



DARK FLAME

KAT SILVER

FLAME BORN
SERIES



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Flame-Born #1

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Proofread by facebook.com/TanjaOngkiehongEPS/

Cover Art by bookflydesign.com

Interior Design by Stephanie Anderson at alt19creative.com

ASIN: B08GKWXSFZ

Published by:



Dedication

For my beloved critique partner, Lee Colgin.
This book wouldn't even be finished without your never-ending patience
with my fusspot ways.
Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my fabulous critique partners, including Lee Colgin (If you like vampires and shifters, go check out her books. You'll love them.), Sebastian Black (He also has paranormal novels to go see), and my many writer friends in my online writer group, who tell me it straight, but always keep me pepped up with encouragement. I love you. I need you. Thank you so much.

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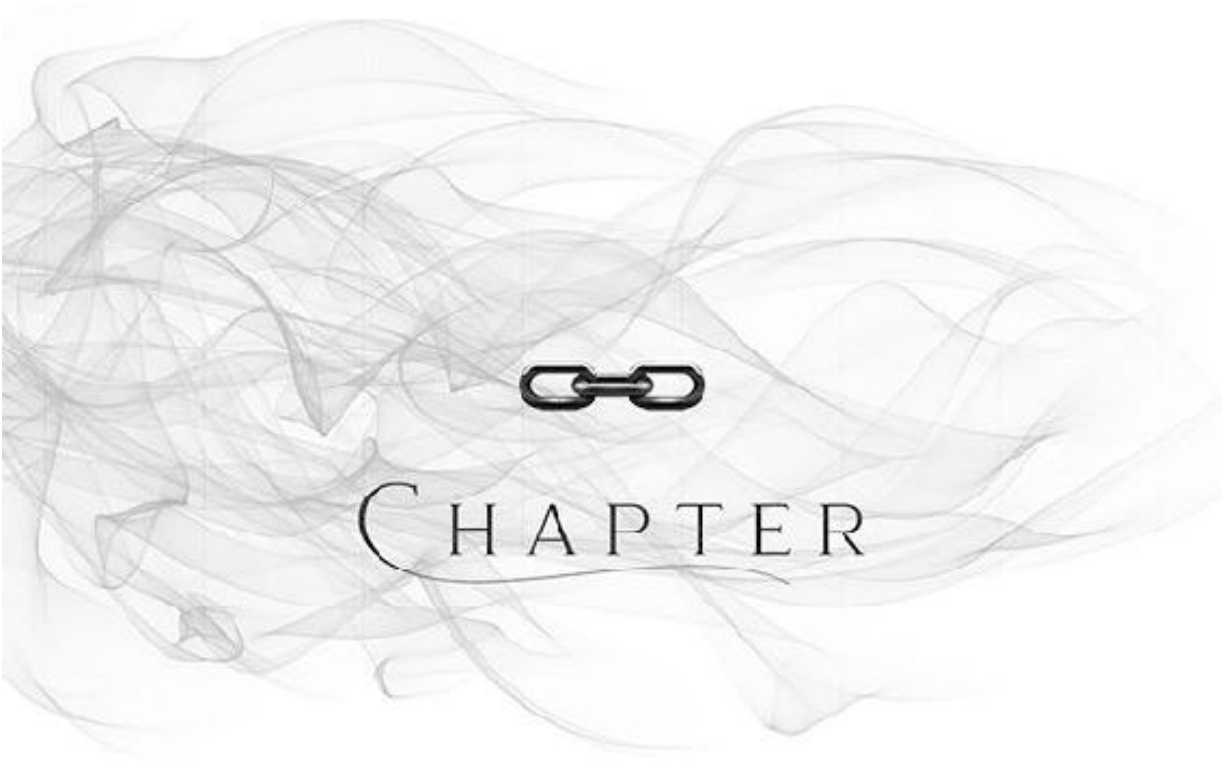
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1

The tall, elusive figure has followed me for the last three months. The shadow. My silent tail. Whether I'm at my job in the café or relaxing in my one-room flat, I only need to look outside to find him standing across the road. Watching me. A faceless darkness. A mysterious presence that lights my nerves and constricts my chest.

I can't tell what he looks like. Hell, I can't even tell what he's wearing. He's nothing more than a silhouette. A spooky intangible darkness that seems to swallow the light. I get the vague impression of a man, a suit maybe, but that's all.

I feel his steady gaze, though. His eyes prick the skin of my neck.

When he first appeared, I tried to face off with him. Probably foolish; how do you fight a shadow? But I've trained in martial arts for years, won a few competitions, and I was feeling pissed off enough to give it a go.

“What the fuck is your game?” I roared at him, stomping across the street to shove my fist in his invisible face.

But the guy evaporated. Disappeared like a bloody apparition. That sent an almighty shiver through me. When I retreated to my side of the road, he reappeared as though he’d never left. I sensed amusement. Bastard.

I didn’t bother the police because nobody else sees him. People don’t glance in his direction. The boys in blue would assume I was a strawberry short of a punnet and dismiss me as a crackpot.

Maybe I am. Maybe he’s a figment of my imagination. Why would some shadow guy watch a twenty-six-year-old nobody? Why would he stand at the edge of a barroom while I drink my vodka? I’m cracking up, that’s why.

Another glance at the wall and he’s gone again. Only multicolored lights flicker across white paint. The electrified feeling dissipates, and my chest relaxes. Where does he go? I shouldn’t care, but the guy’s presence wakes this restless need deep in my belly. A want that I can’t name. A magnetic pull, almost like a spell.

I turn my back and finish my drink with a gulp, welcoming its dry sting hitting my throat. I’m not a big drinker, but I’ve found a few shots of vodka dulls the paranoia that I’m one step away from life in a straitjacket.

The bar’s packed, pumping bass, and the Saturday crowd filling the giant room with weekend buzz.

Terry, the barman, leans over the counter and waggles his thick brows at me. “Hey, Mickey.” He points a thumb behind him. “Mr. Hollywood at the end wants to buy you a drink.”

“What?” I look up to check out the guy indicated. Goose bumps pebble my arms. The man seems out of place. Out of time. I don’t know why Terry called him Mr. Hollywood. With his blond top knot, neat beard, and hard leather vest, he looks more like a Viking who’s lost his way to the battlefield.

When our eyes meet, the man’s intense silver gaze locks onto mine. He nods once, a curve at the edge of his lips.

Shit. He’s out of luck. I don’t swing that way.

“Tell him I’m good, will you, Terry?”

“Yeah, sure. You want a refill anyway?”

“I’ve probably had enough. Just give me a water.”

Terry plucks a bottle from the fridge behind him and leans across the bar again, showcasing his full-sleeve tattoos. “He’s been watching you for a while, that one.”

“Has he?”

He angles closer and nods slowly, a twinkle in his hazel eyes, and I grin because I know what’s coming. “Mmm. Bit of a looker too.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

Terry wipes the bar with his cloth, feigning nonchalance. “Mm-hm. Might be the adventure you need, Mickey boy. Meaty arms to spend a night in. You might discover you like it and your favorite barman was right all along.”

I roll my eyes. Terry’s easy manner and playful banter is one of the best things about this Irish-themed bar. But he’s an incorrigible flirt and convinced I only need the right kind of encouragement to see “the light.”

I raise my bottle of water and wink at the burly barman. “Why don’t you have a go, Terry? You can take him home to that love bed you keep telling me about.”

Terry sighs dramatically. “Those muscles would be perfect laid out across my Jamie Drake silks. But our blond Adonis only has eyes for you tonight. He obviously likes his men tall and broody.”

“Yeah, well, he’s gonna have to be disappointed. I’m not a beard man, see. Bit too rough for my sensitive skin. And what the fuck are Jamie Drake silks?”

