jessica Sweet and her family. Master Jonathon explained to her what he knew, but that turned out to be very little.

“Victoria is Harrier’s mother, Rachel and Rebecca’s, too. So, that makes her Jessica’s great, great, something-or-other grandmother. Jess can’t even do the math, so I have to admit I’ve never tried. Anyway, the woman’s a right bitch, doesn’t know the meaning of family.”

“That happens more than one would think,” Jun said.

“Meaning?”

“When you come to teach next time, look around. The world is full of parents who do not know the first thing about parenting. For every *Kurai Senshi* you see, you will know of one, if not two, people who do not know the meaning of unconditional love.”

Tas nodded at her, reached for his cup again, and took another drink. Though he tried to hide it, Jun saw the way his eyes dimmed, the way he averted his gaze from hers as if he, too, were ashamed of her. It did not offend, as she was used to her kind treating her as an outsider when they found the Shade dwelling within her. Maybe, in centuries past, it might have hurt, but that was long ago. She had lived a hundred human lifetimes since then. Now, she would as easily kill such people as look at them.

“Speaking of that night,” Tas said, his attempt to change the subject obvious.

Jun reached for her own, much smaller cup and took a slow sip. When she didn’t reply, he went on.

“You never did tell me why you and Merlin were crossing swords.” Merlin was the name the Legion called her brother, as if they, too, knew the shame that went along with the name, Katsuro. She should have known not to mention that night, but it was too late to go back now.

“There is nothing to tell. We got caught up in the fight.”

“So, that’s still your story?”

“It is not a story. It simply is.”

“You shocked the hell out of Merlin,” Tas said. He leaned back in his chair, though his hand remained wrapped around the cup on the table. “He said you tried to strike him from behind.”

“Is that what he said?” It was the truth, though she would not confirm that to Tas. Not here, not now.

“It is. But I want to know what you say.” He appeared relaxed, calm, yet she could feel his energy all around her. His words were a challenge, even as

his tone soothed her, mollified her to a point where all her secrets could be his for the asking.

She shook her head, first to shake away the cobwebs, then to clear her own traitorous thoughts.

“There is nothing to say,” she managed. “It was a mistake in battle. It certainly will not happen again.”

And by that she meant the next time she struck at Katsuro, she would not miss.

“He liked you, you know.”

Jun’s eyes snapped to Tas’s. “How so? We had so little interaction beyond the fight.”

“Well, when I told him that I... that you were in most of my classes, he said that there was a uniqueness about you. He said he felt a kinship with you as well. Probably through the Shade, since you all have little bits of you floating around in that dark place. Still, I think he would like to meet you under different circumstances.”

“He said this?” she asked, as the shock of Tas’s words spread through her like a wildfire through desert-dried brush.

“Not those words exactly. He just said you were different somehow. Said he wouldn’t mind knowing your story.” Tas dropped his eyes to his lap, but she could still see that smile. “Truth is, I wouldn’t mind knowing your story myself. Guess that’s why I asked you here tonight. So, we could, I don’t know, maybe, if you wanted, get to know each other a little?”

It came out the equivalent of one word all strung together, but she caught his meaning. And it was exactly what she had hoped to avoid. She would rather have meaningless sex with this male than to spend time getting to know him. Her lack of experience in this area was evident. Takeshi had been a thorough teacher, and thus she had many talents in the carnal arts. However, luring a man to her bed without any... strings attached? This was not something she knew how to do, and her lack of skills could very well get her into trouble.

She picked up her cup and drained it in one long, scalding gulp. “I need to get back,” she said.

Tas looked at her as though she’d grown a third eye. “We just got here. My coffee’s not even—”

“I have to go.” Jun stood, grabbed her cup and her coat, and walked straight out the door, leaving Tas to scramble after her.

## Chapter Six

As the wind blew through the streets of London, Ulrich Fuhrmann stood on a balcony, his white-blond hair lifting and twisting in the breeze. Not that he needed the invisible force of nature to set his locks to flight. The magic flowing through him was enough to get things moving. Frustration had a way of doing that.

The phone call from the feral, Maxx, had been enlightening, though ultimately was the source of his annoyance. For the briefest of moments, they'd had the Sweet girl in their possession, still the perfect person to bait the trap. And once again, she slipped through his grasp. Maxx and Victoria's grasp, really, but it was basically the same thing.

It was never easy. Twice the murdering twins had slipped his father's grasp, and twice more he'd failed to end them, himself. Not this time. For once and for all, he would destroy those abominable creatures, even if he died in the process. He would avenge his parents' death if it was the last thing he did in his life.

A *ding* sounded from inside, catching his attention. He stepped off the balcony and into the flat he rented on a weekly basis. The laptop was on the breakfast bar, in its usual spot, and currently flashed a notification that he had a new email from Maxx.

He pulled up a bar stool and settled himself before clicking on the link. The letter popped up instantly—he had amazingly good reception there—along with an attachment.

*Victoria is still in the wind, but don't worry. I have things under control. As expected, the Legion are watching the airports. Your decoy arrived safely, and sure enough, there was a Legion welcoming party there waiting for you. Have to hand it to you. That was smart having someone else travel under your name. You have the credentials I sent you, though. That and flying into*

*Louisville should keep you below the Legion's radar. There will be a car waiting for you, and everything else has been arranged. If you need anything further, shoot me a text before you board. I'll have it for you when you arrive.*

*One other thing. It has come to my attention that the Legion is housing one of your race on their premises. You may recall her from our time with the Primeval in London. I've attached a current photograph. She's altered her appearance somewhat, but I'm positive it's the same girl. Please advise how you would like us to proceed.*

Uli clicked the icon and waited a brief moment for the photograph to load. When it materialized in its completion, he leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. She did look familiar, though her hair was much shorter and dyed an ungodly brown. Her eyes were also changed.

Fury coursed through him. What kind of Sorceress would defile herself in such a bald-faced and insulting manner? Had she no pride in the blood running through her veins? Her hair should be white, like his, her eyes red, or the palest blue were she of a lesser blood. Sure, Uli had used contacts to obscure his eyes when out among humans, but what she'd done to her hair was an abomination. A Sorcerer's hair was more than a source of pride. It was a conduit between the body and the earth, the place where magic began and ended for their kind. The color was bad enough, but to *cut* it? That was more than simple bad form, it was dangerous.

Upon reading Maxx's missive, Uli had to admit a certain wisp of hope at having a kinsman within the Legion ranks, but this? This woman had obviously turned her back on her race, and he had no use for her. How could he even begin to trust her?

This woman was a nonstarter. When it came down to it, he would kill the twins in whatever manner he chose. Then he would kill this *kinswoman* strictly on general purposes.

Uli powered down his laptop and closed the lid, then packed it in his messenger bag. He grabbed the rest of his meager belongings and made a slow circle around the tiny flat. He'd enjoyed his downtime there; however, enough was enough.

He had a plane to catch.

## Chapter Seven

When her shift with Viper finally ended, Sasha bypassed her suite and went directly to the garage. The fleet Honda Mason had graciously provided her sat in its designated spot, just waiting to be taken for a spin. She didn't leave the Compound often, but when she did it was a stark reminder of the freedoms she now enjoyed, thanks to this unlikely group of Vampires.

Technically, she'd only received her official driver's license a couple of weeks ago, compliments of Merlin, of course. The male truly was a tech genius, capable of replicating anything one would need to exist among the humans.

She'd been driving on her passport ever since she arrived in the States. That was another gift from Mason. She'd found it in the post not long after the Vampires had liberated her from the Primeval's servitude. With it he'd enclosed a note reminding her that his offer for her to join them here in Fallen Cross was open ended, should she ever change her mind.

Now, here she was with a spiffy red car and a laminated piece of cardboard complete with her photograph and an assumed name. Merlin insisted that she have proper identification. He said it was imperative that the Legion personnel appear legal should they find themselves on the wrong side of the human law.

However, she had not expected him to make her take a driving test. She'd read the manuals on line, studied the American laws, and was relatively confident driving the rental she'd acquired for herself. Merlin, however, was relentless. For several weeks, the male took her out before work to put her driving to the test. Sasha was fond of Merlin, really, but when it came to driving instructions, he was a bit of a stickler.

When he'd felt she was ready, he'd taken her out on this very road, and boy was she glad he'd been so tough on her. The road into Fallen Cross was

narrow and filled with twists and turns, with steep barely-protected drop-offs on either side. She'd been terrified that night, but Merlin kept her calm with his gentle voice and endless supply of patience. He might have slipped her the Vampire equivalent of a mickey to keep her relaxed, but she wouldn't be bothered about it. She owed so much to the Legion already. And yet, that driver's license, falsified as it was, was something she felt she'd truly earned. Ultimately, she found herself grateful that Merlin had put her through the paces.

As she crossed the bridge just before the park where the twin, Nox, had battled a group of ferals who worked for her father, she considered the task in front her. After twelve hours working in the lab with Viper, all she wanted to do was go back to her rooms and relax with a glass of wine or six. However, Martin's mention of his friend, Frank, could make all the difference in her quest to find her father.

She sat in the parking lot in front of the big box store and waited for them to open. Promptly at eight o'clock, a pimply-faced boy turned the key in the lock and gave her a little wave. He'd barely made it back to the cash register when she flew inside, eager to find an obnoxious alarm clock that might be able to rouse her from her erotic dreams.

The boy was kind enough to direct her to the back of the store, where she found that which she sought. On the way, a display caught her eye, and she congratulated herself for finding this little something extra.

"Have a nice day," he said to her as she left the store with her packages.

"You, too," she called, with a little wave.

And if the gods were with her, it might be a nice day at that.

Her jaw cracked as a yawn escaped her, reminding her that another day of interrupted sleep might be the death of her.

She put the car in gear, then headed further into town in search of her true errand. She drove straight to Good Times, the little bar where most of Fallen Cross and many of the Vampires went for food and adult beverages. Once there she slowed to a crawl, her head on a swivel as she searched the streets and alleys for the homeless.

When she reached the alley beside the drycleaner, she saw a man hunched over a grocery cart. She stopped the car, rolled down the passenger side window and called out to him.

"Frank?"

The person in the alley wore tattered clothes, and their hair hung in knots

down past the collar of a faded coat. The cold December air was a reminder that winter was upon them. Sasha shivered under the warmth of her own Legion-provided down-filled jacket. She'd known cold before, had been denied the comfort of a fire or a blanket in the dead of winter as punishment for some misdeed or another, and her heart ached for this poor soul.

The man didn't respond, so she tried again. "Sir? Are you Frank?"

The person turned around and snarled at her, bearing yellowed teeth through thin, peeling lips. "Do I look like a Frank to you?" the woman bellowed.

Realizing her mistake, Sasha hastened to apologize.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated. "It's just, I'm looking for someone who lives around here. Do you know Frank?"

"Sure I do," the woman said, and promptly turned her back on Sasha to continue sorting the items in her purloined grocery cart.

"Please," Sasha tried again. "It's imperative that I find him. Would you perhaps know where I should look?"

The woman turned slowly, her eye roll taking her head in a full circle. "Oh, imperative, is it? You should have just said so." She shook her head and turned back to her belongings.

Sasha parked the car, and got out. If this woman knew where Frank was holed up, she needed to know. "Please, ma'am." She reached out and touched the woman's soiled coat. "It's very important. I'm looking for my father."

The woman spun around, nearly knocking Sasha to the filthy ground. "Frank's yer dad?"

"What?"

"Well, why didn't you say so. Course I know where Frank is. He's letting me keep the alley safe while he's gone walkabout. That's Australian for wandering aimlessly, you know?"

"Of course." Sasha had no idea what the woman was talking about. "Then you know where he is?"

The woman leaned an elbow against the cart's handle and buffed her grimy nails against her grimier coat.

"Maybe."

"But you said..."

"I said I'd help you. Didn't say I'd do it for nothin'." The woman continued to stare at her.

Sasha waited for the woman to say something more, then it clicked. "Wait.

You want money? For information about Frank?”

“Food ain’t free, you know.”

“I, well, no I suppose it isn’t.” She dug into her jeans pocket and came up with a twenty-dollar bill, plus some change from her recent purchase. She held it out, wondering what the appropriate amount would be for procuring the whereabouts of another homeless person.

“That’ll work,” the woman said, plucking the twenty from Sasha’s outstretched palm. “Wouldn’t wanna leave you broke,” she added with a toothless grin.

“So, you’ll tell me? Where to find Frank.”

The woman shrugged and turned back to her cart.

“Please,” Sasha said again. However, her pleas fell on deaf ears. She waited several moments, but the woman continued to ignore her. Dejected, she turned to go back to her car. The indigent was obviously out of her mind. Sasha would just have to find Frank on her own.

She opened the Honda’s door and had one foot on the floorboard when the woman called out.

“Frank said he might sleep over in the cemetery last night. He does that sometimes, you know? To get out of the weather? I’d start there.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much. You don’t know how much this means... I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“They calls me Tannie Annie,” she mumbled into her shoulder. “On account of my old tanning bed habit. But you can just call me Tan.”

Sasha gave herself a mental head shake, feeling so out of her element. She tried to imagine this woman tanning animal hides for a living, although she’d never heard of anyone using a bed specifically for the task. For all the hell she’d lived through with the Primeval, the real world never failed to astonish her.

“Thank you, Tan. You’ve been a great help.”

“Pfft,” the woman said, and she waved Sasha away as she returned to the ever-important task of sorting through her things.



## Chapter Eight

Uli Fuhrmann entered the building with a scowl on his face and a handkerchief over his mouth and nose. It was a large concrete structure, one of many clustered close together on a rather massive plot of land slightly west and on the outskirts of Fallen Cross. Any equipment that might have once resided there had long since been removed, leaving the concrete floors bare of large obstructions, yet riddled with tripping hazards, like oversized bolts and rusty hooks sticking out at random intervals.

And it smelled like something had died in there. No, not *something*. *Somethings*, lots of *somethings*, over and over, for decades upon decades. It wasn't an odor that humans would necessarily notice, as it had faded over time, but his olfactory senses were as keen as most other supernatural beings. To him, he might as well be standing in a pile of rotting carcasses. Not even the smell of burnt cabbage, the unfortunate aroma of his feral Vampire minions, could come close to covering up the scent of death that permeated the complex.

True to his word, Maxx sent a daywalker to retrieve Fuhrmann from the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport. The male was surly and not big on conversation, which suited Uli just fine. After nine hours on a plane seated behind a woman with a curious toddler and a colicky infant, the drive provided two and a half hours of peace and quiet, a welcome relief.

However, when Maxx told him he'd procured the "perfect" hideaway for Fuhrmann and their small army of ferals, this abandoned rendering plant wasn't exactly what Uli had in mind.

The daywalker led him through the empty warehouse to an L-shaped bank of windowed and doored offices along the southwest side of the room. All were dark, except for the larger corner office, where a television's flickering light bounced between the slits in the lowered window blinds that covered a

large pane of filthy glass.

The daywalker knocked twice, paused then thrice more before he motioned Uli ahead and disappeared into the shadows. Some shuffling occurred inside, then after a brief wait, the door opened. The feral, Maxx, filled its frame, his dark hair on the long side and desperately in need of a comb. He scratched at the scruff on his chiseled chin and blinked a couple of times. His eyes, the color of rotten pumpkin and unique to feral Vampires, still gave Uli the willies.

“You made it,” Maxx said, as he stepped back and motioned Uli inside.

The room wasn’t quite what the Sorcerer had expected. A twin bed stood in one corner of the L-shaped room, a shabby dresser at its foot. The muted fifty-inch flat screen hung on the wall in the longer side of the room and two tattered recliners, straight from someone’s dumpster, faced it.

A card table and chairs sat beneath the half wall of windows, a deck of blue-backed playing cards scattered in its center as if someone had abandoned an old-fashioned game of Solitaire. A refrigerator and a free-standing bar occupied the corners to either side of the television, making the room complete, if not a little cramped.

“You are always one to state the obvious,” Uli said, in response to Maxx’s inane statement. He stored his gloves in his pockets, then removed his coat and hung it on the rack near the door. “Where are the others?”

“They’re around. Some have kitted out a few of the offices here, and there are more like it in some of the other buildings, but they smell like holy hell. This was the best of the bunch.”

“I see,” Uli said, although he couldn’t imagine it getting worse. “How many are we?”

“Twenty-three at last count. Drew and Randy are on recruiting detail. They’re having to go as far as Columbus and Indianapolis to find new blood. Still, we’re growing every day.”

Uli glanced around the room, his thoughts elsewhere. “It’s not enough, but never mind. I have an idea that will make joining our little club irresistible.”

Maxx crossed the room and stood closer than Uli liked. “Just how big is this going to get?”

“How many did you have in the condo?” Uli replied with a question of his own, referring to their most recent debacle.

“I don’t know. A dozen?”

“And of those twelve, how many are still with us today?” Uli raised his

head to pin Maxx with a red-eyed glare.

Maxx looked away before he responded. "Me."

"Exactly."

"In our defense, we weren't prepared for an all-out war. We were just supposed to be watching that female until you got here."

"Right. And where is she now? Oh, yes," he said when Maxx didn't answer. "She's at home with her family while my family rots in their graves. You weren't prepared for anything, and that was the problem. I thought after the fur farm you would have been more vigilant. Obviously, I was wrong."

"I don't even remember the fur farm," Maxx mumbled, and Uli knew that to be true. The male had taken a bullet to the brain, and though Uli had been able to keep him alive, he wasn't dealing with the healthiest of Vampires. Ferals were the Vampire equivalent of human drug addicts. Their drug of choice was dying blood, and the price? Besides the orange eyes and the aforementioned odor, they gave up a large portion of the magic that made them Vampires. A shame, really, that he had to side with the lowest of the species in order to challenge the most depraved.

"Forget it," Uli said, never mind his poor choice of words. "Once the Legion realizes I'm here, they aren't going to mess around. They will come at us with everything they've got, and we need to be prepared. We thought we were ready before, and we weren't."

Uli stepped to the window and opened the blinds to look out onto the barren concrete space. "With enough fighters," he said, "and a proper plan, we can lure Raven and Nox in and take them out once and for all."

There was a knock at the door and Uli watched as Maxx answered it.

"I've got Mr. Fuhrmann's things here." The driver must have slipped through the shadows without Uli seeing him. Interesting. "Where should I put them?"

"I've got a room set up for him at the end of the row," Maxx said.

"Leave them here," Uli interrupted. "I'll be staying in this room. Maxx, I'm sure you'll be comfortable in the other space."

Maxx opened his mouth to argue, but Uli squelched whatever the male had planned to say with a glance. "Of course," he said instead. "I'll need to get my stuff."

Maxx grabbed a duffle bag from under his bed and began stuffing clothes from the dresser into its zippered mouth.

"Is the rest of the complex like this? Empty buildings and such?"

Maxx shook his head as he packed. “Some still have equipment, rendering machines, vats, and the like. Some of them have so much shit, you could get lost going from one end to the other.”

“Perfect,” Uli said, a plan formulating. “Now,” he added. “Tell me about the girl.”

## Chapter Nine

Sasha jumped in the car and drove back the way she'd come. The cemetery in question was on the righthand side on the way out of town. The sprawling expanse of land started out flat and rose in a steep incline toward the back of the property, all of it filled with tombstones. Some were ancient and crumbling, others shiny and new.

All of them represented at least one life, human beings who had once walked the earth as she did right now. People who left behind families and friends, or perhaps who died alone and miserable.

Sasha walked through the stones, noting the dates etched into the memorials left in their honor. Some were children, infants even who hadn't even begun to live, others very old at the end of full lives.

Sasha stopped next to a piercing obelisk and shielded her eyes against the rising sun. Six crypts lined the eastern edge of the cemetery, buildings of varying sizes set along the back of the perimeter, their occupants serving as sentinels set to protect the bones of the deceased from invading forces.

The third from the left caught her eye, its door slightly ajar, giving the building a slight imperfection that the others lacked.

Thanking her good senses and her decision to wear sneakers this morning, Sasha trudged through the tombstones and headed toward the back of the lot.

"Frank," she called, when she neared the crypts. "Frank, are you in there?"

The door to the crypt in question squeaked on its hinges, as a gnarled hand wrapped around its edge and pushed it forward. An icy chill raced down her spine and she glanced at the rising sun, thankful for its light. If she'd come at night, this little scene would have had her screaming and running for the car.

"Frank?" Her voice trembled on the name, and she had to swallow several times to tamp down her unease.

The door completed its screechy path and came to rest at an odd angle. Framed in its arches was an old man with stringy grey hair and hollow cheeks. She shouldn't have been surprised that his appearance was so much like Tan's. However, it was interesting to note that while the woman in the alley had vacuous eyes, this man was quite the opposite. In fact, his eyes were bright and alert, and she doubted there was much that escaped his notice.

"Frank?" she asked, quietly this time, as there was really no need to shout.

"Who's askin'?" the man called in a gravelly, underused voice.

"My name is Sasha. I'm a friend of Martin's. Are you Frank?"

"You say you know Marty?"

"Yes," she said, unable to hide the relief in her voice. "We work together, actually. You know him, right?"

"Sure, I know Marty. Good guy. Little strange, but then we all got our quirks."

Sasha smiled and approached the crypt. "Yes, he's a very good male."

"Did he send you?"

"Not exactly," Sasha said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "He mentioned that you kept an eye on things in town for him. You know, for anything *unusual*?"

Frank eyed her for a minute, perhaps sizing her up. Finally, he said, "Been quiet. Like the calm before the storm, if you ask me."

Sasha deflated a bit, then soldiered on. "Indeed," she said. "But the creatures you saw with the white hair and the red eyes? Could you tell me if you've seen them around town lately?"

Frank scratched at the silver scruff on his chin and angled his eyes to the sky. "Nope. Like I said, super quiet. I'd have told Marty if I'd seen 'em."

"Yes, well, I was wondering. Would it be possible for you to tell me first, if you see them, I mean?"

Frank folded his arms over his scrawny chest and glared at Sasha, suspicion evident in his gaunt frame. "I don't know," he finally said. "Me and Marty got a deal, you know? I keep him up to date on all the strangeness and he keeps me fed. I'd hate to do anything to piss him off. Pardon my French, but a fella can get mighty hungry of an evening."

"Of course not," Sasha hurried on, for fear she was losing him. "I wouldn't want that either. Perhaps, if it's not too much trouble, you might let me know first? Before you tell Martin, I mean. Would that be too much of an

indiscretion?”

Frank cocked his head and squinted his beady eyes at her. “Tell me why.”

Sasha closed the short distance between them and grabbed onto his forearm. “I’m looking for someone,” she pled, all the desperation she felt laced heavily in the words. “And you are the only one who can help me. Please, sir.”

Frank scrunched up his face in a bitter scowl, then shivered beneath his thin jacket. “Don’t call me sir,” he said. “I feel like my dearly departed daddy is ghosting up behind me. Just call me Frank.”

“Sure. Frank. As I said, I’m looking for someone, my own father, as it turns out. But I don’t want anyone to know. Martin is a good, honest person, and I’m afraid he won’t understand. I’m not out to hurt him or any of his friends. Only, I’m desperate to find the man who gave me life. You see, we’ve never met, and, well. You can understand that, right? My need to find him?”

Frank scratched at his upper arm as he thought. “Well, that is something,” he agreed. “I don’t like keeping stuff from Marty, but I don’t see any harm if you’re just looking for your pops. But only if I see you first. I ain’t gonna hang onto anything that might be important, just because you ain’t around for me to tell.”

Sasha’s heart practically skipped a beat. “Could you call me?”

Frank gave a coarse chuckle. “Not sure if you noticed, lady, but I ain’t up on much of that technological stuff. I haven’t made a phone call since they took out the last pay phone over by the laundromat.

Sasha pulled her extra purchase out of her pocket and held it out to Frank. “You could use this.”

Frank leaned over to examine the burner phone in Sasha’s hand.

“It’s disposable,” Sasha explained. “Called a burner. I’ve already programmed my phone number into it, and it’s all charged up. All you have to do is push this button to turn it on, then this one to call me. I’ll answer if I can. If not, you can leave a message. Do you think you can remember that?”

“I’m homeless, not an idiot,” Frank growled, but he took the phone and turned it over in his hands.

He played with the buttons for a few seconds, then Sasha’s cell began to ring. She pulled it out of her other pocket and answered it. “Hello?”

“Heeheehee!” Frank cackled, the sound rattling in front of her and through the phone in a weird sort of stereo. “Never thought I’d have me one of these.

I don't suppose you're gonna let me keep this after you find your pops?"

"It's yours to do with whatever you like."

"Alrighty then."

"So, you'll do it?" Sasha held her breath, afraid to hope.

"Sure. I don't see no harm in it."

"And you'll keep it just between us? I wouldn't want to upset Martin over a little thing like this."

"Whatever you say, lady."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you!" she grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down. She would have hugged him had he been the teensiest bit cleaner.

"Okay lady, you can give me my hand back now."

Sasha let go and took a step back. "I'm so sorry," she said. "It's just, I've never been this close."

"Yeah well, don't get yer panties in a twist just yet. We haven't discussed my fee."



## Chapter Ten

The scent of her lingered, though she'd left the lab hours ago.

Viper scrubbed his hands over his face then searched the room, half expecting to see her hidden behind the farthest workspace, or stepping out of the bathroom but that was delusional thinking. She'd spent the entire night chomping at the bit, her eagerness to get away from him practically bleeding all over the room. When the clock struck eight, she grabbed her things and skedaddled with barely a backward wave.

*And what, you expected a heartfelt goodbye? Catch you later in your dreams? Riiiiight.*

He rubbed his nose for the umpteenth time, then slapped his palms on the table. This was useless. There was no way he'd be getting any work done today, so what was the point in trying? He cleaned up his workspace, shut down the computer and tidied up his desk. Then he walked to the door, took one last look around, and turned out the light before he locked up behind him.

He made a quick stop by his suite to change clothes, then headed to the Club for a quick workout. Most of the manse would have settled in for the day, but his relief in finding the place empty wasn't unfounded. Some of the female residents weren't as nocturnal as the rest of them. They also happened to be the ones keen on staying in shape, so one could never guarantee alone time at the gym anymore. Especially since Jessica had the baby.

Viper dropped his towel over the bar on the treadmill, stepped on and started things up. His feet hit rubber as the belt gained speed, the rhythmic sound echoing in the cavernous a room. Soon he felt his heart beating in time with his steps, his breathing slow and even despite the speed of his pace.

He closed his eyes as he ran, finding his peace. Aside from the lab, this was where he felt the most Zen. From the moment he joined the Legion, he'd

had to learn all over again how to live with others. He'd been on his own for such a long time before Mason found him, always alone. He never trusted anyone to get close; it wasn't safe. Not for him.

Not for them.

So, he'd stayed to himself, only going out when the need for blood forced him into close proximity with others. That's how he'd found himself facing off against the *Kurai Senshi* that night in Bangkok. It hadn't ended well for them.

His eyes popped open before the scene could replay in his mind. It wasn't something he wanted to relive. None of it was.

Sweat dripped into his eye and he lifted a shoulder to wipe it away, hoping to scrub the memory along with it. Decades had passed, and it felt like yesterday.

Still, when Mason found him, it was a blessing in disguise. Viper didn't know if it was fate looking out for him, or if he'd just gotten lucky. Either way, he had to admit that becoming a part of something greater than himself had been good for him. It gave him a purpose, a focus that, until that moment, his life had sorely lacked.

When the Warlord approached him, Viper was short on details and long on attitude. Whatever the male was selling, he'd wanted no part in it. But Mason was nothing if not persuasive, and really, what did Viper have to lose? If it didn't work out, he'd ghost, disappear, and write it off as life experience. That was ages ago. Funny how time flew.

The Club's double doors opened and Viper heard soft footsteps as someone entered. He glanced into the mirror and saw Phire hovering in the doorway.

The young female wore workout clothes and a pink towel hung loosely around her neck. She was one of the young twins in Rachel's charge. In truth, Rebecca was her mother, but that female was... Viper decided for the thousandth time that the relationships were too complicated. They had nothing to do with him, and so, as usual, he let the thoughts pass.

When the girl didn't move, Viper sighed. "Come on in," he said. "You won't bother me."

"Are... are you sure?" she squeaked, as if she were talking to a horrible monster or an asshole or something.

Viper frowned, her reaction bothering him for reasons he couldn't put a name to. "I'm sure," he said, both to escape further thought and to get her out

of the godsdamned doorway.

“Okay.”

He watched her cross the gym, her bright red hair pulled up into a curly tail, her young face fresh and sweet. Admittedly, he hadn't spent a lot of time with the youngest members of the household. Phire—short for Sapphire but rhyming with fear for reasons unbeknownst to Viper—and her twin brother, Talon, kept mostly within their familial unit. In fact, other than their initial arrival and Jessica Sweet's mandatory-attendance Thanksgiving dinner party, he couldn't remember seeing either of the children around.

Then again, he kept to himself as much as possible, so was it really such a surprise? They could be playing baseball with the Soldiers or riding cardboard boxes down the manse stairwells, and he'd never know it.

The girl climbed onto the treadmill next to his and he glanced down at her. “Is this okay?” she asked.

Viper shrugged. “Makes me no never mind,” he said.

She threw him an odd glance, then went about setting up the machine. She draped her towel over the cross bar in front of her and programmed the machine for a moderate speed. With a heavy sigh and a flip of her ponytail, she hit the go button and things started up.

Viper watched it all with mild fascination. Then it occurred to him, this kid was, like, twelve, and it was way past sun up. “Shouldn't you be in bed?” he asked, though he regretted the question almost immediately.

The kid lifted her shoulder and sniffed as she cranked things up another level. A drop of red fell from her chin and landed on the pink towel hanging in front of her. Vampires didn't sweat blood. Their tears were something else altogether. A closer look confirmed his suspicions, and Viper resisted the urge to run.

*Christ on a catapult.*

“You okay, kid?” he asked, though it was totally against his nature and he wished like hell for a cigarette or something disposable to blow up. Safely, of course. He wasn't a fucking animal.

She lifted that shoulder again, but didn't respond. Figuring he'd just dodged a bullet, Viper let it drop. He'd done the adult thing, offered an ear and all that. Wasn't his fault if the kid didn't want to talk.

“Do you ever feel like you don't fit in?” It was a whisper, and damned his Vampire hearing, he caught every word. The tug at his heart could have been anything, but he recognized it for what it was: understanding.

Unfortunately, though, Viper didn't know thing one about child psychology. Hell, he'd totally flunked being a kid himself, so why on earth had the gods sent this girl to him? He glanced in the mirror and saw her watching him, waiting, that sweet face marred by the tracks of bloody tears seeking their way southward.

"Yeah," he said, surprising them both. "I do."

"Really?" She hit the e-stop button and turned to him as her belt slowed to a halt. "You're not just saying that?"

"Kid, do you even know who I am?"

"Sorry," she said and turned back to the control panel. "I'm sorry."

*Shit.*

"What I meant to say was, uh, yeah. I'm not just saying that."

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what?"

"Why do you feel that way? I mean, you're a Warrior, right? And you're really smart and everyone looks up to you and trusts you because of your inventions and stuff."

"They do?" he asked, because, *who said that?* sounded a bit clueless on his part.

She turned and leaned against the treadmill's handrail, her arms folded across her chest as she watched him run. Yeah, he was still running, and yet it was doing nothing to get him out of this awkward conversation.

"Uncle Harrier talks about you all the time. He says you're a genius, only not like Merlin's a genius. He says you can do things with weapons that nobody's ever thought of before. He says what you do is like magic. Is it?" she asked.

Viper was still on Harrier saying he was a genius. That male didn't compliment anyone. "What?"

"Is it magic? What you do?"

Viper hit the stop button on his machine and took his time with the slow down as he tried to get his thoughts in order. Her question hit way too close to a shit ton of his own. "What do you think?" he asked, deflecting.

"I don't know. I'd say that magic is a relative thing. I mean, I know Sasha has magic, but she's a Sorceress. And the Sorcerers are generally bad news to hear Uncle Harrier talk about it, so I don't know. You're just a Vampire, right?"

Viper lifted a corner of his mouth in a half smile. "You say that like it's a

bad thing. Aren't you *just* a Vampire?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I am."

"And in a manse full of mostly just Vampires, why would you feel like you don't fit in?"

She hesitated, suddenly focused on her foot as she dug the toe of her tie-dyed Chuck Taylor into the rubber belt. After a minute she said, "I've never fit in."

"And again, I'm asking you why?"

"*She*, I mean Rebecca, our mother, was never very good at it, at being a mom. I'd like to say she tried, but I'm not sure she ever really did. I don't know how me and Talon survived being totally dependent on her. From as far back as I can remember, she would disappear on us for days at a time. Talon's always been a fierce one, ready to fight his way out of anything. Not me, though. I just wanted to survive. I guess that's why I like to be called Phire instead of Sapphire."

"You want to be reminded of your fears?" Viper asked, genuinely confused.

"Forget it," she said, and she grabbed her towel and stepped off the treadmill, the scent of fresh tears heavy in the air.

*Shit.*

"Phire," Viper called as he dashed after her. He stopped her halfway to the exit with a gentle hand on her shoulder, and when she turned around, he said, "Yeah, that was uncalled for. Come here."

He led her over to the weight benches and patted one for her to sit on before he planted himself on the other. She sat with a reluctant huff and looked up at him with wary eyes.

"Go on," he said, "Waste of a mother. Facing your fears. Continue."

The kid must have really need to unburden herself because, much to Viper's surprise, she went on.

"I thought once we got our fangs, Rebecca would see us as less of a bother and more like equals. Instead, she dragged us here and dumped us the first chance she got. You know the rest."

"Yeah, I do. Fuhrmann really did a number on the two of you. Is that what this is all about? Fuhrmann?"

Phire studied her fingers for a minute, then said, "Not really. I guess it's more about everyone having a purpose here. Even Talon is spending time with the Soldiers, learning how to use weapons and hand to hand combat and

stuff. He comes back from his training full of stories about what he's learned and how he's going to help the Legion when he's old enough to join."

Come to think of it, Tas had mentioned something along those lines a while back. He told Viper how well the young male was doing, that he had great potential, and Tas was usually right about such things. Phire wasn't far off in thinking her brother had a place with the Legion the minute he was legal.

*Shit.* The kid was still talking.

"Mom, I mean Rachel, helps Merlin with the day-to-day household stuff. Jessica has her visions and Sasha works with you. Even Kythryn can shift into a liger and kick enemy butt when she has to. That leaves me and Rebecca, both of us completely useless." The kid sighed again, folded one leg under her and swung the other foot back and forth beneath the bench.

Viper struggled for something, anything, that might ease the kid's mind. The truth? She wasn't wrong. Rebecca was a complete waste of oxygen, but Phire? From what he'd heard, she was wicked smart, loved learning and worked hard at her studies. To compare her to her birth mother was, frankly, an insult to the girl. Other than the hair, the two had nothing in common.

"So that's it?" he said. "You're afraid you're being compared to Rebecca?"

She didn't answer, but the shrug and slight uptick in foot-swinging was all the response he needed.

Contrary to his general character, Viper felt compelled to help the kid. Nobody should have to go through life feeling like that, like they were only kept around because they had nowhere else to go. Later, he would blame that, more than anything, for the next words out of his mouth.

"So," he said. "How do you feel about munitions?"

## Chapter Eleven

*His lips were soft, so soft and in direct contrast to the hard press of his fangs against her neck. She arched her back, her breasts searing with the feel of his bare skin on hers, and she ached to feel his bite, to welcome the razor-sharp points into her skin, to fill him with her blood as he filled her with his hard...*

Sasha bolted upright, the clang of her new alarm clock blaring at her from its intentionally inconvenient home across the room. A sheen of sweat bathed her body, and when she rolled over, her intent to silence that insane blaring noise, her legs rubbed together, sending jolts of electricity straight from her core to every part of her body. She moaned, the alarm clock forgotten as she reached beneath the blankets and sought the release she'd been so close to achieving in her dream.

It didn't take much. Since the dreams had started, she'd taken to sleeping in the nude, making access so much easier. The orgasm shot through her with a few eager strokes, her mind easy to deceive into thinking it was Viper's tongue between her legs rather than her own desperate hand.

The quaking eventually subsided, and the imagined vision of Viper's satisfied smile faded from her vision. The shrieking alarm, which had gone muffled while she was otherwise occupied, blared in her ears once again. She knew she had to move, knew she'd be late again if she didn't, despite having set the alarm a full hour earlier than necessary. Still, it was nice, lying there, steeped in the feeling of... what? She couldn't say love, because that was simply ridiculous. Desire, perhaps? Maybe. Even if it was just Dream Viper, that figment of her imagination that had absolutely nothing in common with the actual male, it still left her feeling wanted.

Logic told her she needed to get up, get moving, but the idea of rushing to be in the physical presence of a male who, in person, was the complete opposite of the male he was in her dreams... was it any wonder she was in no hurry to trade her current state of euphoria for... that?

She gave herself another stroke, hoping to rekindle the sensations the dreams always left upon her, but it was too late. Reality had already replaced them in her mind. Disappointment filled her as she rose to shower, to face the night and the real-life version of Viper, a pissier of a Vampire who was anything but the male of her dreams.

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When she arrived at the lab, it surprised Sasha to see that she and Viper were not alone. Seated at the workstation between hers and the desk, the station usually occupied by Viper, was the young Vampire, Phire. Viper stood beside her, patiently going over some instructions or other. He barely looked up when Sasha took her seat and fired up her computer.

Yep, reality Viper was a total gem.

Fifteen minutes later, Lord Viper deigned to acknowledge her presence. "Sasha," he barked. "I need you to focus on the Fuhrmann situation. I need a list of anything you think he might throw at us and what countermeasures the Vampires can use to neutralize it. You know Phire. She's going to be helping us out around here. Get to work."

Sasha caught Phire's wide-eyed reaction to Viper's sharp words and smiled. *Get used to it, kid. This is as good as it gets.*

Sasha dove into her work, her focus on creating a spreadsheet that contained every spell and counter spell she could think of. She knew that Ulrich Fuhrmann would have things up his sleeves she would never dream of, but she wasn't about to tell Viper that. He probably knew it as well as she did, but she supposed it was possible they might stumble upon something anyway.

She was deep into the project when her cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled out the device and a thrill shot through her as she recognized the number.

Without a word, she shot from her chair and sped out of the lab. Viper's shouted, "Where the hell are you going?" barely registered as the door slammed closed behind her.



“Hello,” she whispered into the phone as she continued down the hall, toward the elevators, far away from the lab and prying Vampire ears. “Hello, Frank?”

“Yeah, lady. Just wanted to let you know, that fella you was looking for? I just seen him over by Good Times.”

Sasha’s heart thumped in her throat and she slid to the floor, unable to believe her good fortune. “You’re certain it’s him?”

“Oh, yeah,” Frank said. “I’d know that fella anywhere. I don’t know where he’s staying or nothing, and I’m not getting anywhere near him. Last time I did I almost got et up.”

“Yes, I understand. Can you keep an eye on him, though? Let me know if he talks to anyone, or if anything strange happens.” The old man was always on about the strangeness.

“I suppose I can do that. So far, he’s just creeping, like he’s laying in wait for something, or someone, hard to say. I’ll keep watch though, sure thing.”

“Thank you, Frank. Er, by any chance, have you told anyone else? That you’ve seen him?”

“Nah,” Frank said, though it sounded like he was speaking into the wrong end of the phone. “Marty’d already come and gone by the time I seen the fella. Was figuring to let him know the next time I saw him, though.”

“That’s fine, Frank. Thank you.” Another thought struck her. “Frank, do you think you can figure out the camera feature on your phone?”

His sigh was loud and exasperated. “Lady, I told you, I’m homeless, not stupid. I’ve been taking pictures all day.”

Naturally. “Can you get a picture of the man? The white-haired guy?”

“Already done. Anyway, I said I’d call, and I did. When can I expect my fee?”

Fifty dollars. She’d agreed to give the man fifty dollars for the information. “I’ll bring it to you in the morning,” she said. “Where will I find you?”

“Oh, I’ll be around,” he said, and with a cackle, he disconnected.

She sat on the floor, and her hand fell to her lap, the phone clutched tightly in her fist. Her heart banged against her rib cage, and she struggled to tame it while she planned her next move.”

“Sasha?”

The girl’s voice was soft and hesitant, but Sasha nearly leapt from her skin at the sound of it.

“Phire, you startled me,” she said, as she scrambled to her feet.

“Viper told me to come and find you. Everything okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sasha said with an emphatic nod. “Everything is just perfect. Now let’s get back before Lord Viper decides we’re planning a coup.”

“Lord Viper?” the girl asked, and Sasha laughed as she explained the finer points of working in the lab.

As they talked, the words were all there, but Sasha’s mind was a million miles away. Her father was *here*. She was *this* close to finding him, and hopefully a step ahead of the Legion. She simply had to make sure she found him before Frank could get the information to Martin.

## Chapter Twelve

Even after working late that morning, the intense treadmill run and the hour he spent talking to Phire and Rachel about the kid helping out in the lab, Viper still suffered a restless night. Sleep was long in coming, and when it did, Sasha was there, beckoning him to her, all soft and dewy and warm. He barely made it to the lab before Phire arrived.

The initial toss and turn action had a lot to do with the second and third thoughts he had over offering this internship of sorts to the girl. Their discussion left him with no doubt that she would be an asset, and Rachel thought it was a wonderful idea. However, he worried he might have dropped the kid into the middle of a nuclear situation on the verge of detonation. On the other hand, she could be just what he needed to douse any unwanted flames that might spark up during working hours. At least he hoped she would.

So far, so good.

With his focus on instructing Phire on the finer points of data research, he was able to ignore the heady scent of ozone that entered the room ahead of Sasha. He didn't see the swish of her hips or the way she brushed her hair out of her eyes before turning on her computer. He was able to ignore her completely, one hundred percent off his radar.

Until her phone buzzed and she bolted from the room like her ass was on fire. Irritation flared inside him, and he totally forgot what he was saying to Phire as he barked at the Sorceress fleeing the lab.