Terry arches a brow, stroking his dark beard with thick fingers. “My dear Michael, I’m more than happy to introduce you to silk and the pleasures of man fur. You only have to say the word.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Keep hoping, big bear. You never know, I might mistake you for a hot chick one day and follow you home by accident.”

Terry sighs again. “I wait in earnest, oh broody one.”

He pushes off the bar and saunters over to the other side, affecting an exaggerated swish of his jeans-clad hips.

I chuckle. Terry isn't the first person to try and coax me over to the other team. I may be dark-haired, six foot, and muscular, but I've got a fresh-faced, pretty-boy look going on. I can't help it; I haven't aged a day since my eighteenth birthday. I can't even grow a beard. People seem to stereotype me, assume I'm into men. I've never been there, prefer the ladies. The assumption doesn't bother me, though.

And playing the field—any field—is fairly recent. I was a happily settled man for a while there. Lived with the love of my life, Louisa Mayfair—a chocolate-eyed brunette with the body of a goddess and the attitude to match.

Until six months ago, when said Goddess packed her bags and left me for another man. The only explanation for the sudden change was a note that said she hoped I would one day decide what I wanted. Whatever the hell that meant.

Funny how life can kiss you one day and punch you in the balls the next.

But three months ago, at the same time all the weirdness with the shadow began, I started feeling a pulsing pressure at the base of my spine and a tingling energy that circulates through my limbs like a fire. My body heats till I'm sweating a river, and I crave sex with the ferocity of a sixteen-year-old on Viagra. I have a permanent semi most days. If I don't get the release I need, I'm hot and edgy, the pressure builds, and the burn in my spine becomes unbearable.

I've picked up a woman two or three times a week in this bar. Terry calls me a man whore. I fear he's not wrong. But my trusty right hand isn't enough to relieve the tension.

My jeans pocket vibrates, my phone buzzing me a message. I tense, fingers hovering over my pocket. I've been having trouble with electronics too. The new tingling energy causes devices to spark and short when I handle them. It's stressing me out. This is my third phone in a month.

I pull it out, and the screen activates when I press the home button—so far so good. It's Anne, my aunt. The sister of my adoptive dad. We're not

close, but we both feel obligated to keep in touch. John adopted me at the age of ten, and he saved me from a childhood in hell. I owe him my sanity and my life. When he died of a heart attack eight years later, I swore I'd make sure his sixty-year-old sister had everything she needed. I spent the winnings from my fights to pay off her mortgage so she could retire. Now, I mostly leave her be, but we check on each other from time to time. For John.

I type a bland response, something cheeky that'll keep her sweet, but as soon as it's sent, the words dissolve into random pixels, sparks crackle and spit. Then the screen goes blank. I press the power button. Nothing. The phone's as dead as a stone.

Damn. My static hands are getting worse. I went through three toasters and two kettles before realizing it was me causing them to break.

"Michael. My name is Gabriel Flanagan. I must speak with you." I glance up to find the Viking who tried to buy me a drink standing over me, looking oddly serious. He must have gotten my name off Terry, that cupid traitor.

I can see what my friend means, though. Mr. Hollywood is a handsome bloke for sure, with striking silver eyes, but he definitely personifies the History Channel more than Tinsel Town. He's got plaits running through his hair on one side, and his hard leather vest looks like armor. A detailed silver symbol glitters on the vest's right shoulder—a circle enclosing a howling wolf, wings, and a growling cat, six dots in a line beneath. He's as odd as my illusory shadow, but this character is definitely real. I can smell the leather, and those steel knives on his belt glint in the bar light. The man's lucky the police aren't around; he'd be arrested.

I stuff the phone into my jeans and stand to edge past him to make my escape. "Er, listen, mate. I'm flattered an' all, but I'm not into dudes."

He's at least seven inches taller than me—a mountain in leather—wider in the shoulders too, but I think I can take him if he starts getting antsy about the rejection.

I give him an easy smile and point to Terry, who's watching my discomfort with a touch of concern. "Why don't you try Terry? He has a

love bed. With Jamie Drake silks.” Guilt twinges my chest for pimping out my friend, but tall and muscly is his type, so he won’t mind.

As I back away, heading for the safety of the dance floor, the guy reaches for my arm. “Michael, it’s important we speak tonight. You are in danger.”

Wow, this weirdo lays it on thick. He clearly thinks he’s at some fantasy cosplay event. I tug my arm from his grip. His eyes flit around the room as though checking for something.

I retreat farther and raise my palms. “Listen, man. You look real cool in your Viking warrior gear and everything, but I’m not into the role-playing stuff, all right? I hope you have a great night.”

I slip into the crowd, pushing my way to the center. I’m not much of a dancer, but the space is so packed I don’t think anyone will notice. I breathe with relief when the cosplay wannabe doesn’t follow.

I’m not there long before a looker with straight black hair down to her waist wraps her arms around my neck. Her eyes glitter like sapphires, even in the dim light.

“I’m Alyona,” she purrs into my ear.

“Michael,” I answer with a grin, trying to aim for charming rather than lusty. It’s tough. In her leather short shorts and next-to-nothing camisole top, she’s curvy in all the right places, smoking hot, and just my type. She smells of lilies and sweat and all the things a man longs for, and her touch tingles against my skin. Unusual.

“I have a soft spot for men with green eyes, Michael. Especially such a pretty shade of jade.” My name slides from her lips with a foreign inflection, Eastern European or Russian maybe. I’m surprised she can make out the color of my eyes in the dark of the dance floor.

“That’s good because I have a soft spot for beautiful women.” Okay, a bit corny, but I’m thinking on the fly here.

She gives me a sexy grin, the kind that could melt a man’s trousers off. “You want to dance with me, Michael?”

“If you’re asking.”

“Oh, I am asking.”

For the next hour, I'm pressed against soft curves, heat, and sensual promise. The bar and its crowds become a distant blur. We don't speak, but our bodies are conversing like long-lost friends, and when she asks me if I want to follow her outside, I'm not in need of persuasion.

She takes my hand and guides me through the press of squirming dancers, through a doorway, and out to the back of the building.

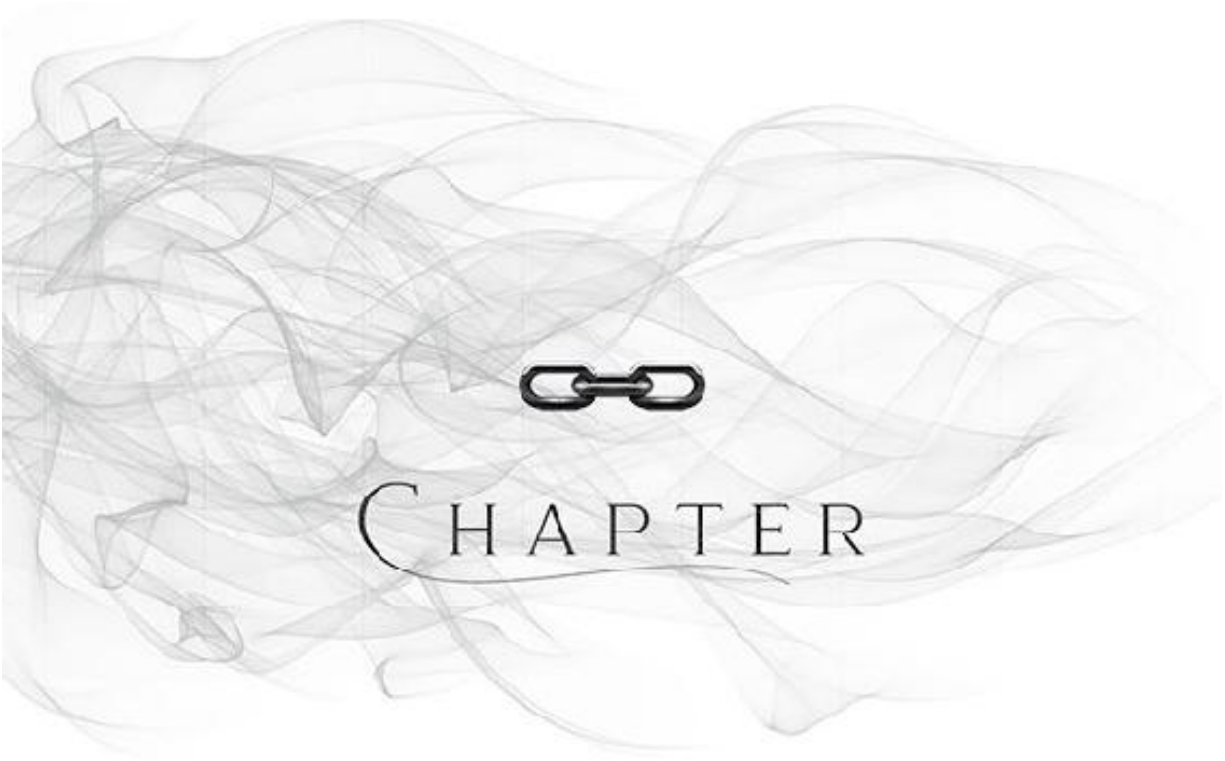
The alleyway isn't the most romantic of places. It's gray and dank and smells of bins and cigarette butts, but I barely notice. I've got an iron bar straining at my jeans, and my mind's swirling as though I've drunk a lot more than three vodkas.

With surprising ease, she pushes me against the wall and, wearing a salacious grin, drops to her knees, making easy work of my belt and fly. She wraps me with firm fingers, the black stone in her ring glinting in the dull lamp light, and guides my aching cock deep into her mouth. When her moist velvet heat envelops me, the groan that leaves my throat is long and heartfelt. This woman knows her way around a man's need. Her grip on my shaft is firm and confident. Her lapping tongue a sinful tease. Her mouth a haven of intense pressure driving me mercilessly toward release with ruthless skill. And every suck of her lips sends a tingling heat all the way down my willing cock. My head lolls back against the wall, muscles softening, hips thrusting gently as my fingers curl into her thick, silky hair.

Man, this is nice. I can forget everything when buried in the warmth of a woman. Even my illusory shadow becomes irrelevant.

But my mind floats like a cloud, and my thoughts scatter into an incoherent mess. The world feels distant, immaterial. The city noise dulls to a faraway echo, as if I'm underwater, sinking deeper with every pull of Alyona's talented mouth.

Until a woman's screeching plea cuts through the fog like a chainsaw. "Help! Help!"



2

My eyes spring open. Did the shout come from farther down the alley? It's hard to tell. My head's a mess of swirling mist.

"Ignore it, Michael," purrs Alyona. "They are playacting. Be with me."

I peer down at the woman who holds my dick in her fist. Her eyes glint orange in the dim light. Her face seems morphed somehow—cheeks sunken, brows more pronounced. An ugly fierceness dominates the pouty elegance.

"Yes," I hear myself murmur. "Be with you."

Wait a minute. What the hell am I saying? I shake my head. Try to push away the fog creeping into my thoughts.

"Help! Please, someone." The woman's cry punches straight through my gut. That isn't playacting; it's distress. I can hear the gruff voice of a man too. The sounds are coming from farther down the alley.

I pull out from Alyona's grip, awkwardly tuck myself away, and zip up my trousers. "I need to check that out. Someone needs help."

She bares her teeth, anger flashing across her eyes, and snatches at my T-shirt, but I step out of reach. What's with her?

"Michael," she snaps. "You will stay."

She doesn't raise her voice, but the order ricochets through my head like the blast of a megaphone. My body twitches, feet shuffling to follow her command. Who is this woman?

Walking backwards, I shake it off. "I'm going to check it out. You can do what you like."

Her eyes—definitely orange now—widen with shock, then narrow. "How did you do that, little man?" The seductive voice she used in the bar has gone. She sounds more like a pissed-off Medusa than a sultry siren at this point.

"Do what?" I don't know what she's talking about. What the hell is wrong with everyone tonight? I feel like I've stepped into the Twilight Zone.

I turn away, figuring I can deal with Miss Demanding in a minute, and stumble down the alley toward the location of the woman's cry. My limbs feel heavy, as though I've spent three hours with a kick bag.

Alyona follows. "He's broken away. Come in now."

I glance behind me. She isn't using a mobile, so who's she speaking to?

Whimpering and guttural breathing greet me from the far side of the next dumpster. When I turn the corner, I find a man holding a woman up against the wall by the throat. Her ripped shirt hangs open, exposing a crimson bra. Smudged makeup streaks her cheeks with black lines and scarlet blotches. Blonde hair falls in a tangled mess around her face. She's sobbing.

My mind snaps free of the fog. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The man's bald head whips around. He's a big bloke, same height as me but wider, with a face like a slapped bulldog. His cheap suit stretches tight across his muscled shoulders.

"Who the fuck are you?" he bites out.

I address the woman. “You need help?” It’s best to check. It looks rough, but it’s none of my business what people are into.

The man slams his hand across her mouth. Her blue eyes plead with me. Fresh mascara-stained tears slide down her cheeks.

I step closer. “Move your hand.”

Baldy sneers. “What you gonna do if I don’t?”

There’s no point arguing with the asshole. I jump forward and slam my fist into his face.

Baldy’s head whips sideways, his body crashing into the dumpster beside him.

I shake out my hand—hurts like a bitch. I know how to throw a punch, but hitting a face is like smashing your fist into concrete.

I check on the woman while her attacker remains distracted. She’s slumped to the ground, faux-fur coat gripped tight across her chest, blue eyes wide with fear. I want to pull her into a hug, take her somewhere safe, but I’ve got dickface to deal with.

“Go to the bar,” I say to her. “Find Terry, the barman. You can trust him. He’ll help you.”

She nods and scrambles to her feet, stiletto heels unsteady as she lurches away.

Baldy wipes blood from his nose. He sways but doesn’t take long to recover. His face twists with fury. “You little bastard.” He thrusts off the dumpster and flies at me.

I dodge sideways. It’s easy; he must have had a few. He lands on the concrete facedown but soon pushes up to try again.

“Let it go, man. You’re too drunk to fight.”

With a frustrated growl, he launches at me again, and from the shadows, Alyona steps up behind him. She spins him to face her as though he weighs nothing and, grabbing a fistful of his shirt to keep him still, stares him straight in the eye. “Leave.”

The man blinks. “Leave,” he repeats robotically, then stumbles away.

Well, shit. Why didn’t I try that?

“Thanks,” I say to Alyona, but when she turns, her face is all wrong. Her brow protrudes in a fierce line. Sharp incisors glint white between her lips. Her eyes burn like two flames in the dark.

A cold shiver slides down my spine. I don’t know what’s going on, but I know a predator when I see one.

I take a step back. “What are you?” My voice cracks on the question, fear tightening my throat.

She smiles. It isn’t a pleasant sight; it’s a raptor’s grin. “You’ll know soon enough, little Channeler.”

“You finished playing with the prince’s toy, Alyona?” The male voice comes from behind me.

I spin and find six men in the alley, all in identical black leathers. Not biker gear, more of a uniform: buckled vests, leather trousers, shiny boots, and long leather coats. They’re armed with swords.

More action movie characters.

I retreat a few steps until my back hits one of the dumpsters. “Who the fuck are you?”