Why didn't she just take the call at her station? It wasn't like he was the type who would yell at her for taking a personal call. Was he? No, he wasn't, so what could be so private that she had to leave the room. What didn't she want him to know? Was she seeing someone? He supposed it was possible.

He'd seen the way she melted every time Tas walked into the room, but how likely was that? Besides, Tas would have said something to him if the two were an item. For sure, he would have mentioned it.

So, who did that leave? It could be a Soldier, he supposed, but he kept her so busy at the lab, when would she have time to...

Phire jumped out of her seat as the pen he'd been holding exploded all over his hand, the table top, and the chair the girl just vacated.

For the love of...

"Go get her." He said it through clenched teeth, did his level best not to let his frustration scare the poor kid on her first day, but damned if it wasn't hard.

Phire's wide eyes and hurried scramble for the door told him he was carrying a success rate of about zero point two.

He grabbed a handful of paper towels and some cleaning solution, and set to scrubbing the ink from... everything. He could feel his power building within, knew that he was on the verge of blowing some shit up, but really, if the Vampire equivalent to Goo Gone didn't work on this mess, nothing would. Hell, he'd invented it himself.

Five minutes later, the area was pristine and he disappeared into the bathroom to wash the ink from his hands. As he turned the tap to warm, he heard the girls return.

Their conversation was light and they even laughed a couple of times. His heart did this strange little flippy thing at the sound of Phire's excited banter. Viper didn't like kids, never had, but in the course of a few hours, this one had somehow wormed her way under his skin. It was an odd, itchy feeling, but it beat the hell out of whatever it was Sasha made him feel. He'd take itchy over that any day.

He dried his hands on the utilitarian towel hanging on the rack next to the sink and replaced it with barely a thought. When he walked back into the lab, the girls' happy chatter broke off like someone suddenly dragged the needle across an old LP. "Was it something I said," he grumbled, then joined Phire at what was now her workstation.

"It's always something you've said," Sasha mumbled under her breath.

"I heard that," he said.

"You *always* heard that," she sniped again.

Who the hell peed in her bran flakes? He glanced at Phire who studiously ignored him. "Back to work, both of you," he snapped, afraid he'd somehow

lost his ally in Phire to the enemy.

“You both know what you’re supposed to be doing. Do it.”

He gave them each a satisfied nod, and walked out the door. He hadn’t a clue where he would go, but just then, anywhere was better than his lab.

## Chapter Thirteen

Once Viper left the lab, Sasha and Phire had an enjoyable rest of the night. They got a lot of work done, and not because Sasha had to micromanage. The young Vampire was very intelligent and equally eager to learn.

She hated to admit it, but when Phire told her how she'd come across this little internship, Sasha was impressed. Not with the girl, but with Viper. She'd never imagined him to be the charitable type, let alone kid-friendly. Still, Sasha understood the child's need to feel useful in that male-dominated mausoleum they all called home. She had no doubt this was just the thing the girl needed to help her feel as though she belonged.

Not that it worked for Sasha. She'd been there for months, and even with all she'd contributed, she still felt like the outsider.

She pushed that and everything else from her mind as she wound her car through the back roads on her way to meet Frank. She hadn't a clue where to find him, though, as he'd been completely vague. She started at the cemetery, having chosen to drive through the narrow, designated paths rather than hike up that hill again.

Unlike her previous visit, all the crypts' doors were closed up tight. None of them showed any sign that Frank was in residence. As she rounded a bend toward the cemetery exit, she wondered absently how Frank managed to get into the sealed vaults in the first place. The thought was fleeting, though, and quickly replaced with a renewed urgency to find the man, to see if he had any new information on her father.

She turned north toward town, and drove up and down a few of the streets before finding herself at the alley where she'd first met Tan. She parked in front of the drycleaner and decided to walk a bit. The morning was cold, but

the sun had risen bright and beautiful, with barely a cloud in the sky. It was a rare morning she got to enjoy such a sight, and she stood by the car for a moment just to take it all in.

When she found her father, she would no longer be forced to live her life in darkness. She remembered the sun from her youth, before her mother sold her to the Vampire Primeval. She'd spent centuries yearning for the feel of it on her face, its warmth seeping through her dreams as she shivered in the cold underground cell where she waited to do her master's bidding.

Even now, with the Legion, her life revolved around their nocturnal schedule. Sure, she could refuse to work with Viper, but she found the job fulfilling, and like Phire, she did want to be useful. Still, she missed this. Just standing in the middle of the sidewalk on a bright winter day with the sun on her cheeks.

It wouldn't be long now. Soon, she would live her life in the light, as she was born to do. This one thing she promised herself.

"You gonna stand there with your eyes closed all day or are we gonna get down to business?"

Sasha snapped her eyes open and found Frank standing a few feet away in the mouth of the alley. He had a cart like Tan's, full of his own treasures, she supposed. Today he wore a stocking cap pulled over his ears with tufts of his grey hair sticking out from the bottom in a half moon around the back of his head.

"Frank, you startled me!"

"Well, if you kept your eyes open, that prob'ly wouldna happened," he said with a chuckle. "You got my fee?"

"First things first," Sasha said. "Did you get a picture?"

"Does Santa fart peppermint sticks?"

When she didn't reply, he said, "The answer is yes, to both questions, since you din't seem to know. Come into my office." He motioned toward the back of the alley.

Sasha hesitated briefly at the lane's entrance before she continued after the little man into the alley's shadowy depths.

"By the way, this thing's getting low on juice. You din't happen to get one of them thingamajigs, chargers, with this thing didja?"

"Yes," Sasha said. "Of course. It's in the car. The picture?"

"Hold your horses, lady. I got it right here."

She moved to stand next to him, and looked over his shoulder as he

flipped through the assortment of odd pictures he'd managed to store on the little phone. Most were of his fellow homeless people—she recognized Tan in a few of them—but there were also pictures of some of the older buildings around town. There were so many and he scrolled so quickly, she had a hard time seeing every shot.

“Nope. Nope. Not that one. Heeheehee, that’s a good one. Nope. Nope.”

“Wait, go back,” Sasha said. “Here.” She grabbed the phone from him, her patience having met its end, and scrolled through the photos herself. She went back a few pictures and there it was.

The image was dark, but there was no mistaking the white hair, despite him having pulled it into a tight braid. She continued to scroll back and found that Frank had taken an entire series of the Sorcerer.

She thumbed through them all, and stopped at one that stood out. In it, her father—because there was no doubt the Sorcerer in the photograph was Ulrich Fuhrmann—faced the street, his hand to his ear as if he were speaking on a cell phone himself. The light from the streetlamp caught his eyes, and she could almost guess at his conversation based on the hard set of his jaw, the determined glint in his eye. To her, though, his displeasure was of little consequence. This was proof that her father had truly arrived in Fallen Cross.

“So, about my fee.”

Sasha reached into her jeans pocket, pulled out the money and handed it to the old man. “Thank you,” she said.

She'd nearly reached the end of the alley when she heard Frank clear his throat.

“Hey, lady,” he said, as she turned to him. “You said I could keep that phone.”

Yes, she had, hadn't she? “My apologies,” she said. “Just let me...” She tapped on the photo and texted it to herself. She would have liked to have the others, but this one would do.

Frank was right beside her when she turned off the device and held it out to him. “And the charger?”

“Oh, yes.” She checked her cell to make sure she'd received the picture, then retrieved the charger for Frank. She held it out to him, but when he reached for it, she pulled her hand back. “There's another fifty in it for you if you can find out where he's staying.”

Frank dropped his hand as he seemed to mull things over. “I told you what he did last time, didn't I?”



“Yes or no, Frank. I understand either way.”

They appeared to be at a standoff, with Sasha’s next step hanging in the balance, solely dependent on the old man’s desire for a little bit of cash.

“I’ll do it,” he finally said, and she let out the breath she’d held. “But if I get et up or killed, I expect you to throw me a funeral fit for a king.”

Sasha grinned. “If anything happens to you, your send off will be the envy of the gods. You have my word.”

Frank scratched his chin and smiled, the twinkle in his eye practically a literal thing. “In that case, lady, you got yourself a deal.” He held out his hand for the charger, and she dropped it in his palm. “I’ll be in touch,” he said, then he turned and walked back to his cart.

## Chapter Fourteen

The clang of metal on metal rang sharp in Viper's ears, and the heavy contact vibrated the muscles from his forearms all the way up through his shoulders. Tas spun away from him, his blade arcing through the air as he came to rest in front of Viper, his sword aimed low at Viper's hip. Viper blocked the strike with his own blade, swept Tas's sword from the male's hands, then arched his blade in a powerful blow that he pulled at the very last moment, a scant millimeter from Tas's jugular.

Tas threw his hands up in the air in surrender, his eyes sparking aquamarine light as he tossed out more than his charming-as-fuck smile into the room. Viper felt his agitation ease, and he really wanted to be pissed about Tas using his calming powers against him, but then he couldn't be pissed because, well, Tas was using his godsdamned powers against him.

Viper let his sword fall to his side and he took a step back from his opponent. It sucked to be beaten not by the sword, but by a guy who had the ability to suck every ounce of fight from a male's soul without batting an eye.

Viper rested the tip of his blade on the hardwood training floor and narrowed his eyes at a still-grinning Tas. "That's cheating," he said but Tas just shrugged.

"The way your eyes were sparking, I wasn't sure if you still knew who you were fighting. Can't blame a guy for trying to save his own neck."

Viper rolled his eyes to the ceiling and counted to ten. Tas wasn't wrong.

After leaving the females in his lab to talk behind his back, Viper felt the inescapable desire to hit something. Treadmills weren't known for their combative nature, so he'd grabbed his things from his suite and headed for the Soldiers' facilities. Tas conducted training classes ranging from beginner

to expert, and he was good enough to let Viper take his frustrations out on a couple of the more experienced Soldiers.

Tas being Tas, he noticed that the Soldiers weren't giving Viper the fight he needed. Might have been the blood, or the broken arm. You never knew where Tas got his insight. Whatever the reason, he offered to spar with Viper, even let him choose the weapons. Naturally, Viper chose swords. He'd strapped his mother's long, narrow blades to his back as an afterthought before he left his suite.

Now, despite his waning frustration, he knew it was a wise choice. Tas was a fair swordsman, and Viper didn't have to worry about slicing anything off him.

"You know, if you'd have done that three hours ago, there wouldn't be seven Soldiers in the infirmary," Viper said. He wiped the sweat from his blade and slid it into the scabbard on his back.

Tas's smile widened, and he shrugged as he bent to retrieve his own weapon. "It was their own fault," he said. He and Viper stepped away from the training floor to give others room to spar. "I heard them taking bets on who could best you first. I'm training future Warriors here, but they need to show some respect for those who've come before them."

The sound of that kid's arm snapping replayed in Viper's mind, and he winced. "I guess," he said, "but I feel bad about that last one."

Tas caught his eye, and without so much as a blink or a word, called bullshit.

"You're right," Viper said. "Little shit deserved it."

"Damn straight," Tas agreed, and he grinned as he slapped Viper on the shoulder. "Let's go."

"Where?" Viper asked, but he followed, not really caring about the answer or the destination.

"We're gonna get a drink. I know a guy," he said with a grin.

They ended up in one of the barracks, on the second floor where Tas knocked on one of the doors.

"Just a minute," a male voice called from inside. In less time than that, the door opened a crack, but then quickly slammed shut again. Viper could hear a commotion inside the room, whispered voices swearing panicked oaths as glass clinked and furniture scraped the floor.

Tas grinned up at Viper as he waited patiently for shit to calm down. He pulled the elastic band from his blond ponytail and ran a hand through his

hair, which left a mess of platinum curls, damp from his workout, to dry around his handsome face.

Viper remembered how Sasha hung on every word, every movement Tas made, and his eyes sparked briefly.

Unfortunately, it didn't go unnoticed. "They'll be with us in a minute," Tas said, his misread of Viper's emotion seemingly deliberate.

Sure enough, no more than a minute later, the door swung open just enough to expose a lanky, slightly out of breath Vampire posed casually in its frame. "Tas, Viper, what brings you to my humble abode?"

The minute Viper saw Osprey, he knew what Tas had in mind, and it wasn't a bad idea. Not at all.

Tas grinned and pushed the door a little wider. "Hey Oz. Kyte. How's it going?" he asked as he entered the room. The other Soldier, slightly shorter and stockier than his partner in crime, lay at an awkward angle on the bed, the pillow between him and the wall a lot lumpier than any Viper had ever seen, even in the Soldiers' barracks.

The male waved and said, "Hey Tas." He sounded like he'd run a mile in the short time Viper and Tas waited in the hall.

Oz followed Tas inside, his attempt at innocence a major fail as his eyes darted nervously around the room. His friend fared no better, himself a portrait of guilt as he practically hovered over that lumpy pillow.

"So, what's up?" Oz barked, when Tas reached for the bottom desk drawer.

Viper took Oz's place in the doorway, Tas's little "inspection" way more enjoyable than it should have been.

"Oh, you know. Just checking on my favorite Soldiers," Tas said. He slid a finger into the drawer pull and tugged gently.

Twin gasps escaped the Soldiers, and Tas's grin widened. He pulled the drawer open, his feigned surprise almost dramatic enough to make Viper laugh. The guy should get a golden statue of an androgenous dude for that performance.

"What have we here?" Tas said, his hand to his heart. "Osprey, I thought we talked about this. No Vampahol in the barracks. I'm afraid I'm going to have to confiscate this," he said with a *tsk*, as he slipped the mason jar into his sweats pocket.

Vampahol was a new type of liquor Oz developed a couple of months ago. It was nasty as hell, but it was the only beverage known to have an

intoxicating effect on Vampires.

Viper had only had it one time, and that was after he'd nearly lost his arm during the *Kurai Senshi* battle. He hadn't asked where it came from at the time, but its numbing properties had come in handy when Allon had sewn his arm back together. Afterward, he'd asked about it, only to be told it was one of Oz's little projects. At the time, he'd blown it off, having more important things on his mind like rehabbing his damned arm. Now, curiosity made him wonder what else the Soldier/entrepreneur had simmering on the back burner.

"Kyte," Tas said to the Soldier on the bed. "Give it over."

The kid's eyes skittered between Tas and Oz, but he didn't move.

Oz slumped against the dresser and huffed out a defeated sigh. "Do it," he said.

The stocky Soldier's face fell, but he climbed out of the bed and flipped the pillow over to reveal several more jars of the clear liquid. "That's all we have," the male muttered, not as a confession but more out of despair.

"I'm sure Oz will have some more cooked up before breakfast," Tas said. He threw three jars at Viper, rapid fire. Viper caught the first two but bobbed the third one, which drew another round of gasps from the Soldiers.

"Damn," Oz said, as Viper righted the third jar and tucked it under his arm. "It's bad enough you're stealing—"

"Confiscating," Tas corrected.

"Fine, *confiscating* my stash. You break that shit, and that's alcohol abuse, no two ways about it."

"You know the rules," Tas said. "I don't care what you do off site, but we can't have this shit in the barracks. Last thing we need is a bunch of drunk-off-their-asses Soldiers laying around. We're not immortal, not even invulnerable. The KS battle should have taught you that if nothing else."

Viper shifted his hold on the jars, Tas's choice of words not sitting easy on him, what with his questionable parentage.

"I'm trusting you, Oz," Tas said. "I don't want to have to come down on you hard." He shook one of the jars in Oz's face, pivoted on his heel, and walked out the door. "Let's go," he said to Viper. The wink thrown his way gave the order the weight it deserved.

Viper glanced back into the room where the Soldiers had their heads together in heated conversation. "Oz," he said, to add his authority to the situation. "I want you in my lab tonight, sundown."

The kid's hazel eyes grew wide, any response he had lost in a stutter of

unintelligible words.

“Sundown,” Viper said again, and he shut the door, leaving the Soldiers to work out exactly what kind of trouble Oz was in.

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Less than ten minutes later, Tas and Viper were in Tas’s suite enjoying their first shot of Oz’s finest Vampahol. It was past sunup, so they’d had to take the tunnels, but Tas didn’t mind. It was cool and dark down there, and they provided him with the means to travel back and forth between home and work as he pleased.

He loved training the Soldiers, but at the end of the night, he wanted to come home to his quiet rooms where he could enjoy the peace and solitude. Plus, he liked having his own bathroom with his own shower. Life in a penal colony would do that to a guy.

“Cheers,” he said, and held his shot glass up to Viper. The male absently lifted his glass in Tas’s general direction and downed the fiery liquid with barely a grimace. Tas drank his, too, but he still pulled a face. “Woo, that shit burns,” he screamed as he banged his glass on the black lacquered coffee table separating him and Viper. “Another?”

Viper slid his glass across the table, and Tas filled them both.

It took that round and two more for the hard set to Viper’s jaw to soften and the tight coil of his muscles to visibly ease. Tas, on the other hand, felt pleasantly light and floaty. This wasn’t the first time he’d “confiscated” Oz’s stash, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

He wasn’t lying about it being a bad thing to have circulating the barracks, but Oz charged an arm and a leg for a single jar. Tas wasn’t about to pay that kind of money for contraband. He didn’t want to dampen the kid’s entrepreneurial spirit, but he wasn’t going to fund it either.

As he poured the fifth shot, he had to hold his arm steady to keep from spilling the liquid gold all over his Aubusson rug. He handed the glass to Viper, whose hand barely wavered as he took what was offered. The guy must have the metabolism of a hummingbird.

Viper downed the shot, and fell back into the overstuffed reading chair he’d planted himself in, his eyes slightly out of focus. *Finally*.

“So,” Tas said, ignoring the full glass in front of him. He leaned back in his chair, a twin to Viper’s, and folded his legs into a half lotus position.

“You want to tell me why you felt the need to beat the shit out of my Soldiers today?”

Viper slid low in the chair, his feet flat on the floor, as he rested his head on the cushions behind him. “No,” he said, his eyes closed, his breathing even.

Tas thought about throwing some calming mojo at him, but figured that might toss him over the edge between comfortably numb into Snoozeville, and he really didn’t intend for this to be a slumber party.

So, he waited, kept his mojo to himself.

“She’s a fucking Sorceress,” Viper muttered to the ceiling.

Ah. Sasha.

“Is that a problem?” Tas asked. Before Jun had forced her way into his life, Tas had given Sasha more than a passing glance. She was beautiful and sweet, and he could admit to being attracted to her once upon a time.

Then Jun showed up and all romantic thoughts of anyone but the tiny Dark Warrior seemed ludicrous, unimaginable. Not that he was getting anywhere with her, but that wasn’t somewhere he wanted to go just now. He didn’t steal Oz’s stash so he could talk about himself and his own pathetic love life, or lack thereof.

“Dangerous,” Viper said, the word a welcome interruption to Tas’s shaky thoughts. “Can’t trust the bastards.”

“Sasha’s not Fuhrmann,” Tas said. Hopefully, his words didn’t sound nearly as slurred to Viper as they did to his own ears. “Neither one of them,” he added, just to hear himself speak again.

“Not the point. Can’t trust anyone with magic.”

Tas’s eyes snapped open, something in Viper’s words ringing true. The male hadn’t moved, still sat sprawled out on the chair, his head against the back, his closed eyes facing skyward. As Tas watched, Viper opened his eyes and the dim room filled with polished bronze light.

One of the effects of Vampahol was the inability to control the spark. That’s why Oz had created the contact lenses that were ultimately used as one of the Legion’s defenses against the *Kurai Senshi*’s ability to literally suck the light out of the world.

Viper was one of the most controlled Vampires Tas had ever met, and this was not the first time he’d sparked this morning. Tas wrote the other occurrences off as battle reactions brought on by training, but now he had his doubts. Whatever had the male balanced on a razor’s edge was major.

“You want to tell me why?” Tas asked, his full focus back on his friend. “I mean, we’re all magic to a certain extent.” How else could he explain being turned into a Vampire?

“Not like us,” Viper said, his words slurring almost as badly as Tas’s. Looked like the Vampahol finally caught up with him.

“What do you mean by us?” Tas asked. When no response came, Tas sat up in his chair. “Viper, what does ‘not like us’ mean?”

A soft snore rumbled across the room, and Tas sighed. Alrighty, then. Slumber party it was.



## Chapter Fifteen

The heavy oak doors banged closed behind Sasha, and a little shiver of portent raced through her. *This isn't a betrayal.* All the way home from her meeting with Frank, she repeated the words in her mind. When that didn't work, she said them out loud. Was it so terribly wrong for her to search for the man who'd sired her? Was it her fault he had a beef with the Legion?

She'd nearly had herself convinced, but the moment she walked in the manse, heavy guilt wormed its way back into her subconscious.

She pushed the elevator's call button and waited for the doors to open. *All the way home.* Did she really just think that? She was getting too comfortable here, that was the problem. Really, there was no need for her to stay. Once she found her father, she was out of this place. Then she wouldn't have to worry about sneaking around or placating her churlish boss.

The doors opened up and she stepped into the car. *Would the dreams follow her?* she wondered. Or would some distance help erase the Vampire from her mind, from her life, for good?

"Hold the door!"

Sasha threw her hand between the doors, and they gently squeezed her fingers before opening again. Kythryn dashed in before they'd parted completely, her hands full of reusable grocery bags bulging with goods she knew what.

"Hey," the cat Shifter said, as she dropped the bags on the lift floor and brushed dark bangs from her eyes. She reached over and hit the three button. "You're two, right?" she added.

"Yes, thank you," Sasha said. "You've been shopping?"

Kythryn nodded as she stared at the bags she'd tossed haphazardly at their feet.

"I thought the staff took care of that for everyone?"

“They do,” Kythryn said. “But there were a few things we needed, and to be honest, I get tired of doing everything in the dark. Sometimes I just need to get out in the sunlight. You know what I mean?”

“I was thinking the same thing earlier myself.”

The lift slowed and Kythryn pushed away from the wall when Sasha failed to notice they’d reached her floor. “You okay?” she asked, her small body blocking the doors from reclosing.

“Of course,” Sasha said, hoping her smile appeared more genuine than it felt.

“‘Cause you don’t look okay.”

Sasha swallowed the rock in her throat and rearranged her smile. “I’m fine, really,” she said, and she moved to exit the lift.

Kythryn cocked her head in a decidedly catlike fashion as she studied Sasha like a particularly challenging prey. “Nope,” she said, as the doors banged into her arm again. “Not buying it. You need a drink. Let’s go.”

Sasha’s mouth fell open, but she closed it directly. “It’s not even noon,” she said.

“So, we’ll have a toddy, or a mimosa. Anyway, it’s five o’clock somewhere.” She let the doors close and collected her bags as they ascended to the third floor. “There’s definitely something wrong with you, my friend, which means you are in need of girl time. Just so happens I’m a girl, never mind what that boss of yours says about me.”

“Viper?”

“Who else? But don’t worry. I’ve got the cure to whatever ails you.” When the doors opened again, Kythryn stepped into the hall, chattering nonstop. When Sasha didn’t move, Kythryn waved her through the doors with her bags. “Let’s go. Time’s a wasting. Scoot.”

And so, Sasha scooted, as it seemed she didn’t have a choice.

Kythryn and Harrier’s suite was much like Sasha’s, with a large open floorplan, huge fireplace, somewhat smaller galley kitchen, and a door leading off to the right that Sasha assumed was the bedroom. The furniture was on the masculine side, lots of leather and straight-lined wood, but it suited Kythryn as much as it did her hybrid mate. The girl might be tiny, but what she lacked in size she made up for in attitude.

“Sonofabitch.”

And she could cuss like a sailor.

“Is something wrong?” Sasha asked.

Kythryn had disappeared into the kitchen with her groceries, which left Sasha to decide whether it was more appropriate to sit before invited to do so, or stand and wait. Kythryn's outburst at least gave her something else to focus on.

"Sorry. I thought we had OJ, but we're all out. You want straight champagne or do you prefer something Irish?"

"Coffee's fine," Sasha said. What she really wanted was to get back to her suite so she could digest the information Frank had given her.

"Right. Irish it is. And have a seat. I'm gonna do coffee pods. It'll only be a minute."

Sasha chose a large reading chair next to the fireplace and sat on its edge, her feet flat on the floor as if she might flee given half a chance. Kythryn had always been friendly, but this was the first time she'd wanted to hang out. The concept was completely foreign to Sasha and she had no idea what the other woman expected of her.

After several loud bangs and a lot more swearing, the rich scent of coffee filled the air.

"Harrier's on a run for Mason," Kythryn called from the kitchen. "He had to take the helicopter somewhere to pick up something and deliver it somewhere else, so we won't have to worry about him interrupting us."

She entered the room carrying two large mugs topped with generous dollops of whipped cream.

Though Sasha definitely was a cream and sugar girl, this was something altogether different. She accepted the mug with a polite, "Thank you," and cautiously took a sip.

A fire that had nothing to do with temperature burned her esophagus, and Sasha choked and sputtered as the toxic liquid scorched her gullet.

"Whoa, there, here you go." Kythryn grabbed the mug back before Sasha spilled it all over her nice rug, set them both on the coffee table and rushed back to slap Sasha on the back.

When she could breathe again, she asked, "What did you put in that?"

"Whiskey, of course. I told you it was Irish."

"Irish means whiskey?"

"Well, it does when you're talking about coffee." The Shifter's eyes were bright, and Sasha could tell she made an effort not to laugh at the ignorant little Sorceress. "I'm sorry," she added. "I really thought you understood."

Sasha waved her away, but not unkindly. It wasn't Kythryn's fault that

Sasha still had so much to learn. Despite the books and, more recently, the computer Magnus provided, there were certain things one could only learn from experience. "It's fine," she said as the little cat grabbed her own mug and curled up in the corner of the sofa. "It surprised me, that's all."

"Try it again," Kythryn said with an evil little grin. "Now that you know what to expect."

The second sip, a bit more cautious, turned out to be incredible. She could still feel the burn, but the flavor danced on her tastebuds, and she could feel herself calming. Perhaps the Shifter knew what she was doing after all.

"Good?" she asked.

"Yes," Sasha said, with a smile. "Very."

"Good. Now you want to tell me what has you so out of sorts? I swear the elevator was leaning sideways with the weight of the world you got on your shoulders."

"Is it that obvious?" Sasha asked, paranoia settling in on top of the guilt she'd carried home with her.

"It is to me, by I'm intuitive about stuff like that."

Sasha took another sip and watched the cat over her mug. "I thought that was Jessica's department?"

"Just because she has visions doesn't mean she's cornered the market on intuition. Hers is just off the charts. Mine's more subtle, like I can pick up on when one of my friends has something on her mind."

Sasha sighed, and returned the near empty mug to the coffee table. The chills she'd carried in with her melted away as the whiskey found its way to her blood stream, warmed her down to her toes as it pumped its way through her veins.

"I don't know," she said, going for vague. "I guess I'm just overwhelmed at work."

"Viper still being a jerk?"

Sasha laughed. Kythryn was nothing if not direct. "Yes, but I'm used to that by now."

"Shame he's such an ass. That's one fine looking Vampire, if you ask me. Course, don't tell Harrier I said that. He has a bit of a jealous streak, if you know what I mean."

Sasha didn't, but she could imagine the mountain of a Vampire Kythryn had mated would not be the type to share. Her mind circled back to Kythryn's original comment. "You really think he's handsome? Viper, I mean."

Kythryn chugged her Irish coffee and waggled her eyebrows as she drank. After licking the cream from her nose, another distinctly catlike action, she grinned. “You’re sweet on him, aren’t you?”

“Sweet?” Sasha tried to force the blood from her face, but the blush took on a life of its own. “I don’t...”

“You *are*. You’re hot for Viper!” When Sasha didn’t respond, couldn’t respond, Kythryn kept going. “OMG, this is so perfect. We’ve been trying forever to figure out how to find that male a girl, and you’ve been right here all the time.”

Sasha reached for her mug, but hesitated. “Who was? And why? I mean, why is Viper’s love life any of your—anyone’s business?”

“It’s not,” Kythryn said with a shrug. “But you put a group of women together and you never know what kind of shenanigans we can get up to. The only unmated males in the manse are Viper, Tas and Mason. Tas could have any female he wanted. That male is just *fine*, and Mason? Just between you and me, I could see him mated sooner rather than later. He just needs to get out of his own way. Viper though?”

She stood and held out her hand for Sasha’s mug. “You want another?”

“Yes, please,” Sasha said, surprised that she’d finished the entire cup.

Kythryn disappeared into the kitchen again, though she never stopped talking. “Viper,” she called, “is totally different. He’s always off on his own. Even Harrier doesn’t know much about him. Then again, Harrier isn’t exactly the sociable type. Anyway, Viper. He keeps to himself, rarely goes on patrol, and when anyone tries to include him in anything, he just blows them off. He wouldn’t have even come to Thanksgiving if Mason hadn’t ordered him to be there.”

“Wait, Mason *ordered* him?”

“Yep.” She returned with two more steaming mugs of spiked coffee, handed one to Sasha and took hers back to the couch where she once again curled up in the corner.

“That’s so... sad.” Sasha couldn’t imagine why anyone would choose to be alone. She’d been there, and not by her own doing. As awkward as she was, it hadn’t taken long to learn that being with people who cared about you was always better.

“Maybe but that’s neither here nor there. Tell me, when did you know?”

“Know what?” Sasha sipped her coffee, in hopes that the whiskey would do something to ease her nerves.

“That you were in love with Viper?”

“That I *what?*”

“I know that lost puppy dog look,” Kythryn said. “You can deny it all you want, but I know love when I see it. And, honey, I’m looking right at it.”

## Chapter Sixteen

*After that startling awakening, sleep was impossible to reclaim. Young Erik laid on his pallet and wondered at the strange vision, the mysterious voice who claimed to be his father, and the odd tingling sensation that still buzzed within him. For a time, he tried to convince himself he'd imagined it all, but the hair on his arms and legs stood straight out from his body, daring him to deny what he knew to be true.*

*Perhaps he had simply sparked in his sleep. That seemed a logical thought, although the idea of it was disappointing at best. He'd dreamed of his first spark from the time he was old enough to understand it's significance. Whenever he would think about the human boys and their ruthless teasing, he would imagine the anger building within him until Bam! His eyes would glow, and his fangs would finally drop, and he would stare at those males with all the loathing they'd earned over the course of his short life.*

*It was to be a grand thing, something fascinating and terrible, fierce enough to instill terror into each and every one of his tormenters' hearts. He would threaten them with his newly acquired weapons and they would run like the children they were. It would be the last time they ever abused him.*

*At least, that was how he'd imagined it. If it turned out that he'd slept through the whole thing, he couldn't even begin to verbalize how disappointed he would be.*

*Carefully, he ran his tongue over the flats of his teeth, which were still... flat. No extended canines with razor sharp points. Nothing but the teeth he'd had since he could remember. Just to be sure, he glanced around the room, searching for some trace of light that shifted across the floor with his gaze. When he saw nothing, he stared at his hand, long and hard, as he tried to reignite the spark by sheer determination. Still nothing.*

Disappointed, he'd laid on his pallet and stared at the thatched roof above his head. Had he really spoken with his father? And if so, what kind of male was capable of filling him with such energy? It was too much to hope for, and once again he searched for reason where there was none to be found.

His mother stirred as the last rays of sunlight fell below the horizon. She had blonde hair that fell to her waist in a tangle of braids she held together with a leather thong. She flipped the long tail over her shoulder and stretched her muscles awake before turning to him.

"You're up early, my son."

"Yes." There was so much more he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the words.

Bodil rose and crossed the room to sit at the foot of Erik's pallet. "What troubles you, Erik? Tell me."

It was a quiet demand, but a demand nonetheless. When he hesitated, she laid her hand on his arm, then withdrew it with a hiss.

"You're burning up," she said. She urgently reached for his forehead, then pressed her hands upon his cheeks and his ears. "What is it? What ails you?"

More than her previous demand, the panic in her eyes compelled him to speak. Besides, all her fussing was annoying. He wasn't a child, after all. "I'm fine, mother. In fact, I feel great." He hesitated a moment, but realized he spoke the truth.

Her narrowed eyes and the firm set of her jaw spoke of her disbelief, and so he continued. "I had a dream."

"I don't understand. You feel like a fever has consumed you."

Erik shrugged. "Perhaps it has," he said, and he told her of his experience in the clouds. He told her of the voice, and of the gift supposedly bestowed upon him.

Bodil listened to him without interruption, though her eyes glowed brighter with each word he spoke. By the time he finished, she was in full spark, her fangs fully descended, and the entire room illuminated with the bright blue light of her eyes.

"I told you he would come," she said. She jumped to her feet and hugged herself as she spun in a circle, her face a picture of euphoria he'd only ever witnessed in the berserkers as they ascended into madness. It was a disturbing sight, and for the first time Erik wondered if she might truly be insane.



*“It was a dream, Mother, nothing more.” He crawled out from beneath his bedding and reached for his clothes.*

*She grabbed his shoulders and turned him around to face her, her expression feverish with excitement. “No, it wasn’t. It was him, just as I said. Don’t you see? Why else would he gift you with... tell me again about the gift.”*

*Erik slid from her grasp and turned to finish dressing. “There’s nothing to tell. He said he was giving me a gift, but I have received nothing. It felt like the shock of rubbing a thick fur in the middle of winter, then touching your blade, only multiplied a thousand times.”*

*And it came from within, though he wasn’t about to tell her that. It would only fuel her delusions, and he couldn’t bear to see her decline any further.*

*“Oh, Erik,” she said, and she moved to stand before him when he didn’t turn around. “You will see, I swear it. Your father has not forgotten you. He’s given you something special, a power like nothing you could possibly imagine. You will be strong and undefeatable. With his gift, you will be the most formidable Vampire to walk the Earth, this I vow to you.”*

*Erik walked around her to the center of the room and knelt to stoke the fire back to life with a long stick. He then added some fine tinder to urge the flames along. When the kindling blazed, he topped the growing conflagration with a couple of logs to warm the room. Fire licked up the sides of the dry wood, and Erik followed the path of the smoke as it rose upward and snaked through the hole in the roof to continue its journey to the heavens and beyond.*

*All the while, Bodil chattered on about Erik’s destiny, his sure path to greatness now that his father had come to claim him. When he could take no more, he stood and faced her.*

*“Enough, Mother, please. It was a dream. Just let it rest, I beg you.”*

*He rarely spoke to her with such sharpness, and this worked in his favor, as her surprise at his tone rendered her temporarily speechless.*

*“I need to collect more firewood,” he said, any excuse to escape her blazing eyes.*

*As he crossed the threshold, she called to him. “You will see, Erik. You will see.”*

*He let the door close behind him, torn between wanting to believe the mother he loved beyond all things, and the knowledge that he lived in the real world. A world where dreams were just dreams and divine entities couldn’t*