The giant at the front steps forward and leers at me. His ugly face, a scarred ruin, twists into a vicious grin. “We’re the transport, sweetheart. Here to take you to your new owner.”

New owner?

Without taking his eyes off me, he addresses Alyona. “How the hell did pretty boy here break away from your Haze? You losing your edge?”

She scowls. Her face looks human again. “He was lucky. Rope and bag him, Jackson. I have better things to do with my time than stand around in shithole alleyways.”

Rope and bag him?

The one called Jackson flicks his hand, and the others move forward. He stands there like a leather-clad planet, thumbs hooked in his belt while two of them approach me with a folded length of rope.

Every muscle in my body springs tight, stomach twisting. Who are these people? I want to run for it, but the dumpster traps me from behind.

The men wear business-as-usual faces, as though this is something they do all the time. The one on the right goes to grab me, but I lash out with a kick. It doesn't stop him from coming. I try another, but it's batted aside. I throw a hard right—the man swats it from the air as if it's nothing. What the...? I go all out with a volley of rapid punches and knee strikes. He blocks every one with relentless ease and keeps coming.

Eventually the man on the left steps in, and they each grasp a wrist, and it's with such unusual strength that even though I give it everything I have—kick repeatedly, jab hard with elbows and knees, dodge and twist—nothing is enough. It's a shock. I'm used to being the strongest in a fight and the fastest. This is like battling animated statues.

The man on the right says, "Knock the fucker out, will you, Stenner? I can't tie him if he's struggling."

The other man rolls his eyes.

And the full force of his fist meets the side of my face. Hard.

My head snaps sideways, and pain shoots through my jaw, blurring my vision. My body meets the ground with a dull thunk, the back of my skull smacking the concrete. When I try to rise, the man thumps his foot on my chest.

I shove and jab at his calf, but it's immovable and metal-hard.

"Keep still, boy, or my next smack'll break that pretty face."

A cold awareness runs through my blood. I'm in deep shit. They're gonna tie me and bag me, and there's not a thing I can do about it.

I struggle to breathe, squirming to free myself, and I'm suddenly left grappling thin air when the weight jerks off my chest. The man flies backward, crashing into a dumpster. There's cursing from the other men, a cry of pain, then a crazy amount of jostling in the alley.

Looking up, I find the Viking bloke from the bar, fighting like a seven-foot machine, his whirling movements fast and brutal. He's fighting for me.

I try to rise, but heaviness weighs me to the ground. A sharp pain pulses through my skull. When I touch the back of my head, my fingers come away wet.

Alyona steps backward, calculation on her face. She glances down at me. "Another time, pretty Channeler."

She turns away and speaks rapidly in a language I don't recognize. A line of bright light appears in front of her, cutting downward through the air. As it widens into a doorway, she steps into it and disappears. I'm left blinking at an empty space. Where the hell did she go?

Movement catches my eye. From the opposite end of the alley, two new opponents join the fray. Both wear the same leathers as the Viking. What was his name? Something Irish. Flanagan. One guy, stocky with a shaved head, cuts through the men in black with a sword spinning in his hand. Beside him fights an Asian woman, her short black bob sliding across her jaw as she moves like the wind.

The clash and ring of steel on steel echo through the alley. Light flashes, night becoming day as lightning bolts streak from the hands and swords of the men in black, fizzing and crackling through the air. What the hell?

Flanagan fights weaponless and close combat. He's got two men attacking him, and they're losing. His opponents' swords seem to bounce off his skin, and he absorbs their electric streaks without effect.

The woman uses long knives. She knows how to work them too. Her opponent looms large, but she's so fast he's struggling to keep up. She returns the lightning with flashes of her own, and silvery flames lick her knives as she wields them with swift precision.

I've never seen anything like it. This is officially the freakiest night of my life.

I try to rise again and make it to an elbow, but my vision dims, the alley spinning. Collapsing back, I suck in lungfuls of air to keep from blacking out.

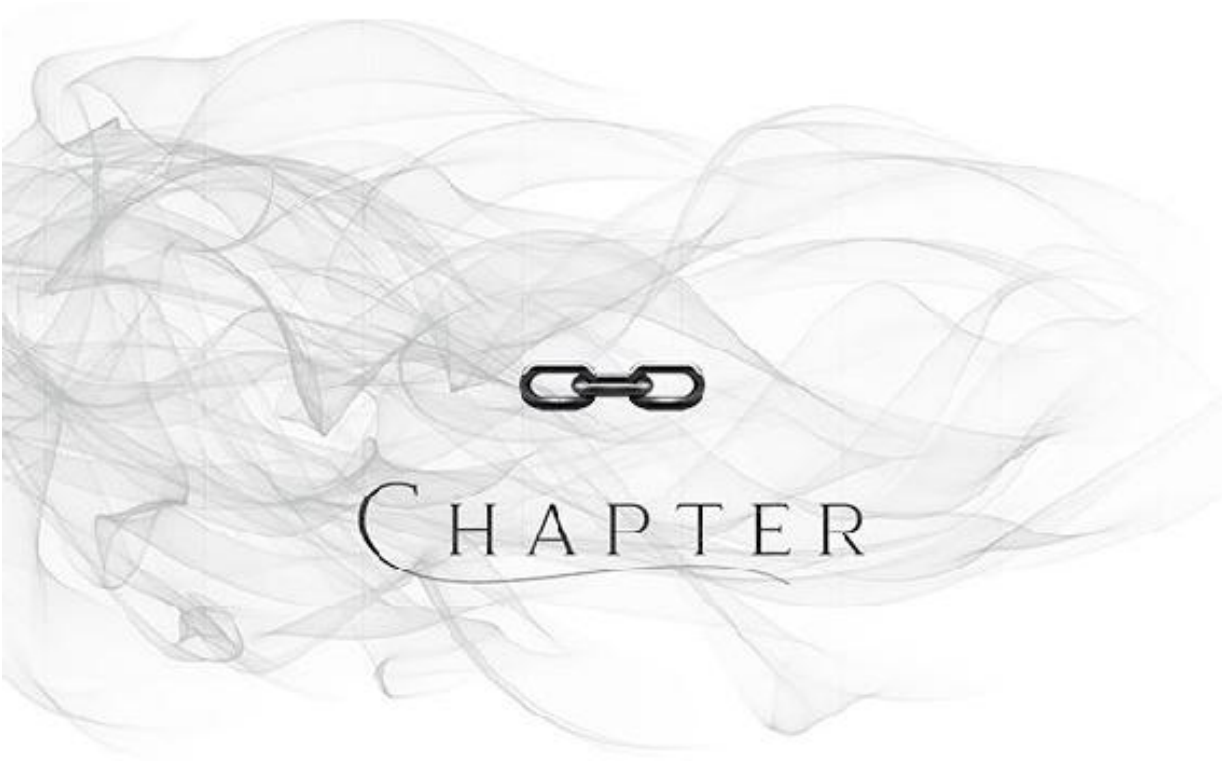
The alley goes quiet apart from the echoing steps of the last attacker running for his life. The dark of night returns. The fight's over.

Flanagan steps across to me and kneels. "Michael. Are you okay?"

I manage a slurred, "Whath the fuck," but my sight dims.

"You're safe now. Just rest."

Darkness sucks me down. Before it swallows me, I wonder, safe from what?



3

I wake with a shock, heart pounding. Did something bump the bed?

No, wait. Not a bed. A van.

I'm lying on the floor of a fast-moving box van, my body juddering against cold metal. Dark walls loom around me, street lights flashing orange streaks across their shiny surface. I can see people beside me in the vehicle but can't make them out. My vision blurs when I try to focus.

Brakes squeal. An abrupt change in direction slams me sideways. My shoulder collides with something hard—booted feet.

“Slow down, Seonu.” It's the husky voice of the Viking guy from the bar. Flanagan. He's crouching beside me.

“Alyona will soon be on our tail, Commander,” answers a female voice with an Asian accent—Japanese maybe.

“I am well aware. But I would still like us to arrive in one piece. Laasya, can you feel them behind us?”

“No, Commander.” This comes from a petite young woman in dark clothes sitting cross-legged on my other side.

The van slows. I realize Flanagan has his hand planted on my abdomen. My skin prickles strangely beneath his touch, even through my T-shirt. A tingling current fills my belly, running the length of my legs.

“Who are you? Where are we going?” I struggle to sit up, but he presses me back to the floor. My head lands on something soft. A cushion or a folded coat.

“Stay calm, Michael. Your skull took a nasty knock.”

I reach up to check the wound at the back of my head. The crusty surface feels tender, but my fingers come away dry. My skull throbs, though, as if little men with pickaxes mine for gold in my brain.

“Shouldn’t we restrain him?” asks the stocky man from the alley, perched on the side bench. Metal glints from weapons around his belt. “This feels off to me. He’s old for a new Channeler, just like the one who went kamikaze on us last year. And how did he break away from Alyona’s Haze?”

“I agree,” the driver says. “We should’ve taken him to the safehouse and locked him down till we could assess his risk level.”

Locked him down?

I jerk up, determined to sit this time, but Flanagan pushes me back again with barely any effort, even though I resist.

“Settle. You are not in danger.”

I peer up at his face through my hazy vision. All I can make out are glittering eyes and the highlights in his dirty-blond hair. “What the hell’s going on?”

“My name is Gabriel. Commander Gabriel Flanagan.” He gestures to the other people in the van. “This is my team. We’re taking you somewhere safe. We are not going to restrain you.” He speaks curtly, the light accent I noticed in the bar more obvious now. Scandinavian, I think, but with an odd lilt to his sentences. He returns his hand to my abdomen, that peculiar sensation rousing again. Tingles surge from my lower spine as if rushing to meet his touch, causing a strangely pleasurable feeling. Like the burst of

sherbet on the tongue, only magnified, streaming through the flesh of my belly and concentrating in my groin. In fact, it's giving me a boner.

I grip his wrist to push him off me. "Get your hand off my—" Long bolts of silver static crackle between us. I jerk my fingers back. "What the hell?"

"It's called Flame. It's why Alyona tried to bind you. Why those men tried to take you. And it's why we want to help." He presses down on my chest till I'm lying flat, then settles his hand back on my abdomen. "I'm Grounding your Flame. Some types of Channelers, like you, store the energy. If I don't siphon it from your body, the vehicle will stop working. I'm sure you've already experienced this problem."

I peer down at my hand, eyes wide, expecting my fingers to sprout more lightning. I've had things spark around me, but not my own fingers. They look normal now.

"That's why I can't use a phone?" I ask. "Because of this Flame?"

He nods. "That's right. The Flame is a supernatural energy. Found everywhere. Less so around high concentrations of iron. But it doesn't mix well with technology—electronics are useless around it. You will learn to contain its effect."

Supernatural energy? Is he pulling my leg? "How do I get rid of it?"

"You don't. You're Flame-born, Michael. A Channeler. A reality you will adapt to. Alyona and her kind *use* the Flame-born, enslave them. That's why we're helping you."

I grasp my thumping head. Has somebody slipped me crazy pills? I can barely absorb what he's saying.

I'm about to ask another question, but Flanagan says, "Rest for now. We can explain everything later. Let's get you to safety first."

Safety? I haven't let go of the *lockdown* comment yet.

I need to get my bearings. I make a third attempt to shove up from the floor. Flanagan thumps his hand on my sternum to stop me, but he doesn't push, only prevents me from rising.

I grasp his wrist, ignoring the sparks shooting off my fingers. "Get the fuck off me, man."

The driver's voice cuts in, "Sir, the dashboard's going haywire."

“You must remain calm, Michael.”

“I’ll stay calm when I know who you are.” I try one last thrust upward, and he relaxes his hold, letting me rise, but my move makes my head spin. I grasp my temples, nausea forcing me back to the metal. “Shit. What’s wrong with me?”

It’s the young woman who answers—Laasya. “Concussion. You’ll be fine. The wound is already healing. It’s probably best to lie still, though. Are you feeling any nausea at all?”

I squint up at her and get a sense of light brown skin with horn-rimmed glasses and messy dark hair. “Yeah. A bit. And my eyesight’s off. Everything’s blurred.”

“Let’s see if I can help you with that.” She places a delicate hand on my forehead and her other on my stomach. Flanagan moves his giant paw to my thigh. Not a better position. The feel of that one hand completely drowns out Laasya’s gentle touch. My groin fills with the tingling sherbet sensation he’s drawing from my body, and my dick loves it, twitching out a request for friction. It’ll have to wait. Getting off isn’t exactly a top priority right now. Thankfully the van’s interior is dim enough to hide my reaction.

Laasya closes her eyes and takes long, deep breaths. With each exhale, steady warmth flows from her hands and sinks into my flesh. The heat cascades through muscles and limbs until tension melts into pliancy. My body sags against the floor. Details replace blur. The van’s interior sharpens. My stomach stops its attempt to give me back my vodka.

“That’s some trick,” I comment, able to see the face behind the glasses now. She looks about eighteen but could be older. Though a waif of a woman, she’s cute. Her plain features are saved by big brown eyes and a button nose.

Her thin lips twitch with a bashful smile. “The effect is temporary, but it will help while we’re moving.”

I cast a glance at the van’s four occupants.

Flanagan’s bulk looms to my right, Laasya to the left. I twist my head up to see the driver. The only visible part of her is a shiny black bob. I assume it’s the Asian woman I saw fighting in the alley.

The stocky man on the bench glowers at me when I check him out. A square-jawed, blue-eyed bruiser with a shaved head, and the same suede trousers and hard leather vest as Flanagan, but a darker brown. Same silver symbol on the shoulder too, only with two dots beneath instead of five. Some kind of soldier, maybe?

He must have every option of knife and sword on his person, as well as the folded crossbow hanging from his belt. Not sure what these people have against guns. Maybe the Flame makes them useless or something, but from the way this man holds himself, I get the impression he knows what to do with the steel he's packing.

If I need to escape these people, I could overwhelm Laasya, but against Flanagan and Mr. Happy there, I don't stand a chance.

My head flops back to the cushion. Whether these people are friend or enemy—and right now, the jury's still out—I'm not getting away from them unless they want me to. But they won't be *locking me down* without a fight.

When I look back up at Flanagan, he's watching me, blond brows pulled close, his expression a mix of concern and curiosity. As our gazes meet, I'm struck again by his strange eyes. They're not weird the way Alyona's in the alley were, but they are unusual. They glint in the dim light like diamonds.

"Feel better?" he asks.

"Yeah. Thanks."

He gestures to Mr. Happy with his spare hand. "This is Sergeant Mason. The driver is Captain Seonu. And you've met Laasya. We're called Guardians: specialized Channelers who police the supernatural world. This particular team keeps Channelers away from Alyona and her kind. Laasya here is the team's witch."

Guardians? They sound like something from a Marvel movie. And who knew witches were a thing?

I give Laasya a smile but ignore the sergeant. "And what about the shadow guy?" I ask. He's got to be one of their scouts. "Is he with you?"

"What shadow guy," Mason asks, eyes narrowing.

Flanagan and Laasya share a look.

"No," Flanagan says. "He's not with us."

“Is he one of them, then? Alyona’s crew?”

A dark expression crosses his face. “There’s no need to worry about him. You’re safe now.”