*be bothered with the likes of him.*

*Three nights later, he sparked for the first time.*

~~~~~

Viper woke with a start, his legs bent at an odd angle, the rest of his body contorted into some kind of knot. He tried to stretch, but found himself surrounded on all sides but one. Something soft tickled his chin, and he fought to free himself from the weighted confines of whatever bound him. Panicked, he untangled his limbs and forced himself upright. His feet found the floor, but the sudden movement sent sharp pains knifing through his frontal lobe. He cranked his eyes open, and the pain in his head intensified, forcing him to slam his lids shut again.

He leaned forward, let his head fall between his knees, only to land his face in the middle of all that soft and fuzzy again. Slowly, he opened one eye a bare slit. When he finally gained focus, he found himself staring at a thick grey blanket. He let his arm fall to the floor, his fingers grazing the soft material.

*That's nice, he thought. Wonder what it's made of?*

It was random and stupid, but it was fast becoming obvious that Viper's brain wasn't firing on all cylinders.

*And where the fuck was he?*

He managed to get his other eye working without too much effort, and—again with the tortoise speed—he pushed himself upright. How in the hell had he fallen asleep in a chair?

The blanket was clutched tight in his fist, having apparently made the trip from the floor to his lap as he sat up. Bad decision. Vertical lasted all of about ten seconds before he fell back in the chair, where his head bounced a couple times on the soft cushion. When things settled, he attempted a slow left to right recon, eyes only, though, as the thought of moving his head again made his stomach heave. That's when the fog thinned, and he gained a bit of clarity.

He'd gone to train with the Soldiers, to work off some steam, and Tas had brought him back here to Tas's place for... what?

He shivered, despite the fire crackling cheerfully in the fireplace to his right, and he pulled the fuzzy blanket over him and tucked it under his chin. A huge, overstuffed chair identical to the one he occupied sat across from

him, a low, square coffee table between them. The other chair was empty, as was the sofa to his left.

He managed to sit up fully and pulled his cell phone from his pocket to check the time. It was damned near seven PM. He tucked the phone away and scrubbed his palms over his eyes, then over his skull to the back of his neck.

That's when he saw the mason jars on the coffee table, and the two shot glasses: one empty, one full. For the love of Loki, Viper was hammered. Why in the name of all the gods would anyone do this to themselves on purpose?

Better question, why had Tas thought it was something they should do? Where was the bastard, anyway?

Viper, pulled himself forward in the chair, replanted his feet, and managed to stand. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and he swayed a little before he found his balance.

"Tas?" he called, though if the male had consumed as much of that rotgut as Viper had, odds were he wouldn't answer.

Viper furniture-walked through the living room, peeked in the galley kitchen—empty, of course—then wall-walked to the bedroom door. Sure enough, there was Tas sprawled on his bed... sort of. He'd managed to get his shirt off, but his sweat pants were still half on, the clothed leg hanging off the side of the bed, foot still on the floor, while the rest of him lay sideways across the mattress. He had his forearm over his eyes, and his breathing was slow and even. At least he was still alive, and, thank all the gods and everything holy, his boxers were still in place.

Viper turned to leave, but something—probably the same thing that prompted him to give Phire that internship—made him go back. He grabbed the leg of Tas's sweats still attached to his body and swung the last leg onto the bed. Tas mumbled something that sounded like "June" before rolling over and clutching his pillow. Viper took the fuzzy blanket from his shoulders and quickly threw it over the Warrior before he changed his mind and took the damned thing with him.

He rubbed his upper arms to ward of the sudden chill, and as he closed the bedroom door, he made a mental note to ask Tas where he got that blanket. He'd blame it on the Vampahol, but damn that thing was nice.

He collected his swords and took one last look around the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. He was halfway out the door when he turned around and plucked two full mason jars from the coffee table. He felt like Cerberus' favorite chew toy, would probably vomit the minute he got

home, but one good thing had come from this drunken fiasco.  
He hadn't had one single dream about Sasha.

## Chapter Seventeen

After a blissfully dream-free day, Sasha arrived at work at precisely four fifty-five, and she was at her work station, computer up and running by five o'clock. Phire rushed in at five oh two and ran straight to her station, where she flipped open her laptop and powered it up before taking the time to put her lunch in the minifridge near the lockers.

The two exchanged pleasantries but agreed it would be best if they at least appeared to be hard at work when Viper arrived.

Shortly after sundown, there was a knock at the door. Phire glanced at Sasha before going to answer it. When Sasha saw who it was, she leaped to her feet and met Oz at the door. He'd taken quite a beating during the KS battle, and she was glad to see him looking so well.

"Oz," she said. "What are you doing here?"

The young Soldier glanced around the lab before returning his attention to her. "No idea," he said. "Viper told me to be here at sundown. It's sundown. Where is he?"

"No idea," Sasha said, "but you're welcome to wait."

He joined her at her workstation and sat on the extra stool.

"It looks like you've fully recovered," Sasha said, and Oz blushed.

"Thanks to you," he said. "I have a feeling they would have left me on the field to rot if you hadn't been there."

It was Sasha's turn to blush. "I hardly think that's true. If not for you, I think the outcome might have been a lot different. I wasn't about to let them forget that, or you. You were my top priority."

Well, Oz and Viper, but no one needed to know that she'd run straight to the center of her magical circle and found him near death, his arm all but severed. She'd been almost as insistent of his medical care as she had been with Oz. In the chaos that fact was thankfully lost, and she certainly wouldn't

be the one to remind anyone.

“Yeah, well, thanks for that,” Oz said, pulling her from her memory. “You have no idea where he is?” he added.

Assuming he meant Viper, Sasha shrugged. “No idea. He’s usually here long before we arrive, and he stays long after. This is not like him at all.”

“Probably hung over,” Oz said, as he propped his booted feet on the cross board beneath the tall lab table.

“I beg your pardon?” Sasha wasn’t sure she’d heard correctly.

“Tas and Viper raided my room last night. Took every last jar of Vampahol I had. I guaran-fucking-tee you they didn’t pour it down the drain. Pardon my French,” he added with a glance toward Phire.

The girl had gone back to her computer, but Sasha saw her stealing the occasional glance over her shoulder at the handsome Soldier in their midst. Not the best person for a schoolgirl crush, Sasha feared. Then again, the child could do worse, considering Sasha’s own inexplicable attraction to their missing leader.

Sasha worked as they talked, but Oz was distracted, as he periodically checked his watch.

At six forty-five he stood and said, “I give up. I’m on patrol in fifteen minutes. Tell Viper I couldn’t wait. If he wants me bad enough, he knows where to find me.”

Sasha gave him a dubious stare. “You want me to deliver that message word for word?”

As he headed for the door, he shot a wink at Phire before turning his charm on Sasha. “I’m trusting you to give it your own unique flare,” he said. Then he bowed to them with a sweeping flourish, and walked out the door.

“He is so hot,” Phire said with a sigh, and Sasha cringed at the dreamy look in the girl’s eyes. She was headed for heartbreak with that one, but who was Sasha to give relationship advice to a young Vampire.

“He’s very handsome,” she agreed, having decided to stand on neutral ground before changing their conversational direction. “How’s the study going?”

“Good,” the girl said, then cleared her throat and returned to the important task at hand. “It’s good. I’m not quite sure what he wants me to do with pages thirty-two through forty, but I think I’ve got a handle on the rest of it.”

“That’s wonderful,” Sasha said, but she wasn’t really listening. *Where was he?* she thought for the hundredth time.

When the clock struck eight o'clock, Sasha counted herself officially worried. "That's it," she said, so suddenly she startled Phire into dropping her mouse.

"What's it?"

Sasha's head swung toward the door where Viper stood looking like the seventh circle of hell. The snarl on his lips was normal, but the bloodshot eyes and the ashy complexion were new. Plus, his shirt was twisted sideways underneath his leather vest, which itself had only one arm through it. The other half hung haphazardly down his back, and it was also probably best she not mention the fact that he wore sweat pants rather than his usual leather uniform. Oh, and he was barefoot.

Phire stood up, having retrieved her mouse from the opposite side of her workstation. "We've been worried about... you," she said, but her jaw dropped when she got a good look at him.

"Is that so?" Viper spoke to the girl, but his eyes were fixed on Sasha.

"It is," Sasha said. "I was on my way to check on you. You missed Oz, by the way. He had patrol duty tonight, but he asked me to let you know he stopped by and would be happy to reschedule."

"He said that, did he?" Viper crossed the room, his bloodshot eyes never leaving Sasha's. His intense glare unnerved her, but Sasha didn't back down.

"If you're going to respond to everything we say with a snide remark, then why should we bother bringing you up to date in the future?"

"That how you feel, Phire?" Viper asked, and still he stared at Sasha.

"Hey," the girl said, "I'm just an intern."

"That's right," Viper said. "And a good one at that. Sasha, on the other hand, has a bit of an attitude, doesn't she?"

"Just an intern," Phire said again, "and one who has to use the restroom. Excuse me." She jumped off her stool, tossed an apologetic look to Sasha, then practically ran for the bathroom. Sasha figured she wouldn't resurface until either Viper left or things got quiet again.

"Have I done something?" Sasha asked, sincerely concerned. Viper was short with her on a regular basis, churlish and rude by nature, but this was different. He really seemed angry.

"Have you?" he sneered, showing a bit of fang as his eyes began to swirl with bronze light.

"Forget it," Sasha said, in an attempt to calm him. He took a step toward her, staggered, and she instinctively rushed to help him. She slipped her arm

around his waist and he leaned heavily against her, his breath smelling suspiciously of Oz's Vampahol, just as the young Soldier had predicted.

"You're drunk!" she said. She hadn't meant to say it out loud, but his frown told her it had slipped out.

"And you're beautiful," he said, then he slid down her body and landed hard on the floor, out cold.



## Chapter Eighteen

Once again, Viper woke not knowing where he was. Somehow, he'd made it from Tas's room on the ground floor to Sub T2. He'd meant to go home, grab a shower, and head to the lab, but he wasn't sure how much of that he'd accomplished.

At least this time he was lying flat and in some semblance of a bed, though the blanket left something to be desired. A cool cloth rested across his forehead and the scent of ozone filled the room. Okay, he wasn't awake. This was a dream, just another dream, and any minute now she would walk in buck ass naked and give him a mind-altering blow job, or else she'd straddle him and screw his brains out. Either way, he'd end up brainless, and not unhappy about it. At least not until he woke up with nothing to show for his efforts but a tangle of wet sheets and a handful of his own cock.

*Fuck me now and get it over with.*

"Excuse me?"

Viper bolted up and the room swam around him. He was in the lab, on the cot in the back. Sasha sat on the floor next to him, a bowl of water by her side, her eyes wide with shock.

"Where am I?" Viper asked, rather than the obvious, "Did I say that out loud?"

"You're at the lab. You waltzed in here three hours late, drunk off your ass, and you passed out. It took both Phire and me to get you in here, and now your spouting vulgarities at me."

"Jesus fuck," Viper said. It wasn't her fault he couldn't stop dreaming about her. Well, it was, but not in any way she could help. "I thought I was dreaming."

"Well, you're not."

“How long have I been out this time?” he asked, figuring a subject change was in order.

“Three hours. I called Allon, and he was kind enough to come up and have a look at you.”

Viper groaned. “You didn’t.”

“I most certainly did. I wasn’t about to have you dying at my feet. It would be just one more thing you’d hold against me, even in the afterlife, and I wasn’t about to have that on my conscience.”

Viper fell back onto the cot. “There is no afterlife for me,” he muttered, her comment striking far too close to his greatest regret.

“Of course, there’s an afterlife, even for the likes of you. Mind you, you’re bound to have landed yourself in the humans’ hell, but regardless, you’ll be somewhere. Souls don’t just turn to dust and blow away like flesh and bone. They linger, they carry on, and when souls are connected, they will reconnect when they are born again into this world or another.”

Viper stared at her, his aching head forgotten. “You really believe that?” he asked. “That even Vampires’ souls go... somewhere after death?”

“Absolutely. We are all made up of energy, and that energy can never die. It may change forms, but it can never be destroyed, so yes. Even you will go somewhere, or your soul will. And hopefully you will have learned something in this life that you can carry on to the next. Otherwise, you’re doomed to keep making the same mistakes over and over again until you do learn. Until your soul learns.”

“And then what? What happens when I, when a soul learns all there is to know?” he asked, his desire to push her as far from him as possible replaced by this desperate need to know.

“Then, and only then, will you reach your final destination.”

“And where is that?” He raised up on his elbows, as hope filled him. Raw, desperate hope, that she would say the word. *Valhalla*.

“Well, I suppose only the dead know that, don’t they? Now lay back before you pass out again. Allon said we need to get you hydrated. He said blood wouldn’t be a bad idea if you haven’t fed in a while, and then food when your stomach can handle it. Have you fed?”

*Only the dead know. But what if... what if it was all true? What if Odin really was his father, willing to accept him into the Hall of the Slain?*

“Viper?”

He rested back against the pillow and stared at the ceiling, his mind full of

childish thoughts of a father he may or may not have, and of an afterlife he may or may not deserve.

“Viper.”

“There’s blood in the minifridge,” he said, but he didn’t really want it. He turned to her again, his eyes open in more ways than one. If only he had a way to contact Odin, to talk to the god and to hear him respond. He would listen, now. He would hear what the man—deity, whatever—had to say for himself.

He didn’t see her go, and was only aware that she had left his side when she returned with a plastic bag from the fridge. She held it out to him, and he took it, grateful that she turned away as he tore the top and drank from the bag of O neg like a juice box. He downed it quickly, feeling its effects almost instantly, his head clearer, his body stronger.

He sat up and tossed the empty into the nearby trashcan so she wouldn’t have to handle that unfortunate part of who he was, so she wouldn’t be reminded that they weren’t the same. He was Vampire, after all, and she was... magic.

“Let me look at you,” she said, and she gave him a satisfactory nod. “Much better. Here,” she added as she handed him a sports drink full of electrolytes. “Allon said this would be best for you, after the blood, of course.”

Blue, his favorite flavor. He took it from her and drank obediently. He wanted to hate her, had tried hard to at least be disinterested in her. The dreams made it next to impossible on a physical level, but even that he could handle. Then she had to go and get all existential on him.

With that one statement, she’d brought it all back, the dream of his father, of Odin, and his promise of a place for Viper in Valhalla. Without even knowing it, she had given him the thing he needed most with regard to finding himself. His true self. She’d given him hope.

Truth was, she’d given him more than that, again, without ever meaning to. There was only one thing in the world stronger than hope, and Viper had sworn to never put himself in its grasp again.

And yet, if hope was possible, perhaps love might not be such a lofty desire after all.

## Chapter Nineteen

Sasha found a box of peanut butter crackers in the bottom drawer of Viper's desk. It wasn't what she would call healthy, but there were carbs and a modicum of protein, both of which Viper would need to recover from the idiotic stunt he pulled.

"What can I do to help?" Phire sat at her workstation, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes filled with concern as they shifted back and forth between Sasha and the back room where Viper had ended up. The girl had chosen to remain with Sasha while Viper was unconscious, and the moral support was welcome if nothing else. Now, however, there wasn't much more she could do, and Sasha said as much.

"You should go home and get some rest. Viper won't be giving orders anytime tonight, at least not work-related. Enjoy your evening and we'll see you back here tomorrow night. I'm sure he'll be better by then."

"What about you?" the girl asked. "You gonna be okay?"

Sasha smiled and went to the girl. The hug was impulsive, but Phire clung to her for a moment before stepping back and wiping her eyes.

"Sorry," Phire said. "It's been a long night."

"It has," Sasha said. "So go home and relax. I'll be fine here. If I need anything, Allon is just a phone call away."

Phire gathered her things and headed out. She stopped at the door and turned to give the back room one last worried glance, then left with a half-hearted wave.

Sasha retrieved the crackers from the desk where she'd dropped them, and returned to her patient.

"Where's Phire?" Viper said from the cot where he'd managed to sit himself up. "I thought I heard her voice."

"You did, but I've told her to go home. There's no reason for her to see

you like this any more than she already has. And gods forbid you speak to her the way you've spoken to me. Harrier would have you flayed."

Viper scrubbed his hands over his face. "You're probably right about that."

"Of course, I am." She handed him the pack of crackers she'd opened for him. "I found these in your desk. Eat, and I'll get you some water."

He took the snack pack, retrieved a cracker. When he started to nibble, she turned her back on him to get the water from the fridge.

"You want to tell me what prompted you to get drunk off your tail?"

Viper growled. "It's none of your concern."

Sasha spun to face him, and her hair lifted from her shoulders as her magic ignited within her. "Ah, but it is my concern," she said. "I work with you, Viper, and some of the stuff we do is dangerous. I need to know that you've got your wits about you if I'm to trust you in our work."

"Trust? You want to talk to me about trust?" Viper struggled to his feet and somehow managed to loom over her. "You work for *me*. Your kind has caused more damage to the Legion than any other species, including the KS, and you want to talk to me about trust? I've managed to trust you, just on your merits. I would expect you to do the same for me."

"But you don't, really, do you? Trust me?"

"Mason trusts you."

"And that's enough for you to let me into your secret lair, privy to all of your creations? On Mason's say alone?"

"I don't have a choice, so yes."

"Bullshit." Her hair stood on end, her magic alive and ready, but Viper barely seemed to notice.

However, the rare swear word that crossed her lips did make him blink. It was a brief reaction, though, as a split second later his bronze eyes swirled with light. "What did you say?"

Sasha refused to back down. "You heard me. I know you don't like me, Viper, can't stand the sight of me most days, but if you didn't have at least a little faith in my abilities you would never let me through that door. I've been around long enough to know that not even Mason holds sway over your domain."

"I don't like you?" Genuine confusion laced his tone, but Sasha was on a roll.

"Of course not." She turned and stormed out of the room, but continued to

shout the whole way. “You make it perfectly clear with every scowl you throw at me, with your one-word comments. Gods forbid you have to use a complete sentence to explain something to me.”

She moved to her work station, and busied herself by gathering her things as she continued to speak her mind. “There are no niceties with you, Viper. No ‘Hey, Sasha, how was your day? Anything new?’ Nothing! A grunt is the closest thing to a greeting I ever get. Either that, or a ‘Where the hell have you been?’ So, no. You most definitely do not—”

Whatever she’d meant to say next was cut off. When she turned around, Viper was there. He’d somehow managed to follow her into the lab, where a polished bronze light now filled the room. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to him, his actions so unexpected she failed to react at all.

The kiss itself came fast and hard, but his lips were soft and demanding as he pushed his way into her mouth with an eager tongue. She opened for him instantly, completely taken aback by her own wantonness, her own desire. A fire sparked in her belly and when his arms wrapped around her, when his hands explored her backside, it ignited into a full-blown inferno.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed a hand against his close-shaved skull and held him to her. A sudden fear that he would pull away and end the kiss struck her, and she tightened her hold, afraid if she let go it would all be another dream.

She needn’t have worried. She felt his hand slip inside the waistband of her slacks, of her panties, to cup her bare behind, and she nearly lost her legs.

“Please,” she murmured against his lips. “Please.”

“What do you want?” he panted against her mouth. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you.”

“*Fuck.*”

She felt the lab’s cool air on her skin before she realized he’d relieved her of her pants, and when the two of them fell to the floor it was smooth and gentle, hot and wicked.

She moaned when Viper pulled his lips from hers, but his mumbled, “*Christ,*” said so much. He smoothed his hands over her body, cupped her breasts through the thin cotton of her t-shirt and teased her nipples with his thumbs.

“Viper,” she moaned

He shook his head and nipped at her breast. “Don’t talk,” he said, the

sound a deep, tortured growl. “Just don’t.”

He pushed her shirt up and laid his hands on her bare skin. The contact created a heat so palpable she thought she might explode. His explorations continued, his mouth and hands venturing southward, ever southward until his mouth met the bare skin of her most private place. Had he not settled his hands upon her hips, held her tightly, she might have jolted through the ceiling, the sensations such as she’d never felt before. So warm, so wet, so amazing.

He paused briefly, and she took a moment to catch her breath, only to be sent skyward again when his tongue darted out and flicked the topmost part of her down-there. His hands, those amazing hands, held her steady, though. When he wrapped his lips around that little nub and sucked, rolled his tongue around it, she cried out with a release so great, so *magnificent*, tears sprang to her eyes.

He didn’t stop.

She could easily have passed out from sheer bliss, her body so sensitive she could barely stand the touch that moments ago had brought her to such heights, but Viper wasn’t finished.

He paused only long enough to rearrange his grasp on her before he dove in again. He started with a long, languid lick that found its way back to that little nub. He sucked it into his mouth and rolled it around his tongue with such skill, such amazing control, she nearly screamed. Had they not been in his lab, she thought—vaguely, way in the back of a part of her mind still capable of rational thinking—screaming would have been the exact right thing to do.

Thrice more, he brought her to that glorious peak, built her up, sent her over the edge, only to do it again and again. When finally, he seemed to have his fill of her, he rested his head on her thigh, and the velvety growth of hair against her skin created another sensation she would cherish forever.

After a moment, he kissed her opposite thigh, ever so gently, and the tip of his fang grazed her skin.

“I need—” was all he managed to say, but she knew exactly what he asked.

“Then take,” she whispered, and he did. The sharp stab of his fangs through that sensitive flesh was a brief moment of pain followed by pleasure of a more explosive kind. This time, as he pulled the blood from her vein, she felt that tingly sensation throughout her entire body. From the tips of her toes

to the ends of her hair, each pull sent that exquisite thrill through her, and it all radiated from that tiny nub she'd been denied for centuries.

Soon, all too soon, he retracted his fangs and rested his head once more on her thigh.

She wanted to say something, anything, but words escaped her. Instead, she laid her hand upon his head and brushed the short growth of hair with her thumb.

"I could rest here for eternity," she heard him whisper. Then again, she could easily have imagined it, as the words were nearly identical to her own thoughts.

Neither of them moved for the longest time. They simply laid together for a while, no talking, just touching, a gentle aftermath to the volcanic combustion that swept her up and rocked her entire world.

She felt herself drifting off in her content, completely sated, but her bliss shattered when Viper bolted to his feet, leaving her cold and wanting. "Don't move," he hissed. He wiped a bit of blood from his lips and stormed out of the lab.

Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to Sasha that neither of them had locked the door. Anyone could have walked in and seen what she'd allowed Viper to do to her. And yet, as Viper disappeared into the hall, she couldn't work up an ounce of concern. The only thought on the matter she had was that an interruption would have deprived her of a surprising taste of heaven.

And it was definitely something she wouldn't mind doing again.

At least once more, before she found her father and left the Vampire manse, and Viper, forever.

With that one thought, reality came crashing down, and didn't that just ruin everything.



## Chapter Twenty

Viper burst into the hallway and slammed the door behind him, to block from view the unexpected treasure he left bare on the other side of that too thin slab of wood. He could have stayed there forever, between her legs. Hell, he might have spoken the words aloud. Even without his own release, he felt more relaxed than he could ever remember. Not that the raging hard on crammed in his pants was a comfortable thing, but that was irrelevant. He embraced the pain, used it as a reminder that what just happened, really happened.

From the moment she walked into the War Room all those weeks ago, Sasha was a distraction. He'd fought with Mason, didn't want to work with her. The last thing he needed was a Sorceress hanging around, potentially picking up on his secret.

But she'd been so damned nice, and eager to help with the looming *Kurai Senshi* threat. He had to admit her skills had come in handy. That was the difference between a person trained in their power and, well, him. What he hadn't expected was the pull he felt from her. His innate desire to protect her was overwhelming, unreasonable, yes, but undeniable.

And now... now.

For months he'd kept his distance, only caved a little when they prepared to battle the *Kurai Senshi*. He felt certain she wouldn't survive, and if he hadn't touched her before one or both of them died, he would have regretted it eternally. On the off chance his mother hadn't been crazy, that his father *had* come to him in that dream, that could be a bitching long time.

As it turned out, they were both still alive and kicking, and the feelings he'd developed for her had only intensified. The dreams weren't helping. Apparently, neither did the Vampahol.

The last thing he'd intended to do tonight was pounce on her like a love

starved lion, but all that shit about him not liking her? She pushed his buttons or flipped his switch, and he did what he swore to himself he would never do. Not just with her, but with anyone. He let his feelings override his common sense, even when he knew the safest course would have been to walk away.

Viper dragged a hand over his skull and ground his molars because, yeah, he'd do it again in a fucking heartbeat.

Lying between her legs, the sweet scent of her surrounding him, the taste of her blood, of her, on his tongue, was better than anything Valhalla might have to offer. She was very nearly perfect, but for some scarring in the creases of her legs near her center and around her waist. He didn't want to think about what horrors Magnus subjected her to, what torture she'd withstood to bear that kind of intimate damage. If he ever saw that particular Primeval again, he'd rip his fucking lungs out.

Such were his thoughts when the elevator dinged, and he crossed the line from Zen-like euphoria to protective male in the span of a microsecond. His eyes sparked and his fangs, which had just retreated, burst from his gums again. The entire floor was his, and anyone getting off that elevator would be headed their direction. No way in hell he would let another male walk in on them, on her, so completely sated and undone. That was for his eyes and his alone.

And now here he was, storming down the hallway, ready to protect his own from any and all invaders...

Tas came around the corner and slid to a halt a few feet away. Viper could only imagine what he looked like, wild maybe, out of control.

"What is it?" Tas said, instantly on guard. "What's happened?"

"What do you want?" Viper deflected.

Tas held his ground as he searched the hall for whatever danger it was that had Viper all vamped out. "Mason needs you," he hedged, his eyes still wary.

"I've got a fucking phone."

"Yeah, and you weren't answering it, so I got to play messenger boy."

Viper felt his pockets, but no phone. It must be in the lab... or, hell. Who knew where it ended up?

"I'll be there in ten minutes," he said. "War Room?"

"No, his office." Tas turned and took a step back the way he'd come, stopped and looked over his shoulder. "You sure you're okay?" he asked. Damned empath.

"I'm fine," Viper said, and that one step Tas had already taken away from

his female was enough to make it true. He felt his fangs retract and the light in the hallway lost its bronze hue.

“Okay,” Tas said, but several over-the-shoulder glances on his way to the lift said he might have been humoring Viper.

Only when he heard the elevator doors open and close, and the lift itself began its ascent did Viper return to the lab, anxious for one last look at those beautiful legs.

He rounded the lab table where he’d left her, but the space was empty. He looked around and found her near the cabinets at the back of the room, fastening her slacks. She didn’t look like a female well satisfied, and the joy in his heart fell like a rock into the pit of his gut. Instead, she looked miserable, her typically stick-straight back bent, and was that? He smelled her tears before he heard the soft snuffle, before he saw her scrub her face on the sleeve of her t-shirt.

“Sasha?”

She whipped around to face him, eyes startled and wide like a wild animal in the middle of a dark road or a child caught doing something she shouldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t think I can work today. I don’t feel... I need to go.”

She swept past him, or tried to, but he grabbed her arm to prevent her from fleeing. When she wouldn’t meet his eyes, he turned her face to him with a gentle touch. “Don’t be,” he said. “I shouldn’t have—”

The tears she’d attempted to stifle burst forth again as she frantically tried to free herself of his hold, of him.

Stunned, he let her go.

“Sasha, we need to talk.”

She shook her head and ran to the door. “I’m sorry,” she said again, and she disappeared into the hall.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Viper found Mason pacing his office like a caged animal. The Warlord rarely showed irritation, but for whatever reason, tonight he was off.

He rapped his knuckles on the doorframe and Mason looked up. The male blinked a couple of times, seemed vaguely surprised to find Viper standing there. This wasn't the first time he'd found the Warlord distracted like this, either. A few weeks ago, he'd had to knock twice to get the male's attention. Something was going on with their leader, but it was none of Viper's business. He had enough troubles of his own to be getting on with.

"How're you feeling?" Mason asked, when Viper entered the room.

Viper narrowed his eyes at the male. "I'm fine, why?"

"You going to make me say it?"

Viper looked away. Of course, he'd been talking to Tas. "No, but I'm fine, really."

"I want you to go on patrol with Tas tomorrow night." Mason held up his hand to fend off any objections. "You're spending too much time locked away in your lab. You need to get out. Don't argue. Don't question. Just do it. That's an order."

"You know I don't take orders well."

Mason sighed, and crossed the room. He laid a hand on Viper's shoulder and looked him dead in the eye. "Then consider this an official request. Please."

Viper rolled his eyes and stepped away from the Warlord. He never liked being too close to anyone. It was a habit he simply had chosen not to break, and one more reason what happened with Sasha had been a mistake. Now, he had to deal with this.

"Fine," he said.

Mason turned back to his desk and started sorting through his mail.

“Good. Thank you for making that easy. Rest today, then meet Tas and Martin in the garage at seven. You’ll be downtown.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“And Viper?”

Viper stopped mid pivot and turned back toward the desk. “If you see any ferals out there, maybe beat on one of them for a bit. No more Soldiers, understood?”

“Sure. No problem.”

He left the Warlord’s office, fairly certain the other male had a smile on his face, went down one level and bypassed the lab. The idea of being in there with everything *her*? He just couldn’t do it.

He let himself into his suite, closed the door behind him, and stopped two steps over the threshold. This was no better. It wasn’t that anything in the room reminded him of her. It was worse than that. It was that *nothing* in the room reminded him of her. It was barren and empty, not for lack of furnishings, but for that lack of anything *Sasha*.

He blamed her, of course. If she hadn’t said the things she’d said, about the afterlife, about his soul. If she hadn’t sent him down that thought path toward things he’d sworn off centuries ago, he might not have been so easily moved into action.

But how could she believe he didn’t like her when the truth was the complete opposite?

And it had been perfect... she was perfect, just as he’d dreamed, only better because, yeah, real was always better than Memorex. He’d had every intention of taking her to his suite to wait for him, and once Mason was done with him, he planned to pick up where they left off. There were a million and one things he wanted to do to her, to do with her. The last thing he’d expected were tears.

His fault. He knew better. Should never have put himself out there like that, put her in that position. Didn’t matter what his feelings were, he knew better than to let them out. Still, this was better than what could have happened. At least Sasha was still alive.

He thought about showering, but decided against it, blaming it on fatigue. In reality, he liked the scent of her on him, and a shower would only take away from him the last only chance he had to embrace what would never be his.

Sleep did not come easy. His dreams were bizarre and fraught with angst.

In them he searched for her, first in her rooms, and then the entire manse, but she was nowhere to be found. He started awake several times, only to fall asleep and begin the search all over again. His subconscious knew what his waking mind had already accepted—even in his dreams he couldn't have her. It wasn't fair, but then again, what in his long, miserable life ever had been?

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Sasha ran from the lab, her vision blurred by the tears she'd tried unsuccessfully to hide. The worst part about working with Viper, at least by her current way of thinking, were the elevators. Too many elevators to get from the lab on Sub T2 to her suite on the second floor. She barely remembered the trek, though, could think of nothing but her own shame.

When she finally reached her rooms, she ran straight to the bathroom, stripped herself naked and ran a steaming hot bath. When the enormous tub was full—no bubbles. She didn't deserve bubbles—she submerged herself, half wishing she would drown in the cavernous pool.

When she reemerged, she drew her knees to her chest and buried her face in her hands. She honestly didn't know who she was anymore. She grabbed the loofah from its hook, lathered it up with body wash and scrubbed herself until her skin practically bled. She felt dirty, unclean, and no amount of soap would ever cleanse her of her sins.

Not because of what she'd allowed Viper to do to her. Her opinion of that brief moment of bliss hadn't changed since he charged out of the lab in search of... whatever he was after. But in the short period of time he was gone, it occurred to her that she was the worst sort of being the gods had ever created.

She was a liar of the greatest magnitude. She'd come to the Legion under false pretenses, accepted their generosity and kindness. Now, she was falling for a Legion Warrior when she had no intention of sticking around. It wasn't fair. The eons she'd spent under the Primeval's thumb were nothing compared to the torture she now forced upon herself. But worse than that, she was willing to take Viper down with her.

She sensed a weariness in him when they were intimate, a vulnerability she'd never seen before in the male with iron emotions. She'd thought

nothing could penetrate his soul, but she was wrong. In just a few bliss-filled moments, she'd truly felt him, known him for more than the hard-nosed asshole he pretended to be. This time it wasn't her imagination.

And she wanted so much more.

When her skin could stand no more of the scrubbing, and the water had grown tepid, she dragged herself from the tub and dried off on one of the luxurious towels the Legion provided her. So much different than the thin rag and ice-cold water she was given for her personals as the Primeval's slave. Was she really willing to throw it all away?

She considered bed, but the last thing she wanted was to dream of the male. It would only serve to lessen the experience, cheapen it somehow, and despite her sins, she wasn't ready to give up the memory.

Several centuries of wearing a chastity belt had given her very little carnal knowledge. Her reproductive knowledge came from medical books and the like, courtesy of Primeval Magnus, and any sexual experience was limited to the abuses Magnus subjected mostly to others. She'd either been forced to watch or to use her powers to subjugate his victims to the point where they couldn't fight back. Nox's wasn't the only torture she'd been compelled to participate in.

All of it repulsed her, and while she had fancied herself enamored with Nox, she had no idea what real sexual desire was like. Not until the dreams started.

Before then, she'd never so much as touched herself beyond her daily cleansing rituals. At court, it was forbidden, not that she could have gotten around the iron underwear had she wanted to. After she gained her freedom—one more thing she had to thank the Legion for—it never occurred to her.

Then the dreams started, and with them, her first orgasm. She'd thought such a thing was a metaphor, or a means to help the male seed find its egg for procreation. She had no idea the actual pleasure involved.

Now she knew the dreams, and even her own stimulations, were a pale comparison to reality. Viper had shown her what it meant to burn with passion, and how did she plan to repay him? With deceit and betrayal.

She glanced around the room at the literal riches surrounding her, and knew she didn't deserve it. She wasn't even worthy of the dungeon of a room she'd occupied in the Primeval's castle.

She towel-dried her hair and drew on a pair of sweat pants with a matching shirt, then eyed her bed as the absolute last place she wanted to be.



If she were smart, she'd abandon any idea of reconnecting with her father. He was an unknown, to her at least. And what she knew of him from the Vampires wasn't at all flattering.

She picked up the hairbrush on her dresser and watched herself in the mirror as she worked out the tangles. She had nearly convinced herself to give up the fanciful dream of finding Ulrich Fuhrmann and trade it in for the equally fanciful dream of a life with Viper. Then her cell phone vibrated on the dresser top.

She tried to ignore it, but too much time with Kythryn the cat Shifter had left her curious. In truth, it could easily be Viper checking on her, since she'd left in such a state.

She grabbed the phone, and slowly turned it over. The number was one she recognized, and her heart did a traitorous flip when she saw it.

She slid the tab over to connect the call, and it was as though someone else controlled her hand.

"Hello," she said, and the word sounded distant to her ears.

"Hey lady," the familiar voice responded. "It's me, Frank. I got you an address if you still want it."

Sasha knew she should tell him to forget it, that she'd changed her mind, and she opened her mouth to say just that. Instead, she heard herself respond.

"Hold on. Let me get a pen."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

The morning dawned cold, and when Sasha pulled out of the Legion's underground garage, a hard sleet assaulted the little Honda's windshield. She turned on the wipers, and her heart kept time with the *whump, whump* of the blades. It was difficult to tell if the weather and her limited driving experience was the cause of her anxiety, or the fact that in a few short minutes she would be face to face with the man who had given her life.

To take her mind off the slippery roads, she practiced what she would say to him when they met. *Hello, Mr. Fuhrmann. My name is Sasha and I am your daughter. Mr. Fuhrmann, sir, I heard so much about you as a child. Mr. Fuhrmann, you are my father.*

It all sounded so lame, even when she spoke out loud. She had a feeling she'd be lucky if she could form the words at all. The last time they'd met, she completely failed to introduce herself as his long-lost offspring. His sudden appearance caught her off guard, and she'd missed her chance in telling him the truth. Then the Legion had swarmed in, and before she knew it, Fuhrmann was gone, and a new life was hers for the asking.

This life. The life she currently enjoyed.

In the end, Frank refused to give her the location without first receiving his fee. A quick trip to his alley left her fifty dollars lighter, with only a grimy piece of paper to show for it.

The Honda's GPS directed her to an abandoned rendering plant on the outskirts of Fallen Cross. By the time she pulled into the parking lot, her stomach was in knots.

Once again, she considered calling the whole thing off. It would be so easy to just turn around and go home, back to the Legion and to whatever might or might not be developing between her and Viper. Ulrich Fuhrmann had no idea she existed, and as such, he would never know she was there.

Any disappointment would be hers to bear, and that would be okay. What did she have to lose by going back to the new life she'd started?

The answer? Nothing. You can't miss what you never had. So, she never knew her father. So what? There were other kinds of family, and she was on the verge of discovering what that looked like.

Sasha stared at the warehouse a moment longer, then shifted the car into reverse. Her right foot hovered over the gas pedal, and the car slowly rolled backward as she contemplated hitting the gas.

A loud knock on the window made her jump and slam her foot on the brake. When she looked up, a strange looking male glared at her through the window. He had orange eyes and even through the glass, she could smell the unpleasant odor of burnt cabbage.

He made a cranking motion, but Sasha didn't understand.

"Roll the window down," he shouted.

She fumbled for the button and lowered the window a couple of inches. "May I help you?"

"Seems you're the one in need of help," the male said. "You lost, maybe?"

"No," she said as she glanced around the deserted lot. "I was just turning around."

"Well, I think you might want to come inside," he said. He crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot, like her compliance was a forgone conclusion.

"I... I don't think I do," she said, and in that moment, she knew that going inside was the very last thing she wanted to do. This was a mistake. It had all been a huge mistake.

"Mr. Fuhrmann wants to see you," he said. "And what Mr. Fuhrmann wants, Mr. Fuhrmann gets."

Sasha's heart tripped in her chest. "Why would he want to see me?" she asked, totally forgetting her previous lie. *Did Ulrich Fuhrmann know who she was?*

"I didn't think to ask. Now get out."

Any hesitation she felt was waved away by the muzzle of a gun pointed at her through the window.

*Well, what did you expect? A welcome wagon? Hearts and flowers?* The man was a killer, after all.

Sasha put the car in park, rolled up the window, and pushed the button to kill the engine. She placed the key in her coat pocket and opened the door.

The male stepped back, the scent of burnt cabbage stronger now as she exited the vehicle and turned to lock the door.

“Let’s go,” he said, and he tapped the gun against her shoulder.

Fear licked at her belly like a wild inferno. Though she’d imagined this moment a million times, this particular scenario had certainly never crossed her mind.

The male grabbed her arm and practically dragged her to the building, where a short flight of stairs led up to a loading dock. Four garage doors lined the dock, with a smaller entryway door between the first two on the left. The male pushed her through the smaller door and shut it quickly behind them, as he wiped his brow with the back of the hand that held the gun.

“Thought you’d never get out,” he said, as he nudged her forward. “I’m not a full daywalker. Even that little bit of light was getting to me. Come on. This way.”

He led her down the side of a long narrow room that looked to have once held a lot of machinery of some sort. At the back of the room, a bank of offices lined one side of the wall. Tall windows with drawn blinds lined the upper half of the offices’ outer walls, though she could see light shining behind several of them.

The male nudged her toward the corner office, and the door opened at their approach. When she hesitated, the male pushed her inside and closed the door, causing her to trip and nearly fall. When she regained her balance, she stood up straight and looked up to find herself face to face with the man she’d dreamed of finding her whole life.

One look at him, and all fanciful thoughts of love and romance with Viper flew out the window. All she could see was the man before her, his white hair flowing around lean shoulders, red eyes staring at her through narrowed slits. Moments ago, she’d been willing to throw it all away, to give up this opportunity to meet him. Now that she was here, though, she knew she would have regretted walking away. And she knew exactly what to say.

“Father.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

After a long training session with the Legion Soldiers, Tas headed for the tunnels, eager for a hot shower and his bed. His head still throbbed from his trip down Vampahol Lane, but at least he was vertical. He felt a little guilty about Viper, though. Based on his brief encounter with the male earlier, Tas thought he may have fared much better than his friend.

That being said, he still wasn't himself, and the young Soldiers deserved better. After the bloodbath the rogue *Kurai Senshi* handed them, the Legion ranks were sadly depleted. What new recruits they had were soft by Legion standards, and sorely undertrained. Where the KS grew their ranks with people already powerful with the Shade, the Legion took what they could get.

The aristocratic Vampires didn't want their children to join, Martin's family included, and the poor of the race were so scattered it was hard to track them down. Even the promise of three hots and a cot, to coin a phrase from human prisons, wasn't enough to bring them running. And the ones that did show up, well, let's just say Tas was unimpressed and more than a little disheartened. Another attack like the last one, and they'd be in a world of hurt.

Then there was the way his "date" with Jun had ended. Tas had no idea what he'd said or done to make her run like that. Whatever it was, she'd made it to his car a full minute before he did, and she refused to speak to him all the way back to the KS campus. She jumped from the car practically before it stopped without so much as a thanks-for-the-coffee, kiss-my-ass or anything. It was the old "two steps forward, one step back" scenario, only for Tas it was more the other way around. No matter what he did, where Jun was concerned things always went south.

He gave a frustrated tug on the elastic in his hair, freed his ponytail, and gave it a vigorous shake. The sun was long past up, and he was bone weary.

Maybe after a good day's sleep, things would look better. That was Tas, always the optimist.

As he reached the tunnel entrance his cell phone dinged. The text from Mason was short and sweet.

*Viper joining you tonight on patrol. Don't ask. Don't argue.*

Okay, maybe not.

He was halfway down the tunnel when he spotted his favorite entrepreneur headed toward him. It was a little late for the Soldier to be in the manse or even the parking garage, but that was none of Tas's business.

"Hey," he said when they drew closer. "What did Viper want with you last night?"

"Don't know," Oz said. "He never showed. I'm not surprised, though, especially if the two of you put so much as a dent in the Vampahol you stole —"

"Confiscated."

"Fine—*confiscated* from me."

"Well, you'll have a chance to ask him tonight."

"Yeah, why's that?"

"Because he's joining us on patrol."

"He's... I'm sorry... did you say patrol?"

"Yep, that's right. So, I suggest you not be sampling your own wares before work. I have a feeling he won't be too happy about being out there, but we have orders."

"Wow.

"Wow what?"

"Just wondering how Viper fucked up so bad that Mason put him out on patrol with us."

"If you're smart, you won't ask him."

"Well, that's one thing you don't have to worry about. If I'm anything, it's smart."

"Right," Tas said. The pair performed a complex handshake and went their separate ways, Oz back toward the barracks, and Tas toward the tranquil comfort of his suite.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

What did you say?” Ulrich Fuhrmann stared at the girl, preoccupied by the fact that she looked like anything *but* a Sorcerer. Her hair was short and a dull brown, with eyes to match. He knew she’d covered her irises with contact lenses, but there was no excuse for what she’d done to her hair. He’d thought the picture was appalling, but in person it was enough to make his stomach churn.

The girl put her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide as she stared at him, a strange expression on her face.

“Come closer,” he said. “I want to get a look at you.” Of course, that was the last thing he wanted. The sight of her infuriated him, but Maxx was right. Having someone inside the Legion Compound would be a coup, and one they couldn’t afford to pass up. Besides, word on the street had it that she was looking for him.

She took a few hesitant steps toward the desk he’d had moved in from one of the other offices, and as she drew nearer, he saw her physically brace herself. His reputation must precede him. Living with the Vampires as she was, there was no doubt they had poisoned her brain with their twisted version of events. He simply needed to set the record straight.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that. It’s just, I’ve been looking for you for so long. I mean, wanting to, but now here you are.”

“Yes, here I am. And again, I didn’t hear you. For what, exactly, are you apologizing?”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, there were tears brimming against her lids. “I called you father,” she whispered, and a single tear spilled over, leaving a trail on her pale cheek. At least she hadn’t gone to one of those horrendous tanning facilities. Wait...

“Father?”

She nodded, and the dam broke, a river of tears chasing one after the other down the soft angles of her face.

Fuhrmann laughed. "I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else," he said.

She shook her head. "My mother was very specific. She told me your name, your line, and—"

"And what? Don't stop now, you have me intrigued."

"And she told me I should never try to find you. But then she sold me to the Primeval for less than the price of a good milk cow, and I knew that you couldn't be worse than she was, so I... I looked for you."

Fuhrmann cocked his head, her voice suddenly familiar. "What's your name, girl?"

"It's Sasha. Sasha Becker."

"Have we met?"

She nodded and cleared her throat. "Yes, at Primeval Magnus' home a few months ago. I asked you if you knew my mother, and you said no."

"Why didn't you tell me this story then?"

"I... I was afraid." She spoke the last word so quietly he barely heard.

"I remember you, only then you at least looked like someone who might belong to me. But this?" He rose from his chair and waved a hand in her direction. "This abomination before me? This is nothing I could ever claim as my creation. What have you done to yourself, girl? Did you really think you could come to me looking like... like *this* and I would open my arms to you? Preposterous."

"I'm sorry!" she cried, and she rushed to the desk and flattened her hands on the wooden top. "I was on my own with no one to guide me. I tried to blend in with the humans as best I could. I don't know my people, not really. I can change—"

"Quiet. Of course, you can, but that is not why I had my man retrieve you from the parking lot."

"It's not?"

"I understand you live with the Vampires. Is that correct?"

"I..." The girl's face fell, and she took a step backward, then another.

He was losing her. He waved his hand and Maxx moved to stand in front of the door to block any escape she might have planned.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked, changing tack. "I have quite a selection in the refrigerator behind you. Maxx, bring our guest a bottle



of water.”

“No, thank you, I’ll just...”

“Water, Maxx. Now.” The feral made a quick trip to the fridge, retrieved the water for the girl, then returned to his spot in front of the door.

She looked at the bottle in her hand as if it were a foreign object, twisted it in her palms as she stared at the ground.

Fuhrmann rose from his chair and circled around the desk to stand directly in front of her. “Perhaps I was a bit hasty.” He retrieved the bottle from her, tossed it back to Maxx, then took her hand in his. The girl shook like a leaf, from fear if there was a brain left in her head, and that pleased him. Not enough to claim her. His family was dead and he had no desire for more. Still, if she thought they were related, not playing on her pitiful emotions would make him the *dummkopf*.

“Forgive my outburst,” he said. “I have been under a bit of stress lately. You understand. Please, sit.” He guided her to the sofa and she hesitated but a moment before lowering herself to the cushions. Fuhrmann sat with her, gave the back of the hand he held his interpretation of a fatherly pat, and said, “Tell me again about your mother.”

The girl—Sasha, was it?—looked over her shoulder at the door, then glanced at their joined hands. When she looked up, a glimmer of hope shimmered through the remains of the tears. Fuhrmann forced out a smile, and she relaxed a bit. Very good.

“Your mother?” he prompted again, and just like that, the dam of mistrust shattered and she began to talk.

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**M**y mother’s name was Katharina Becker. We were from Germany, but I believe you knew her in England. She never said how you met or how long you were together. Only that if I ever saw you, I was to run the other way.”

Sasha looked at her hands, ashamed to tell this man how her mother had despised him.

“And yet, you sought me out?” Her father had settled into the corner of the couch, which gave her a little breathing room, made the conversation a bit easier for her. His long arm lay along the back of the sofa, and by all appearances he seemed at ease. But Sasha could feel his tension, even with

that bit of space between them.

“Well, as I mentioned, she sold me to the Primeval.”

“To the Vampires.”

“Yes, and when she didn’t come back for me, I suppose I thought you couldn’t be any worse than she was.”

Sasha chanced a look up at him. A strange smile played at the corner of his mouth, an unnerving expression, but then this whole experience was a little off-putting.

“I see. And now that you’ve found me?”

Sasha dropped her gaze again, unable to look into her father’s red eyes a moment longer. Two weeks ago, she could have answered that question without a thought. *Take me with you. Let’s leave Fallen Cross and go somewhere where you can teach me all the things a Sorcerer needs to know.*

Only moments ago, she was ready to walk away from that fantasy forever. But now, with him sitting right in front of her, the dream had become tangible. Walking away from a figment of her imagination was much easier than turning her back on the real thing.

“Sasha?”

She looked up again to find him watching her, waiting. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

“Let me see if I can help you.”

When he smiled again, the tips of his pointy teeth showed a bit between his lips, and a sharp chill raced through Sasha’s spine. Fear, perhaps, or excitement. It was a fine line between the two, and either way, she felt exhilarated. While a small piece of her still wanted to flee, something kept her rooted to her seat as she waited for a sign that would prove this to be anything other than a mistake.

When Fuhrmann finally spoke again, Sasha listened and hoped.

“While I find the idea of having a child, a grown daughter at that, implausible, I will admit to being intrigued. I have no doubt your time with the Vampires, especially this most recent lot, may have swayed your opinion of your race in general, and of me in particular.”

When Sasha didn’t respond, he went on. “While I’m not a fan of what you’ve done to yourself—honestly, did you have to cut your hair?”

Sasha flinched, and he back-peddled. “My apologies. I can see how you must have been misguided. All of this, though,” he swept a hand in front of her, “all of it, can be repaired in time. Embrace who you are, Sasha. There is

nothing to be ashamed of. Our race is powerful, we are powerful. Don't turn your back on your people. You've given enough of your life to the Vampires. It's time you came back to your blood, to me, for good."

The red in his eyes deepened and his hair lifted from his shoulders as he reached for his magic. He spoke of the Vampires, of Raven and Nox, and the atrocities they had committed against his family, her family. The more he talked, the more intense he became, and though his tone was temperate enough, his eyes grew colder, emotionless, and another shock of ice slid down Sasha's spine.

This time she knew it for the fear it was, should always have been. "What are you asking?" she whispered, but the mania in his eyes was answer enough. He reached for her hand, and electricity sparked against her skin at the contact. She pulled out of his grasp and jumped to her feet.