Yeah? I’m not a hundred percent sure on that. I push myself up, done with lying down. I need answers. Nobody tries to stop me, but Flanagan says, “You must stay calm, Michael. You’re still charged, and your Flame can upset the van’s electrics.” He leaves his huge hand on my thigh as though it belongs there. The tingle continues. In fact, I can now feel the same sensation where his arm presses against mine, even through my leather jacket. I ignore my persistent arousal.

“I’m calm,” I snap, resting my back against the side bench. I can put up with his touch for now, but only if they tell me where they’re taking me and I’m happy with their answer.

“Right,” I say. “I want to know where the fuck we’re going.”



4

“C ommander!” shouts Captain Seonu. “The van lights have quit.”

Mason swears. Flanagan looks at me.

“I’m calm,” I protest. Apart from my rapid heartbeat, my churning stomach, and the need to shag something.

Flanagan’s mouth curves with a knowing smile.

“What?” I ask. It’s not his hand arousing me. I’m straight. It’s those tingles passing between us. Definitely the tingles.

He speaks to Laasya. “Can you feel Blood Servants following?”

Blood Servants?

“No, sir. Not at all.”

He raises his voice to address the driver. “Seonu, find somewhere to stop. We’ll call for my car.”

“We’re coming up to the industrial estate,” Seonu says. Her accent is definitely Japanese. “I can pull into a parking lot at the back, sir.”

“Good. Good.” Flanagan pronounces the word as *gud*, his Scandinavian accent clipping it. An international crew, it seems. He turns to me. “While we wait for pickup, I will explain everything you need to know.”

I just nod. I want answers, but I’m not convinced I’m safe with these people. I can’t help wondering if the stop will give me a chance to escape.

Mason throws me a dark look before addressing his commander. “This is way off, sir. The Channeler shouldn’t need this amount of Grounding. Not with a True Grounder siphoning off his Flame. And why aren’t they following?”

I meet his hostile gaze. I’ll not be intimidated, even by a man wearing enough weapons to take on an army.

Flanagan remains calm. “Michael’s Flame is strong. It will take time to subdue. It’s likely the Blood Servants intend to meet us at the steelworks. When you call for the car, Seonu, tell Nelson I want three units to be waiting there.”

“Three units, sir?” Laasya queries. “You think they’ll be there in force?”

“I think the prince will be very curious about a Channeler this strong. He will no doubt send witches as well as Servants.”

“And where he goes, the Blood Guard goes. Fucking wonderful.” Mason throws me another suspicious glower.

I have no idea what they’re talking about—Blood Servants, Blood Guards, princes, but I get that Flanagan means we’ll be attacked at some point. Mason clearly thinks that’s my fault. If it were up to him, I’d be locked down by now. Flanagan appears friendly, but his touch has a possessive edge. I get a strong sense this rescue isn’t only about my safety. Even though he’s been reassuring me, if I decide I want to leave, I bet all the steel on Mason’s belt the commander would have a problem with that.

The van swerves, tipping everyone to the right. I brace myself using the van’s side bench so I don’t have to grab Flanagan’s leg. After a few more changes in direction, the van slows. A faint white glow replaces the glare of orange streetlight. Traffic noise diminishes to a distant drone.

When we come to a stop, Flanagan gives out his orders. “Seonu, call base and tell them to send backup. Mason, walk a perimeter. Laasya, you know what to do.”

They all bark a “yes, sir.”

Seonu slips out and strides off. Mason throws the back doors open, jumps down, and marches the other way. Laasya bounces to her feet and follows but remains close, her eyes scanning the area.

I note her lack of soldier leathers. She wears a brown linen dress, long enough to touch her ankles, and a matching woolen cardigan. Pouches dangle from the leather belt that cinches her waist. The way the plain clothes hang off her thin frame gives her a frumpy look. I get the impression practicality trumps beauty in Laasya’s world.

Feeble moonlight makes it difficult to see much of what’s outside the doors, but judging by the white parking lines crisscrossing the ground and the dark mass looming beyond, we’ve pulled in at the back of a factory on the north side of the industrial estate. I used to pass it every day on my way to the hospital when I worked there as a porter. Had to leave that job on account of my electric fingers—a lot of vulnerable people depend on electronics in a hospital, and anything with wires doesn’t seem to last long with me around.

At this time of night, these buildings will be empty, the surrounding area free of pedestrians.

Laasya walks a few feet from the van and settles on the ground cross-legged. She bends her head and, resting her hands palm up on her knees, begins chanting.

“She’s forming a glamour around the vehicle,” Flanagan explains. “If anyone passes, they will see an empty space. Guardian teams always travel with a witch. They keep us hidden from questioning eyes.”

“Is that how you got past the bouncers at the bar with those knives on your belt?”

He studies my face, his mouth curving. “That’s right. And you shouldn’t be able to see anything but a business suit either.” His tone turns dry. “I

realized you could when you accused me of looking cool in my Viking warrior gear.”

Without giving me a chance to respond, he gets up, his movements smooth for a man of his size, and I take it as my cue to move too. I shuffle to the door, and I’m about to step out, but he turns and plants his hand on my chest.

“Don’t leave the van, Michael. Sit here. I will continue to Ground you while we wait for the car.”

I don’t appreciate him ordering me around. I’m not one of his bloody soldiers. I need to stretch, breathe some air.

“I’m just gonna walk around a bit. Okay?”

He steps sideways into my space. He doesn’t push, but he doesn’t move his hand either. I knew I wasn’t free to leave. I’m sick of him touching me like he has the right.

I grip the pressure point by his thumb to twist his hand off my chest. The move should induce excruciating pain, forcing him to jerk away. I’ve executed the defense countless times. His hand doesn’t budge. Not an inch. His arm holds like a steel girder. Tiny sparks crackle between us, but he just looks down at me, watching my struggle with interest.

I glower up at him. “Move your fucking hand.”

“No,” he says matter-of-factly, and the bastard’s mouth twitches as if he finds my aggression cute. Which pisses me off.

I keep hold of his wrist and level my fury at him.

I’ve faced beasts in martial arts competitions, stared them down, but I find Flanagan’s diamond gaze a hard one to meet. He appears at ease, and yet his eyes glow with an intensity that could burn through bone. The hint of something dark and menacing flickers in their depths. I’m pretty good at reading people—you have to be when you grow up in foster care; it’s how you survive. This man may appear calm and patient, but his eyes tell me he’s dangerous. Unyielding and resolute. In other words, hard as fuck.

I drop my hands. “I want answers.”

“And you’ll get them.”

My legs burn with the need to bolt, to leave this madness behind, but given the fluid way Flanagan moves, even if I could get past him, I don't think I'd make it far.

I shoot him one last sour glare and step back to perch on the lip of the van floor, feet braced on the ground. He nods his approval. Arrogant bastard. My knuckles crack as I grip the van's metal edge.

Laasya still chants cross-legged on the asphalt, her voice a steady murmur.

I eye the knives strapped to Flanagan's belt. "So I'm your prisoner, then?"

He perches beside me, mirroring my posture. The silver symbol on the shoulder of his vest shimmers in the low light. "You're at risk of capture and slavery, Michael. Your Flame is out of control. Guardian protection is not imprisonment, but we will restrain Channelers who pose a risk to others."

Restrain. That word clangs through my mind like the toll of a bell.

I don't like enclosed spaces of any kind. Cars, lifts, cubicles, even small rooms used to cause a panic attack. A serious inconvenience for my foster parents when I was a kid. It certainly made the school run interesting. I'm better now. I can breathe deep and fix my mind on other things. I didn't even notice it in the van, though I had plenty to keep me occupied. But *restrained. Locked up.* Those phrases chill me to the bone.

So does slavery.

"What is a Blood Servant anyway? Who's this prince you mentioned? What do they all want? That woman, Alyona, didn't look human."