He stood with her and placed a hand on her shoulder. Sasha flinched, but the touch was benign, even though his words were not. "Bring me Nox and Raven," he said, "and I will ensure that the Vampires never harm you again."

A nod was all Sasha could muster before she made a beeline for the door. Maxx stopped her before she could make her escape and demanded her cell phone. She hesitated, but gave it to him, anything to get out of that creepy place. He fiddled with it a bit, asked for her password, then fiddled some more. When he handed it back, she stared at it as if it might bite.

"Take it, Sasha," Fuhrmann said. "I'll be in touch."

She grabbed the cell from Maxx's outstretched hand, then fled for the parking lot. Fresher air greeted her on the other side of the metal door. She turned her face skyward, toward the thick grey clouds that cast the world in a shadowy haze, an unfortunate reflection of her current disposition.

When she finally collapsed inside her car—doors locked, windows up tight—she let free with the one thought that threatened to plague her, but she dared not formulate in her father's presence.

Ulrich Fuhrmann might protect her from the Vampires, sure. But who would protect her from her him?

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Traipsing around Fallen Cross in the middle of an ice storm with an empath and a boy genius was pretty much at the bottom of Viper's Top Ten Things I Want to Do List. It was right there below getting his arm cut off (again) and taking a red-hot poker to the eye.

And yet, there he was, pounding the pavement with Tas and Oz, looking for ferals and keeping the peace. Who was he kidding? It was Sunday night in Podunk, USA. They might as well have rolled the sidewalks up when the sun went down. Even the ferals were laying low, not a scent of burnt cabbage anywhere.

Then there was Oz. The boy would. Not. Shut. Up.

Viper made the mistake of asking what other kind of inventions he had up his sleeve. The Vampahol, while lethal, was pure genius, and the contact lenses he'd created to cover up the inadvertent spark-while-intoxicated had saved their collective asses. He'd wanted to discuss this in the lab, the night after Tas confiscated the boy's stash, but Viper'd died several deaths since then.

Just to kill the quiet, Viper broached the subject, and now he wished he could take it back.

The Soldier stepped in front of Viper and walked backwards as he talked. "Picture this," he said, and he held his thumbs and forefingers in the shape of a box. "Fang caps." He raised his eyebrows, obviously expecting... something, but Viper just stared.

"That's the other problem with the Vampahol. Our fangs get loose, well, not really, but they drop when we don't want them to. Just glue a set of fang caps on, and with the contacts, we can absolutely live the human experience

without threat of exposure. It's brilliant, am I right?"

Viper stopped and glanced at Tas. The other Warrior scanned the streets, by appearances all business but for the grin he didn't even try to hide.

Viper looked back at the kid, deadpan.

"Come on," Oz said. "You've got to see the brilliance in the concept. I have a dentist friend who is teaching me the entire procedure."

Voluntarily, Viper was sure. "That's just it. Humans have been capping their teeth for ages."

"Yes, but we haven't. I mean, when have we ever had the need? Now, with Vampahol, we have to be careful. Even with Primeval Magnus in the wind, we still have to watch our Ps and Qs. I figure, this way we—"

"Wait a minute. Go back."

Oz exhaled, then started over like he was talking to a four-year-old. "You see, the Vampahol makes our fangs drop—"

"Not that, the other."

"What, you mean about Magnus being in the wind?"

Tas tore his eyes from the parking lot across the street. "You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Magnus escaped the Primeval Consortium. They aren't sure where he went, but the other Primeval are going nuts."

*Christ on a cupcake.* Viper had been so up in his own head lately, he'd totally missed this. Begged to question what other major events he'd blanked out on. "So, what's Mason say about it?" he asked.

"That's just it," Tas said. "He's barely said a word other than that it happened. Not sure where we fit in, but for now, he's totally mum."

"Psst."

The three Vampires turned their heads as one to stare into the dark alley next to the drycleaner.

"Psst."

The sound came again, and Viper took a few steps toward the mouth of the alley.

"Who's there?" he called, as Tas and Oz laid hands on their weapons.

"It's me, Frank. You some of them people what hangs out with Marty?"

"Forget it," Oz said. "That's Martin's 'informant.'" He gave the word air quotes then shouted into the alley as though the man were deaf. "Martin's not on duty tonight. You'll have to catch him later." Oz rolled his eyes at Viper as though this were a regular thing, then double timed it to catch up with Tas,

who'd wisely moved on.

Viper made to follow, but the man in the alley spoke again. "You'll wanna take care out there, sonny. There's strangeness, and then there's strangeness."

"Who are you?" Viper asked. "Step out here where I can see you."

He heard the man cackle before he stepped into the dim light of a street lamp. He was old, with grey hair and a heavily-lined face, but his eyes caught the light and Viper fascinated at the way one eye reflected the light, and the other seemed to refract it. The old man blinked, dispelling the illusion as he held Viper's gaze in a visual vice.

"Marty usually gets me something to eat when I tell him stuff," he said. "You're kinda skinny, though. Maybe I should take some of my earnings and buy you a burger."

"Da fuck?"

The old man sidled up to him and cupped a hand over his mouth as he leaned close to Viper's ear. "It ain't all bad," he said. "But you need to be careful. There's some kinds of strangeness that can kill. You're only mortal, after all."

The old man's words sent a chill through Viper that had nothing to do with the weather. "You want to explain that?" he asked, but Frank had already moved back into the shadowy alley.

As Viper turned to join the others, the old man shouted again, and Viper jumped, automatically filled his hand with the weapon at his hip.

"Watch your tail, sonny."

"What?"

"Viper! Come on, man. We need to hit the Heights before heading over to Buzz's."

Viper turned back to the alley, but the old man was gone. Shit like that was precisely why he didn't go on patrol anymore. Humans were one species he would never understand.

He kicked himself into a jog, and splashed through the slush to catch up with Tas and Oz.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*C*ome along with us, Kythryn said. *It'll be fun*, she insisted.

Normally, Sasha would have politely declined, but the meeting with her father left her unsettled. She had planned to bury herself in her work, to forget about his demands until she was able to figure a way out of it.

But, when she checked her phone, she found a text message from Viper telling her to take the night off. No explanation, nothing. Just the prospect of a long night ahead of her with nothing to distract her thoughts from what she'd been asked to do. Ordered, really, but it was all semantics.

That was how Sasha found herself at a large table in the middle of Good Times drinking margaritas and sharing *girl talk* with every mated female living in the Legion Manse. Oh, and Rebecca.

Jessica Sweet sat on one side of the table with Rachel to her left and Rebecca to her right. Rebecca wasn't mated to anyone, but as Rachel & Harrier's sister and Jessica's aunt, she, like Sasha, had found herself living as a guest of the Fallen Cross Legion. Nice gig if you could get it, and Sasha wasn't ungrateful.

Still, the only reason they'd included Sasha in their little hen party tonight was because Kythryn, Harrier's mate and the only other non-Vampire in the manse, had invited her.

When she and Kythryn walked into Good Times, the popular little pub in the center of Fallen Cross, the looks exchanged between the Vampires were priceless. Still, she had to give it to them. They were trying to be nice, and that was the most she could ask for, considering the hell she'd forced upon Rachel's mate all those years ago. Sasha and Nox, having both been Magnus' prisoners, shared a bond that the other female simply couldn't understand. That the Primeval used Sasha to torture Nox, well, it was a "you had to be there" situation, and she wouldn't wish that on anyone, not even Rachel.

“So, Sasha,” Jessica said after taking a long drink of her icy green concoction. “How are things with Viper?”

Sasha glanced at Kythryn, who wore a sly grin as she waggled her eyebrows. Ignoring the taunt, she turned back to Jessica and said, “He is who he is. I enjoy the work, and that is enough.”

“I don’t know him very well,” Rachel threw out. “He always seems to keep to himself. What’s he like?”

All eyes were on Sasha, and she knew this was Kythryn’s doing. The woman had been the first to embrace Sasha, but it looked like she was also a bit of a gossip. Sasha regretted having ever confided in her. Thank the gods she wasn’t aware of the latest development.

“He’s... surly,” Sasha said. It was best to keep things succinct.

“He’s sweet on her,” Kythryn added, and she fluttered her eyelashes like a debutante.

The other females offered a round of oohs and ahs, and Sasha felt her face burn with the rush of blood filling her cheeks. She wasn’t sure “sweet” was quite how she would describe it.

“Do tell,” Jessica said. She grabbed her drink and sat back in her chair, totally focused on Sasha.

“Yes,” Rebecca said. “Do tell. Did he make a move on you? I hear that’s called harassment, and if he’s bothering you, you should go to his supervisor. That would be,” she put a finger to her chin as if she had to think about it, then stabbed the finger in the air. “Oh, yeah. Mason.”

“You would know about Mason,” Kythryn said, but Jessica wouldn’t be sidetracked.

“We can talk about Rebecca’s issues later. I want to know about Viper. I agree with Rachel. He’s the most difficult Warrior to get a feel for. Hell, as stiff-backed as Mason is, I feel like I know him better than Viper.”

Sasha threw another glare at Kythryn before she answered. “There’s really nothing to tell,” she said. “The male is impossible. He’s grumpy and impatient. He yells at me constantly, and he couldn’t give a compliment if his life depended upon it. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve solved one of his multitude of conundrums only to be met with a glare and a snarl. Would it be so hard to say, ‘Good job, Sasha,’ or ‘Wow, thanks, Sasha,’? Obviously, the answer is yes. For him, it’s impossible.”

She hadn’t meant to say all of that, not out loud and certainly not to these women. Especially after her passionate encounter with Viper the other night.



Her frustration with her situation must have been apparent, because they all stared at her now with eyes wide and mouths hanging open. They held their drinks in midair, completely forgotten, as they took in what really was the most she'd ever said to them in one go.

“He’s pulling your pigtails.”

The world started up again as all eyes turned to Kythryn, who had leaned back in her chair and managed to get her drink all the way to her mouth.

“What?” Sasha asked.

“Your pigtails,” Kythryn said again. She set her glass down, gathered her hair in her hands to either side of her head and twirled the two matching tails in the air. “He’s yanking your hair. Pulling your pigtails.”

Sasha blinked twice. “I don’t understand,” she said. “I don’t have... pigtails.”

“It’s a metaphor,” Jessica said. She leaned forward, suddenly animated as she spoke. “It means he likes you but he doesn’t know how to process those feelings, so he’s pulling your hair. It’s what little boys do when they like a girl but don’t know how to show it.”

Kythryn nodded. “Exactly. Only Viper was probably never a little boy so he never got past this stage of male development.” The shifter pulled her straw out of her glass, tapped it on the side, then pointed it at Sasha before she stuck it in her mouth and sucked.

Sasha attempted to hide another blush by taking a long drink of her margarita. They were on their second pitcher, and she already felt light and floaty. She had to giggle at her friend’s choice of words, though. They had no idea how *developed* the male was, at least from what she’d seen in her dreams. Her only regret, other than the Fuhrmann situation, was that she hadn’t managed to see if he measured up to Dream Viper in real life.

“It makes perfect sense,” Rebecca chimed in. “I’ve known a lot of males, mostly humans, who didn’t know how to express themselves. They usually did stupid shit like bring me flowers or candy.”

Sasha felt a brief respite as all eyes turned to Rebecca.

“That’s what they’re supposed to do,” Jessica said.

“They are?” Rebecca looked honestly confused.

“Yes,” the other females chorused.

“Those are nice ways of showing that they care,” Rachel added.

“Oh,” Rebecca said. “I thought they were just being lame.”

“No,” Kythryn said. “Lame is yelling at a girl when what he really wants

to do is throw her on the desk and rip her clothes off.”

“*What?*” Sasha gasped as the other females laughed hysterically. Kythryn’s comment came way too close to reality, and once again she felt her cheeks warming. At this rate, her skin might be permanently red.

“It’s true,” the little cat Shifter said. “I guarantee if you look at his package, you’ll see. The meaner he is, the bigger the bulge.”

Jessica snorted in her margarita and they all screamed with laughter. Kythryn, however, was dead serious.

“I know what I’m talking about,” she said. “It’s how I knew Harrier loved me.”

Rebecca slapped her hands over her ears and shouted, “Lalalalalalala!”

Rachel laughed but shook her finger at Kythryn. “That’s our brother you’re speakin’ of. We’d thank you to spare us the ungodly details of your courtship.”

Kythryn’s smile turned evil, but when she began to speak, the others loudly interrupted her. More laughter followed, then more drinks arrived, and thankfully conversation turned away from Sasha and Viper and on to safer subjects, for Sasha anyway.

As the other ladies carried on, she fell quiet. In her bizarre way, Kythryn gave her a lot to think about. Still, as much as she would like to believe it, the whole pigtail thing was a bit much.

Though she thoroughly enjoyed that brief moment of intimacy with Viper, Sasha would be a fool to read too much into it. She couldn’t let one nearly-screaming orgasm cause her to lose focus, to forget why she was in Fallen Cross in the first place.

Just because Viper accosted her, and she bloody well enjoyed it, meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. It wasn’t like he professed his undying love for her.

Or did he? Had he not said he could stay as they were forever? Or was that something a male said when he’d taken a woman in his mouth without so much as a moment’s warning.

By the gods, her mind was a mess. While the other women prattled on, Sasha replayed the meeting with her father. He was right in many ways. The Vampires in general were responsible for a lifetime of misery. She would certainly be remiss to forget that. But to counter Uli’s paternal wisdom, Vampires also freed her. These Vampires, the mates of the women here who were finally warming up to her. Or at least a bit of the ice had chipped away,

and wasn't that progress?

Just when she thought it didn't matter, that she had no reason to care, Viper happened, then tonight happened and her world shifted on its ear. She was this close to being accepted not only by Mason and most of the Warriors, but by their mates as well. Could she live with herself knowing she was the catalyst that would cause two of these females to lose their mates forever?

And what of Viper? If these females were correct, if he really did have feelings for her, would she have the strength to walk away from that, just to please a man who, quite frankly, scared the crap out of her? And for what? Family loyalty? Blood?

Sasha took another drink, then rested the cool glass against her forehead. She'd gone from feeling light and floaty to dizzy and confused. She only wished she could blame it on the alcohol.

Unfortunately, her father hadn't left her much wiggle room. By the time he released her, it was obvious he had certain expectations of her, and if she didn't deliver? She had no doubt, she would pay for it with her life.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Five nights. Five long, torturous nights, since Tas's failed coffee date with Jun, and he'd barely slept a wink stressing over it. Legion training and patrol shifts occupied his waking hours, but the days were interminable.

He'd gone over it a million times, replayed every word he said, every question he asked, and still couldn't come up with one solid reason for her to have taken off the way she did. He would love to ask her but, what do you know? She was the one student who had neglected to give him a cell phone number.

He thought he'd reached a new level in wooing her, thought the old "let's get a coffee" routine would play in his favor. She'd said yes, after all, but something wasn't right. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out what he'd done to chase her away.

And yet, now that he had a night off from his Legion responsibilities, he was less than excited to be back with the KS. For nearly a week, all he wanted to do was talk to her. Now, he'd just as soon let it go. He was done obsessing over the female. She was far too complicated for the simple lifestyle Tas enjoyed. It would be best if she didn't show up at all.

At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

He pulled onto the KS campus and parked his Prius in its normal spot just behind the main house. Master Jonathon preferred he park there rather than in the lower lot where the older KS kept their Fords and Chevys. Made no difference to Tas, but Jonathon insisted, so who was he to argue? The walk to the training field was certainly shorter.

As he gathered his gear from the back seat, he looked over the top of the vehicle at the grounds near the barracks. Despite an icy drizzle, the field was already filling with young Dark Warriors, some lost, some eager, all desperate for a sense of acceptance and belonging. Tas totally understood that

feeling. Having never encountered another changed Vampire such as himself, he knew what it was like to be different. It was a lonely world, and one he wouldn't wish on anyone. Maybe that was why he felt drawn to the *Kurai Senshi*. Or it could be they were all a bunch of badassess-in-training, and it felt good to be a part of shaping the young Warriors, of helping them reach their potential.

Sometimes he wished he could touch the Shade like they did. It must be something to feel the whole of your brotherhood inside you, like a part of you. Born Vampires had their familial bonds and fated Links, but having been born human, Tas experienced none of that. His only bond had been to Raina, and while it was exquisite, you were only changed once. To his knowledge, he'd never have that kind of connection with another being again, as long as he lived.

No matter what happened to these young Warriors, they would always have each other. They may have been born into a taboo existence, but they weren't cast there alone. At least not the ones he trained here. He tried not to think about the poor kids who were abandoned by their families and never found their way to a place like this. Too sad. Such a waste.

Tas threw his bag over his shoulder and headed toward the growing group. He forced his eyes straight ahead, refused to search the gathering Warriors for her. It was Tai Chi night—not her particular favorite—she would be there or she wouldn't. The greater part of him hoped for the latter.

He took his place at the front of the class, acknowledged the waves and greetings from a few of the older kids who'd been there a while, and he called the group to order. While the original *Kurai Senshi* originated in Japan, Tai Chi was a Chinese Martial Art. Most of the American KS were too young to know the difference, so Tas taught them as he had learned the art years ago.

He first led them through a guided meditation, to relax the mind and get their breathing under control. It was a quiet few minutes that he found essential in helping the young Warriors gain a bit of inner peace that they most likely lost when the Shade made its existence within them known.

When the meditation ended, he opened his eyes and automatically looked at the front row, where Jun was conspicuous by her absence. Tas ignored the tug of disappointment and directed the class into the first movement. He focused on his hand positions, his stance, he watched the students, and he pushed aside any kind of feelings he had about the situation.

He breathed deeply, exhaled, his motions slow and deliberate, and he forced himself to concentrate on the young people before him, on their form, their abilities. He spoke softly, pointed out corrections when necessary, and he ignored the empty space front and center. By the end of the form, he was calm and serene, strengthened and focused. The kata had done what it was meant to do.

As he completed the one hundred eighth, and final, movement, the icy drizzle stopped and the moon peeked out from behind a bank of thick clouds. A gentle breeze kicked up and washed over him, bringing with it the scent of jasmine, which completely destroyed the serenity he'd fought so hard to obtain.

He turned his head and found her there, not in the block with the other students, but off to the side, leaning against a lamp post. Her dark hair was loose around her shoulders, and she wore jeans rather than her usual gi. The glowing lamp above her lit her face but left the rest of her in shadow. Her eyes were narrow, her lips tight, as she watched him, watched the class.

Tas held the final pose a little longer than usual, then stood straight and bowed. "*Tong Xue Men Zai Jian*," he said. Goodbye students.

They returned the honor with a palm in fist salute, and as one replied, "*Lao Shi Zai Jian*." Goodbye, teacher.

He took a step back, and the class began to disperse. Several students approached him, to ask questions, seek guidance, just to say hello, and he acknowledged each of them in turn, but he never lost the sense of her.

She folded her arms, unfolded them and shifted her balance from one foot to the other. The movements were small and far-spaced, but for Jun it was the equivalent of fidgeting. Her impatience was both irritating and thrilling, but Tas wouldn't rush the kids. He gave them all the time they needed. Besides, Jun ran away from him, so he was in absolutely no hurry for her to insult him again.

When the last young Warrior waved his goodbyes, Tas turned to stash his gear, and there she was. One second all the way over by that lamp post, and then? Someone was getting anxious, and despite the little thrill he got at the scent of her, it was satisfying to have made her wait.

"Not in the mood for Tai Chi tonight?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he looked up to find her staring at him. She still held her jaw firm, and she clenched her teeth as she watched him. "If you're here to apologize for running out on me last week, don't bother. Honestly, it's not necessary."

He zipped his bag a little more aggressively than he'd intended, stood and flung it over his shoulder. Still, she stared at him, didn't say a word. He gave her a few more heartbeats to change her mind, then he was done.

"Yeah, well, I'm out of here." He shouldered past her and headed for his car.

He was several yards away when she finally spoke. "You are very good with them," she said. Not what he expected, or wanted truth be told. But probably the only reason he turned around.

"And?"

"And nothing." She stuffed her hands into her front pockets and shrugged. "They respond to you, and that is important. Most new *Kurai Senshi* have nothing, no one to turn to. In Japan, it was... difficult. Many did not survive. But these young Warriors have not only their fellow *Senshi*, they have you to guide them."

"I don't know a damned thing about being *Kurai Senshi*, Jun. I'm just here to teach a class."

"Maybe, but you know about people. You care, and not everyone in their position has someone like that to help them through this most difficult time. You are... honorable."

She had a faraway look in her eye, like she was standing there in Ohio, but her thoughts were thousands of miles away. A stretch of clouds slipped over the moon, muting its brilliance, and the cold rain returned.

"Did you have someone?" he asked, before his better sense could stop the words from escaping his traitorous mouth.

She nodded once, and when she faced him again, a single tear graced the sharp plane of her cheek. It was soon joined by several tiny droplets from the sky, and Tas thought he might have imagined the solitary trace of weakness in the stolid Dark Warrior.

Then, somehow, he was right in front of her, drawn by an invisible force he neither wanted nor understood. He knew only that this one moment in time was important, and he was exactly where he needed to be. He leaned into her, his mouth mere inches from hers, her breath sweet and warm against his lips. "What happened?" he whispered, wanting to know, but needing so much more.

She lifted her chin to bring their lips so close he could practically taste her. He breathed her in as his eyes fell closed, and he angled his head to erase that tiniest bit of space left between them.

But she was no longer there.

He opened his eyes to find that she had stepped back, her face hard and distant. And just like that, the moment of vulnerability disappeared like a tear in a rainstorm, taking his heart along with it.

“He died,” she said, in answer to a question Tas had completely forgotten he’d asked. Then she turned on her heel and walked away.

Tas struggled to still his racing heart as he watched her silent retreat. Too soon, she disappeared into the darkness, leaving him alone in the freezing rain.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Can I help you with that?”

Sasha looked up from the experiment on her table to see Viper hovering over her, again. While she'd enjoyed the time off the previous night, she'd found herself looking forward to being back in the lab.

However, she hadn't expected this. A surly Viper she could handle. She was used to it, knew how to deal with it, but this? It unnerved her.

“I'm fine,” she said for the dozenth time. “Truly.”

When he didn't respond, she looked up, only to find herself caught in his bronze gaze as he desperately searched her eyes for... something. Well, not something. She knew very well what he wanted. The male who for months couldn't be bothered to utter more than a two-word sentence to her unless it was laced with profanities, suddenly wanted to *talk*. Unfortunately, Sasha had no idea what to say.

And Phire was suspiciously absent. “Where's our intern tonight?” Sasha asked, to change the subject.

“Had homework.”

That was more like it, but she could feel the lie in his words.

“Sasha, about the other night—”

“Actually, you could help,” Sasha interrupted. “I need a couple of grenade jackets from the cabinet over there. Would you mind getting them for me?” That was as much to test her theory as it was to divert his attention. His usual response would have been, *Your legs broke? Get them yourself*, accompanied by some psychedelic swear words. When he practically scampered to the other side of the lab to do her bidding, Sasha knew she was in for a long night.

She had no doubt what was going on, and she would have loved to be able to put his mind at ease. But any conversation they had would only make

matters worse. It was better to put a stop to it now, to whatever it was that had changed between them, and pretend it never happened. It would save them both a world of heartache in the end. At least she hoped so, for Viper's sake.

After a few seconds of clanging and banging in the far cabinet, Viper turned to her, the green cast iron eggs held high. "Found 'em!" He hurried back to her lab table and laid the items in front of her, like a cat presenting its master with a dead mouse. "Anything else you need? Just ask," he said.

"Okay."

He took a couple of backward steps. "Yeah, okay."

When he went no further, Sasha slapped her hands on the table. There was no way she would get any work done with him hovering over her like that. "What? What do you want?"

She hated being short with him, but she'd laid awake all day trying to devise a way out of her predicament. Her father had been very clear about his expectations. She was his to use, and she would deliver on his request. Period. She'd been wrong to think the man could see reason, that she would be able, as his daughter, to convince him to give up his vendetta in exchange for a relationship with her. He was a zealot, blinded by his need for revenge, and she was quite literally nothing to him.

She knew the stories, about how Raven had killed his mother, Sasha's grandmother, and then much later how the twins had joined forces to murder her grandfather. She understood her father's hatred, but Sasha just couldn't reconcile that with the males she knew, especially Nox. That Vampire didn't have a cruel bone in his body, and she should know. If anyone deserved retribution, it was Nox.

But that didn't matter to her father. He was blinded by his grief, and nothing would sway him, not even her. As it turned out, he'd already knew there was a Sorceress living with the Vampires. He'd formulated his plan for her long before they met. The fact that she was his daughter changed nothing for him.

None of this was Viper's fault, of course. According to Kythryn and the others, the fact that he wanted to talk was a good thing, but what would she say? She couldn't speak her heart, even if she wanted to. There was simply no way she could have that conversation with him, which left her with one choice. She needed to distance herself from him, at least on a personal level, no matter how it gutted her.

If only she'd left the parking lot before that feral had come for her. Then she could be having an honest conversation with Viper, and maybe...

No, no maybes. She had achieved her goal of meeting her father, and in doing so, she set herself on this path. She could have come clean with Viper, and maybe together they could have found a way out of this mess. But now she would have to deal with her father on her own. There was time to figure it out, but she refused to take Viper or the others down the path to hell with her. This was her doing, her sin, and she would pay the price for it alone.

Sasha jumped when Viper's eyes sparked and bronze light filled the room. Finally, a reaction she recognized. "I just wanted to apolo... I wanted to say I'm sor... fuck it. I want to know that the hell's wrong with you!" he shouted.

He stood across the table from her, his palms flat as he leaned toward her. His face was inches from her own, that metallic light blinding, but she wouldn't back down. She couldn't.

"I don't know what the *hell* you're talking about!" she countered.

Viper's entire body shook with the incredible restraint she knew he fought. His fangs dropped, and she felt his frustration like a palpable thing. She did her level best to match him glare for glare, leaned into his aggression rather than pull away. Time stood still as each of them wordlessly dared the other to do or say something. Anything.

Then, as if someone had stuck a pin in him, Viper deflated. He blew out a long breath, and seemed to fall in upon himself as he once again backed away from her.

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Viper dragged a tattooed hand over his face, and when that didn't produce the desired result, he tried both hands. He tried hard not to growl, not to roar or scream at the frustrating female, but it was no use. He was who he was.

"Damn it, Sasha," he growled. "I don't get it. Why? I mean we..." He waved at the floor as if she would understand that any time he looked down there he saw her, naked and beautiful, completely undone beneath him. Like she would know what that did to him, but then, how could she? He could barely think the words, let alone speak them, especially when he had absolutely no idea what was in her head. "... and then you ran away."

Some of the fire seeped out of her as she straightened, then fell into her chair. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I wasn’t prepared for what happened,” she said. “For what we...” she looked at the same spot on the floor. “What we did. It was sudden, and when you ran out, I realized it was just another way for you to humiliate me.”

Viper’s jaw unhinged. “What?” he cried. “I only went because Tas...” but she’d buried her face in her hands and quietly wept.

“Sasha, please, look at me.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. “I’m too ashamed.”

“Because of what we did?”

She nodded, but her hands still covered her face, which made it impossible for Viper to show her how very fucking sorry he was. He’d made a mistake, had been weak on too many levels, and she’d gotten to him. Hell, he thought they were on the same page, finally, but now? Was he really that much of an emotional moron that he couldn’t tell the difference between passion and capitulation?

Damned Vampahol. He was never drinking that shit again. The two jars in his cupboard were going down the drain the minute he got home.

“Sasha,” he said, as calmly as he could manage given the fact that she was currently ripping his guts out. “Sasha, I screwed up. This is on me. I should never have given in. You’re beautiful. I said it before, but this time I’m sober and I know what I’m saying. But that’s not an excuse for before. I just... Christ, Sasha, would you please look at me?”

She hesitated at first but a moment later she drew her hands away from her face, and he wished like hell she hadn’t. The sorrow, the utter devastation on those perfect tear-stained cheeks was enough to make him wish Odin had struck him down at birth as the abomination he was.

“*Christ,*” he muttered again, then he turned on his heel and left the lab, her destruction permanently imprinted on his heart.

## Chapter Thirty

Sasha watched his back as he left the lab, his broad shoulders hunched, and his hands wrapped around the back of his neck as if he would strangle himself should she just say the word. Gods, what had she done? It was wrong. The whole situation was wrong, but she'd dug herself a hole so deep, it would be impossible to climb out of it.

Even if she wanted to confess now, there was nothing any of the Vampires could do to help. They would want to, would certainly try, despite her lies and deception. If she'd learned nothing else from life at the manse, it was that these people believed wholeheartedly in second chances. Perhaps even third or fourth chances. They'd never turned her away, even knowing who and what she was. They'd opened their doors to her, trusted her with Legion secrets, and rather than protect them from the hell she knew her father sought, she was destined to betray them.

To betray *him*.

She rose and walked to the spot where they had been intimate, stood there and stared at the floor where that one perfect moment in her life took place. The worst of it was, she'd made Viper believe she regretted what they'd done. It wasn't like she was a virgin. Just because Magnus forced her to wear that gods-awful iron belt that scraped and scarred her didn't mean he was afraid to remove it now and again for his own evil gratification.

But that was for *his* enjoyment, not hers. She'd never had a lover, never known what real passion was until that very moment, right there in that very spot, with Viper.

Her thanks? Duplicity. She'd played the embarrassed innocent rather than admitting to him the true source of her shame. For the first time since she'd met him, the male had done everything right, and now hers were the actions that pushed them back to square one.

She looked toward the exit where he'd disappeared, and she wondered what would happen should she go after him. His suite was just down the hall, she could catch him in no time. She took a slow, hesitant step, and then another. If she hurried...

Her cell phone buzzed as she took another step toward the door. She could have ignored it, should have, really. She needed to find Viper, to apologize, but something drew her to the table instead. The number on the display wasn't one she recognized at a glance, but she thumbed it on to connect anyway, her mind down the hall, with the male she shouldn't have allowed to walk away.

"Hello?"

"Hello, my daughter," a now-familiar voice spoke into her ear. "What news do you have for me?"

*Father?*

"I-I have nothing, yet," she said. "I've barely been home long enough to see anyone, let alone learn anything." True enough, though she'd spent more time trying to work things out in her mind rather than perform any actual spying for her father.

"There isn't much time," he reminded her, as though he hadn't said it a dozen times during their meeting the previous night. "I can't be seen here, and to be honest, I can't stand the idea of staying in this godsforsaken town a moment longer than I must. You know what this building smells like, Sasha, and the longer I'm here, the crankier I'm going to get."

Sasha glanced at the floor where Viper had shown her what living was all about, and just like that, something inside her shifted. "Mr. Fuhrmann," she said.

"Please, call me Father."

Her breath hitched, but she squared her shoulders and deliberately omitted the honorific. "I'm honestly not sure how I'm going to be able to help you. It's not like the Vampires trust me with all their plans and secrets. What you're asking is impossible and I just don't think I can do it. I'm sorry, I truly am, but there is only so much I can do."

The silence that met her from the other end was deafening, the only sound that of her father's deep, controlled breaths. When he answered, his response sent chills down her spine.

"I'm going to suggest you reconsider. Would you really betray your own flesh and blood? Because what I hear you saying is that you value your

relationships with those bloodsucking devils more than ours. We had an agreement, Sasha. Turn your back on me now, side with those animals, and I swear to you, you will regret it.”

Her spine turned to ice, the threat clear.

“It’s not like that, Father,” she desperately backpedaled, hoping the form of address would appease things a bit. “I just don’t understand what good can come from this vendetta of yours. Can’t you just, let it go? Move on with your life.”

“Let it go?” he whispered, and the words held more venom than if he had shouted them in her ear. “Let it go. They *murdered* your grandparents. That beast, Raven, defiled your grandmother, and together with his brother and that human girl, they destroyed my father. And you want me to *let. It. Go?*”

“But they’ve been good to me,” she whispered.

“Do they know?”

His question took her off guard. “Know what?”

“Do they know that I’m your father?” When she didn’t respond, he said, “I’ll take that as a no.”

“Father—”

“Do you know what they will do to you when they find out?”

“They would understand.” She breathed the words, more to reassure herself than to convince the other Sorcerer.

“You’re dreaming, *Liebchen*. When they discover you are of my line, they will turn you out like yesterday’s garbage. Worse, they will torture you, force you to tell them everything you know of me, which, I’m sad to say, is now more than I would like. They won’t look kindly upon you, *mein Kind*, my child, and once they know about you, I’m afraid I’ll have no further use for you. They will use you as a weapon against me, and I’ll have no choice but to treat you as a liability. Do you know what I do with liabilities, Sasha? Hmm?” he asked, his tone alone enough to freeze the blood in her veins.

“No, Father,” she said, only because it seemed he waited for a response.

“I eliminate them. Now, will you really force me to destroy my own flesh and blood?”

“No, Father.”

“Good, because I promise you, once the Vampires are through, I would not think twice about finishing whatever was left of you. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Father,” she whispered, and her hands shook, now from fear rather than regret.

“Good. Now, when can I expect to hear from you?”

“I will find something tonight, I’m sure,” she promised, afraid to say anything else.

“See that you do. The sooner I eliminate those bastard twins, the sooner you and I can... reconnect. I’m relying on you, Sasha. Do not disappoint me.”

“I won’t, Father,” she said, the words more quiet than the last. “I won’t.”

She disconnected the call and collapsed into her chair, as the weight of her actions settled firmly upon her shoulders.



## Chapter Thirty-One

Viper fought the power building within him. If he didn't get to the lab and purge it soon, something bad was going to happen. After the awkward start to the shift with Sasha and his abrupt departure, he'd thought about ignoring his previous vow and hitting the Vampahol again. However, his last bout with the potent liquor was still fresh in his mind and he didn't think his stomach, or his ego, could handle another go around so soon.

Still, he had to do something. The conversation with Sasha hadn't gone anywhere near the direction he'd planned. If she wasn't ignoring him, she was snarling at him, and he'd tried. He'd done everything but be his regular surly self. He should have left things where they were, let the silent treatment go on. Talking had been so much worse.

None of which had anything to do with his current powder keg situation, or the lit fuse that was damn close to setting the thing off.

It was going on ten a.m., and Sasha should have been long gone by then. She probably left right after he did, but he hadn't stuck around to see. He hoped that was the case, because he didn't think he could last another hour.

When he reached the lab, he was grateful to see the place dark and more importantly, empty. He locked the door behind him and headed straight for the firing range. Yes, he like shooting his guns and other weapons. The room was practically indestructible, and as such, was the perfect place to try his creations. But that wasn't the reason he built the thing.

He learned ages ago that when the power built inside him, he had to, basically, let the steam out. It was the true purpose of the firing range, a place where he could let the energy out, one that could withstand the explosion without anyone in the manse being the wiser. Early on he'd tried doing it in the woods, but he'd started a small forest fire that took too many of them to

douse. Despite a lot of questions, Mason eventually wrote it off as a freak lightning strike and let it go. However, that incident spurred Viper to come up with his current solution.

He stopped in the center of the range and stripped off his t-shirt as the door swung shut and sealed him in. The fuse inside him burned shorter and shorter. He quickly sat on the floor, crossed his legs and assumed his meditative position. Deep breath in, long breath out, then again, over and over until he found the sense of calm he sought. One last exhale, and he opened himself up to the power, gave it its head and let it go.

He didn't have to open his eyes to know what he looked like. Emerald light seeped through his skin, beamed through the outlines of the runes etched into his flesh. As the power intensified, so too did the light. Brighter and brighter it grew, as the thin lines widened, offering the power the avenue it craved to escape its mortal confines. The runes themselves ran one into the other, fused together until the green brilliance at last consumed him.

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*Odd how one remembered certain aspects of their life. Afterward, even in his dreams, the events of that day played out at a tempo so slow, Erik would swear himself able to pick out small details he hadn't noticed the night he sparked. Like the way Bjorn's hair lifted out from his head, or the smile on his mother's face as she realized what had happened.*

*In fact, the horror of the moment had struck Erik deaf, blind, and dumb, and it astounded him that his mind allowed him to remember any of it.*

*Three nights had passed since his dream. Three nights of intensified harassment from the Viking children. They had no idea what he was, only knew he was different, not one of them. They knew his mother was a fierce fighter, that she was as capable as any among them when it came to their night raids. She earned her share of the spoils and this allowed them to stay among the Vikings during the long, dark winter months.*

*They were only required to pay a small tribute to the Jarl, the king of the local clan, but a percentage of their take was a small price to pay for the gift of living without fear of being hunted. It turned out, the Vikings were as fearsome as the Vampires. In some cases, even more so.*

*However, it seemed Erik's mother had boasted to one of the shieldmaidens about Erik's dream, about how his father, the god, had come to him and*

presented him with a magnificent gift. This, of, course, reached the ears of the children, who insisted upon seeing this almighty gift. If he was the son of a god, why not prove it?

The taunts and demands came with physical attacks, and for two nights Erik brought home more cuts and bruises than he could heal in short order. He tried to hide the damage from his mother, but she had a keen eye and she knew the scent of his blood as well or better than he did. Not even drinking his mother's blood could heal the damage before the next night's beatings began.

By the third night, Erik's patience had met its end.

He strode into the village at his mother's side, his head held high, his chin jutted out and his thin arms taut with resolve. It was the middle of December, a time when the sun shone but for a few hours a day. This left Erik and his mother free to raid and train with the Vikings as they chose. In the spring they would travel south, far enough that they could escape the endless sunlight that would eventually plague the northern lands. But for now, they worked hard, slept little, and Erik, at least, dreamed of a time when they would be forced, by virtue of their race, to move on.

Until then, he had a score to settle.

When they reached the clearing at the center of the wide-spaced dwellings, his mother split off to seek out the other shieldmaidens in their training. That left Erik to continue on to where the Viking boys worked on their weapons play. It was not something he enjoyed, but his mother expected him to be ready to join the raids the minute he was of age, and he would not let her down.

As usual, Bjorn broke from the others the minute he saw Erik enter the field.

"If it isn't the son of Odin, come to lord over us mere mortals," he said, his otherwise handsome face distorted by the sneer that twisted his mouth. "Have you brought your great power with you tonight? Or will I have to thrash you again, to prove you are nothing more than a puny embarrassment."

Erik stood to his full height, all five foot two inches of it wound tight and ready to spring at the first sign of attack from Bjorn or any of his army of human monsters.

He didn't have to wait long.

Bjorn pulled a dagger from his belt and lunged.

*Erik twisted away, his reaction fast, but not fast enough. The human managed to arc the blade through Erik's shirtsleeve and slice through the flesh of his upper arm. Until that moment, the Vikings' preferred weapons were their fists or the occasional blunt end of a spear. This was the first time any of them, including Bjorn, had dared to raise steel against him.*

*The pain was exquisite, like fire licking up the side of his arm. He felt the burn intensify as he fell into a fighting stance, ready for the next attack.*

*That's when things went horribly wrong.*

*Erik's gums exploded in pain, the agony in his arm forgotten as he felt his fangs bite into his lower lip. His eyes snapped open and a brilliant light burst forth upon the field, bathing his foes in a bright bronze glow. His first spark! And it couldn't have come at a more perfect time. Erik allowed his smile to widen, despite the promise he'd made to his mother to never give the race away. He bared his fangs and hissed at the human boys, and he reveled in the sheer power of it, at the shouts and screams of the inferior boys.*

*When he thought of all the ways he would repay the Viking children for their cruelty, a buzzing sensation built within him. In the excitement of his first spark, he'd forgotten about the dream. The buzzing intensified, and his smile faltered as the power from his dream continued to grow inside him.*

*"Get him!" someone yelled, probably Bjorn, but by this time, Erik was beyond the ability to comprehend his surroundings. He felt, rather than saw, the other boys charge toward him, but he couldn't move, was frozen to the spot.*

*Although frozen, wasn't quite the right word. The buzzing became an uncontrollable vibration that jarred him from the soles of his feet to the tips of his braids as his body filled with liquid fire.*

*No one had ever told him that sparking made you feel so, well, powerful. It was an absent thought, one that barely registered, before a frightening roar exploded across the field.*

*His enemies were upon him! A dozen Viking boys surrounded him with weapons raised, ready to cut him down.*

*Erik lifted his hands to defend himself and startled at the emerald light emanating from his fingertips. The burning inside him grew, as the green fire swathed his hands, traveled up his arms and down his body, until the strange light radiated from his entire being.*

*It was the most amazing feeling, the energy inside him. He had a brief moment of omnipotence, of feeling like he held the world in his grasp, before*

*the green fire exploded from him in an overwhelming blast that sent his enemies flying in all directions. He screamed as the earth rocked beneath his feet, the sudden internal emptiness instantly replaced by the preemptive buzz as the power within him once again began its rapid surge. And as it did, his skin began to glow, that bright emerald light just below the surface.*

*“Erik.”*

*Someone spoke his name, a soft voice from a far away place.*

*He turned to see the entire clan had gathered, and each of them stared at him as though he had grown horns from his skull without need of a helm.*

*Front and center among them stood his mother, her arms stretched toward him, her smile radiant and proud.*

*“Moder?” He knew he spoke, but his voice sounded foreign to him, deeper and more menacing.*

*“Oh, my son. Your father’s gift.”*

*Somehow, she had traveled the short distance between them without him realizing. She reached out, but before Erik could take her hand, a primal scream rent the air as someone rushed him from behind. He felt the blade enter his back as he spun to face his attacker. By instinct, the power within him burst forth again, stronger this time, and with purpose directed at whatever—whomever—attacked him. As before, the fire exploded in a circle, taking out anyone within a five-foot radius.*

*He saw Bjorn, his blond hair lifted around him as the power sent him flying across the field. Erik hadn’t meant for him to fall into the weapons rack, nor for him to be impaled upon a bundle of spears stacked there. It was certainly an accident, but he couldn’t deny the satisfaction he felt.*

*“Erik.”*

*That voice again, softer this time, pulled him from the gruesome sight of his felled enemy.*

*One slow turn of his head, and his entire world imploded.*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

*How could she have been so stupid?*

Sasha burst from the elevator, ran the length of the hall, and slid to a stop before the lab door. She reached for the knob, her hopes for finding it locked mixed with a tremendous dread that it would open with ease. An unlocked door meant Viper had returned. She'd left not long after his dramatic departure, and midday wasn't far off. He should have gone to his residence hours ago, but one never knew with him, and calling wasn't an option, even if she'd had the courage to do so.

She turned the knob and breathed a sigh of relief when it didn't budge. Considering her current problem, he was the last person she wanted to run into there. She fumbled the key from her pocket and slid it into the lock, gave it a slow, quiet-as-she-could-manage turn. The tumblers disengaged and she exhaled again. She pushed the door open enough to slide into the lab, and just as quietly closed it behind her.

Her workstation was exactly the way she left it, somewhat cluttered with papers and other detritus of her night's abandoned work. After a brief moment of panic, she found the phone tucked under a pile of spreadsheets.

*Disaster averted*, she thought as she tucked the device into her pocket and vowed never to be so careless again. After the conversation with Viper, and then her father's disturbing call, she was beyond unhinged. She'd tried to put her desk in order, but ended up tossing things around before rushing from lab. She tried to relax in a hot bath, even prepared herself a cup of "Irish" with the ingredients Kythryn had thrust upon her after their chat the other morning, but it was no use.

Her father had threatened her life. The man she had dreamed of calling family, who she thought would take her in and rejoice at their meeting, would as soon kill her as look at her. The only thing stopping him? For the moment,

she was useful. She had no doubt, now, that she'd made a stellar mistake, but at this point there was no turning back.

He wasn't wrong about the Vampires using her to find him, but his assertions that they would turn on her if they knew who her father was sowed seeds of doubt in her heart. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe they wouldn't be as understanding as she thought. Perhaps their kindness only extended to those whose last name was not Fuhrmann.

When it came down to it, she would be dead either way.

Once she'd come to that conclusion, she'd realized her other mistake in leaving her phone lying around. The last thing she needed was for Viper to find it and start pushing buttons to find out who she talked to. Not that she thought he would... oh, who was she kidding? Of course, he would.

She tapped her pocket to confirm the device was safe inside, and turned to make a silent escape. Then something strange caught her eye.

The room was dark, and she hadn't dared turn on any lights. She may not have a Vampire's vision, but she saw well enough in the dark to be getting on with things. However, in the back of the room, a thin line of emerald green light shown near the bottom of the door leading to the shooting range.

"How odd," she murmured. She knew she should leave. It was probably one of Viper's super triple secret experiments he didn't want her to know about. But what if someone were in the lab who didn't belong? What if there was a saboteur in their midst?

She really should have called Viper, gotten him to come and take care of it, but that was a ridiculous thought. Had she not been integral in thwarting the rogue *Kurai Senshi* when they attacked the Compound? Hadn't she killed a few with her own wits and magic? There couldn't possibly be anything in there that she couldn't handle.

Sasha straightened her spine and slipped to the back of the room. A faint humming emanated from the shooting range. It was not so much that she heard it, more like something she felt, deep inside. Someone had pulled the interior blinds on the bulletproof windows, and while she couldn't see much, the band of light seeped through the seams around the edges.

She heard someone moan, as if they were in pain, and she cautiously reached for the door. Something was wrong, very wrong, and she felt it deep inside her as if whatever happened to the person inside were happening to her as well.

She turned the handle and pushed the door open a crack. She just wanted

to peek inside, to see who or what she had to contend with before calling in reinforcements.

A bright light burst up the side of the door, its brilliance such that it temporarily blinded her. She threw a hand up to shield her eyes, and felt her hair rise around her, only she hadn't tapped into her magic. This was something else. She pushed the door wider and squinted against the emerald glare as she stepped into the long, rectangular space.

When her eyes adjusted, she gasped and her hand fell slowly to her side.

Viper sat in the center of the firing range wearing only a pair of sweat pants, his legs crossed in the lotus position, as he hovered six inches above the floor.

And he was completely enveloped in the emerald light.

This wasn't a Vampire sparking—that was an eyes-only thing—but this... this was everywhere, all around him. The light pulsed, and she threw her hand back up to shield her eyes. With that bit of protection, she realized her initial assessment was slightly off. The light didn't surround Viper, it *was* Viper.

The dozens of tattoos she often wondered about, the unique artwork that covered nearly every inch of his skin from the neck down, were the true source of the light. Even though they had grown and morphed on his skin, with the bright green light shining through them she could see them for what they were: Norse runes.

A sudden urge to hit the internet, to translate the messages written on Viper's skin, was overwhelming. Never in her life had she seen a creature filled with such—she had to call it what it was—such magic. It was powerful and beautiful... no, it was *transcendent*.

Slowly, very slowly he turned his head to her, the spark in his eyes shining like polished bronze. As bright as it was, it barely penetrated the green energy field, a tiny swirl of bronze quickly absorbed by the brilliant emerald light.

Sasha locked eyes with the Vampire, or whatever he was. "Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered.

The green light intensified, and the pulsing increased to a maddening speed. Without warning, the light, the sound, the vibration literally exploded around her.

The last thing she saw was a single, blood-red tear tracing a path down Viper's cheek, and then her world went black.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

Noooo!” Viper screamed the word, but there was no one to hear.

This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be true. Not now. Not *again*. He'd been so careful, and yet somehow this sick version of déjà vu was real.

As he scrambled to where Sasha lay crumpled on the floor, his power quickly faded, leaving them in relative darkness with nothing but the room's safety lights to see by.

He pulled her into his lap and held her close, rocked her in his arms as he tried to get control of his grief.

He leaned his head to hers and his tears leaked onto her cheeks, the bright red in stark contrast with the pale white of her luminescent skin.

“No,” he said. “Not Sasha. Please, Father, no.” He repeated the words over and over, had no desire to relive the horror of his past. He'd already killed the first woman he loved. He couldn't live with himself if he killed the last.

Sasha twitched in his arms, and a small gasp escaped her perfect lips.

Afraid he'd imagined it, Viper pulled her closer and framed her face between his thumb and forefinger. “Sasha,” he cried. “Please, Sasha. Talk to me.”

Her lashes fluttered, and he held his breath, dared to hope, to believe.

“Sasha, *Ástin*. Say something.”

She opened her mouth, her eyes—pale blue, not brown—never leaving his, and she whispered something. His heart leapt in his chest and he hugged her tight against him.

“Say it again,” he said. “I couldn't hear you. Please, please say it again.”

“I said, your hand is on my breast.”

Viper froze, assessed the situation, and by the gods, she was right.

“So it is,” he said, and he tightened their embrace, careful to shift his hold to remove the offending hand. It was a sign of his despair that he hadn't

realized the treasure he held in his palm, relief being the only emotion to fill him at the sound of her voice.

He kissed her temple and inhaled deeply, filled himself with the scent of ozone that was distinctly her. It calmed him in a way no words or deeds ever could.

After their last and only sexual encounter, Viper swore to himself that he would never lay a hand on her in that way again. Now that he'd nearly lost her, he wasn't sure that was a vow he could keep. But not like last time. He wouldn't behave that way toward her again, ever.

He stroked her hair and whispered into her ear. "If you promise never to scare me like this again, I'll make a promise of my own."

She laid her head against his shoulder and said, "Tell me."

"The next time I touch your breast, it will be because you beg me to."

~~~~~

Sasha looked into Viper's eyes, temporarily stunned into silence, unsure she'd heard correctly.

She missed the warmth of his hand when it was gone. But then he wrapped his arms around her, oh so tight, and pulled her close, the heat of his hand replaced by that of his bare chest as he held her to him.

He kissed the top of her head, then her temple, and when she looked up, he wasted no time in capturing her lips.

She was still in shock, had to be, because when he licked her lips, she opened for him without hesitation. The kiss deepened, and she felt herself falling again, only this time it was a gentle descent, with strong arms lowering her to the floor as the male continued to explore her mouth, to taste her as she tasted him.

When she was flat on her back, he hovered above her, balanced only on his elbows and knees, his hips pressed into hers. She could feel his hardness as he licked his way down her neck, his hands playing at the sides of her breasts, so close, but never touching. She arched her back, desperate to feel his hands there, everywhere, but he merely blew hot breath on her nipples through the fabric of her blouse and moved on. He dropped sweet, hot kisses on her ribs, her sides, everywhere but where she wanted him most.

When she moaned, he ground his hips into her, and once again she opened for him. Her legs this time, which gave him full access to that throbbing

juncture between them.

Well, not full access, as they both still wore far too many clothes for her liking. He stroked her sides with both hands, his thumbs close, so close to her breasts but it might as well have been miles. When she arched toward his touch, he moved away, and she groaned with disappointment and need.

“Please,” she whispered. She knew it was what he wanted, but at this point she didn’t care. She wanted it too, more than she cared to admit.

“Please what?” he murmured. He slid himself up the length of her again, took advantage of the opportunity to rub his loosely-clad erection against her center. When he reached her breasts, he stopped. Once again, he opened his mouth over her nipple and breathed with a fire that licked through her belly and shot straight down to her core.

“Please, touch my breast.”

“As you wish, *Ástin*.”

He made short work of her blouse, completely ignored the buttons and ripped it right down the front. It was okay, she never liked it much, anyway. It didn’t fit quite the way she—holy mother of Pete! She didn’t even feel the bra give way before his lips were on her. He pulled her nipple into his mouth and traced exquisite circles around the sensitive bud as he sucked and licked his way around it.

The orgasm built inside her, and she was nearly undone simply by his mouth on her breast. He suddenly let go, abandoned her perched on the edge of climax, her poor nipple wet and cold. She whimpered and arched her hips up to meet his, rubbed herself along the firm outline of his swollen girth.

“Christ on a cucumber, you undo me,” he groaned, then moved on to capture her other nipple in his mouth.

That was much better. As he sucked and licked, she felt the intensity build within her again, but once again he released her, leaving her panting, wanting.

He buried his head between her breasts, his breath ragged and uneven. “I want you, Sasha. Gods, I want you.”

“Yes,” she said. It was the only word she could manage, her mind not quite firing on all cylinders.

“Yes, you know, or yes, you want me too?” He lifted his head and rose on his elbows to look her in the eye. “Because I’ll only ask once. If this isn’t what you want, then you need to leave, because one more minute of you in my mouth, and there will be no turning back.”

He looked away, but she cupped her hands on the sides of his face and forced him to look at her. "I've never been more certain of anything in my entire life. I want you Viper. Here. Now."

He exhaled a shaky breath and lowered his mouth to her neck. "Blood?" he whispered against her carotid, and a shiver thrilled through her spine.

"Yes," she said again as he dragged a sharp fang along the tender skin at her throat. "Gods, yes."

"You've bewitched me," he said with a nip. "Bespelled me somehow, but I don't care. You're mine, Sasha. *Mine.*"

The bite was fast, the sting instantaneous but the pain quickly transformed into sheer ecstasy. She felt each pull deep in her belly, and the orgasm hit her fast and hard. She wrapped her legs around him and rubbed herself against him, wished desperately they'd taken the time to remove all their clothes so she could feel the length of him buried deep inside her.

When he removed his fangs and licked the side of her neck to close the wounds, she trembled with aftershocks, the climax so complete she wondered how she had ever believed her dreams were realistic.

Viper reached up and claimed her mouth, pushed his tongue deep inside to tangle with her own. He tasted of copper, of her blood, and it was erotic rather than unpleasant. She wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, frantic to feel close to him, one with him.

She licked at his fangs and pricked her tongue. He sucked at the tiny drop of blood that resulted and she shivered in his arms. When he broke away, she nearly cried at the loss, but the feeling evaporated when he slid down her body and unceremoniously removed her jeans, underwear, shoes and all. He stood and quickly shed himself of his own clothing and she thrilled at seeing him in all his glory. Just like her dreams, he was long and lean, well-muscled but not overly so. Sinewy, like the serpent he was named for, his muscles rippled as he returned to hover over her, his thick, naked length rubbing against her bare skin at long last.

He slid a hand between them and pressed the tip of his erection between her legs, hard and wanting, but with a restraint that showed in the muscles roping at his neck. She could tell he resisted, but she didn't know why.

He rested on his elbows, his face above hers, and he searched her eyes as if to give her one more chance to back out.

Sasha didn't want it.

She raised her hips, stole the decision away from him as she welcomed

him inside her. He filled her completely, so hot and thick, and she shuddered when he met her halfway with a thrust of his own.

Thus began a rhythm that rocked her into a frenzy, the push and pull, thrust and retreat, a magical dance that filled her in ways far beyond the physical. Her heart pounded in her chest and her breaths came in hitches and stutters, as the climax once again built in her belly. All the while he watched her eyes and she didn't look away.

"Viper. Oh, Viper," she whispered, and he kissed her. To silence her or to claim her, she didn't know, didn't care.

She raised her hips and wrapped her legs around his ass, and his thrusts went ever deeper, each one taking her that much closer to the explosion of bliss she had so often dreamed of. When his rhythm faltered, she tightened her legs, held him deep inside her as he shattered in her arms.

He broke the kiss and tightened his arms around her, pressed her face against his chest. Instinctively, she bit him.

"Gods, yes," he screamed, and bronze light filled the room. His hold on her tightened, and he pressed her head securely against his chest as they rocked through their climax.

She bit harder, pulled his skin into her mouth, and sucked, which elicited a satisfied groan that vibrated throughout his body.

"Harder," he said, the word a harsh demand, and one she gladly obeyed.

When she tasted blood, she released her teeth—she hadn't meant to hurt him—but when he shouted, "No!" she bit again, harder this time as it seemed to be what he wanted.

His hips rocked against her and she felt him growing once again inside her. Time stood still as he drove her anew to heights she never dreamed possible. When she felt his fangs re-enter her throat, they climbed to the apex of ecstasy and exploded over the edge, together. As one, they rode their climax to its end, then slid down the other side into a near coma of bliss.

He rolled to her side then pulled her close to him, her back against his chest, his arms wrapped around her, one hand planted firmly on her breast.

As he played with her nipple, he kissed her shoulder and said, "I want this forever."

That was it. Beyond anything she knew innately, beyond anything she'd ever learned, this, right here, was how magic started.

And she should never have allowed it to happen.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Viper held her close to him, his words ringing in his mind as truth. He did want this forever. He wanted her, right here, or, well, maybe his bed would be more appropriate. Either way, any possible way, he wanted her. He could admit it now, even though it scared the hell out of him, realized it the moment he saw her lying on the floor, so lifeless...

“I thought I’d killed you,” he whispered against her hair.

She snuggled her ass against him, and he instantly grew hard again. “I’m tougher to kill than you think,” she said. “However, if your recovery time is any indication, you may be the death of me yet.”

She turned her head to him, her sweet smile irresistible, so he didn’t even try. He kissed her slowly, reverently, attempted to convey in that simple act the feelings that surged in his heart.

She pulled away too soon, and snuggled back against him. As incredible as it was to finally have her in his arms, he couldn’t block the image of her as his magic slammed her to the floor. Memories he’d long buried had rushed to the present. Of the night he’d first sparked, the night he’d learned that, Odin or no Odin, he’d been cursed with a terrible gift.

He saw the human boys who had taunted him scattered around him like scarecrows blown from their posts. Bjorn impaled on the practice spears, and his mother...

A cold shiver crawled the length of Viper’s spine and he attempted to physically shake the vision from his mind.

Sasha twisted in his arms to face him. “What is it? What’s wrong? Are you cold?”

How could he explain to her the horrors he’d committed? She’d seen him in battle, had watched him kill. Hell, she’d even helped. But how did you tell the woman you loved that you had committed matricide?

“I think I put your blanket back in one of the lockers by the bathroom,” she said, and she moved to get up, but he pulled her back to the floor.

“No,” he said, “Stay here. You are all the warmth I need. Unless you?”

“I’m fine,” she said and settled back in his arms, “but you’re still shaking.”

“I keep seeing you, lying on the floor. I nearly killed you.”

“Nearly isn’t permanent,” she said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” he said. It was as if she’d peeked into his mind and saw his greatest sin.

“That you have magic.”

“Oh, that. I haven’t told anyone.” It was the truth, however, the words tasted wrong on his tongue.

“It explains a lot,” she said.

“How so?”

“Well, the way you defeated all of those rogue *Kurai Senshi*, for one. I remember seeing the green light and thinking it was your spark, but your eyes don’t spark green, do they?”

“My eyes are dark bronze. They spark with the light of polished bronze.” It was an obvious thing to say, but his head was still a little light on hemoglobin.

A small smile played at the corner of her perfect mouth. “I saw that tonight,” she said, “but I think you’re deflecting.”

Maybe he was. Still, he didn’t respond. What was there to say?

“Talk to me, Viper. Why didn’t you tell me you have Sorcerer blood?”

Viper sat up, instantly on the defensive. “I do *not* have Sorcerer blood,” he spat, though he regretted his tone, if not the words, the minute they left his lips.

“I see.” Sasha pulled herself away from him, stood, and gathered her clothes from where they’d scattered on the firing range floor.

“I’m sorry,” Viper said, still more words that tasted funny on his tongue. He didn’t use the “S” word often. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d said it and truly meant it. Now, maybe?

Sasha didn’t respond. She already had her pants on, and she stood with her blouse in her hands, probably trying to figure out how to put the shredded pieces back together.

He jumped up, grabbed his sweats, and stuffed his legs into them, hopping a bit as he yanked them up and knotted the string at the waist.

“Let me get you a shirt from my locker,” he said, and he ran from the room. It was as much to give himself a chance to get his brain working again as it was to find her something to wear. Truly, there was no way he would let her wander the manse halls looking like she’d been attacked. Especially since he was the attacker.

He yanked the metal door open and grabbed one of his t-shirts from the top shelf, gave it a quick sniff test, and hurried back to her. She sat on the floor of the firing range in nothing but her jeans and that lacy bra, her knee bent as she tied her shoe. Her hair was tousled and her skin had a bright pink flush to it, which he found becoming against her natural pale complexion.

“Here,” he said. “You can wear this. It’s fairly new.” As if that mattered. Still, if she didn’t cover herself soon, he was going to strip her of all she’d put on just so he could feel her bare skin against his again.

“So, you’re not Sorcerer,” she said, and the snippy emphasis on the last word made him feel worse than he already had. “Then what are you?”

He scrubbed his hand over his skull and said, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

She looked up at him, and her pale blue eyes begged him for a truth he’d never spoken aloud. He liked her natural eye color better than the brown contact lenses she normally wore. It suited her face, and probably her hair when she didn’t dye her white-blond tresses. Not that he minded the darker hues. It simply seemed peculiar on her. He understood her initial desire to blend with the human population, but she was among people who knew her now. It was perfectly okay to be herself.

“Never mind,” she said. She stood and brushed the seat of her jeans, then held her hand out for the shirt he had yet to give her. Viper handed it over, and she wasted no time in slipping it on, his Kiss “Animalize” concert tee a more than adequate cover for all that feminine beauty. And damned if she wasn’t even sexier in his oversized shirt. Or perhaps it was seeing her in something of his that turned him on.

None of which provided an iota of defense toward getting him out of the doghouse. By the time he lifted his mind from the gutter, she was in the lab.

“Wait,” he called as the shooting range door slid shut. He punched it open and hit the lab as she reached for the door at the other end of the room. “Wait,” he said again. “I’ll tell you.”

“You don’t have to,” she said, with no inflection, no emotion. It was as if the past few hours—days, lifetimes—hadn’t happened. How did he keep



screwing this up? Maybe he *was* a complete fuck up, but one thing he knew. There was no way he would let her walk out that door again.

He covered the distance between them and pulled her into his arms, crushed his mouth against hers, and he didn't stop until she kissed him back. When that happened, the kiss could have gone on forever, which took him back to seeing her in his shirt, or just her bra, or... *fuck*.

He broke the kiss, and struggled to catch his breath, to find the words he needed to say. "My father was more than a mere Sorcerer or Witch. He was a god. The god of many things, magic being one of them."

She looked up at him, those pale blue eyes blank with disbelief. A beat later, she pushed herself out of his arms and shook her head. "Forget it, Viper. Really, you don't have to tell me."

"Shit," he swore. He wasn't saying it right. "Wait, please." He grabbed her hand and held on tight, refused to let her walk out on him again.

He just needed to be clear, come out and say the words he'd refused to utter for over a thousand years. He'd never felt the need, let alone the want to reveal his secret to anyone. Sasha, however, deserved to know the truth, at least the truth as his mother had believed, even if Viper had never embraced it as fact. Why say the words if you question their veracity?

For her, though, he could do it. He just had to open his mouth and speak.

"My father," he said, "was Odin."

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Odin?” Sasha asked. She’d heard the term “having your brains screwed out,” but she didn’t think it was a literal thing. Still, it must be because she was certain she’d lost half her wits while making love with Viper. She couldn’t possibly have heard him correctly.

Viper sighed and stepped away from her. “Yes,” he said. “Odin. God of War and of the dead, King of Asgard, Ruler of Valhalla. He also happened to be a magician, which is where my lovely gift came from. According to my mother, anyway.”

“Let me get this straight,” Sasha said, “Are you telling me you’re a demigod?” She pressed her fingers to her temples and closed her eyes so she could focus on his answer.

“Christ,” Viper swore. “Don’t say it like that. It’s fucking pretentious.”

She opened her eyes and tried again. “I’ve read Norse mythology, and I don’t recall ever reading about Odin and his mighty son, Viper.” She didn’t mean to sound condescending, but that wasn’t the kind of thing you heard every day.

Viper growled at her, her poorly-veiled sarcasm apparently not lost on him.

“First of all,” he said, “my given name isn’t Viper. My mother called me Erik. And secondly, Odin had a lot of sons. There aren’t enough books in the world to recount all of his trysts and the progeny they begat.”

“I see.” Sasha searched her frazzled mind for something more intelligent to say, but after being magicked unconscious, and then losing the rest of her brain cells to arduous passion, “I see,” was the best she could do.

“Forget it,” he said. He turned and walked back toward the shooting range, which left her in the doorway kicking herself. Now it was her turn to follow him, to apologize. She guessed he must have put a bit of Vampire speed in

his retreat, because the door had shut by the time she caught up.

She edged it open and peeked inside. Viper sat where she'd originally found him. He was flat on the floor this time, though, not floating above it, despite having assumed the same position. He had his back to the shaded bank of windows and to the door where she hovered, waiting for him to acknowledge her presence.

She watched as he played with a ball of green light in the palm of his hand. He passed it in front of him, from the right to the left hand, then back again. Wash, rinse, repeat, or so they say. She closed the door behind her and leaned up against it, where she could admire the Vampire, or, well, the demigod, she supposed, whom she had fallen for like a skydiver taking that first deadly step into midair. The fall was long and exhilarating, but if she wasn't careful, the landing might just kill her.

"She was beautiful, you know. My mother?" He spoke without looking at her, all his focus on that little ball of light. "She told me over and over again, told anyone who would listen, that Odin had blessed her with a son. She said one day he would come for me, and then they would all see."

Sasha slid to the floor and folded her legs beneath her. She didn't respond, didn't want to interrupt his thoughts.

He tossed the ball of light up in the air and caught it before it hit the floor. "He came to me in a dream, though. Odin? Yeah, gave me this *gift*, or so he called it. My mother said it meant that one day I would walk with him through the halls of Valhalla, even though Vampires aren't welcomed in the Hall of the Dead." He tossed the ball of light into his opposite hand.

"She was so proud, my mother. When she told the clan that my father had promised me, a non-Viking, a place among their honored dead, their reactions were mixed, a combination of anger and disbelief. Bottom line, it only solidified their opinion of her, and of me by association. They said she was crazy, called her Bodil the Insane. Do you have any idea what that kind of shit does to a kid?"

He didn't look at her, didn't wait for an answer, and so she provided none.

"Three nights after the dream. Three nights. That's when I sparked for the first time. It should have been a day of celebration. That's what we did in the old days. Hell, maybe Vampires still celebrate their children getting their fangs. I wouldn't know."

He tossed the green light to his left hand, reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack of filterless cigarettes. He tapped one free, tossed

the package across the floor, then stuck the thin white cylinder into his mouth.

Viper then lifted the energy sphere to the cigarette, and she thrilled to see the little ball of light flare with the contact as the cigarette's end produced its bright orange glow. He inhaled deeply, removed the cigarette, and blew the smoke out toward the far end of the room, away from her.

"What happened?" Sasha asked, unable to stay silent both from curiosity and to let him know he wasn't alone.

"What you'd think. The Viking kids were real assholes, you know? If it was just me, I could have lived with it, but they insulted my mother. She was a shieldmaiden, as badass as they come, and she regularly beat the shit out of the Viking women and even some of the men when they trained. Still, because of me, they called her crazy."

He tossed the ball of light into the air and caught it in the same hand, his left hand, as he lifted the right to his lips for another hit from the cigarette. "While the adults were either whispering behind her back or calling her batshit to her face, the kids took their narrow-minded prejudice out on me."

He stuck the cigarette between his lips and waved his empty hand over the light in his other palm. He added a little flourish, and the light disappeared. He leaned back on one hand and retrieved the cigarette with the other.

Sasha held her breath as she watched his every move.

"That night began like any other. It was wintertime, so it was dark all but a few hours, which was great for my mom and me. We slept whenever we wanted and were able to keep a lot of the same hours as the Vikings. We had to go south in the early spring to outrun the midnight sun, but that was months away.

"Bjorn, he was sort of the leader of that little gang of twatwaffles. He started in on me the minute I showed up on the practice field. I was a skinny little shit back then. Never did flesh out like some of the other Warriors around here, but whatever. Bjorn, he just wouldn't let it go. Kept going on about my mom and how crazy she was to think a scrawny little thing like me was the son of their beloved god.

"They had us surrounded, me and Bjorn, the rest of the Viking kids itching to see me get my ass handed to me again. Bjorn had a dagger in his hand, and he kept waving it in my face, threatening to stab me, to see if I had silver blood or some stupid shit like that. Every time I tried to walk away, someone would push me back to the center of the circle. Bjorn said something about

my mom, something vile, and I felt it building inside me. I thought, *this is it. I'm finally going to get my fangs and chew this little fucker's throat out.*

“The way I felt I probably would have, only I started to glow. Not the shiny bronze I'd expected since I was old enough to know what was what when it came to sparking. Nope, it was green, and it wasn't coming from my eyes, it was coming from... everywhere. Later I found my body covered in all these tattoos. Turns out they are the actual source of the light, of the power. But that first time. Yeah.” He took a long draw on the cigarette, then turned it sideways and studied the glowing end as he exhaled the white smoke through his nose.

“The other kids backed away, but Bjorn was either too stupid or too ballsy to do the same. I can still see the way he flipped the dagger in the air, caught it, then slashed me. Drew blood, and pissed me off all at the same time. I felt it growing inside me, the magic, the power, whatever you want to call it, but I didn't understand.

“There was an explosion of light... you've seen it when I fought the *Kurai Senshi*, you know what it was like. Damn near blinded me. When I opened my eyes again, anyone who was dumb enough to have gotten close to me was laying out flat. Must have been a test blast though, because it didn't pack near the punch it could have. I was still Green Lantern-ing that shit when someone spoke my name. I turned around to face the crowd of adults who'd come running at all the commotion.”

She watched his Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed hard, twice.

“Did I mention my mom was a badass?” He didn't look at her, didn't wait for her to respond. Just took another drag, blew out the smoke and carried on.

“She was a pureblooded Vampire, as dangerous as we come. My entire life she protected me, from the Vikings, from the rumors, as long as she could. She would have cut down anyone she thought truly threatened me. She trusted me, though, knew I could take care of myself in a pinch. Only thing, I was a bit of a pacifist back then, and she had her work cut out for her, convincing the Vikings that I was some kind of, well, demigod as you put it. They'd look at me and be all like, yeah, right. That scrawny little shit?

“My *moder*, though? She was my strength, my backbone. The only thing I ever feared was losing her. But that would never happen. She was favored by the gods, after all.”

The cigarette had burned down to nothing. When Viper realized it, he

outed the thing on the palm of his hand.

Sasha gasped when the smell of burned flesh, *Viper's* flesh, reached her nose. She wanted to get up, to go to him, but even with his hand surely blistered, he never flinched.

“Anyway, I heard that voice, knew it from before I was born. I believe that, anyway, that you know your mother’s voice by instinct, based on the nine-ish months you spend together, you know, growing, bonding.

“I looked toward the voice, and there she stood, looking beautiful and fierce, and so fucking proud. I started to go to her, but somehow Bjorn was still conscious. Fucker put his blade in my back, and the power went nuclear. Bjorn took the brunt of it. He landed in the middle of the weapons rack with a couple of spearheads sticking out of his chest. I tried to feel bad about it. I really did, but I couldn’t dredge up an ounce of guilt. Not even when I heard my mother call to me again.”

Viper stretched his legs out in front of him, then crossed them again and rested his hands, palms up, on his knees. He took a deep breath, his exhale slow and long, before he continued.

“I searched the crowd for her,” he said. “The entire lot of them looking at me with wide eyes, their faces twisted in horror like I was some kind of monster. I think their terror was the only thing that kept them from rushing me. Every last one of them watched me like I was about to explode again. Well, all but one. She was a shieldmaiden, and one of the few Vikings we trusted as a friend. She was staring at the ground a couple yards from my feet.

“I followed her gaze to the ground, and I heard my *moder* speak my name again. That’s when I saw her, crumpled on the ground, her face... burned. I didn’t recognize her before. Thought she was one of the boys who’d been badgering me. She spoke again, though, and I knew. I ran to her side, horrified for the first time by what I’d done. Hurting the Viking boys didn’t bother me in the slightest, but this... this was my *moder*, my life’s blood. The only family I’d ever known. The only person I’ve ever loved.”

Viper straightened his legs again and stared at his hands. The green ball of light was back, a bright glowing orb balanced in his left hand. He tossed it in the air, caught it, then passed it to his right hand.

“It was supposed to be a gift,” he whispered. “This *power*, a gift from a god who called me son. Instead, it was a weapon, and because the sonofabitch wasn’t man enough to stick around and show me how to use it, she was dead.”

He turned to face Sasha for the first time since she'd entered the firing range, his face a contortion of grief as bloody tears streamed from devastated eyes to stain those sharp cheekbones, those perfect lips.

His eyes sparked as he doused the ball of light, and bright bronze light filled the room. "I killed her, Sasha. I killed my own mother."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Viper stiffened when she wrapped her arms around him, completely unaware that she'd moved from the doorway where she'd sat quietly through his horrible confession. One minute she was over there, judging him, or so he thought. The next she had her arms around him, offering him comfort he didn't deserve.

"I'm so sorry, Viper. So, so sorry." She whispered the words in his ear and part of him wanted to push her away. He didn't want her sympathy, or her kindness. She was the only person outside of the Viking clan who knew what he'd done, and they had all gone to their graves centuries ago.

But he couldn't move, just sat there frozen as she stroked the back of his head, his neck, his shoulders.

"It wasn't your fault," she whispered. "Gods, it wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, it was," he said, when he found his voice. "If I had only believed, maybe I would have been ready. Maybe I would have had more control. Maybe I would have stayed in the dream long enough to ask Odin for some godsdamned instructions."

She grabbed his shoulders and leaned back from him, forced him to look her in the eye. "No," she said, and she shook him when he tried to look away. "Gods, Viper, how long have you been carrying this around? Nothing that happened was your fault. Do you hear me? Nothing."

Viper stared into her gentle, pale blue eyes and he broke. Maybe it was the compassion he saw there, or the—gods, he couldn't even *think* the word. Whatever it was, it stripped him raw. He fell into her arms, buried his head in her shoulder, and he let the tears fall.

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*Erik,” she said as he fell to his knees beside her. He may not recognize her face, but he would always know his mother’s voice. Never had he known it to be so weak, though. She raised her hand to him and he reached for it, hesitating only when he saw the burned flesh. She grabbed his hand, somehow able to ignore the tremendous pain the touch must have caused her, just to feel her son’s hand in her own.*

*“Your father’s gift... is magnificent,” she said.*

*Erik burst into tears and pulled Bodil into his lap where he cradled her in his arms. “I’m sorry, moder. I’m so sorry. Forgive me. Forgive me. It will be fine. I’ll see that you heal. I promise, I will do everything. You won’t have to do anything, just rest and get better. Please, moder, please forgive me.”*

*“There is nothing to forgive, my son. You have always been the brightest light in my life, my heart, my soul. I would die for you a million times over, just to see the looks on their faces again.” She coughed, a weak, gasping sound that Erik later realized was a laugh.*

*“You won’t die,” Erik insisted. “Already you grow stronger. I feel it in your grasp.”*

*“We all die, my son. Even us. Remember that.” She closed her eyes and rested against Erik’s shoulder, as a strange little smile played at the corner of her charred mouth.*

*“Not you, moder. You promised me,” Erik cried, and he felt more like a little boy in that moment than the adult he was now supposed to be. “You said we would always have each other. You can’t leave me. You can’t!” He shook her roughly in his arms, and to his relief, her eyes popped open again.*

*“Erik, listen... to me. You must leave here. Their shock... will wear off. They... they will hunt you. They will never believe. Go south... as we do for spring, but do not stop. Keep... going. Your life... is out there.”*

*“No, moder, no. you can’t leave me.”*

*“It is... what must... be.” Her voice grew weaker with each word. She whispered something, and Erik panicked, unable to hear through his grief.*

*“What? Moder! What did you say?”*

*She inhaled a long, shuddering breath, and as she exhaled, she said, “He... will find... you. Someday.”*

*They were the last words his mother spoke, for no matter now much he shook her, she would not wake. Tears soaked his face, bloody tears that would only terrify the clan further, but he didn’t care. In his grief, he cared*

*not that they didn't know what he was, that the superstitious lot would consider it one more reason to kill him. He only cared that he had lost the only person who had ever loved him.*

*Erik was all alone.*

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When he'd cried himself out, Viper realized he clung to Sasha much as he had to his mother. Only this female was still alive, and she held him as if he were a small child, desperate for a comfort only she could give. He'd lived with the Legion, among some of the toughest Vampires he'd ever known, for decades, yet he'd never felt as safe, as protected, as he did in Sasha's arms.

He leaned back—when had he crawled into her lap?—and slid to the floor beside her. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders, to keep him close as her warmth soaked into him. He sniffled—gods, could he be more pathetic?—and she handed him a scrap of cloth.

“Thanks,” he said. Only when he lifted it to his face to wipe away the evidence of his grief did he realize what it was. Her scent filled him, instantly, that ozone and thunderstorm smell that drove him crazy from the moment she'd walked into the War Room and turned his life upside down.

He sniffed again and wiped a stray tear on his shoulder. “Yeah, sorry about that,” he said, holding up the scrap from the blouse she'd worn earlier.

“It was worth it,” she said.

He caught her smile though his eyes were lowered, and suddenly he felt ten tons lighter.

“So, what did you do?” she asked.

She stroked his back, her fingertips feather light on his bare skin. It felt so good, like a warm bearskin blanket on a cold Norwegian day. Her touch soothed him like nothing had since that awful night.

“You don't have to tell me,” she said. “It's okay.”

“It's fine,” he said, when her question registered. “I did as my mother asked. The shieldmaiden I mentioned, she dragged me away before the others came out of their stupor. She took me to our home, my mother's and mine, and she helped me throw together some supplies. She wrapped me in as many furs as she thought I could carry, and she hustled me out the back. She hid me in the woods where I waited for the longest fifteen minutes of my life. When

she came back, she had a horse and my mother's swords. She was good enough to retrieve them from the practice field where my mother had abandoned them to run to my side."

"The swords you used during the *Kurai Senshi* battle?"

Viper smiled for the first time in what felt like years. "You remember?"

"How could I forget," she said, her fingertips light and comforting as she continued to stroke his back. "It was the most magnificent thing I'd ever seen, the sight of you dressed for battle. You're an imposing figure, with or without magic."

He turned to look at her, ready to call bullshit, but the look on her face stole the words from his tongue. "You mean that, don't you?" he asked, dumbfounded.

She looked into his eyes, her sincerity like a magnet that held her gaze to his. "I wouldn't have said it otherwise."

Viper slipped his arm behind her and wrapped it around her waist, pulled her closer to him as he absently rubbed the area at her side where he'd noticed some of her scars.

"She brought you a horse." Sasha said. "The shieldmaiden? What then?"

Viper sighed. "The rest was a blur. I ran, as my mother commanded, and I never looked back."

"Did the Vikings ever find you?"

"Nah," he said. "It was close a couple of times in the first day or so. It was easy enough to hide myself during the few hours of light, but hiding that damned horse had been a challenge. It took my mind off my sins for a while, though. Off my grief."

He nuzzled her cheek and closed his eyes, inhaled the scent of ozone that would always remind him of her.

"The shieldmaiden suggested I not go south," he continued. "She'd heard my mother's words and assumed others would have heard them, too. So, I rode north for a while, then turned east when I could, through what is now Sweden, then Finland. After two days' travel, I shaved my head and traded horses with a farmer in the middle of the night. I was confident he got the better end of the bargain, so I didn't bother to wake him up. Afterward, I turned south. Russia was interesting, couldn't get through it fast enough, things being what they were in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, and I kept going. I've been everywhere, sort of like that old Statler Brothers song."

"Who?"

“Not important. Eons later, I ended up in Bangkok. That’s where Mason found me and recruited me into the Legion. It’s also where I had my first run in with the *Kurai Senshi*.”

“I’ll bet they didn’t know what hit them,” Sasha said with a grin.

Viper frowned. “No, they didn’t. Neither did I. I did everything I could to hide the power. It wasn’t something I wanted to use. It was a horrible weapon that killed my mother. The KS didn’t fare much better.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make light of the situation. It’s just... Oh, Viper! Look at what you’ve done without any guidance whatsoever. Imagine what you could do if you had true control over it. I could teach you. We would have to run some experiments to see how similar your magic is to mine, but Viper! This is a good thing, I swear to you.”

He watched the excitement dance in her eyes, and for a moment Viper almost believed it. The question remained, though, did he want to know more about the horrible power inside him? Did he want to experiment with it, knowing that if he lost control again, Sasha might not survive?

And could he live with himself if she didn’t?

Another glance at her, pale blue eyes dancing with excitement, and he knew he had to try.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

It's all about control," Sasha said. She and Viper had been working since sundown, trying to get a feel for what he could and could not do magically. It wasn't going well.

Their midday talk had taken an emotional toll, not to mention their carnal calisthenics, both of which left them thoroughly drained. When Viper suggested she retire in his suite down the hall for a quick nap before they returned to work, she'd gladly accepted. Not that they'd gotten much sleep, but it was far more comfortable having a bed to lie on as they got to know each other on a deeper level. They did doze for a bit, then enjoyed a leisurely shower before they finally found their way back to the lab. It was the complete opposite of what she was supposed to be doing with regard to her relationship with Viper, yet she couldn't seem to find the energy to care. She was where she wanted to be, and if that meant reevaluating the situation with her father, then so be it.

Everything considered, the thing Sasha was most anxious to do was delve into the depths of Viper's magic. In her excitement, she'd completely forgotten he'd hired an intern.

Phire leaned against the wall beside the doorway, one knee bent with her sneakered foot flat against the wall. White wireless earbuds stuck out of her ears, and she had her eyes glued to her cell phone. If she noticed the two of them leaving Viper's suite, she made no mention of it when Viper keyed open the lock and waved her inside.

The lock on the lab door was one of the things he'd been able to magically enhance. Most of the locks in the manse were basically for show, being how any Vampire worth his fangs could open them mentally. Not Viper's lab door, though. He'd explained to her the process he used during one of their late day breaks in their quest for carnal knowledge. It was fascinating how

he'd managed it, and Sasha had a feeling it was merely the tip of the iceberg.

Phire popped the earbuds out of her ears and asked, "What are we working on today?"

Viper seemed at a loss. He was as excited as Sasha about the prospect of learning more about his magic. It seemed he, too, had forgotten about his protégée. Before Sasha could give her the day off, though, Viper chimed in.

"Here," he said. He led the girl over to his desk and grabbed the laptop he'd left open there. He handed it to Phire, but it nearly yanked out of his hands when the plug remained firmly in the surge protector. He yanked it a couple of times until it popped free, then gave the lot of it to the girl. Then he turned back to dig through the papers scattered across the desktop. He snatched a wireless mouse and tossed it on top of Phire's growing pile of hardware as he continued to search for... whatever he was looking for.

"Aha!" he said, as he pulled a thick, spiral notebook from the middle of the pile. "Here." He dropped the tattered sheath of paper in her arms with a satisfied nod.

To her credit, Phire caught everything without any droppage, though confusion twisted her pretty face. "Viper?"

"Yeah." He just stood there, staring at her, as if he expected her to disappear or something.

The poor kid must have been totally baffled. Viper's unnaturally good mood would have thrown Sasha off balance as well, if she hadn't been privy to its source. To Phire's credit, she kept her composure. "I'm not sure what you want me to do with this."

"What? Oh. Take it home, read through the notebook. There are files listed in the front. Study them and then tomorrow you can tell me your thoughts. Deal?"

Phire looked between Viper and Sasha, her green eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Okay," she said, and walked out the door.

Viper exhaled audibly, then grinned at Sasha. "That was a close—"

The door burst open again, and Phire stuck her head in. "I get the feeling you're trying to get rid of me," she said.

The hand-in-the-cookie-jar look on Viper's face was priceless. To rescue her male, Sasha said, "We have some top-secret things to work on today. I'm afraid you're not cleared for this level of R&D. Research and development," she added, at the blank look on Phire's face.

"O-okay," the girl said. "Do you want me to write a report or anything on

what I find here?” She waved her stack of homework at them and waited for more direction.