Flanagan gives me a wry smile. "That's because she isn't human. She's an Anlu'kyr witch."

"Anloo what?"

"Anlu'kyr. The people of the blood. You will know them better as vampires."

I check his face, expecting a grin. His expression remains sober.

"Vampires? As in creatures who drink blood, sleep in coffins, avoid holy water. The undead. Those sorts of vampires?"

He laughs a deep rumble. “They’re not undead. Well, most of them aren’t. They’re a supernatural species. They sleep in beds, have no aversion to holy water, and though they live on blood, they can eat normal food as well if they choose to. But they are almost immortal, and as fast and strong and lethal as the legends suggest.”

I search his face for humor again. I’ve read enough vampire books to be familiar with the legend, including the original Dracula. But it’s hard to swallow what he’s telling me. I wouldn’t believe him at all if I hadn’t seen Alyona’s beauty morph into monster. Those teeth, like cat fangs, only a hell of a lot bigger. I remember my response too. A primal revulsion. An instinctive recognition of something deadly.

Vampires. Real-life vampires. Well, shit. I really am in the Twilight Zone.

Flanagan watches my reaction with interest, almost as though he’s verifying my ignorance.

“And Blood Servants?” I ask.

“Channeler bloodlines who willingly serve the Anlu’kyr in exchange for Anlu’kyr blood. It makes humans faster and stronger, heals any illness, and can triple a lifespan.”

That explains the freaky strength of those men in the alley.

“What do these vampires want with me?”

“To use you. Anlu’kyr bodies create Flame from light. Especially sunlight. If they generate too much, they combust. They use Channelers to absorb the energy so they can walk safely in daylight. This is why you are valuable to them. They want to enslave you, use your ability, your blood.”

A cold shiver runs the length of my spine. I was nearly captured by bloodsuckers. The thought leaves me nauseated. If it wasn’t for the Guardians, I could have ended up as Alyona’s personal blood bag. Holy crapping graveyards.

Flanagan shifts closer. His touch ignites the tingles again, all along my arm and thigh where our bodies meet. I’m still pissed at him, but I know he’s doing it to Ground me, so I don’t move away. I ignore the instant arousal. Again. The turned-on sensation must be caused by the Flame energy passing between us or something.

“I know you are unsure of our protection,” he says quietly. “You think you may be safer without us, but if Alyona’s collection team successfully Hazes you, you will do anything they want.”

“Hazes me? Does that make you mindless or something?”

“A Haze is a deep sexual trance, caused by an overwhelming amount of Flame. New Channelers are prone to this state anyway, but the Anlu’kyr use it as a way of keeping their slaves docile and compliant. Like chainless bondage. You wouldn’t be mindless, but you would crave constant stimulation and do anything the Anlu’kyr told you to for the promise of sexual release.”

Chainless bondage? I shudder. A slavery of the mind as well as the body. That sounds out-there terrifying. I’m beginning to get a stark picture of how much shit I’m in.

“Fuck.”

Flanagan nods. “Yes. And I’m sorry. I know this is a lot to take in.”

A lot to take in? A bomb has gone off in my head. My thoughts are like bumper cars, chasing around in my mind and crashing into each other.

Flanagan goes quiet, letting me stew for a moment. Laasya has moved from her spot on the ground to circle the van, hands deep in her cardigan pockets. Mason has returned from walking a perimeter. He leans against the vehicle’s door with his back to us, pretending he’s not listening to our conversation.

When I look back at Flanagan, he’s studying me again.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re a mystery, Michael. Channelers mostly come from known bloodlines—families aware of the supernatural world. We always background check the unknowns. We found little on your past.”

I frown. I feel uneasy knowing the Guardians have checked me out. I don’t know why they didn’t find anything.

“I was fostered, then adopted. So...”

He shakes his head. “We checked both agencies. They had your name, but no details were attached to your records. Either your information has

been wiped, or your details were never there.” He searches my face while he waits for my answer. Does he think I’m lying about who I am?

I shrug. “That’s news to me.”

“Do you know anything about your biological parents? Anything at all?”

I take a long breath. I’m always reluctant to talk about my parents. I feel like I’m sharing a sob story. “They were found murdered in the woods when I was a baby. I was with them. Obviously I don’t remember anything. The police report said their throats were slashed. Nobody came forward to identify them or claim me, so I have no information on them at all.”

That wasn’t strictly true. I did have a piece of parchment found on my mother. It came in the post with a letter from the foster agency six months ago. Some admin clerk had cleared out a basement and found case files rotting in a corner. While cataloging the new data, he came across the parchment and the instructions it should be passed on to me when I reached sixteen. It was only ten years late. It didn’t tell me much either. Though the yellowed paper had once held a longer note, only three faded words remained on its surface, written in a cursive script.

Lancaster. Blackriver. Sabel.

The parchment was the reason I moved to Lancaster. I’ve always burned with the need to know what happened to my parents, why they were murdered. I even dreamed of finding their killer. The paper gave me hope and a potential surname. But the move was useless. There’s nothing here called Blackriver and no one with the name Sabel.

I decide to tell Flanagan. There seems little point in keeping it from him, and he might be able to shed light on the information.

I open my mouth to speak, but before I form words, the shadow appears. Standing right in front of me—a looming black figure blotting out the moonlight. I jolt in my seat and stare up at him, still unable to make out a face. He shakes his head once and raises a finger to his lips. Then he disappears like he’s never been there. I’m left with my mouth open.

What was that? A warning? Don’t mention the words on the parchment?

I'm frozen, hands gripping the metal. When I turn to Flanagan, he's watching me with narrowed eyes. "What did you just see, Michael?"

I snap my mouth shut and feign nonchalance. "Huh? Nothing. Just thinking, that's all."

Mason spins around, hand on his scabbard, gaze scanning the parking lot. Flanagan signals, and after a quick glare at me, the soldier turns his back again.

The commander's frown has deepened into a scowl. "You were about to tell me something. About your parents. What was it?"

I don a neutral expression. "I told you I don't know anything about my parents."

It feels uncomfortable lying so blatantly. I've always felt edgy when speaking an untruth. The commander was already suspicious of me, and this is going to make it ten times worse. Who the hell is that shadow? And why doesn't he want me to mention the parchment? But given I don't know who I can trust right now, I think I'll take his advice.

Flanagan's eyes flit around the parking lot before returning to study my face. It's clear from the deep groove in his brow he doesn't believe me.

I meet the intensity of his diamond-silver gaze with difficulty. He's not fooled. Flanagan seems the sort that doesn't miss a lot. He's about to say something, probably question me, but I'm saved by Seonu returning.

"Yes, Captain?" Flanagan snaps without moving his attention from me.

"Sir, the SUV is about to arrive. Nelson will meet us at the steelworks. Base reports the Blood Guard and three units of servants just left Dvamira Castle."

Flanagan shifts to face his captain. I let out a breath, relieved to be free of his scrutiny.

"Destination?"

Seonu straightens and folds her arms. Now she stands more closely, I see she's clearly Japanese, though her skin is pale and her eyes an unusual blue. She's only a few inches taller than Laasya, but her tight brown leathers accentuate a fighter's physique. The silver symbol on the shoulder of her vest has four dots beneath it. She throws a stinging ice-blue glare my way.

“You were right, sir. They mean to block us at the crossing to Blackriver Mansion.”

“Blackriver?” The word leaves my mouth before I can stop it.