“Yeah, kid. That’ll be great,” Viper said when he finally found his tongue. “If you need anything, just text me. You have my number, right?”

“Sure. I’ll text. Should I come back tomorrow?”

Viper looked to Sasha for confirmation before he sent the girl on her way. It was funny how a little sex could change one’s perspective. She never dreamed this male would look to her for guidance on anything, let alone the comings and goings of his new lab assistant.

At Sasha’s nod, Phire left again and closed the door behind her.

Sasha and Viper waited a full minute before either of them spoke, just to be sure she was gone.

“I thought she’d never leave.” Viper closed the distance between them and pulled Sasha into his arms. She looked up at him, saw the glint in his eye, but when he pressed their hips together, she pulled away.

“You’re insatiable,” she chided, but he merely grinned.

“What can I say? You’ve ruined me.”

“Yes, well, since you saw fit to hire an intern, we are going to be limited as to how much time we can spend working on your magic. I suggest we get started.”

That was two hours ago. They were back in the firing range, and gruff and surly Viper had returned with a vengeance.

“I know it’s about control,” he said on a growl. “That’s my whole fucking problem. If I could control this shit, I wouldn’t need you, now, would I?”

Sasha twisted around and found Viper with his hand over his mouth. A sudden attack of insecurity washed over her. Was he right? Would he need her at all if he knew how to use his magic? She’d thought what they shared was special, but what did she know of love or relationships? Was it only about the sex for him?

He stole to her side and cupped her face in both his hands. “*Ástin*, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.” He bent down and kissed her sweetly. “I’ll always need you.”

Sasha held his eyes, that deep, dark bronze nearly metallic in the range’s bright lights. “I know that,” she said, because she could see it in the way he drank her in with those eyes, and she chided herself for doubting. “What does that mean, anyway?”

“What? *Ástin*?” She nodded and he pressed his lips to hers again. “It

means ‘beloved.’ Shall we get back to work?”

“Ah... sure.” He’d stunned her with his admission, with the pet name he bestowed upon her in his native language. She didn’t know how to react, so normal work mode seemed safest. She put some distance between them and paced to the door and back, thinking.

“Just close your eyes and concentrate. You know how to create the energy, how to toss it around. When you’re calm, you have all the control in the world. It’s when something startles or frightens you, as it did when you were a child, that you lose control. Or when your life is on the line, as it was with the *Kurai Senshi*.”

“I knew what I was doing with the KS,” he said.

She turned to face him and hid her smile. His crossed arms and petulant face gave her an idea regarding what he was like as a child. His mother wasn’t insane. He was surely a handful.

“Both times?” she asked.

He thought for a moment then dropped his defensive posture. “Point taken. So, what do you suggest?”

“Like I said, concentration is key. Do you always levitate when you purge the power?”

“Levitate?”

“Yes, you were about a foot off the ground when I found you earlier.”

“I...”

“I’ll take that as a ‘not sure,’” she said. “Do you want to start with that? Something less lethal?”

He narrowed his eyes and gave her a dubious look. “If you try to tell me how to say *Leviosa*, I’m gonna kick your Hermione-brained ass back to Hogwarts.”

Sasha stared at him a long moment, unsure how to respond.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you? Never mind. When we’re done here, we’re going back to my place for a movie marathon.”

“Is that what they’re calling what we did earlier?” Sasha gave her lashes an innocent flutter. She didn’t know if it was her words or the look that put that glint in Viper’s eye. Either way it sent a thrill through her, right down to her toes.

“Are you trying to distract me? You can’t tell me to concentrate then say things like that. It’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair,” she said. A wave of guilt flooded through her, and the



giddiness from a moment before vanished beneath its weight.

“Yeah, well, we both know that, don’t we,” Viper said. He moved toward her, to comfort, perhaps, but she waved him back. There would be time enough for contrition when her father called his marker due. Until then, she remained determined to enjoy this small slice of unexpected happiness. After the life she’d lived, she certainly deserved it.

“Sit. Lotus position.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and he did as she commanded.

“Now concentrate, call your magic. Only this time, don’t focus the power into a ball. Instead, let it flow through you, envelop you.”

Viper closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. After a moment, his breathing slowed and a faint green glow emanated from the runes etched in his skin.

“Good, that’s good,” Sasha whispered, so as not to interrupt his meditation.

“Now, let the power lift you. Feel it beneath you, supporting your weight. You are lighter than air, like a cloud or a feather. Let the power build and build, pushing you higher until... *you’re doing it!*” She breathed the last, barely able to contain her excitement, yet afraid she might break his concentration. “That’s amazing!”

Viper opened one eye and glanced down to see himself floating about a foot off the ground. The other eye popped open and his head snapped to her, his smile jubilant as he... fell back to earth.

“Damn,” he said as his butt hit the floor. He bounced to his feet and ran to Sasha, picked her up and swung her around. “Did you see that? Did you see it?”

“I did,” she giggled, as he set her feet back on the ground and kissed her hard. She melted into him, suddenly afraid his newfound skill would be the beginning of the end for them, a metaphor for how they would drift apart due to her unfortunate parentage. “You’re amazing.”

“*You’re amazing,*” he said, and he hugged her tight.

“I didn’t do anything. And it’s not like you haven’t levitated before. You’ve just never done it on purpose. It’s all about—”

“I know, concentration and control. Doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t have gone there without you. Hot *damn!*” he shouted, and he spun around in a circle and clapped his hands together as he faced her again. “What else do you think I can do?” he asked. “Holy shit. Do you think I can fly?”

“You’re a demigod,” she said. “I imagine they float, or fly, whenever and wherever they want. You just need to embrace who you are and let the magic guide you. You’ve done a great job so far. I mean, look at what you’ve accomplished as the needs arose. With your weapons? Security? My guess is, you will be out-magicking me in no time.”

“You’re right, Sasha. Once I have full control, Ulrich Fuhrmann will be nothing but goo beneath my shoe. The bastard won’t know what hit him. Hey.” He sidled up to her and snuck a kiss on her neck. “We could have competitions,” he whispered against her skin, and his hot breath made her tingle.

“Someday, maybe,” she said, and she thanked the gods he couldn’t see her face. The sadness, the anticipated loss she already felt in her heart, would surely be reflected there. Viper had finally accepted her and her magic. It was too much to hope that he would forgive her parentage as well. Once he learned who her father was, he might never look at her the same way again.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

As much as she wanted to spend another entire day with Viper, Sasha begged off the movie marathon and retired to her suite when they finished in the lab. She'd disappointed him, she could tell, even though he said it was okay.

She had things to do, however. As she'd spent the last hours helping Viper embrace who he was, it occurred to her that it was past time she did the same. Her father wasn't wrong in that aspect, and while it wouldn't hurt to be herself again the next time he saw her, she realized this was something she needed to do for herself.

Not wearing the brown contact lenses was happenstance, an act of fate as she had already taken them out prior to realizing she'd left her phone in the lab.

Which led to her finding Viper, which led to...

Yes, well, it felt good to have those little bits of plastic out of her eyes, and Viper seemed to like it. He'd mentioned them several times during the course of their lovemaking, and his compliments thrilled her to the core. Her eyes were always a source of contention for her among the Vampires at the Primeval's mansion. She counted herself lucky that she had the rare pale blue eyes as opposed to the red ones most of her race were born with.

But her hair? She'd been shocked by her father's extreme reaction when he first saw her. To be denied by him because she'd cut and dyed her hair struck her like a knife to the heart. She'd disguised herself in order to be able to blend better, to make her search easier. She thought he would have approved of her ingenuity. Instead, he was furious. That didn't matter, though, as this was no longer about him.

She grabbed the bag off the kitchen counter and carried it into the bathroom. There was nothing she could do about the length. However, the

lady at the drug store assured her this would bring her hair back to its original state. Sasha doubted anything in a bottle would bring back the white-blond of her natural color, but this had to be less offensive to her father than the brown she currently wore. And hopefully, it would be close enough that, as her hair grew, it would be less noticeable than the darker color.

An hour later, she stared into the mirror at a reflection she almost recognized. While her hair had grown out some since the initial cut several months ago, it was nowhere near as long as before. She'd hacked a lifetime of growth from the length, measurable in feet, not inches. It would take another lifetime to grow it back, and she could admit to feeling as though she'd made a mistake.

However, the lady from the drugstore had not steered her wrong. While the color wasn't exactly the same, it was very close, and Sasha felt a sense of coming home again.

Now, if only she could find a way out of the mess with her father. Sure, it would be easier if she didn't have a conscience. Raven and Nox had escaped her father's wrath on more than one occasion, and by contrast, he had escaped theirs as well. She was confident enough in all three of them that they could all withstand another meeting without anyone losing their life.

However, things had progressed beyond her wanting to prove to her father that she loved him. It was no longer about earning his acceptance. This was about saving her own skin. She'd come to Fallen Cross to find him, and now that she had? Well, things weren't going quite the way she'd dreamed. She'd known that she would betray Mason and the Legion in the end; however, leading two males into a trap had never been part of her plan.

Her goals had seemed so noble at the time. Now she felt like a fool, and the guilt that had cloaked her while working with Viper threatened to smother her now. She couldn't even think about how her leaving would affect her Vampire. Falling in love hadn't been in her plans, either.

It was bad enough when he crept into her dreams. In them, their lovemaking was a simple nocturnal invasion that left her no more connected to him than she would be to any stranger her mind conjured as she slept. Things were different, now. Their connection was real, and the things she told herself about living in the moment, then walking away? Lies. All lies.

But it was how it had to be. She was in too deep now, and there was no turning back. Based on their last conversation, Sasha knew the odds of getting her father to walk away were slim to none. Still, if the situation arose,

she also knew she had to try before anyone got hurt or worse.

She rubbed a towel through her hair as she retreated to the bedroom. It had been a long day, an even longer night, and she was exhausted. She dropped the towel somewhere in the vicinity of the hamper and crawled into bed without bothering to find her sleeping gown. She was hot from the shower and the sheets felt good against her skin, a cool barrier between her and the weight of the blankets. All of it provided a comforting embrace that pulled her instantly into sleep.

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*Her dream started like all the rest, random nonsense, blurred images, more feelings than actual scenes. Then everything changed. Her bedroom came into sharp focus, with Sasha lying on the bed, alone, asleep.*

*And then he was there, as if he materialized from nothingness into his hard, hot, corporeal form.*

*“Sasha, Ástin, you’ve changed your hair.”*

*Sasha sat up and the blankets fell to her waist, baring her breasts to him, her nipples hard and aching. She ran her fingers through her platinum locks and blushed. How sweet of him to notice.*

*“I like it,” he said, but she could tell her hair wasn’t where his focus lie.*

*She felt a throb between her legs, the weight of his eyes upon her as palpable as a touch. He stood before her in nothing but his skin, and it amazed her how accurate her dreams were, had always been. His lean muscles, the detail in every tattoo, and yes, the fabulous erection that had brought her so much gratification both in and out of her dreams.*

*She reached for him, and he crawled across the foot of the bed to lay above her, the blankets the only frustrating barrier between them and sheer bliss. He didn’t remove them, though. He lowered his head and kissed her, slowly, reverently, before he licked his way into her mouth. She opened for him eagerly, lifted her hips to rub herself against him through the comforter. Even through the fabric, she could feel the hard length of him. She wanted him, oh gods, she wanted him, inside her, around her, one with her.*

*He broke their kiss, left her gasping with loss and want as he kissed her jaw, her neck and worked his way down to her breasts. He circled his tongue around one nipple, then moved to the next where he pulled the hard nub into his mouth. His tongue swirled as he sucked and nipped, each pull a*

*tantalizing stroke that filled her core with hot, aching need.*

*“Please,” she begged. “Please, Viper.”*

*“Please what?” he said, his breath hot on her nipple as he released her only long enough to say the words.*

*“Please. I want you.”*

*“You have me, Ástin. You will always have me.”*

*She raised her hips again, her control lost as she sought him out through the blankets. He rose on his elbows and slipped the offending fabric from between them. Finally, finally, he pressed the tip of his erection against her center. She was wet with need, and she rose her hips to take him in, all of him.*

*He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, but the passion had faded. His face now bore a puzzling twist of shock and confusion. “Sasha?” he said.*

*And as quickly as he’d arrived, he was gone.*

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Viper sat bolt upright in his own bed, the fuzzy blanket he’d managed to talk Tas out of balled up in his arms like a freaking teddy bear. It had cost him one of his good scabbards, but it was totally worth it.

That wasn’t what startled him awake, though. The dream was still fresh in his mind, the same, yet different. Yes, it was erotic as hell, and yes, he still had a wicked hard on he could pound nails with. That wasn’t it.

It was her hair. Why had he dreamed of her with blonde hair? Earlier, it was a passing thought, a vague pondering as to why she still dyed it. He’d talked her out of going back to her place for the brown contact lenses she’d worn since arriving at the manse. He loved the pale blue of her eyes, so pale they were almost white. Funny, a few months ago he would have found that and anything else Sorcerer-related offensive. Now he couldn’t get enough of them.

But he hadn’t mentioned her hair.

He scrubbed his face with his palms and stared down at the offensive appendage tenting his sheet.

Fuck it. He had to know.

He jumped out of bed, threw on the workout clothes he’d tossed on top of his hamper. After giving himself a sniff test and passing—barely—he dashed out the door.

The elevator took forever and after about three seconds of impatient pacing, Viper hit the stairwell, double timed it up eight flights and burst through the fire door into the carpeted hallway. With his heart pounding against his ribcage, he turned left down the main hall, stopped, looked around and reversed his course. Past the elevators, and then one, two doors down, he raised his hand to knock.

No, that wouldn't do. He had to know, and waking her up wouldn't prove anything. He mentally unlocked the door and slipped inside. The suites in the manse were all laid out basically the same. Some were larger than others, having two or even three bedrooms to go along with the living room, kitchen and very generous bath. Sasha's suite was basically his, only with the kitchen and bedroom off to the right upon entrance, where his was to the left.

The door to the bedroom was closed, which he found both curious and telling. Sasha had spent centuries locked in a small cell of a room, a slave to the British Primeval, Magnus. He imagined even this suite would seem enormous to a girl whose world had been so small for such a long period of time. Perhaps closing the door to the great big world would give his female a sense of security. Or maybe it was simply to serve as a barrier between herself and the rest of the suite in case someone barged in.

Like he was. Right. Now.

Not his fault, though. In a manse full of Vampires, locks were demonstrative at best. He'd have to talk to Mason about changing that. The spell he used on the lab seemed to be holding, and it might give the newer inhabitants their own sense of privacy. He thought of the females, of course. There wasn't a Warrior in residence who would dare enter another male's territory without knocking first.

He stared at the bedroom door longer than he should have. *Quit stalling*, he thought. *Just open the damned thing*. Worst case scenario, she threw him out.

However, he had a suspicion something unique was happening, and if he was right, his female would not be of a mind to toss him out. On the contrary, he had a feeling she'd welcome him into her bed... enthusiastically.

He turned the knob and slid the door open.

He heard her moan, smelled her arousal before he crossed the threshold. *No fucking way*.

He moved to the foot of the bed and watched her as she twisted beneath her blankets. She was beautiful, as always, her sweet lips pulled down in a

pouty frown.

“No,” she murmured. “Viper? Where?”

“I’m here, *Ástin*,” he whispered. “I’m right here.”

Her lashes fluttered and she opened her eyes. “Viper?” she said again, and she raised up on one elbow. “How’d you get all the way over there? And why are you dressed?”

Viper’s heart abandoned the ribcage-pounding and fell to the pit of his stomach. He didn’t need the light from the alarm clock to see her, and what he saw nearly sent his already racing pulse into hyperdrive.

A puzzled frown marred her otherwise flawless beauty, all that impeccable femininity framed perfectly by her tousled hair.

Her tousled *blonde* hair.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Sasha blinked the sleep from her eyes, not sure if she still dreamed or if Viper was really there. One minute they were on the verge of re-consummating their new relationship, the next he disappeared, only to reappear at the end of her bed.

And he was dressed. She knew he'd been naked, because, well, she knew naked when it pressed up against her hoo-ha. Now he wore sweat pants and an old sweatshirt that may or may not have said Navy on the front. The only thing that seemed vaguely correct was the massive tenting in the front of his cotton pants.

She sat up, and the blankets that had somehow recovered her fell to her waist—again—and exposed her breasts. Again. It was the weirdest case of *déjà vu* she'd ever experienced.

And Viper just stood there at the end of her bed, staring at her. And not in the same way it had happened before. Then, he'd been full of lust, his eyes hungry and his body taut and ready to pounce. Now, it disappointed her to see his sweats lose their fullness. Something was definitely wrong.

"Viper?" she asked, her mind foggy and befuddled. "What's going on?"

He rubbed his hand over the back of his head, and it was a moment before he spoke. When he did, it wasn't at all what she expected. "You're blonde again."

"Oh." Her cheeks reddened as she self-consciously patted her newly-bleached locks. "I did it just before bed."

"You were dreaming," Viper said.

Sasha thought her face couldn't possibly get any redder, but she was wrong. She felt the fire in her cheeks as he apparently read the room. There was no hiding her arousal, and gods knew what she said or did before he woke her.

“How did you get in here?” she asked, to change the subject. “I know I locked the door.”

He gave her a look she’d become familiar with in the lab, the one that told her she’d asked a stupid question. “Right,” she said. “Then why are you here?”

His hand slid from his head to the back of his neck, and he never took his eyes off her hair. “I had a dream. I’ve been having a lot of dreams lately. I thought once I had you, they would stop, but this one was the most intense yet. Can I sit?” he added, then sat on the side of her bed before she could answer.

It barely registered, though. He was having the dreams, too?

“Should I ask what your dream was about?” she whispered.

“I was about to enter you,” he said, bold as you please.

“Oh, gods,” she gasped, and the blood that had painted her face mere seconds ago, began to drain.

“I’ve had so many dreams of you lately, I thought I was losing my mind. Every one seemed more real than the last. And then when we finally—” He cleared his throat and stared at the wall. “You were exactly as I’d dreamed, right down to that little birthmark on the inside of your right thigh. I was so wrapped up in you, in finally being with you, it didn’t hit me until tonight.”

She knew where this was going, but she let him talk, not sure she could formulate a sentence if she tried.

“Today, when I dreamed of you, you were blonde. In all the dreams, I’d never seen you that way. You always had brown hair and brown eyes. Today, your eyes were blue. Fine, you haven’t worn your contacts since we first made love, so that made sense, but not the hair. Why would I dream of you as a blonde, unless—”

“Astral projection,” she said. “You’ve been coming to me all these days, making love to me, for weeks!” She kicked the side of his butt from under the covers, may have added a surge of power for a little shock value.

“Hey,” he jumped up and rubbed his tail. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because I couldn’t reach you to slap your face.”

“I didn’t know!” he countered. “If I sit back down, are you going to zap me again?”

“No,” she said. “Sorry.” And she was, if only just a little. She’d done things in those dreams that she’d never even, well, dreamed about. And knowing that he was privy to her shamelessness, that he saw her so out of

control? She pulled her knees to her chest and buried her face in the circle of her arms. This was absolutely mortifying.

“You must think me a slut,” she mumbled into the blankets that still covered her legs.

Viper snapped his head to her, and that beautiful polished bronze light filled the room. “Don’t you ever talk about the female I love like that,” he said.

She turned her head so she could see him better, and he truly was magnificent. His fangs had dropped, and with his sparking eyes, it was easy to see why his friends called him Viper.

“I’m just so embarrassed,” she said, though secretly she wished she’d tried harder to memorize the dreams. Instead, she’d put far too much effort into trying to erase them from her mind. Such a waste.

“Did you... did you enjoy the dreams?” She couldn’t believe the words had slipped through her filter and landed right out there in between them. She didn’t think she could humiliate herself any further, and yet, she’d done just that.

Viper slid up the bed, lifted her face from her knees and said, “They were the best dreams I’ve ever had.” He kissed her hard, pushed her flat to the bed, then straddled her as he devoured her mouth. “I’ve never taken so many cold showers in my entire life, and we’ll not discuss the state of my sheets. Every time you walked into the lab, the previous day’s dream would pop into my head and I’d have to go to the bathroom and take care of things or I wouldn’t make it through the night.”

Sasha giggled, and was thrilled when she felt the length of him dig into her belly, even through the blankets. *Just like the dream*, she thought with a sigh.

There was so much to explore, to figure out how he’d been able to reach her, let alone violate her night after night without them both knowing it was real.

Who was she kidding? She’d have let him violate her any time he wanted.

“What about you,” he whispered, between soft kisses against her jaw and her throat. “Did you enjoy them?”

She would have thought he read her mind, but she knew that was a rare vampiric trait, and one of the few talents Viper did not possess. She sighed as he scraped a fang against her skin, and she lifted her hips to grind herself against him. It wasn’t lost on her that, other than his clothing, this was

exactly how her dream—*their* dream—had started today.

She moaned, and turned her head to recapture his mouth. He nipped at her lips, then worked his way southward, pulling the blankets off her as he went. When he reached her breasts he licked her nipple, then sucked it into his mouth and gently ground it between his teeth. He sucked again, then let it go with a pop. “Answer my question,” he said, as he teased at her nipple with the sharp tip of his fang.

“I forgot what it was,” she groaned.

“Did you enjoy the dreams?” he asked again, as he drew circles around her nipple with his tongue.

“I did,” she moaned. “Very much. Why do you think I’ve been late so many times?”

Viper smiled up at her, a wicked grin that she felt all the way to her core. “Good,” he said. Then he gently sank his fangs into the soft tissue of her breast, and he sucked.

The orgasm was instantaneous.

## Chapter Forty

Once again, Sasha woke with Viper's arms wrapped around her, his warm breath a soft tickle on the back of her neck. And for the hundredth time, an unfathomable guilt consumed her. Her father's words haunted her, in waking hours and in her dreams. Searching for him had given her a purpose, something to hope for while she suffered the Primeval's cruelty. It was everything she'd always wanted. Finding him, however, turned out to be the biggest mistake of her life. The only good to come from her search lay next to her.

Viper shifted in his sleep, and his hold on her tightened as if he thought she might try and escape. She leaned into his embrace, but the smile that sprang to her lips so easily, disappeared just as quickly. *Everything she'd always wanted.*

Why did she have to fall in love? That had to be the feeling currently playing havoc with her heart. What else could it be? She'd gone through every emotion she could think of, even looked up the definitions on her laptop while the hair bleach did its thing. None of them came anywhere close to explaining her euphoria. That lighter-than-air, top-of-the-world, heart-stopping, breath-stealing feeling that intensified when Viper was near and left her empty when he was not.

Centuries of serving Primeval Magnus as his slave had not left Sasha with a great deal of warmth toward the Vampire race. The only person lower on her—what did Viper call it? —her shit list, would be her mother. She spent her first year with Magnus convinced there'd been a mistake, that she hadn't seen her mother sell her to the Primeval for a few copper coins. She was barely sixteen at the time, more than old enough to understand the difference

between right and wrong.

Having descended from a race once enslaved by Witches, Sasha knew that slavery definitely fell into the wrong category. That's how she knew her time with the Primeval would be short.

But it wasn't.

Her plan to find her father developed soon after she realized her mother wasn't coming back for her. If the woman who gave birth to her couldn't be bothered, then someday she would find someone who would. Her mother rarely spoke of him, would only say his name and that he was an evil monster, that they were better off without him. Of course, that was before she sold her only child into slavery.

At first, it was a pipe dream, something to keep her mind occupied during the worst of the atrocities the Primeval forced her to do. However, when Mason and the others freed her with her father *right there* in the castle, she knew it was more.

She'd frozen the first time she met him, had cowered before him the last time. The next time, should there be one, it would be on her terms, or not at all.

Viper pressed his groin against her butt, his erection obvious, even though he still slept.

Sasha sighed. After all she'd gone through to find her father, she was really hoping for "not at all."

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Waking with his cock pressed against something other than a firm mattress was a unique experience for Viper. They were both buck ass naked, and Sasha's hot, smooth skin felt like velvet against all his hard-and-hungry. When she pressed her ass against him, he nearly exploded all over her. Only a strong desire to be inside her before that happened saved him from an embarrassing situation.

He slid a leg between hers and positioned himself to enter her. He found her slick with her own need, and he groaned as he eased himself deep inside her. If her ass was velvet, this was pure silk, tight and hot and as he filled her, he felt her orgasm clutching at him while she shook in his arms. He didn't last long, had known he wouldn't, yet he was exactly where he wanted to be.

When her tremors subsided, he heard a quiet giggle. "You got something

to say?” he asked, as he nibbled at her shoulder.

“Good morning?” she said.

“Try again.” He kissed his way down her arm.

She barely stifled her laughter. “I’ve read about quickies?”

He wanted to be offended, but she was too damned cute. “Go on,” he said.

“I never dreamed it could be so satisfying,” she said, and turned in his arms to face him. “Just having you inside me is enough to...” She covered her mouth and giggled again.

Oh, this was on. “You want satisfied?” he asked, with a devilish grin. “I can give you satisfied.”

Her giggles turned to full on laughter when he flipped her to her back, and plunged inside her. Soon, her laughter turned to moans and cries of pleasure, and he knew that no matter where he went in his life, he would want her with him, always.

## Chapter Forty-One

Sasha and Viper made love twice more before they headed to the lab. She honestly didn't think that level of stamina was possible. Viper said it was a Vampire thing, or maybe a demigod thing, but neither of them knew if that were the case.

Once they finally made it out of the shower and dressed, they headed downstairs to Viper's floor. After a quick stop off at his suite for Viper to change into proper work attire, they walked down the hall to the lab hand in hand.

Phire sat on the floor, her back against the door, earbuds in place while she thumbed through her cell phone. She looked up when they arrived and did a double take when her eyes landed on Sasha and Viper's joined hands. Sasha made to release their grasp, startled that they had been found out by one of the manse's youngest inhabitants. Viper, however, grasped her palm more firmly and stared at the young Vampire, the steel in his gaze hard enough to ensure the child would say nothing, at least not to their faces.

Phire scrambled to her feet and yanked a bud from one of her ears. "I was early," she said, though Viper hadn't asked, and Sasha wouldn't have.

"Good," Viper said as he pulled out a key to let them all in. "There's tons to do tonight, and we're just the crew to do it." He winked at Phire as he swung the door wide and motioned them to enter.

Once inside Phire tossed Sasha a questioning look, that Sasha answered with a shrug. She knew what the girl was thinking. Viper's good humor was unheard of, and until recently, Sasha would have had the same reaction.

Phire grinned, though, and leaned in close to Sasha's ear. "Go you," she whispered, then moved on to her work station where she went about setting up her laptop.



Sasha moved to her own workspace, while Viper practically danced through his own set up routine. It was ridiculous, the way he pranced around, but Sasha had to smile. If she had known it would put him in this kind of mood, she would have slept with him ages ago.

Once everyone had their assignments, they all got down to work. While Viper's mood remained high, his focus and attention to detail were business as usual, and soon they were all buried deep in Legion R&D. Occasionally, Sasha would ask a question, and Viper would leave his desk to join her at hers as he helped her through her task. Yep. So much better.

It was during one of these helpful situations that Sasha's cell phone vibrated in her pocket, causing her to jump.

"Expecting a call?" Viper whispered in her ear, a note of jealousy evident in the slight growl.

"Ha! Not at all. Scared me to death," Sasha found her self over-explaining. "Probably Kythryn. She threatened me with another girls' night out."

Viper stepped back, his eyes narrow. "Well, aren't you going to answer it?"

Sasha turned her focus to the spreadsheet on her fifteen-inch monitor, suddenly fascinated with the multiple columns of color-coded numbers that stared back at her. "Nope," she said. "She'll leave a message. Besides, you were in the middle of explaining this to me."

When Viper didn't move, she reached for his hand. "Come here," she said, and when she touched him, he took that step toward her and leaned against her desk.

"Have I mentioned I'm the jealous sort?" His words tickled her ear and she shivered against his arm.

"You haven't," she said quietly. "Although, it wouldn't matter. As far as I'm concerned, you are the last male on earth."

"Better be," he said, and he bit her ear, a little more sharply than she expected. When she gasped, he added, "Because I'm in too good a mood to have to kill anyone, today."

She flashed him a quick smile, then returned her attention to the computer, though her thoughts were a jumbled mess. There were only two people who would possibly try to contact her, and Kythryn wasn't one of them. It could be Frank, hoping for another assignment that would help fatten his pocket. That would certainly be the lesser of two evils, her father being the only other option. Gods, how she hoped it was Frank.

She waited at least half an hour before she excused herself to the bathroom where she could check the phone in private. She locked the door, even though it wasn't one that Viper had magicked against Vampires, and pulled out her phone. She had one text.

She quickly opened her messages, and when the number popped up, a sick feeling rushed through her. There was no name saved for it. The last thing she wanted to do was advertise that she had her father's phone programmed into her cell. Her finger hovered over the message for far too long, then she closed her eyes and tapped.

When she gathered the courage to look, the message terrified her, though it was only three words.

*"I'm getting impatient."*

Two weeks ago, she would have been thrilled to hear from her father, but now? Now, she realized she wasn't ready. She needed more time. More time with Viper, here in the lab, and in their beds, and the shower... wherever and however she could get him. The women in the manse were finally accepting her, and she wanted more time to know what it was like to have friends.

Once upon a time, knowing her father was all that mattered to her. As it turned out, she'd been delusional. He wasn't at all the man her young girl's imagination had dreamed up. Her mother was a poor excuse of a Sorceress, but her father? In truth, he frightened her. Even as she colored her hair, she knew in her heart she did it out of fear. Fear of not being accepted, not being loved. Fear that he might kill her as soon as look at her simply because she didn't look like him.

Sasha thought about how far she'd come, and how everything she'd ever wanted was right outside the bathroom door. It wasn't holed up in a smelly old warehouse plotting revenge for something that had nothing to do with her. She was safe and loved right there in the Legion Manse.

While she was happy to be back to her old self on the outside, she realized that the inside was where she had truly changed.

And she liked the person she had become.

She read the message once more, and, with her mind made up, she deleted it. She stuffed her phone back in her pocket, flushed the toilet and washed her hands. When she reentered the lab, she felt clean for the first time in ages.

## Chapter Forty-Two

Tas arrived at the *Kurai Senshi* campus ready for anything. It was Tai Kwon Do night, and while any other week he would have eagerly anticipated another demonstration with his favorite “volunteer,” he had a feeling this wouldn’t be one of those fun nights.

As his students fell into line, he glanced up at the waxing gibbous moon. Thick clouds heavy with snow obscured much of its light, threatening to dump their lacy load on the entire tri-state area. While Tas loved a good snow storm, he felt an ominous weight in the air, a sense of dread that there was more to this storm than ice and wind. He shook himself, attempted to shed the ill feelings in preparation for his class.

When he looked back through the block, he was surprised to see Master Jonathon standing off to the side, watching him.

Tas lifted a hand in greeting, and the Dark Warrior sauntered over to him, his hand outstretched. Tas took what he offered, and, as usual, chose to ignore the fact that Jonathon held on for just a little too long before releasing his palm. He knew the male was attracted to him, hell, they’d laughed about it over drinks, but he had news for the guy. Tas had eyes for only one Dark Warrior, and she was nowhere to be found.

“Any chance I can get you to move your classes indoors?” Jonathon asked for the dozenth time. “I know, I know,” he said, as he held his hands up in surrender. “You like the elements, makes ‘em tough, I get it. I’m just thinking about all ya’ll’s comfort.

Tas looked out at his class, and to their credit, none of them batted an eye at their master’s suggestion. To humor him, though, Tas decided to put it to a vote. “What say you?” he asked, loud enough for the younger students to hear him in the back. “You want to move this class indoors or are you fine where we are?”

As he expected, no one answered.

“Speak up,” Jonathon said to the group. “If you’re fucking cold, just say the word, and the gym is yours.”

“I believe I speak for everyone when I say, we would prefer to stay where we are.” The words came from the back row, but Tas had memorized every syllable she had ever uttered. She had no business being in the back. Her status alone would have her front and center, but gods, he was glad to hear that voice.

When no one responded, Jonathon said, “That true?”

The students looked neither left nor right, and as a unit responded with a hearty, “Yes, Master Jonathon.”

Jonathon shook his head and turned back to Tas. “Alrighty, then. They’re your balls. You want to freeze them off, it’s no skin off my ashwagandha. Have a good workout.” He gave Tas a surreptitious wink, then meandered back to the palatial house he called home.

Once the master was out of sight, the group visibly relaxed, but not Tas. He scanned the block for Jun, but simply couldn’t see her for the rows of Dark Warriors in front of her. Finally, there was nothing more he could do but start the class.

“*Charyot*,” he said, and as one, the block faced front, feet together, arms by their sides, fists tight, belly tight, as they came to attention.

“*Kyongrye*.” Tas bowed to the class as they bowed to him.

“*Chumbi*.” Ready. The class cupped their hands and raised them to chest height to gather their Chi, their life force, then pushed their hands down, fists tight, to their sides.

“Forms first, basic one, two and three. *Sijak*.” Begin.

As the class went through the forms, Tas walked around the block, gave advice when merited, encouragement as needed. This class was more advanced, the Dark Warriors older and less skittish than the Tai Chi kids, but they hung on his every word. It surprised him that his classes were always so full, but it wasn’t something he questioned. Master Jonathon had a large group here, and it grew larger every day.

The *Kurai Senshi* were trained assassins, and Tas knew that just because they were born with the Shade inside them didn’t mean they were all built for killing. Still, the strong survived, and if his classes gave them a little comfort, then so be it. And if they learned another way to defend themselves, especially for the younger ones, then more’s the better.

The scent of jasmine and white tea reached him before he saw her. The form turned the class to the back and as she punched, Tas caught her gaze, held it for the split second they had before the next move in the form turned her away from him. He walked on, completed his circle, and returned to the front of the class.

When they finished the last form, Tas instructed them to pair up for sparring. This was generally the part of the program where Jun volunteered to be his demonstration partner. Of course, he had zero expectations of being pinned beneath her this time, but when he turned from pairing up a couple of strays, she was there.

“What shall we show them today, *Sensei*?”

Tas just stared at her, couldn't seem to formulate any words that would end in an intelligent response. When he didn't answer, she took matters into her own hands. She reached for him, and when he reciprocated, she grabbed his hand, twisted his arm and flipped him onto his back, where he landed with a thud on the cold, hard ground.

She jumped on top of him and threw a punch headed straight for his cheekbone. As always, she pulled the punch a whisper away from making contact, her dark eyes nearly black as the telltale smirk played at the corner of her heart-shaped mouth.

Tas sighed. *That's more like it*, he thought, unable to control the smile that lit his face. *That's the Jun I know*.

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When class ended, Tas spent the usual half hour or so with his students, answering questions or simply saying, “See ya next week.” Much to his surprise, Jun stuck around rather than going directly back to her room, or wherever it was that Jun went after classes.

It felt a little too close to how things went down the previous week, what with the failed coffee date and all. Tas found himself wishing she would just go. It would save them both a lot of bother. Otherwise, he was bound to get the wrong idea, which for him would be the *right* idea, but who was counting.

When the final students said their farewells, Tas turned to Jun, who stood a few yards away, her back straight, her head cocked at a thoughtful angle as she watched him. Always, with the watching, and it made Tas's ass itch. Or something.

When she didn't leave, he joined her at the lamp post and smiled his most dazzling smile. It made her scowl, which was so typically Jun, it only made him grin wider.

"What do you say to them?" she asked.

Tas looked over his shoulder at the empty practice field, then back at Jun. "Say to who?"

"To the students. As I mentioned the other night, it is fascinating how well you know what they need before they do."

"I've had a lot of experience with being lost and alone," he said, a little baffled at himself that he'd spoken the words aloud.

"Did your maker not stay with you? That is very unwise for a Vampire to turn a human, then leave them to their own devices."

"She didn't leave me, not on purpose anyway," Tas said, his defense of Raina automatic. "She died," he added, and the similarity between his comment and Jun's words to him when they parted last wasn't lost on him.

"I am very sorry for your loss. You loved her, then? Your maker?"

"I did," Tas said. It was the first time he'd voiced his feelings for Raina to anyone but himself. The circumstances of his turning weren't something he cared to share with anyone, and yet saying the words aloud left him feeling light, free. "She was my entire world until she wasn't," he added. "Left me to figure things out on my own."

"You seem to have managed quite well," Jun said, as she rubbed her arms beneath her gi.

"I figured it out," Tas said, though in reality it was a major downplay to how absolutely difficult life as a Vampire was without Raina to show him the way. "Still, it's tough when you are the only one of your kind."

Jun cocked her head again as she continued to study him. "You are not the only one who feels different," she said. "If I had to guess, I would say at one time, before you were turned, you had a family who loved you."

Uncomfortable with the topic, Tas returned to his duffle bag and knelt to rearrange his gear inside. He had no desire to remember his mother's face the last time he saw her. Yes, she'd loved him fiercely, as had his baby sister. Little good that had done for any of them. "That's not the point," he said, "and you know it."

"Do I?" Jun knelt beside him and placed her hand on his to still them. "The moment my parents saw that the Shade lived within me, they carted me off to Master Masaru. For as long as I can remember, they treated me with

suspicion, watched me from the corners of their eyes as if I might do something terrible at any moment. When I did, when the Shade exposed itself within me, I became the demon they feared. They could not be rid of me soon enough. I do not believe they ever truly loved me. They could not allow themselves to love me. And this makes me different even from you. That makes two strikes against me, I believe the saying goes.”

Tas pulled his hands from hers, deliberately moved his bag a few inches away, more to make a point than to put actual distance between them. She took the hint, though, and withdrew her hand, folded it with the other in her lap as she settled on the cold ground, not going anywhere.

“So, that just makes you different from most,” Tas said. “Not all. Look around you, Jun. There are literally hundreds of Vampires here just like you. You all may be different from the average run of the mill Vampire, but you are all different in the same way. So, you’re different, but not alone. Yes, your parents were idiots, but these people are your family, now, and I guarantee any one of them would die for you, just because you are like them.”

Jun might have responded, but Tas pointed a finger at her and continued. “I’ll put it to you this way. Out of all the *Kurai Senshi* you’ve met, have you ever known one who was changed?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it as Tas waited for her to answer. “Of course not,” she said. “Dark Warriors are born, not made.”

“Exactly. And of all the other, normal Vampires you’ve come across, how many of them do you know who were changed?”

Jun dropped her eyes and said, “You are the only one.”

“Bingo!”

“I counter with this,” Jun said, and she raised her eyes to meet his dead on. “Is the Legion not your family?”

Tas blew out a breath and sat back on his heels. “Yes, they are, but none of them were changed, like me. I am the only one with that experience. As good as they are, as tight as we are, they can’t possibly relate.”

“Perhaps. Do you consider Merlin part of your Legion family?”

“Of course.”

“Is he not different from the rest of the Legion?”

“Well, yeah, but again.” Tas swept his arm in an all-encompassing arch. “He’s also got all of you.”

“That is true,” Jun said, “but what of the Warrior, Harrier, you’ve

mentioned. Is he the same as all the others?”

Tas narrowed his eyes at her. “No. He’s a half-breed, half Vampire, half Shifter. I told you that.”

“Then he is different as well.”

“Yes, but—”

“And Raven, the male who cries when he joins us for Tai Chi. Is he the same as the others?”

A smile crept to Tas’s lips and he lowered his head to hide his reaction. Her description of the Vampire race’s fiercest criminal was far too accurate. “Raven is pure blood, so yes, he’s like the others.”

“In every way?”

“Well, no. He can see another Vampire’s thoughts, and before you ask, his twin has a similar ability, only more acute. Plus, Raven has a brutal history that would put the deadliest *Kurai Senshi* to shame.” Now wasn’t the time to mention Raven’s cage match with Merlin, especially given her dubious look. Besides, he could totally see where she was going with this.

“The others have talents, even the purest among them, that set them apart from everyone else, is that not true?” Jun asked.

“I suppose,” Tas said, and he returned to stuffing his things into the duffel, although with a little more force than was strictly necessary.

“What about you? What skills do you have that make you special?”

Tas had run out of things to put away, so he pulled out a pair of shoes and a spare gi, which he unfolded, refolded, unfolded again. “Mojo.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He crammed the gi back into the bag, dropped the shoes on top of it and zipped things up with a flourish. “I have my mojo. I can, I don’t know, control the emotions of people around me. If situations get too hot, I can calm them down.”

Jun cocked an eyebrow at him, her heart-shaped mouth set in a sly smile. “How interesting. Is this normal among non-*Kurai Senshi* Vampires?”

“No,” Tas stated flatly. “I’ve only known one other, and she’s long dead.”

She tapped her thumbs to each of her fingertips, index to pinky, then back again, an old meditation move Tas recognized as one he had practiced for years. “I see,” she finally said. “By my thinking, then, you would be special—different—even without your unique birth.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Jun. I really do, but nothing can change the fact that I am alone in my heritage. I have no one to ask, *is this*



*normal?* Nobody who can tell me how long I might live, or if I could even father children. There's more to this than just being different from the people around me. It's about not fitting in, not understanding their upbringing any more than they understand mine. Yes, they try, and yes, we are family, but we aren't the same, and nothing is going to change that."

"I understand your plight," Jun said, and she stood, somehow making five feet of Dark Warrior seem closer to nine. "I will tell you my view. Born Vampire or turned, you were destined to be special. Believe that," she added, then turned on her heel and headed toward the barracks.

"Your parents have no idea what they gave up," he called.

She turned on her toes and eyed him thoughtfully. "My parents were accustomed to disappointment. I was simply destined to fulfill their expectations."

Before Tas could respond, she was gone.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Not in her wildest dreams did Sasha believe her job would turn out to be such a joy. Where before, eight hours in Lord Viper's presence was something to dread, now she couldn't wait to get there. Unless she had to leave his bed to do so, but that came with a series of totally different considerations. She now treasured their time together, and not even Phire's presence could put a damper on the new work dynamic. That Sasha would choose to spend every waking hour with him, or sleeping hour for that matter, was another situation she never saw coming. She simply couldn't get enough of him.

On this morning, however, Viper had some Legion things he needed to take care of after work, so Sasha decided to take advantage of the Club instead. The high scale workout facility located within the manse was exclusive to the Legion Warriors and now their mates and other members of the household. It was well worth a visit, even for those like Sasha who were blessed with a very high metabolism. It was a stress reliever like no other. Well, not like sex, but that was a newly discovered release that one couldn't perform any time they wished. The treadmill was another story.

It was no surprise to see Jessica Sweet there when Sasha entered the Club. She was on a treadmill and had a good sweat worked up as she listened to music so loud, Sasha could hear the beat through the female's ear buds.

Phire mentioned to Sasha in passing that she had to babysit for little Izzie, Jessica and Raven's young one, several mornings a week while Jessica visited the Club. "To get her body back," was why Phire said she was going, but for the girl it was all about the extra pocket money. It just so happened, this morning was one of her babysitting days.

When Sasha climbed on the treadmill next to Jessica, the other woman

jumped and yanked out one of the listening devices. “Hey,” Jessica said. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Sorry,” Sasha said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Phire mentioned you might be here, and I thought I would join you for a run.”

Jessica angled her head and asked, “You run?”

Sasha gave a nervous laugh. “Well, we’re going to see. I’ve been looking for a way to burn off some extra energy. I thought it might be more fun if I weren’t doing it alone.”

Jessica grinned and nodded. “I hear you,” she said. “Well, if you need any help with the equipment, just let me know.”

“I will,” Sasha said. “And I will. I have no idea how to work this thing.”

Jessica was gracious, and she quickly walked Sasha through the steps involved to get the rubber belt moving beneath her feet.

“Just start slow,” she said. “You don’t want to kill yourself on your first time out. If you feel like you need a little more speed, hit this button, and if you want an incline, like you’re walking uphill, just hit that one.”

“Got it,” Sasha said, and soon she felt herself fall into the groove.

“I really enjoyed myself the other night,” Sasha said. “Thank you for letting me join you and the others for your girl’s night out. I know it was unexpected, that Kythryn didn’t tell you I’d be crashing the party.”

Jessica dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. “It’s all good. We enjoyed your company,” she added, and it sounded like she meant it. “You were a good sport about Viper. We can get a little rowdy sometimes, but you took it in the humor intended.”

Sasha didn’t know what to say to that, so she just said, “Thank you?”

Jessica laughed. “It’s nice to get out of this place now and again. With the Sorcerers back, we aren’t going to see much of our mates for a while. At least, not until they catch Fuhrmann and do away with him for good.”

Sasha tripped on the rubber belt, but she recovered quickly enough that she didn’t think the other woman saw her. “He’s back, then?” she asked, hopefully without too much interest.

“Yeah,” Jessica sighed. “I really wish they would kill that fucking bastard already so we could all move on with our lives. I swear, sometimes I wish the Sorcerers had never come to Fallen Cross.”

Sasha must not have hidden her reaction to that comment well enough, because Jessica took one look at her and choked. “Oh, shit. Sorry, Sasha. I meant them, not you. I admit, I wasn’t thrilled when they told me you were

coming to the manse to live, and not just because you're a Sorceress. You did some shit to my brother-in-law that I have a hard time forgiving. Nox and I talked about it, though, and I guess if he can let bygones be bygones, I can, too."

"I appreciate that," Sasha said. "I'm not sure I can be so quick to forgive myself, though. Magnus was a horrible creature, and he made horrible creatures out of anyone under his rule, myself included."

"Yeah, well, you did what you had to do to survive. At least that's what Nox told me, and I guess he would know. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that."

"Thank you."

"Don't expect the same from Rachel any time soon, though," she added. "Mates are kind of funny that way. I imagine it's going to take her a lot longer to get past what was done to the guy she loves."

Sasha watched her feet for a moment, unable to quash the memory of what Magnus had forced her to do. How he compelled her to remove Nox's ability to fight back while the Primeval abused and tortured him. She imagined what she would do if anyone hurt Viper the way she had hurt Nox, envisioned about a million ways she would kill someone like her, so she couldn't hold Rachel's feelings against the female. "I understand," she whispered.

They exercised in silence for a bit, then Sasha said, "Do they know where he is? This Fuhrmann fellow?"

"Not yet, Jessica said, but it's only a matter of time. We have Soldiers all over the city looking for signs, and Merlin is working the tech angle. It won't be long, but until then, the guys are going to be pretty tied up. That's the downside."

"To be sure," Sasha said. "Once they find him, what will they do?"

"They'll take him out." Jessica glanced at Sasha, then added, "Does that bother you?"

Sasha shrugged. "Not as much as you might think," she said, surprised by the truth in her words.

Jessica's machine slowed and came to a halt, her programmed time having run out. She patted her face with a purple towel, wiped the machine down with some sort of spray, and jumped to the floor. "It was nice talking to you, Sasha."

"You as well," Sasha said, and she waved as Jessica headed toward the double-doored exit.

“Hey.”

Sasha turned to see Jessica hovering in the doorway.

“We’re meeting at Good Times again tonight, if you want to come. It’s karaoke night. Should be a hoot.”

An invitation from Jessica herself? “I’d like that,” Sasha said. “I’d like it a lot.”

“Great,” Jessica said with a big smile. “We’ll see you at eight.”

“Eight it is,” Sasha said, and she returned the smile with another wave as Jessica disappeared into the hallway.

Sasha nudged the treadmill’s speed up a notch and smiled as she ran. If Jessica was right, her father would soon be out of the picture, out of her life, for good, and she could put all her misguided decisions in the past where they belonged.

She wished things could have been different, that her father wasn’t the maniacal creature that she now feared, but that was behind her now. She’d made her choice. Viper and the Legion, love and friendship, that was what family was truly about. And while she gave a little prayer that her father might live to see the error of his ways, Sasha was equally resigned to the more likely outcome.

Either way, her life would go on, here, with Viper and her new friends, and she was totally okay with that.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Jessica was right about one thing. Until the Legion caught up with Fuhrmann, Sasha's playtime with Viper threatened to be drastically reduced. He texted her around eleven and told her to retire without him. Mason had him tied up in meetings, and it looked like they would be pulling an all-dayer.

She'd reluctantly done as he asked, but her sleep was fitful and resulted in little rest. Funny how a person could so quickly become reliant on another's presence in their bed.

But that was hours ago. Viper made up for his absence, sort of, with a very interesting phone call, and soon she would join her friends for an evening out. This was her new life, and it was all good.

Sasha parked her little Honda in the lot next to the library. It was easier than finding street parking, and she didn't mind the extra walk. A brisk wind kicked up as she stepped out of the car, and she turned the faux fur collar of her jacket up to stave off the cold. It looked like winter had settled in to stay. Thick grey clouds sat low in the sky, giant snow clouds making their slow, ominous way toward her from the west, a portent of the storm headed toward Fallen Cross.

Kythryn called earlier to offer Sasha a ride, but thinking ahead, Sasha realized she might want to make an early night of it. Viper had been sweet about giving her the night off, but it came with the promise that she would be in his bed, naked, by the time he got back to his suite. Oh, and for her information, he planned to get home early after working more than twenty-four hours straight. She smiled as she kicked through the slush on the sidewalk, the memory of his wicked laugh—one that promised a day of

unimaginable pleasure ahead of her—an echo in her mind.

As thrilled as she was to have gained an actual invitation from Jessica, she was just as anxious to get the night over with, and to be exactly where Viper asked her to be, dressed exactly as he expected her to be.

A cold shiver raced down her spine. Thoughts of Viper had a way of doing that to her. Had she not been thinking of him, she might have sensed that she wasn't alone on the dark sidewalk. She might have known something was wrong before she saw Frank waving at her from across the street, before his shouted, "Hey Lady, watch out!"

The rough arm around her throat caught her off guard, and the dirty rag smashed over her mouth and nose worked so quickly, she barely put up a struggle. The last thing she saw before she passed out was Frank jumping up and down like an angry leprechaun. Then she knew no more.

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Tas stepped out of Good Times and inhaled a lungful of crisp December air. The bar had just closed, and the sidewalk teemed with humans hurrying to their cars or jumping into their hired rides, too intoxicated to be trusted behind the wheel of a two-ton vehicle. In a matter of minutes, the streets would be deserted. The sign on the Good Times exit door said it all. You don't have to go home, you just have to go, and so they went.

As the last car screeched away from the curb, Tas smiled. All things considered, he felt lighter than he had in decades. The classes with the *Kurai Senshi* were going well, and his last conversation with Jun hadn't been a complete disaster. He knew, if she would give him the chance, he could crack that hard outer shell and happily devour the gooey center he imagined he'd find inside. He shifted in his leathers as his cock recognized the inuendo before his brain did.

Despite his discomfort, he laughed to himself as Martin joined him on the sidewalk. The kid shook out his coat sleeves and gave each arm a swift brushing, a la Beetlejuice. "Where to next, boss?"

Tas really liked the kid, though they didn't get paired on patrol often. Not only was he a total badass, but he was solely responsible for the perpetual smile Merlin walked around the Compound with nowadays. Tas hadn't seen the tech genius that happy since... hell, he'd never seen him that happy.

"Let's head down to the library," Tas said, "then over to the park. Make

sure there aren't any ferals around stalking the walkers."

"Sounds like a plan."

They hoofed it south, the Soldier thankfully light on conversation as Tas remained distracted by thoughts of a little Dark Warrior who, more often than not, monopolized the majority of his cranium.

When they reached the library parking lot, empty but for a lone Honda, Martin wrapped his arms around himself and his whole body shook.

"You okay? You look like you saw a ghost."

"Yeah," Martin said. "Happens every time I walk by there. Don't think I'll ever forget being attacked by the KS. I know we've seen some shit, but that was creepy AF. Hey look, there's Frank."

Martin was across the street before his words registered. By the time Tas caught up, Martin was already deep in conversation with his homeless friend and informant on all things paranormal.

From what Martin said, nothing went down in Fallen Cross without Frank hearing about it. He was invaluable earlier in the year when Ulrich Fuhrmann first came to town. Without him, they might never have found where the Sorcerer had holed up. The way the two had their heads together sent an unexpected chill through Tas's spine.

"Are you sure?" Martin asked.

"Sure as rain," the old man said.

"Where did you see him?"

"Let's see. It was two... no three nights ago, I was down the street a bit, about a block or so north of Good Times. You know the folks there don't like me setting up shop too close to the bar. Say it spooks their customers. Anyway, he was hanging out in the shadows like a creeper, right? Like he was waiting to jump out at somebody."

Frank scratched his knee, then continued. "After a bit, I got me a customer, gave me a fiver, see. When I looked back, he was gone."

"And you're sure it was the same guy from before."

"You bet. White-haired fella. Never forget him. He damn near got me et up by vampers, but you know all about that."

"Yeah, I do. Tas," Martin said, "did you get all that?"

Tas stepped forward and nodded. "I did. Frank, is it?"

Frank leaned around Martin to stare at Tas. "Who're you?"

"Frank, this is Tas. He's my partner tonight."

"Oh, right. I seen you around the other night, din't I? You was with two



other fellas. Does he know about the strangeness?” Frank aimed the last bit at Martin in a loud stage whisper from behind his cupped hand.

“Yeah,” Tas said. “I do. Good to meetcha.” He held out his hand, but Frank just stared at it.

“He talks funny.”

“Like I’ve never heard that before,” Tas muttered.

“Yeah,” Martin said. “He’s from Australia.”

“I heard about them folks. Tanny Annie likes to act like she’s from there, but we all know she’s from Gratis. Crap. You see her, don’t let on that I told you that. She’s kinda sensitive about it. Probably has something to do with all the time she spent in the tanning beds back in the Nineties.”

“No worries,” Tas said, and let his hand drop. “So, Fuhrmann’s back in town, is he?”

“Sounds like it,” Martin said. “You want to call it in or do you want me to do it?”

“I got it.”

“He’s at the rendering plant,” Martin added as Tas pulled out his cell and thumbed it on.

Martin pulled a bill out of his pocket and pressed it into Frank’s palm.

“Thanks, Marty. Oh, and there’s one other thing about the strangeness,” the old guy said. As he flipped his coat open to slip the money away, something fell from one of the many pockets he’d sewn into the coat’s lining and landed with a *clack* on the alley’s pavement. Frank reached for it, but Martin got there first.

Tas lowered his phone as Martin held up the burner.

“Whoa, Frank. Moving up in the world, are we?”

Frank twitched and jerked away from the thing like it was a poisonous snake straight from the Outback. “What? Huh? That’s not mine. Never seen it before.”

Tas walked back to the pair, but kept his mouth shut. Martin had this.

“Come on, Frank. Talk to me. Where’d you get it?”

“I din’t steal it,” he said, going from denial to defiant in the blink of an eye.

“I never said you did. You just never struck me as a reach-out-and-touch-someone kind of guy. Why would you need a cell phone?”

Frank let out a nervous cackle. “I know that one. Old commercial. I remember it.”

“Frank, you’re deflecting. Where did you get the phone?”

The old man’s jaw worked up and down beneath clenched teeth as he stared at the ground.

“Frank.”

“She gave it to me, din’t she?” he spat.

“Who?”

He took a step back and said, “The lady, that’s who. Said she knew you, and that you was friends. Said it was a secret and that we shouldn’t bother you with it.”

“Go on.”

“She wanted to know about the white-haired fellas. Said it was important that I called her the minute they showed up again. She seemed awful sure they was coming back.”

Frank stopped and ground his jaws together again. Took another step toward the back of the dead-end alley.

Martin closed the distance between them and shook the phone in the old man’s face. A flash of peridot light briefly illuminated the alley as the Soldier fought to contain his anger, his spark.

Frank trembled and stumbled back until he ran into the tall wooden fence that blocked off the dreary lane. “She said there weren’t no need to bother you with knowing about her. Said you might not understand.”

“Why, though?” Martin asked, his effort to tone down his disappointment obvious. “Why did this woman want to know about the Sorcerers?”

A watery tear leaked from the corner of the old man’s beady eye and worked its way through the cracks and tributaries of his weathered face. His eyes darted left and right, as though he were looking for something to focus on other than the friend he’d betrayed. He lifted a shoulder, whether in defiance or defeat, Tas wasn’t sure.

“Looking for her daddy, I guess.”

“Her *what?*” Tas couldn’t help himself. That one took him by surprise.

“Her daddy. She said she’d been looking for him and you wouldn’t understand.”

He directed the answer to Martin, so Tas let the Soldier carry on.

“This lady,” he said. “What did she look like?”

“Well, she was tall and skinny, brown hair, brown eyes. Had a funny accent, though not funny like your friend’s there.” He nodded toward Tas. “Different, though.”

“Fuck,” Tas muttered.

Martin shot a glance at Tas, then refocused on the informant. “Have you ever seen her before?” Martin pushed.

“Maybe,” Frank hedged. “I don’t rightly, remember.”

“Frank?”

“I’m sorry, Marty. She got me in a weak moment. I was sleeping in the cemetery and that always makes me mawkish.”

“Frank.”

“She comes into town now and then, I suppose. I’ve seen her go into Good Times a time or two. Never talked to her until she hunted me down in the cemetery.”

Martin glanced at Tas again, the look in his partner’s eye confirming their thoughts were along the same line.

“Marty?”

“Martin, we need to go.”

“Marty, I’m sorry. I din’t mean no harm.”

The Soldier pushed the cell phone at the old man, did an about face and marched to the mouth of the alley. The burner fell to the ground and clattered on impact. The old man slid down the fence and landed on the cold ground, all the while eyeing the thing like something deadly and foul.

“Tas, let’s go.”

Tas wanted to say something to the old guy, but Martin was right. They didn’t have time to placate the homeless. They needed to find Sasha.

Now.

## Chapter Forty-Five

When he got the nine-one-one from Merlin, Viper bypassed the elevator and took the stairs between Sub T2 and Sub T1 two at a time. He burst into the War Room and found Tas and Martin in the middle of a heated conversation with Mason. Tas caught his eye and elbowed Martin, who ended whatever he was saying to Mason midsentence.

“People stop talking when I enter a room, I’m gonna get a complex,” Viper said.

Mason ignored him. “Where’s Sasha?” he said instead.

“How the hell should I know?” Viper’s surly attitude had more to do with the fact that they’d assumed he should know rather than her choosing to go out with the girls tonight. He and Sasha weren’t exactly “out” as a couple yet, and really, it was none of their damned business.

“She’s not in her room,” Tas said, the concern etched in his normally placid brow enough to put Viper on edge. “We were hoping she might still be working with you.”

Nox and Raven burst into the room, one talking over the other, with their questions about what was doing.

“I’m still trying to figure that out, myself,” Viper said. To Tas he added, “She left the lab around eight this morning. She texted me later, asked for the night off to go out with all your mates for drinks, and I gave it to her. I haven’t talked to her since.” They didn’t need to know about the twenty-minute phone sex session they’d had before she left to meet the other women, or the orgasms initiated by said phone sex. That was also none of their business.

Nox pulled out his cell and tapped out a text, presumably to his mate.

Raven squared his shoulders and pushed himself between Viper and Tas. “Why are we here?”

Tas looked at Viper again, that “Sorry, mate,” look in his eye one that gave Viper the uncontrollable urge to rip his throat out.

“Would someone *please* stop with the bullshit and tell me what’s going on? Why are you looking for Sasha?”

“I think you need to sit down,” Tas said, actually pulled a fucking chair out for Viper and waved a hand at it, as if Viper would sit like a Labrador and beg for a treat.

“And I think you need to just come out with it. Whatever you’re trying to say, just say it.”

Martin stepped forward and said, “Sasha’s looking for—”

Tas interrupted the Soldier. “We think Sasha’s been lying to us.”

“Do I even want to know what this has to do with us?” Raven asked, his hands clasped into tight fists at his sides.

Nox shook his head as he tucked his cell back into his jeans pocket.

Viper fell into the chair Tas still held by its back, his heart in his throat. “Who’s she looking for?”

“Her father.”

“Don’t say it,” Raven said. He pulled out the chair next to Viper and sat, hard. “Do not say what you are about to say, Tas. I don’t want to know.”

Tas took a step back from Raven and Viper while Nox took a seat on Raven’s other side and dropped a hand on his brother’s shoulder, just in case. “We have reason to believe that Sasha is Fuhrmann’s daughter. Fuhrmann the younger, not old, dead Fuhrmann.”

“You had to go and say it,” Raven said. He went on with a lot of swearing and whatnot, but Viper was still trying to make sense of Tas’s accusation.

“That’s not possible,” Viper said. “Why would you even think that? She would have said something. She would have told me... or Mason.”

“She’s been meeting up with Frank, my confidential informant,” Martin said. “He keeps an eye out for me, remember?”

“Yeah,” Viper said. “I remember. Tas and I ran into him the other night. He was talking some weird shit, though. I didn’t understand half of what he said.”

“Yeah, well, I talk to him all the time,” Martin said, “and I’ve never known him to have a cell phone. He said the lady gave it to him, to let her know when her father came back into town. Her Sorcerer father, who just happened to be responsible for Frank’s near-death experience a while back.”

“Do we know where he is?” Raven asked. “Let me and Nox go, take that

sonofabitch out.”

“Soon,” Mason spoke for the first time since Viper arrived. “First we need to figure out what Sasha’s been sharing with him. Viper? Any idea what she might know that could cause problems when we face him?”

Viper blew out a breath and scrubbed his hand over his scalp. “She knows everything I know,” he said. She’s helped me with all the magically enhanced devices we have, including an upgrade to the M-bombs.”

“The ones that knock out magic for a bit?” Mason asked.

“Yeah, those. Now they can be both nullifiers and incendiary devices. She also knows about the cloaking device we made for Jonathon and the KS.”

“How much does she know about our search for Fuhrmann? Does she know where he is?”

“How could she?” Viper shouted. “She’s been with me the whole…”

“The whole time?” Tas finished for him. “Except now, and how many other days that we can’t account for. I know you sleep sometimes, Viper, even if it’s rare. And as for the rest of it, we need to know if she’s told him anything. And we need to know where she is right now.”

“I told you, she’s with your females.”

“She didn’t show.” Raven’s mate, Jessica, stood in the doorway, red-faced and slightly out of breath.

“What are you saying?” Viper felt his fangs drop, and bronze light filled the room.

“We were already on our way home when Nox texted Rachel. Sasha never showed up.”

“I texted her, and tried to call, but she’s not answering and she’s not picking up,” Harrier’s mate added as she pushed her way into the room past Jessica.

“We had a little chat in the Club yesterday morning,” Jessica said. “She was asking questions about Fuhrmann, about what would happen when you found him. I didn’t think anything of it at the time. She’s a Sorceress, so why wouldn’t she be curious?”

“What did you tell her,” Raven asked. He pushed himself away from the table and rose to join his mate in the doorway.

“Not much, just that we were still looking for him, and when we found him, he was as good as toast.”

“Burnt toast,” Martin muttered from his seat across the table.

“Great. So, she knows we’re looking but haven’t yet found Fuhrmann,”

Nox said. “How is that dangerous?”

“It’s dangerous because it isn’t exactly true anymore,” Tas said. “Martin’s homeless guy told us Fuhrmann is staying at the old rendering plant. We need to get some Soldiers together pronto, and...”

Viper didn’t hear anymore. He was already on his feet, pushing his way between Raven and Jessica to get out the door. He didn’t care what the Legion did with their Soldiers and Warriors. They knew where he kept his weapons, and if they were serious about it, nothing he said was going to change the situation.

What did change was Sasha’s status within the Legion. Before, she was a guest of Mason’s. Some may not have liked her being there, but they were forced by Legion mandate, by Mason’s mandate, to treat her with respect and to make her feel welcome.

Now? If Ulrich Fuhrmann really was her father, then she had a lot worse things to worry about than her dad being a total ass hat.

Mason would issue a shoot to kill order, and not just for Fuhrmann, but for Sasha, too. At best, she’d lied to them. At worst? Their mortal enemy now knew everything Sasha knew.

Never mind that she’d taken Viper’s heart and shredded it into a million pieces. Mason may want her eliminated, but Viper needed answers first.

And there was only one way he was going to get them.

## Chapter Forty-Six

Sasha woke with an acrid taste in her mouth, and the scent of decay in her nose. Her head ached fiercely, and when she opened her eyes, the thin beam of light was like a knife to her skull. With a moan, she tried to raise her hand to block the light, only to find herself unable to move.

“If you promise to behave, I’ll have Maxx here remove the restraints.”

*Fuhrmann.*

Sasha tried to speak, to agree to anything, but her tongue felt swollen and dry, and she couldn’t get the words out. When she nodded, her father simply said, “Maxx.”

The next thing she knew, someone was there, the sounds of metal clanking and jangling as they fumbled around her wrists and ankles, followed by sweet relief as the heavy weight lifted from her limbs. The person who released her moved away, which gave Sasha space to sit up, to rub at her chafed skin.

She tried once more to open her eyes. When she succeeded, she wasn’t surprised to find herself back in the old rendering plant, in her father’s quarters. “Why?” she asked, but the word was more of a croak than actual speech.

“For fuck’s sake, Maxx, get her some water. She sounds like a bullfrog.”

There was more scuffling around, accompanied this time with a bit of muttering under the breath. Sasha felt the cool bottle against her hand, and she clutched it absently as the person, Maxx, stepped away.

“Drink,” Fuhrmann commanded, and Sasha drank.

The water soothed her throat, and after a few swallows, she felt she might be able to form actual words. “Why?” she repeated.

“You ignored my text.”

*His text?* It took a moment, but then she remembered. The one she’d deleted when she chose the direction she wanted her life to take. When she



chose Viper over her father.

“I don’t like to be ignored,” he continued. “In fact, I don’t like to be lied to. You had a job to do, Sasha, and so far, I’ve heard nothing but excuses.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Fuhrmann moved so quickly, he was in her face before she could react. “Sorry? Sorry! She’s sorry,” he said with a flourishing spin as he addressed the rest of the room, which, to Sasha’s befuddled mind consisted of herself and Maxx.

“You think you’re sorry now,” Fuhrmann said, “but, if you don’t give me something concrete, and I mean immediately, you will understand the true meaning of regret.”

He was back in her face again, his pointy teeth dripping with spittle in his fit of rage.

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

Fuhrmann stepped back and gave her a bit of much needed space. “You don’t know? How can you possibly live in a house full of Vampires and not have some inkling of what they are about. My understanding is that there are dozens if not hundreds of Soldiers on the premises, and you couldn’t find a single one who would talk?”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, “but no. They were very wary of me. Rarely did they speak of anything important in my presence. They most certainly did not mention you or any of our kind when I was around. They were kind to me, but they did not trust me.” The words were all true, if not the entire truth.

Fuhrmann paced the short length of the room, then returned to stand in front of her, a long, slender finger laid across his lips. He tapped his mouth a couple of times, then lowered his hand. “I see your eyes and hair are back to their natural color. Did you have dental work?”

“What? No!” she exclaimed. Her teeth had always been on the blunt side. “Aside from the length of my hair, this is how I was born. It’s your DNA, so if you find fault with me, half of it is on you.”

Fuhrmann spun to face her, venom in his eyes. “Take care with your tongue, or I will cut it out of your mouth.”

Sasha held his hateful stare for as long as she could, but her defiance only held so long in her weakened state. She tried to reach for her magic, but there was nothing there.

“And don’t bother with your magic,” Fuhrmann said, as though reading her mind. “The drugs will have dulled your connection.”

Could this man really be her father? What kind of parent does this to their child? “Why?” she repeated, the betrayal nearly as painful as that of her mother.

“Because I don’t trust you, Sasha. I never have.”

It was only then that she realized she’d been thinking of him by his surname rather than *father*.

“And I should never have trusted you,” she said. “You’re an abomination. My mother was a horrible person. For her to have called you a monster... I should have known better than to seek you out.”

“And yet you did,” Fuhrmann sneered. “I can see now why the woman sold you to the Primeval. Utterly useless.”

Out of sheer desperation, Sasha reached again for her magic. Hope sprang into her chest when the tiniest spark answered her call. It was nothing she could fight with, not yet. It wasn’t even enough to rouse her hair, but the effect of the drug would wear off eventually, and Sasha would fight her way out of this horrible place and back to the Legion. Back to Viper.

Back home.

There was a commotion at the door, and a moment later, Maxx called out. “Boss, we got company.”

That ember of hope grew exponentially. They were coming for her. She would be back in Viper’s arms before she knew it.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Viper felt his way along the corridor, the place so dark he would have sworn the *Kurai Senshi* were involved. He knew that wasn't the case, though. Any atmosphere not courtesy of the plant's former occupants was entirely Fuhrmann's doing. The underlying scent of burnt cabbage added to the nauseating stench and confirmed that the Sorcerer was still teamed up with the ferals.

Viper had no idea what compelled him, what pushed him on. The female had betrayed him, betrayed the Legion after all they had done for her. She was alive because they fought for her. She was free, because they made it so, and how did she repay them? By turning tail and running directly into the arms of their fiercest enemy.

He shook the thought from his mind, couldn't think about that now. He couldn't think about the way she looked at him as they made love, about the little sounds she made or how her body tensed in his arms when he brought her over. He couldn't dwell on the smell of her, of them, as their lovemaking joined them into one scent, one being, one soul.

He never thought he could conceive of a circumstance where he would pray for her to be a prisoner again, but it was better than the idea of her choosing that monster over him. That was something he didn't think his heart would survive.

The Warriors thought Raven's beast was destructive, but if it was true? If Sasha left him for her deadbeat daddy? Viper would level this place with little more than a thought. If she was especially trite about it, he might wipe Fallen Cross from the face of the map.

He turned a corner and felt himself entering an open area. There was a little more light there, and he got the sense of large pieces of equipment jammed into the center of the room. All thoughts of pleasant scents

disintegrated as the foul odor of decaying flesh overwhelmed him. He'd been by this plant a million times back when he patrolled on the regular, and he knew the smell was bad, but being inside? The place was totally rancid.

Viper rubbed a leather-gloved hand over his nose in an attempt to get the smell out, but it was no use. He ratcheted up his sense of hearing, and he picked his way across the worn concrete floor, ears sharp for the slightest sound, eyes straining in the dim light.

*Focus*, he thought as his mind began to wander again, directly down a twisted path aimed for nightmarish places. Places where his heart was part of the stuff rendered in one of the huge vats scattered throughout the decrepit warehouse.

*Find her first. Leave the rest for after.*

He took another step and his foot slipped in something thick and slimy. He tried hard not to think about its origins. The plant itself had been abandoned for years, but in a place like that, one never knew, especially when an insane Sorcerer who wasn't above removing bits and parts from other living beings was running around. Viper knew too much about the evil that lived inside of Fuhrmann, knew that his relationship to Sasha would mean a hill of beans to him if he could use her to get at Raven and Nox. He'd cut her apart little pieces at a time, and use her pain and suffering against the Legion.

More visuals Viper could live without.

As he moved on, the huge room seemed to lighten, and its dilapidated contents took form. Large vats and yards of conveyors filled its space, a virtual roller coaster of once-moving cogs and belts all joined together for the singular purpose of processing animal parts into something useful. Things like soap or candles, or dog food.

Maybe Viper should get a dog. They rarely led a male into situations like this.

*Damn it, Sasha, where are you?*

He'd abandoned his Hummer down the road a piece, didn't want to alert Fuhrmann or any of his lackeys to his presence. Before he left it, though, he'd closed his eyes and reached out to her. It was a crazy idea, but he thought that maybe, if he could relax enough, he might be able to connect with her, to find her the way he'd found her all those previous nights. Several precious minutes ticked away, and he finally gave up. Either he was too wound up, or she didn't want to be found. Or hell, maybe it only worked when they were both asleep. Either way, it was a waste of time, time he didn't have.

Now, he slid into the belly of the room, and stole his way through the shadows thrown in webs and arches by the ancient equipment. The damned place was huge, with at least six buildings, and he was only one person. Maybe he should have waited for Tas and the others. With enough Soldiers, they would be able to search the buildings in no time flat.

Then again, if one of them found Sasha first, there was no telling what they would do to her. Truth was, Viper didn't have a plan for her either. All he knew was that he had to find her before the Legion did, and he needed answers. Had she used him the way she abused Mason's hospitality? Was he just a way to pass the time, or was it more nefarious? *She knew everything he knew.* All their weapons and defenses against the Sorcerers, any plans that might have been discussed in front of her, she knew them all.

The question remained, did she run to Dear Old Dad with everything she'd learned, laughing at Viper all the way there, or was it all a misunderstanding?

Viper thumped his knee against a heavy piece of metal that jutted out from one of the conveyors, and he bit his tongue to keep from swearing aloud. He needed to pay attention, or he'd be dead before he ever got the answers he wanted, the explanation he so terribly needed.

Viper shook his head to clear away the desperate thoughts as he stepped over the offending piece of steel. He was a realist, and the reality was she'd played him for a fool. If he managed to find her in this godsforsaken place, he would get his answers, even if he had to beat them out of her. Then and only then, would he leave her to the rest of the Legion to do with as they saw fit.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

Tas led his squadron of Soldiers into Building 6, the westernmost of the campus of warehouses and former rendering facilities. Upon entry, the group spread out. The mission was twofold: first, find Sasha. Based on Viper's reaction, Mason correctly assumed the connection the two had built, and he ordered that she not be killed outright. Unless, of course, it was your life or hers. If she proved to be working against the Vampires, then all bets were off, Viper's poor heart be damned.

As he slid into what might have been an old office, a strange noise reached Tas's ears. It sounded like the squeaking of wheels, but any equipment in these old buildings had long ago lost their rolling ability to rust and ruin. Tas remained hidden in the shadow of a doorway as the sound came closer, grew louder.

It was so damned familiar. He knew it was something he'd heard before. When the noise was almost upon him, Tas jumped from the shadows, his weapons drawn, locked and loaded. He had his finger on the trigger, had the thing half pulled when what he saw registered.

Tas jerked his hands to aim his weapons at the ceiling, the barrage of swearwords that spilled from his mouth as much from relief as irritation.

"Damn it, Frank. What are you doing here?" he whispered.

"Free country, id'n it?" the old man replied, his voice loud enough to echo through the building's vast space.

"Quiet, Frank, and you need to get out of here. It's not safe."

"Not safe anywhere, is it?" he said. "Big storm's a brewing. Need to get out of the weather before it takes us all down."

"What?" Tas was so confused by the old guy's mutterings, he forgot for a minute they were in the middle of a pending battle.

"I gotta find your friend," Frank said. "I think he needs my help."

“Martin’s not even in this building,” Tas said. “And you need to go. Shit’s about to get crazy, and you’ll be in the way. Anything happens to you, and Martin’s gonna be pissed.”

The old man just pushed his grocery cart around Tas and waved at him on the way by. “Martin’s a good kid,” Frank said, “but he’s got all the help he needs. You take care, though, Tas. Look deep before you leap.”

“Frank,” Tas hissed. “*Frank!*”

The old man turned a corner and was gone.

Tas tapped the mic on his earpiece and whispered, “Be advised, there are friendlies in the plant. I repeat, there are friendlies in the plant. Do *not* shoot, stab, cut or otherwise harm the old guy with the grocery cart. His name is Frank, and he’s one of ours.”

Martin predictably responded. “Tell him to get the fuck out!”

“I did,” Tas hissed. “He told me to be careful and left me in his dust. The guy’s batshit crazy.”

Two seconds of silence followed before Martin came back. “If one of you assholes kills Frank, I’m a hunt you down and return the favor. For real.”

Tas shook his head and stole off in the same direction as Frank. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

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Fuhrmann jerked Sasha to her feet, and she wobbled despite his firm grasp on her arm.

“They came faster than I anticipated. We aren’t ready,” Fuhrmann hissed. “Who did you tell?” he screamed in Sasha’s face. “Who did you warn?”

“No one,” she cried. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Liar,” he hissed. “They’ve turned you against your own flesh and blood. Now tell me, who knows where we are?”

Sasha bared her teeth at the man she had longed to call father, then she spat in his face. He released her abruptly to wipe the spittle from his cheek, leaving Sasha to sway on weakened legs.

“You little *bitch!*” Fuhrmann screamed, and he slapped her face so hard she landed sideways on the couch. “I swear on my mother’s grave, you will outlive your usefulness, and I will be more than happy to find you a grave of your own. Right now, however, I need bait.”

Without being summoned, Maxx was there with the shackles he had only

just removed. He slapped them back on her wrists and unceremoniously jerked the chain to drag her out of the room. She stumbled behind him, down a long expanse of the empty warehouse, to a cold, steel door. Maxx opened it and yanked her through, into a world of swirling white.

Sometime during her unconsciousness, the clouds had opened up and cast their heavy load to the earth below. Now a couple inches of snow blanketed the ground, more in places where the fierce wind had whipped it into heaping piles against the building.

Their time outside was brief, but someone had removed her winter coat, which left much of her exposed to the elements. By the time Maxx pulled her into the next building, the bite of the wind had numbed her fingers and the tip of her nose. Unfortunately, that did nothing to diminish her sense of smell. This building smelled worse than the last, and as Maxx dragged her further inside, she realized that the old machinery was still in place here, and that the horrendous odor originated from one of the larger vats in the center of the room.

There were no lamps to speak of, nothing but the outdoor lighting from the parking lot that seeped in through the filth-covered windows stretched along the farthest wall. Sasha had a feeling it was for the best she couldn't see very well. Maxx led her to a smelly, giant vat and glanced up. She followed his gaze, but all she could see were the heavy metal I-beams that made up the rafters in the ceiling.

Maxx turned to her and grinned before he dragged a long length of chain from the far side of the vat. "Sorry, kid," the male said, his burnt cabbage smell a bare whisper in her nose compared to the scent of rot and decay. "Wish we could have gotten to know each other. I think we could have been great friends."

With a salacious wink, he hooked the chain to her shackles and swung the longer length to the rafters. The chain looped the nearest beam, and Maxx jumped back a step when the end fell with a clang to the floor nearby. The male retrieved the loose end and fed it through a contraption on the floor with a long handle connected to a spool-like device. When he turned the crank, the chain wrapped around the spool and took up the slack until it forced her arms taut above her head.

Sasha had a very bad feeling about where this would lead. Uli Fuhrmann hadn't lied. He needed bait, and he wasn't above using his own daughter to lure the Vampires in.



## Chapter Forty-Nine

The ferals came out of nowhere. One minute Tas and the Soldiers were searching the enormous warehouse, the next they were engaged in an all-out battle, the stench of burnt cabbage so thick it muted the building's overwhelming odor of decay.

With so many fighting, Tas didn't want to chance shooting one of his own by mistake. He holstered his automatics and drew the sword from the scabbard on his back, a slick leather sheath Viper had inexplicably traded him for a twenty-dollar blanket Tas had found on the internet.

The first feral struck at him from behind, just as his blade cleared the scabbard. Steel met steel as Tas swung his sword around to block the downward slash of his opponent's dagger. He met it with such strength that the blade flew from the feral's hand, leaving him open for the slice and jab Tas delivered. Another arcing sweep left the feral a good foot shorter.

Before the body hit the ground, another of the orange-eyed bastards fell upon Tas. This one died faster than the last.

*Where the hell was Fuhrmann getting his recruits?* Tas wondered as he dodged yet another sloppy blade thrust. They sure as hell weren't trained to fight, and this one was barely old enough to shave.

As the enemy fell to the Legion fighters' superior skills, Tas was convinced the Sorcerer had done no more than drag the addicted ferals off the street with promises of food and a roof over their heads. Probably failed to mention they'd end up dying for their trouble.

The next feral to meet Tas's sword actually begged for his life. Tas hesitated, but not for long. Anyone stupid enough to align with Fuhrmann deserved to die, circumstances be damned.

Shouting from the far side of the warehouse drew Tas's attention from his own battle. One of his Soldiers was in trouble. It was a small distraction, but

large enough to leave Tas with a gash in his arm and another across his thigh.

“Fucking ferals,” he swore, and with a swift arching swing, another orange-eyed creature joined his brothers in Tas’s wake of death.

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Viper smelled her blood before he heard her scream. He hadn’t bothered with an ear piece, or any other kind of communication device, so he had no way of knowing whether he ran to her blindly and alone, or if he might have some backup.

It didn’t matter. He knew her voice, the sound of it etched indelibly in his mind, and he knew the sound of fear. His heart dropped to his belly as her panic coursed through him, the blood he’d taken from her thrumming through his veins, giving truth to the situation. Whatever Fuhrmann was doing to her, and Viper had a pretty fucking vivid imagination, she wasn’t acting. Her fear was real, and he had to find her before it was too late.

He ran toward her, mindless of the dangers, of any traps Fuhrmann might have set. Mindless of the reason he’d stormed the place totally unprepared. None of it mattered now, not even her betrayal.

As he rounded a corner, a spotlight snapped on and lit up the center of the room. There was no apparent source, which left Viper to believe Fuhrmann had magicked it into being. In its center sat a huge vat, the apparent source of the increasing scent of death, and above the vat, Sasha hung from a chain attached to a smaller chain that joined the shackles on her wrists.

Viper slid to a stop several yards away, the implications of the situation clear. Unless she’d volunteered to be hung over a giant tub of putrefying nastiness he didn’t even want to consider, it would seem Daddy Dearest wasn’t as hip to the old family reunion as Tas would have them all believe.

“Sasha,” he whispered, and her head swung in his direction, as if she searched for him in the darkness.

“Viper?” she cried. “Viper! Get out! He’s...”

The sound of chains being fed through a winch pierced his ears, and Sasha cried out again in pain as the chains lifted her higher into the air.

“Who the fuck is this?” A thin man with long, flowing white hair and red eyes stepped into the spotlight and stared at Viper as though this were a formal affair and he had crashed the thing without a proper invitation. Had to be Fuhrmann, though Viper had never had the displeasure of meeting this one

or his asshole of a father.

“Ulrich, please,” Sasha begged. “He has nothing to do with this.”

“Oh, it’s Ulrich now, is it?” Fuhrmann said with a sneer. “What happened to Father?”

“F-father,” she stuttered. “I’ll do whatever you want. Please, just let him go. Viper get out.”

“Not before I get some answers,” Viper heard himself say. As badly as he wanted to drive a double dose of steel through that Sorcerer sonofabitch, that wasn’t really why he’d come. “It’s true, then?” he asked, his eyes fixed on Sasha, the huffing Sorcerer across the room a minor irritation for the moment.

Viper absently took a step toward the vat and craned his head back to see her better. She wore the clothes she’d mentioned to him earlier, during their little phone sexcapade. The black leggings she’d described as she slid them down her legs, and the scoop-necked dress she’d had to move aside for better access to her nipples. He’d imagined her beautiful face as she moaned into the phone, her panting growing heavy as she took herself over the edge.

Now her face bore a scarlet handprint on one side, and her cheeks were wet with her tears. A trickle of blood fell from a cut on her lip. When it reached her chin, it dripped into the vat below and landed with a hiss.

“Please,” she said, her begging nothing like he’d ever heard from her before. This was panicked and painful, desperate and filled with... guilt. “Go,” she whispered. “Just go.”

“Was it all a lie?” he said, only mildly interested in the Sorcerer staring baldly at him or the feral he could scent to the left next to the winch.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Fuhrmann said. “Daddy, Daddy,” he squealed in a high voice. “Please, accept me, Daddy, I’ll do anything.” His voice lowered and he said, “And all the while you’ve been fucking my enemy?”

“Father,” Sasha cried, and her body swung wildly as she struggled against her restraints. “Father, please. Just let him go. He’s not the one you want.”

“No, but it seems he’s the one *you* want.”

Fuhrmann moved so fast, so unexpectedly, Viper jumped when the man stood directly before him. All of a sudden, his decision to rush out of the manse without so much as an M-bomb in his pocket seemed a little rash. He took a step back, but Fuhrmann flicked his wrist and Viper’s legs felt cemented to the floor.

The Sorcerer approached and paced a slow circle around him, scrutinizing him with a critical eye. “How many have you brought with you?” he asked.

Viper shrugged, not willing to show the fucker just how uncomfortable he was. “I have no idea. I took off to find your *daughter* before the others could organize. Why, are they here?”

Fuhrmann backed up a pace and stared Viper in the eye. “You tell me,” he said.

Again, Viper shrugged. He really didn’t know, but considering the idiotic situation he’d walked himself into, he hoped it was the whole fucking Legion.

“Do you mean you’re just here for *her*?” Fuhrmann said, incredulous.

“Well, I was,” Viper said. “Now that I know she’s related to you, I think that ship has sailed. So, if you’ll just unstick my feet, I’ll be on my way.”

The Sorcerer cackled, swept his hands wide and said, “You see, Sasha? You just can’t trust a Vampire. If this one, who you obviously favor, wants nothing to do with you, and I’m of the same notion, I can’t see any use for you.”

He turned back to Viper and said, “Do you know what’s in this vat?”

“Let me guess,” Viper said. “Is that where you bathe in the blood of your enemies?”

Fuhrmann smiled an evil smile, and his long white hair lifted from his shoulders. He had to be pulling some heavy magic to make his locks dance like that in a room with no air moving whatsoever.

“You’re not far off,” he said. “I have an army, too, you know. Maxx, here, has seen fit to gather every feral in the tri-state area to come and fight at my behest. That many ferals, well, it’s a lot of mouths to feed.”

Viper swallowed hard, didn’t like where this was going.

“You know there’s a homeless problem in Dayton. Far too many indigents. The streets are filthy with them. Or, well, they were. My followers hunt at night and this is where they deposit the carcasses left over from their meals. Oh, and for good measure, I’ve added a little something extra to expedite the decomposition. Anything that goes into that vat will instantly begin to decay. Would you care to take a closer look?”

Viper felt his feet free, only to find himself lifted into the air. He tried to tap into his magic, to gain control of his body, but he couldn’t focus. Fear was something he’d learned long ago to suppress. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d experienced the emotion, but that was when the

only life at stake was his own.

Sasha insisted he could fly if he wanted to. Unfortunately, they'd never perfected that little trick, and he seriously doubted this was what she'd had in mind. It was all fun and games before, but now he wished they'd taken that portion of his training more seriously. That and countering another magician's spells. As it stood, no matter how he tried, there was nothing he could do to neutralize the spell Fuhrmann had cast upon him. He just floated in the air at the Sorcerer's will, then stopped suddenly to hover over the deep vat of recently and not so dearly departed. Sasha hung from those chains just a few feet from him, but without control of himself, he was useless to her.

He turned to her, and now that they were closer, he could see the bruise that blossomed beneath the handprint on her cheek, the blood from her split lip that was more than a mere trickle. That sonofabitch had hit her, and Viper was surprised by the rage that swelled inside him. It was clear, now, that even if she had started out searching for a father, she had found the furthest thing from it. And here was Viper, her knight in fucking armor, floating around the place like a pint-sized balloon in the Thanksgiving Day Parade.

"Since neither of us seem to be interested in keeping the lovely Sasha around, I think I'll give her to Maxx. He's been a loyal servant and I don't think I've rewarded him properly. Maxx, you hungry?"

The feral on the ground snorted. "Always," he said, and Viper could see his rotten pumpkin eyes spark a violent orange.

Bring her down then," Fuhrmann said.

The winch engaged, and the sound of screeching and clanging echoed in the cavernous room. Viper watched, helpless, as Maxx lowered Sasha to the ground.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, as she slowly fell past him. She searched his face, looking for something. Forgiveness, maybe?

Viper would never know.

It took some maneuvering, but when her feet touched the ground, the feral grabbed her to him, his orange eyes strobing as his fangs lengthened in anticipation of his next meal.

Fury lit through Viper, and he felt his power surge. As his body filled with the essence of his magic, he felt Fuhrmann's grasp on him loosen, and control over his body reverted to him. Control was a relative term, though. He felt himself falling, helpless to do anything about it as the sea of putrefying flesh seemed to rise to meet him, eager in its desire to swallow him up in a fetid

embrace.

Sasha screamed, and the sight of Maxx lowering his mouth to her neck, his enormous fangs ready to pierce and to rend that perfect flesh was the last thing Viper saw before he sank below the rim of the vat.

His fury intensified, for her safety, yes, but more so at the thought of another male with his fangs in her. When the vat's rim blocked her from view, helplessness consumed him. There was no way he would get to her in time.

As he fought for command of his powers, a bright purple light filled the room and he heard two familiar voices cry out in unison.

“Hey, Fuhrmann. We're baaa-aack!”

## Chapter Fifty

Sasha squeezed her eyes shut, loath to see the feral's violent orange gaze or the saliva that dripped from his fangs as he lowered his mouth to her throat. She concentrated with all she had, grasped frantically for her magic, but it was still just out of reach.

When she felt the sharp fang graze her neck, she let loose with a blood curdling scream. From fear, yes, but more out of frustration and self-hatred. She'd brought them there, both Viper and herself. If she died, well, that was her own fault and she likely deserved it simply for being naïve, but if Viper died because of her? That was not something she could live—or die—with.

She'd seen the magic Fuhrmann had twisted in the bottom of that vat, knew what it would do to any flesh it touched. As Viper disappeared beneath the steel rim, Sasha screamed again. She prayed to Odin, to every god she'd ever read about, that he would be able to grasp his magic in time to save himself, but they'd only just touched upon his abilities, hadn't they? He barely had enough control to summon his magic at will, let alone finesse it into behaving a certain way. In all his years, aside from a few simple spells, the only thing major he'd ever managed was to—how did he say it? Blow shit up.

And that would be catastrophic. Should that spell beneath him shatter, it could kill everyone in the room, including Viper, immortal blood or not.

Sasha felt the tip of Maxx's fang pierce her flesh, and her eyes snapped open. The space beyond Fuhrmann's magically-induced spotlight was bathed in a fierce amethyst light, and two shadowy figures stood in the darkened space behind the unnatural glow. The stories alone told her who the source of the light was and their voices filled her with relief, not for herself, but for Viper, their brother in arms.

“Hey Fuhrmann,” the Legion twins shouted. “We're baa-aaak!”

Maxx jerked his fangs from her neck and dropped her mercilessly to the ground where she fell with a jolt into something disgusting.

“You looking for us?” Nox yelled from beyond the light.

“Finally,” Fuhrmann yelled. “I was beginning to think the two of you were cowards as well as murderers.”

“Nah,” Raven said as he and Nox stepped into Fuhrmann’s magical beam of light. “We just finally got tired of you acting like some kind of super villain. You’ve got more schemes than the bad guys on “Scooby Doo.”

“And he would have gotten away with it, too, if not for those pesky kids,” Nox added.

Sasha didn’t even try to understand the banter. All that mattered was that they had Maxx’s full attention now. As the machismo and male-member-measuring continued, she snuck around to the opposite side of the vat. Fortunately, the few ferals in the building besides Maxx were also focused on the new arrivals, which left Sasha free to try and save the male she loved.

The vat itself was at least twelve feet high, and there was no way to gain access from the ground without releasing its deadly contents. She continued around the steel construct, quickly but careful to remain concealed as her desperation grew.

Red light flashed and an explosion sounded from the other side of the vat.

“Ha! You missed,” Raven yelled.

Another explosion, and a tremendous crash, followed by the sounds of gunshots. If she wasn’t careful, Sasha could end up an accidental victim. Then again, if they knew why she was here, it might not be an accident at all. Either way, she’d do well to keep her head down.

A few steps later, and Sasha found exactly what she needed, a series of metal rungs welded to the side of the vat. She didn’t think, didn’t hesitate, just ran to the ladder and began the upward climb. Bright flashes of light combined with Latin curses from Fuhrmann and creative swearing from the Legion Warriors to permeate the air, but it was all white noise to Sasha. Only one thought was clear.

Viper.

Far too much time had passed since he disappeared from view. If he fell into the stew of magical decay, he wouldn’t last long. Her only hope was that he’d somehow accessed his powers and figured out how to stay out of the moribund ooze.

Someone screamed, and she heard Nox yell. “Raven! Shit, Raven. I’ll kill



you, Fuhrmann, you sonofabitch! Stop hiding behind your magic, and come out here and fight like a man!”

Gods, the Vampires were *losing*.

Sasha took each rung slowly, careful to place her footing just so. She reached for her magic, and felt the hair at her nape raise a bit more as her power eked its way forth.

Another scream, and a bright flash of orange filled the room, then faded away.

And Sasha climbed. When her hands reached the top of the vat, she grabbed hold and stepped up another rung, which enabled her to see inside. The area was vast, and for a moment, the churning sea of mortification was all encompassing.

When she could finally focus, the scene that met her eyes left her heart in her throat.

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**F**ocus,” Viper grumbled as the pool of human goo quickly rose to meet his feet. “You can do this.”

And wha’d’ya know? About a foot before his shitkickers touched down, he felt himself slow, then stop to hover just above the gore in the bottom of the vat.

“Ha!” he laughed. “I’ve totally got this... whoa!”

He dropped another inch before he regained his balance and control. “Okay. Okay.”

Green light surrounded him, as he gave himself over to his powers, his father’s gift. By the sounds of it, things weren’t going well for Raven and Nox, and he had no idea what had become of Sasha. It was time for him to stop dicking around, embrace who he was, and put an end to that fucking Sorcerer once and for all.

A sharp gasp reached his ear, and he snapped his head around, up.

“Viper,” she said, and his heart filled with too many emotions to put names to them all. She was *alive*.

With a thought, he began his ascent. When he reached the point where they were eye to eye, he grabbed for her, pulled himself to her, and kissed her, filling her with his power, his essence. Her hair lifted from around her shoulders, and, in true Sorcerer fashion, blew around her head in a swirl of

static wind.

“It’s back,” she whispered against his mouth, and sparks danced across her fingers as she clung to the edge of the vat.

Viper leaned back and stared into her pale blue eyes, searching. “You with me?” he asked.

Sasha nodded, then looked away.

He lifted her chin with a finger until their eyes met again. “Sasha, are you with me?”

This time she didn’t look away. “Always,” she said, and she leaned in for another kiss.

When he pulled away, it was with regret, but now was neither the time nor the place for the makeup sex already formulating in his mind. “Alrighty, then,” he said. “Let’s go kick your daddy’s ass.”

He hesitated only a moment to make sure she could make the climb down, then Viper levitated himself over the edge of the vat, and landed himself in the middle of a shit storm.

Raven was down. The curse Fuhrmann’s mother had placed upon him before she died left him incapable of raising a hand against any of her family. Made him a liability in any fight against the Sorcerer’s family, but Viper understood why he’d come. He just hoped the male hadn’t made his last run. He had a mate and a kid at home, after all.

Maxx was down, too, along with several ferals Viper hadn’t seen before, which left Nox in a hand-to-hand battle with Fuhrmann, himself. Now that was something Viper hadn’t expected.

Blows were exchanged, punches and insults. Nox flipped Fuhrmann onto the ground, but the Sorcerer regained his feet and dodged Nox’s roundhouse. Nox spun around and grabbed the Sorcerer by the neck.

“Give it up, Fuhrmann,” Nox growled through clenched teeth. Viper could see the ropes of muscle in Nox’s neck straining as the Soldier tightened his grip around Fuhrmann’s throat, preparing for the death blow Viper had taught the male himself. “You’re reign of terror is over.”

Somehow, Fuhrmann twisted out of his hold, reversed their positions, and with a hair’s breadth of space between them, he cried, “Join your brother in Hell.”

Before Viper could react, the Sorcerer slapped his palm into Nox’s chest. Red light exploded between them, and Nox went flying. He slammed against the base of the noxious vat, and his head bashed into the thick steel. The

Soldier crumpled into an awkward pile, as crimson blood grew in an ever-widening pool beneath his skull.

The cavernous warehouse fell deathly silent, as Fuhrmann stood frozen, the only movement that of his chest heaving in and out. Slowly, he looked from one fallen twin to the other, then back to the first. His cry started low and guttural then rose in volume and intensity, until he was screeching and... dancing. The mother fucker was actually dancing like he'd scored the winning touchdown in the State Championship.

In all his celebrations, he failed to notice that Viper hadn't fallen into his vat of nastiness.

"Fuhrmann," Viper called, and the screeching stopped.

The Sorcerer turned to him, his jaw slack and his eyes wide. "How are you not dead?"

Time slowed down as Viper threw up what he hoped was a protective shield, a desperate impulse that had about as much chance of working as a paper parasol.

"Father! No!"

Sasha dashed out from behind the vat, and rushed toward Viper, just as Fuhrmann threw his scarlet ball of murderous magic.

Viper watched as the red ball of light soared through the air, stood helpless behind his barrier as Sasha leaped between him and the killing spell. The Sorcerer's magic hit her between her breasts, knocked her into him, but Viper's magic held. She slid down his shield without so much as a touch, her eyes wide with shock and pain.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, as the light faded from her eyes.

Viper sucked in a breath, and the world sped up again.

"Stupid bitch," Fuhrmann muttered as he gathered up another ball of energy. "Knew her for five minutes and she was nothing but a disappointing pain in my ass. Now, where were we?"

"NOOOOOO!" Viper let out a whooping war cry, dropped his shields, and gathered every ounce of power he'd ever tried to suppress. He'd only ever loved two women in his life. He'd killed the first with his power, and failed the second because he had never learned to use it properly.

That ended tonight.

As Fuhrmann threw another ball of magic at him, Viper countered with a blast of his own. The two jets of light met between them, emerald green against crimson red. As they battled to push their energy, one toward the

other, Viper couldn't help thinking this was some crazy Harry Potter kind of shit. And the fact that Sasha would never get that movie marathon he'd promised her pushed his rage to the edge.

He glanced at the floor, saw her lying there, so still, so *lifeless*, and he pushed... hard. He stared at her body as he clashed with the Sorcerer, her father, her murderer, and Viper's power grew. When he finally looked back at his foe, he saw that his power had nearly reached the other man. Fuhrmann struggled to push back at him, his feet planted but sliding backward, ever backward, as Viper bore down on him with the vengeance of a heartsick male.

"Viper."

He heard her voice in his mind, and it was all he needed for the final push. His power surged, and when Fuhrmann's magic fizzled out, Viper's erupted in an explosion that threatened to take the building down. Instinctively, he threw up another barrier, this one surrounding Fuhrmann and the nuclear explosion the Sorcerer's body had become. He shaded his eyes until the light died down, and the only thing left inside the protective cocoon was a pile of ash. In the blink of an eye, the ash coalesced into a disgusting pile of goo.

Viper ran to Sasha and fell to his knees at her side. When her eyes fluttered open, he nearly choked from relief.

"Why?" he asked as he pulled her into his arms. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I love you," she said. "Viper?"

"Yeah, *Ástin*."

"Thank you."

He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her lips. "For what," he murmured against her skin.

"You came for me."

"I love you," he said, and he held her close.

When her body sagged in his arms, he froze. "Sasha?"

She didn't respond.

He shook her limp body and held her away from him. Her eyes were closed, and her already too-pale skin had gone ashy. "Sasha," he cried. "Don't. Don't do this to me. No!"

Viper leaned his cheek against her mouth, but felt no breath. "No, no, no," he muttered as he pressed his ear against her chest. "Oh, gods, Father, no."

He laid her out on the cold floor and breathed into her mouth. He followed it with chest compressions. Hell, it worked on humans, didn't it? He thought

about giving her his blood, but knew that she would have to swallow, and as he banged on her chest, begged her heart to beat, he knew she was too far gone for that.

“I’m so sorry,” he cried, and was shocked to see his blood red tears fall into her pale blonde hair. “I love you, Sasha. Please. Please.”

A commotion appeared around him and he vaguely recognized Tas’s voice. “Sonofabitch,” the Warrior cried. “Martin, see to Raven. Oz, check Nox. The rest of you – look for ferals. Shit. Shit, shit, SHIT!”

When he felt the hand on his shoulder, Viper new it was Tas by the soothing vibes that permeated his body. “Let me see,” the Aussie said, low and gentle, like he was afraid Viper would pull a Raven on him and start blowing shit up. Oh gods, Raven... and Nox.

The enormity of it all hit Viper like a locomotive, and he felt the room sway around him. Then again, that could have been Tas’s mojo. Either way, he was lightheaded and hearing things, strange sounds he couldn’t put a name to.

It was like something in a faraway dream, a strange squeaking noise, that Viper took as the aural manifestation of his grief. The sound grew louder, but he ignored it as he tried to shake off Tas and his stupid mojo. He wanted to feel this, needed to embrace his grief, even as he had refused to embrace his power all those years. If only he’d tried. If only he’d believed.

The squeaking grew louder yet, and Viper thought he might literally explode. “What the *fuck* is that noise?” he cried.

No one answered, and the squeaking continued until it was the only sound in the room. When Viper looked up, Tas and all the others were staring in the same direction. He pulled Sasha tight to his chest, and turned to see what had the others so spellbound.

What he saw made no sense.

Frank, Martin’s homeless informant, had wheeled his shitty assed grocery cart into the plant and parked it next to Raven and Martin. The Soldier stared up at him as if he’d seen a ghost.

“It’s okay, Martin,” the old guy said as he patted the male on the shoulder. “You have my word, I’ll be back to see to your friend.”

Viper shook his head. It looked like Frank, but it didn’t sound anything like the crazy old man he’d seen downtown just a few nights ago. This guy sounded almost sane.

All eyes were on Frank as he walked toward Viper and Sasha. Viper felt

Tas's hand fall away, sensed when the Warrior backed away to leave him alone with his fallen love.

As he clutched Sasha to his chest, he couldn't take his eyes from the old guy. He could swear the man was changing right before his eyes. Had to be an hallucination, but where once the guy was short and scraggly, now he seemed to grow taller, straighter. His scrawny body became muscular, and the tattered coat he wore transformed into a fine cloak.

Yet it was the man's face that held Viper transfixed. The crags and lines filled and the scraggly beard grew longer, whiter, and it practically flowed like silk as he walked. His hair also grew, white like his beard, and the ball cap he wore morphed into a wide-brimmed hat.

All of this was very strange. However, it was the patch that appeared over his right eye that did Viper in.

"Father?" he croaked, and the old man smiled.

"Did I not tell you I would be watching over you?" he said, his voice low but full of power.

Viper lowered his gaze, unable to look his god, his father, in the eye a moment longer. "I didn't believe," he whispered. "Even with the power you gave me, I never truly believed."

Odin lowered himself to the ground to kneel beside Viper. "What have we here?" he asked, and he reached for Sasha.

Viper pulled her to him, and away from the awe-inspiring being. Just because he was a god, and evidently his dad, didn't mean Viper trusted him one hundred percent. After all, five minutes ago he was a homeless guy named Frank.

The man—god, whatever—laid a gentle hand on Viper's shoulder, and his voice was low and soothing. "I won't hurt her," he said. "Let me give you back what you have longed for all these centuries."

Viper turned Sasha to Odin and held her out to him like an offering. *See what I have done?* he seemed to say, and another tear slid down his face and dropped to her hair, leaving a pink spot where it fell.

Odin laid his hand upon Sasha's chest, where she'd been struck, and Viper growled. The god raised his eye to him and gave him what Viper would call a "dad" look on humans with unruly children. "Sorry," he whispered, but Odin had already closed his eye.

His power wasn't visible, like Viper's, but it was something you could definitely feel. To Viper, it felt like life. Like love and devotion, like heaven.

Like Valhalla.

They sat motionless for the longest time, Viper, Sasha and Odin, and the rest of the Legion personnel who watched in awe. It went on so long, Viper was convinced they'd all been duped, and hope faded within him.

When Sasha gasped and coughed, Viper jumped and nearly dropped her in his surprise.

"What... What happened?" she whispered, but Viper had already pulled her to his chest to hold onto her as tightly as he could.

"Easy with her, Son. She's been through a lot."

"Thank you, Father," he said.

"It was my pleasure," Odin replied with an easy smile. "I made a promise to your mother, and when I give my word, I keep it. You only need ask, and I will be there before you can blink."

"I believe you," Viper said.

Odin chuckled. "Well, it took you long enough. Now, I must see to your friends." He turned away and headed back to Raven.

Viper heard Martin say, "Holy shit, Frank. You're Odin?"

Then the rest of the world faded away as Sasha became his sole concern.

She clung to his shoulders as he rocked her in his arms. That few moments when he thought he'd never hear her voice again, never feel her warmth? It was enough sorrow to last a lifetime, and it occurred to him that he had no idea how long that might be.

Viper pulled her to face him and he kissed her, deep and long. He filled the kiss with promise and with love, so much love. There was no way he could ever express to her the depths of that love, but he knew he would spend the rest of his very long life trying.

"Who was that man?" Sasha whispered in his ear when they came up for air. Her voice was weak and raspy, but it was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard. He had his father to thank for that.

"Him?" Viper glanced over his shoulder to where Odin now knelt before Raven. The god looked up, and when their eyes met, he nodded, then turned back to Viper's fallen friend. Raven gasped and bolted up, and as Martin and the others saw to him, Odin moved on to Nox.

When Viper returned his attention where it belonged, he realized Sasha still waited for an answer. He kissed her again, and held her close.

"That," he said with a crooked smile, "was Frank."

## Epilogue

The ball of frozen fluff hit Viper in the back of the head and he growled as he dove behind the snow fort he and his teammates had hastily constructed. Martin lay on the ground, his fat winter coat showing signs of snowy shrapnel where the opposing team had bombarded him before he sought shelter much as Viper had.

“They’re animals,” the Soldier practically whined, his grey-green eyes wide as he sat up and got back to business, frantically building up their arsenal of snowballs.

“Careful with that,” Raven said. “They’re also our mates.”

“Yeah, well, our mates are animals.”

Viper was in full agreement with the younger male, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

As usual, the evening’s festivities were the brainchild of Raven’s mate, Jessica. After coming so close to losing him, as well as Nox and Sasha, Jessica felt that a winter bonfire was in order. There were hotdogs on sticks and huge pots of chili with varying degrees of heat, which were tasted and judged by the non-chefs in the group. Jessica’s white chicken chili was the favorite, hands down, but there was contention in the ranks about the female winning her own contest.

The snowball fight had been a spontaneous add on, and admittedly it was Viper’s fault. He’d discovered the snow was exceptional for packing, and out of a rare moment of orneriness, he’d thrown it at Sasha, hitting the back of her ski vest square in the middle. Jessica saw the whole thing, gathered Sasha, Rachel, Kythryn and Merlin, and declared war on him. Raven, Nox, Harrier and Martin joined his side, and they thought they had the advantage. They certainly outweighed the other team, so long as Kythryn kept her inner liger on its leash.



However, with the snow on his skull melting, and icy water trickling down the back of his neck and under his shirt collar, Viper began to see the error in his thinking. Their mates definitely had the advantage with a Sorceress on their side. Sasha was forming snowballs out of thin air faster than the others could throw them. Certainly, faster than Martin and Nox could pack them manually.

“What the hell good does it do to have a magical demigod on your side if he can’t make a fucking snowball,” Raven muttered as he slid behind their ice wall, back from delivering their last volley. Martin started to laugh, but coughed to cover it up when Viper glared at the pair of them.

Meanwhile, Nox and Martin kept packing that snow and adding it to the pathetic pyramid of ammo between them. Unfortunately, they were spending them faster than the Soldiers could make them, and that wasn’t their only problem. They were running out of material.

Over the course of the last few days, a good two feet of snow had fallen over the Ohio Valley, which left the Compound looking like a winter wonderland. The full moon cast a yellow glow over the area, and everything sparkled, like the trees, the manse, the ground itself were all made of diamond dust.

All except the area surrounding their fort. In their desperation for ammo, Viper’s team had scraped the ground bare of snow at least five feet out, the crispy blades of brown grass raked clear of the white stuff.

“Someone’s gonna have to go out for more ammo,” Viper muttered.

Three sets of eyes turned to him.

“Martin, you’re the youngest. Get out there and recover some of what they’ve thrown.”

“Fuck that,” Martin said. “Send Nox. He’s the junior Soldier here.”

“Yeah,” Raven said, “but Nox almost died. You should definitely do it.”

The twins shared a conspiratorial grin and a fist bump, but Martin flatly refused to go.

“Well, I’m not going out again,” Harrier said as he dodged a volley of white to join the others behind their wall. “Kitty’s getting mean.”

“Are you kidding?” Raven said. “Jessica threatened to put one of those damned things in my leathers.”

“Ha!” Martin laughed. “Talk about blue balls!”

“Fuck you, Soldier.”

“Fuck you, *Warrior*.”

“Fuck you, both,” Viper said, tired of their bickering. “I’ve got this. Load me up.”

He held out the front of his coat, and Nox filled it with the remainder of their snowballs. “That’s it,” Nox said. “After that, we’re going to have to make a run for the woods. Maybe we can hide behind the trees long enough to restock.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Viper said, and he dumped his ammo on the ground. “I’m gonna take out their arms dealer. Once Sasha is down, you guys rush the others and capture their flag.”

“What flag?” Raven asked.

“There’s a flag?” Martin said.

“Just get them,” Viper growled. “I’m out.”

He headed for the forest, and clung to the shadows as he circled the clearing and moved to flank the opposition.

Unfortunately, Sasha wasn’t their only secret weapon. They also had Merlin, and while he’d had to agree not to turn the lights out on everyone, he had a deadly aim. If he saw Viper before he reached his target, Viper was a goner.

He slid through the shadows, and soon found himself a few yards behind enemy lines.

Sasha looked absolutely stunning. She had a fuzzy cap on her head which constrained most of her blonde hair, but what wasn’t under the hat flew around her as she pumped her magic out like there was an endless supply. Rachel took the snowballs from her as fast as Sasha could make them. The stacks behind the two women were waist-high and there were three of them, one for each of the others to rearm at will. Jessica, Kythryn and Merlin were laughing their asses off as they threw a perpetual barrage of projectiles toward the severely damaged snow fort across from them.

Viper’s team didn’t stand a chance.

He needed to take out that arsenal, stop the bleeding at the very least. And yet, watching her work, her pale eyes sparkling like the fallen snow in the moonlight, her laughter like crystalline bells, it seemed a shame to end her fun.

But his guys were getting pummeled. With a wide grin of his own, Viper gathered a tiny ball of energy between his fingers and with a flick of his wrist, he flung it at the nearest pile of snowballs. The pile exploded into a cloud of white powder and chaos erupted in the opposing ranks. Quickly,

before they could regroup, Viper repeated the move twice more, destroying all of Sasha's hard work with barely a thought. It was her own fault. She'd taught him how to manage his magic so as not to be a danger to those around him. Now it was coming back to bite her in the ass.

And didn't that sound like a grand idea?

"Attack! Attack!" Merlin shouted, and everyone turned toward Viper, who had unfortunately allowed himself to become distracted by thoughts of his beautiful Sorceress with her naked ass in the air.

Snowballs came from everywhere, and before he knew it, Viper suffered about fifty direct hits, one right after the other.

"Uncle!" he cried. "Uncle! Uncle!"

Everyone held their fire, their laughter loud and breathless. Everyone but Sasha.

She formed one huge snowball and threw it right at his chest. It landed true and knocked him on his ass. If he didn't know better, he'd swear she added a little something to it. She looked so fierce, though, and even as she stood over him with another giant ball of snow in her hand, he couldn't be mad, not even a little.

"I said Uncle," Viper laughed.

Her face screwed up and she lowered her weapon. "I thought you were calling for help from the gods," she said.

"Uncle means he gives up," Jessica called. "It means we win."

"Oh." Sasha's smile grew wide and her eyes twinkled with mischief. "Well, then, that's different." And she dropped the mega snowball right on Viper's head.

Viper grabbed her leg and pulled her down into the snow. She laughed when he rolled her over and straddled her. "Who's the winner now?" he asked, as he wiped the snow from his chin onto her jacket.

Sasha raised up and ground herself against his growing erection. Damn the winter and all these stupid clothes. Still, there was such heat to her, he could feel it through all the layers.

"I'm still sure it's me," Sasha purred, and Viper nearly lost it.

"No," he said. "It's definitely me." He leaned down and claimed her lips, her little gasps more than he could bear. Never had he dreamed his life would turn out the way it had. Though he regretted the fact that he'd not believed his mother from the start, he had always loved her. And now, he had love of a different kind. Sasha was literally a gift from the gods, and he would never

take that for granted.

“You want to go inside? Get warm?” he asked when they came up for air.

“I want to be wherever you are,” she said. “And I want to be there, now.”

Viper jumped to his feet, scooped her up in his arms and made tracks for the manse.

“Hey,” Raven yelled. “Where the hell you going? We’re in the middle of a battle here.”

“Haven’t you heard,” Nox called. “He’s sleeping with the enemy.”

“Aren’t we all?” Jessica countered.

The banter continued, but Viper barely noticed. All he cared about was the female in his arms, and the fact that they were less than two minutes away from pure magic.

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**T**as sat by the bonfire with Mason, Rebecca and the younger twins. While a good old fashioned snowball fight might have been fun, even the kids were aware that there was more to that battle than just tossing around some snowballs, and the lot of them by the fire were not part of it.

There was passion on that field of battle, and he had no doubt that every single person out there would be having wild monkey sex before the night was through. Naturally, that led his thoughts to a certain Dark Warrior, and he cursed himself for the hundredth time for not inviting her to the party. It would have been fun to see her maneuver her way around and through the chaos that was his family.

Because she was right. Despite who he was and how he’d come to be there, this was his family now, and he was lucky to have them. He’d count himself luckier if he could convince Jun that he was more than a sparring partner. Someone that was worth getting to know, worthy of letting in.

He shook his head as, one by one, the couples reunited and made their way back to the manse.

“I’m getting cold,” Rebecca whined, and she pulled the blanket she’d wrapped around herself tighter.

“Me, too,” Phire sighed. “I’m going inside.”

“Hang on, I’ll go with,” Talon said. He pulled his stick out of the fire, a flaming marshmallow on its pointy end. “Just one more s’more.” He grabbed two graham crackers and pulled the gooey marshmallow from the stick with

them, then slid a healthy chunk of chocolate between the crackers. He took a big bite, gasped a little at the still hot glob of sticky sugar, then smiled as he chewed, his mouth covered with melted chocolate.

“That’s disgusting,” Phire said, and she stood to go. “You coming?”

“Yeah,” Talon said. “Rebecca?”

The female shrugged, stood, and the three headed back to the manse.

“You doing alright there?” Mason asked when they’d gone.

“Sure,” Tas answered, though he was way too tired to put his usual spin on it. You?”

Mason smiled and tented his hands under his chin. Tas called it his thinking pose. “It’s hard to know how to feel with Fuhrmann the younger having gone to join his family.”

Tas grinned. “Right? Now we can get back to herding ferals, although I know Viper had a shit ton of M-bombs stashed away that we couldn’t get to before the raid. Such a shame they’re going to go to waste. When did he figure out how to lock a door anyway?”

Mason lowered his hands to his lap. “Probably about the same time he admitted to himself that he could.”

Tas shook his head. “All these years, and we’ve had a god living with us the whole time.”

“Demigod, but yes.”

“And I thought having a *Kurai Senshi* in our midst was a coup.”

Mason’s smile turned thoughtful. “Makes me wonder what we’ll learn about you,” he said.

Tas shook his head. “What you see is what you get,” he said. “I’ll never be more than I am.”

Mason pushed himself to his feet, and for the first time since joining the Legion, Tas thought the male looked tired.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” the Warlord said, and he patted Tas’s shoulder on his way by. “You have more potential than any male here. Trust me. It’s why I recruited you.”

Mason was halfway back to the manse by the time Tas recovered his voice. The male was as close to a father as he could ever remember. He’d never known him to be wrong about anything.

As he picked up his phone to call in the cleaning crew to take care of the fire and the other party detritus, he thought, *Guess there’s a first time for everything.*

~~~~~

**Y**ou're dropping your shoulder," Master Jonathon said.

Jun frowned and swung her blade at his throat. "I am not," she said through gritted teeth as he parried her strike with a swift move that swept her blade aside and left her open to his fatal blow.

He pulled the strike short of drawing blood, but it was an impressive move, nonetheless. Humbling as well.

"Yes," he said as he gently touched the blade to her neck. "You are."

He dropped his sword and Jun bowed to him. "You are a most worthy opponent," she said as he returned the honor.

Master Jonathon retrieved a towel and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Maybe" he said, "but I'll bet your sparring sessions with Tas are a lot more fun." He pulled the cloth from his face long enough to wink at her, and Jun felt her face warm.

She turned away to hide her reddened cheeks and said, "Sensei is better than most I have encountered in this country, but he does not have your skills. He is not *Kurai Senshi*."

"No," Master Jonathon drawled. "Maybe not, but I'd bet dollars to dipsticks the male has some other skills you haven't tapped into yet."

Jun spun around to stare her leader in the eye, the Shade threatening to burst from inside her and cast them both into darkness. She pushed it back, barely, and said, "I do not know what you refer to."

Jonathon moved to leave the gym and as he passed her, he paused. "You do. And I'm trying hard not to envy you the opportunities there."

Jun's eyes widened as the Shade died within her. "Master Jonathon?"

"Do yourself a favor, Jun. Don't be so focused on the past that you can't see the future when it's staring you right in the face. Enjoy the rest of your night."

The male made his exit without looking back, leaving Jun alone in the gymnasium with only her thoughts for company.

Did the Master know why she had come to Ohio? Did he know she was there to avenge Takeshi's death, to fulfill her lover's quest to destroy Katsuro, her traitorous brother?

And if he did know, what would that change?

Jun picked up her towel and patted the sweat from her face as she

considered the question.

The answer? Absolutely nothing.

The End

## **Dear Reader,**

Thank you so much for reading “Fallen Gods!” I hope you enjoyed Viper and Sasha’s story as much as I did. While most of my characters talk to me openly, Viper was very tight-lipped about his backstory. Only recently did he open up to me and let me in. That Viper – keeping his secret, even from me!

If you’d like more of the Fallen Cross Legion, the Jessica Sweet Trilogy’s [Sweet Vengeance](#) is a great place to start. Already caught up? Then stay tuned – “Fallen Sun,” Book 6 in the Fallen Cross Legion Series, will be here before you know it!

I urge you to read and review books by Indie Authors every chance you get. Your words of encouragement or even constructive criticism help us all become better writers and drive us to put forth our best work for you, our beloved readers.

Click [HERE](#) to leave a review for “Fallen Gods!”





## **About the Author**

What started as therapy has turned into a fulltime passion for Aliya DalRae. The fictional town of Fallen Cross, Ohio, and its cast of characters, both human and paranormal, reside in her imagination, and she brings their stories of love, loss and redemption to life in her Jessica Sweet Trilogy, and The Fallen Cross Pack and Fallen Cross Legion Series.

You can find Aliya and all her books at [www.amazon.com/Aliya-DalRae/e/B01C9MZ0OW/](http://www.amazon.com/Aliya-DalRae/e/B01C9MZ0OW/) or subscribe to her newsletter at <http://eepurl.com/dtEWqH> for twice-monthly updates, contests and more.

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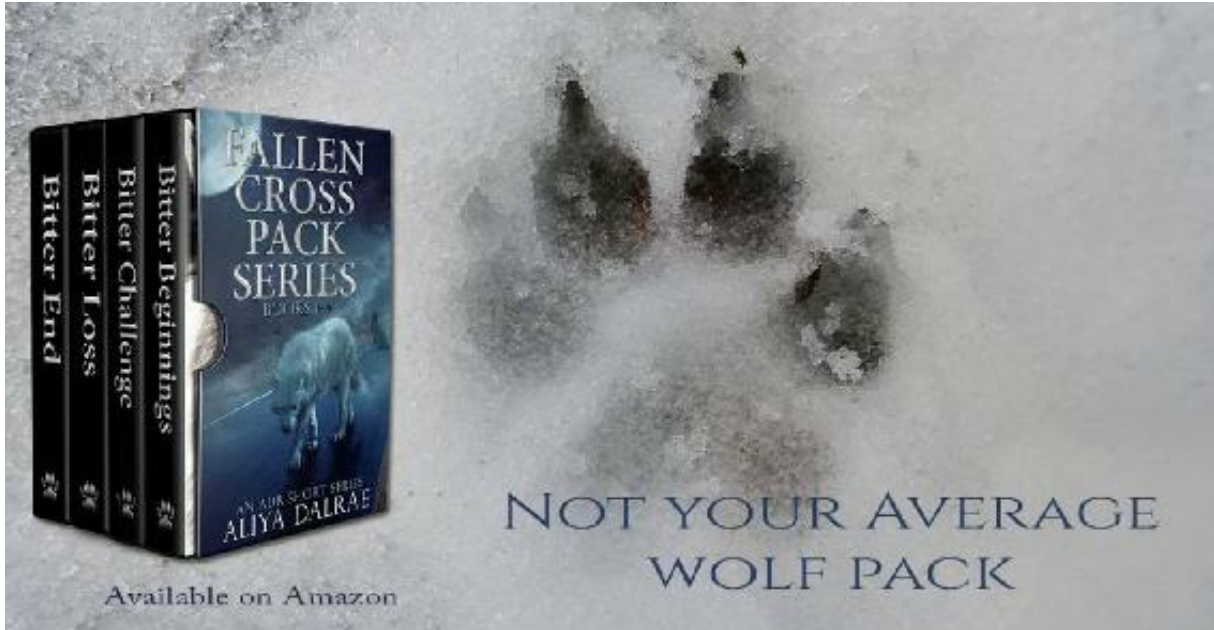
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**[FALLEN GODS \(Viper & Sasha\)](#)**

# THE FALLEN CROSS PACK SERIES



Patrick O'Connell was a family man with a wife he loved and a child they adored. A fateful trip to the corner store robs him of everything he holds dear, including his humanity. This four-part series chronicles Patrick's change from regular Joe to Werewolf Alpha, following the fated couple's struggles to regain the life and love so cruelly torn from them.

**[BITTER BEGINNINGS](#)**

**[BITTER CHALLENGE](#)**

**[BITTER LOSS](#)**

**[BITTER END](#)**

**[THE FALLEN CROSS PACK BOX SET 1-4](#)**

**[BITTER BEAUTY](#)**



# SHORT STORIES

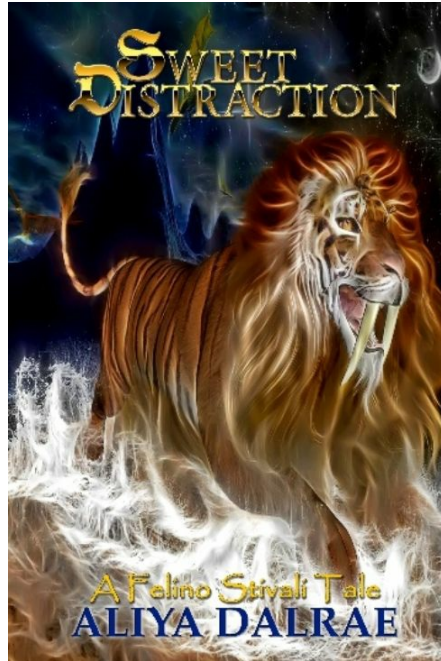


## BEFORE JESSICA THERE WAS ANNA...

**Malcolm Gatta was a normal Feline Shifter with a normal Shifter life. However, the arrival of a new Clowder member has set him on a journey of love and loss that will lead him down a path of darkness... a path from which he would rather not return.**

**Bittersweet is a prequel to the Jessica Sweet Trilogy, covering the four years prior to Malcolm's arrival at Jessica's home. Take a peek into the life of everyone's favorite Shifter. You'll never look at King Kat the same.**

**[BITTERSWEET](#)**



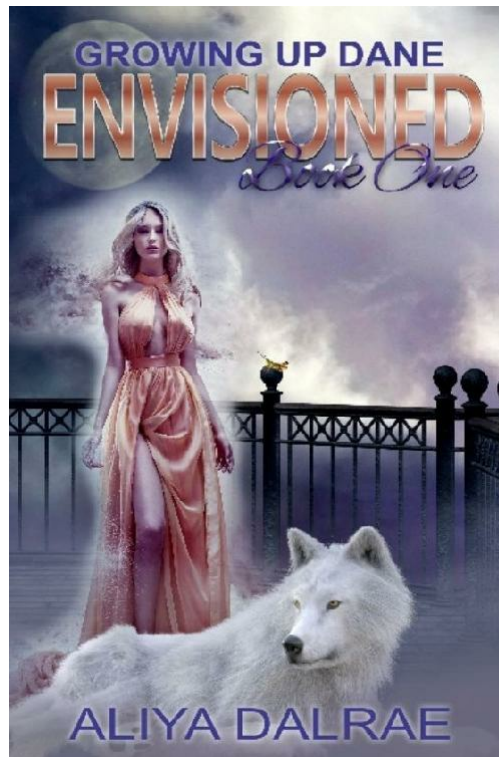
**Kythryn's heart is broken...**

**The man she loves just married her sister, and in response she's decided a night of heavy drinking is in order. When a tall, dark and mysterious man, a cat Shifter like herself, no less, walks into the bar wearing high boots and a duster and makes a strange request, she cannot help her curiosity. (Because, you know, cat.) Following him out of the bar may be a mistake, but it's one that will change her life forever.**

**\* Sweet Distraction is the prequel to the upcoming Felino Stivali Tales series. It can also be read as a prequel to the Fallen Cross Legion series.**

**[SWEET DISTRACTION](#)**

## GROWING UP DANE YA SERIES



**Sweet Sixteen and Never Been Kissed?  
Maybe, but...**

**Allie Dane, teenage Werewolf and emerging Alpha, has been tested her entire life, and always come out on top. Being the only paranormal in an all-human high school should be a piece of cake. Then the killings start, and with them emerges a familial trait Allie thought to have passed her by. Seeing visions of her classmates taken out one by one is bad enough... knowing who's doing it is even worse.**

**As if her plate weren't full enough, there's a new kind of Shifter in town and he has his sights set on Allie. He's tall, dark, and OMG hot, and while his attentions aren't unwanted, his motives are questionable at best. Then he looks her in the eye and says those five little words she could never refuse: "Allie, I need your help."**

# Envisioned: Growing Up Dane Book One