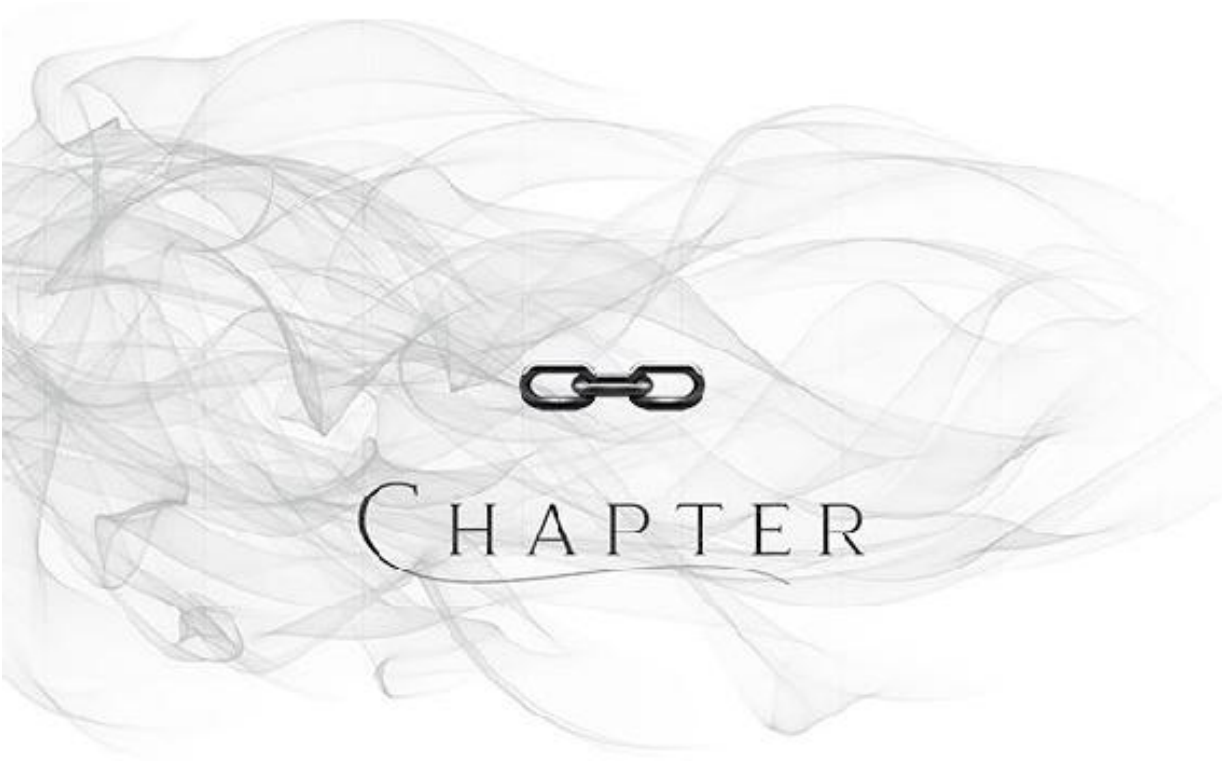
“Our base of operations,” Flanagan answers, turning to me again. “A training center for new Channelers. You’ve heard of it?”

So it’s not Blackriver the shadow doesn’t want me to mention. And the Guardians already know I live in Lancaster. That means it’s the surname Sabel he doesn’t want me to share. I avoid Flanagan’s renewed analysis of my expression by examining my dangling feet. “No. I’m just surprised. I’ve lived in Lancaster six months and never come across it.” Which is the truth.

“It’s not on any map. The compound is glamoured and protected by wards. It looks like a disused industrial site to any observer. It’s where we’re taking you. I’m hoping you’ll come without resistance.”

I can answer that question with an honest yes. This is the best lead I’ve had on my parents since receiving that scrap of paper in the post. I still don’t feel comfortable with these people, and they’re not sure of me either. But at this point, Dracula himself couldn’t stop me from going with them.

“No, no resistance,” I say. “Bring it on.”



5

Flanagan leaves me with Laasya, meeting Mason and Seonu away from the van for a private discussion. I lean against the door, trying to work out what they're saying. I have a strong feeling they're discussing me. Paranoia maybe, but I don't think so. Flanagan has his back to me, and Mason keeps glancing in my direction.

The scent of roses alerts me to Laasya's sudden closeness. She's on tiptoes, staring up to study my face as if I'm an interesting work of art.

She tilts her head to one side. "Your skin is completely smooth. Are you really twenty-six? You look younger than me, and I'm only twenty-one."

I tear my attention away from Flanagan to peer down at the woman beside me. Her face is so close I can see a smudge on her glasses. I had Laasya at younger than twenty-one. If somebody told me she was sixteen, I'd have believed them. Her lightbrown skin is as smooth as a baby's.

“Yeah,” I say, suppressing a sigh. I get this a lot. “I have to carry ID around with me. Even with my size, I’m mistaken for a teenager all the time.”

Laasya snorts. “Yes, I suppose you are very... Um...” She trails off, her cheeks darkening.

I throw her a teasing grin. “Very?”

Flustered, she steps back and waves an awkward hand at my torso. “You know. Well developed.”

Her choice of words makes me laugh. “Well developed, eh?”

She tuts and looks away, her face now a deep shade of puce.

I get the impression Laasya hasn’t had a lot of experience in the men department. I change the subject, not wanting to extend her discomfort. “So, this Blackriver compound. Flanagan said it’s hidden behind an industrial site. He made it sound like a concrete bunker with high walls. Is it?”

I don’t do high walls. I need things open, with easy access to the outside and the nearest door.

She glances up from inspecting the ground. “It’s not a bunker. It’s a mansion. It has a high wall, but its gardens are massive, surrounded by fields and woodland. It’s behind the industrial park and built inside a dimensional half-realm to hide it from prying eyes.”

Laasya’s matter-of-fact casualness suggests this is an everyday occurrence.

I stare at her. “Half-realm?”

She takes a deep breath. “Yes, it’s really interesting. It’s basically a—”

I raise a hand to interrupt her. “Sorry. You know what? Scratch that. I’m not thick, but no amount of words are gonna make me understand dimension-bending half-realms. It’s hidden. I get it. All I want to know is, once I’m in, how do I get out?”

Her expression turns sympathetic. “Oh. Well, you don’t. Not without the commander’s permission. There are guards at the gate, and you’d need a guide to cross over.”

I look back at Flanagan, still in deep conversation with his soldiers. He resembles a high wall himself with those wide shoulders and bulging arms.

I blow out a long breath, my stomach curling into a tighter knot. I don't do small spaces, I don't do high walls, and I don't do trapped. I hope Blackriver has some answers because I know for a fact Flanagan's not letting me out till he wants to, and if we come to blows, I'm not too proud to admit he'll bury me. As soon as I get there, I need to scout for another way to leave.

Flanagan's car arrives, a high-end Mercedes V class with darkened windows and off-road tires, more of a van than a car. The first hazy rays of dawn burn an amber glow across its shiny black doors. The driver parks it beside the van, so I assume he can see through Laasya's glamour.

Mason and Seonu stalk over and open the rear, exposing a weapons cache fit for a world war. Swords, knives, axes, and various sizes of crossbows line the trunk in neat rows. No guns, though. The Flame must interfere with firearms.

The two soldiers get busy dressing their belts, legs, and wrists with an assortment of mean-looking options. They're clearly preparing for serious battle. Makes me wonder how many of these Blood Servants will be there. A lot by the looks of it.

I've never been a weapons man myself, always relied on my fists, but knowing we're going up against immortal bloodsuckers leaves even my fingers itching for something long and sharp.

Flanagan slides open the side door and motions for me to get in. He steers me onto the middle of the back seat with a hand on my shoulder. Laasya enters from the other side, and the pair sandwich me, thighs and shoulders touching. Close enough for me to feel tingles with Flanagan. A few minutes later, metal clatters as Mason and Seonu plant themselves opposite, both watchful, eyes constantly scanning the parking lot. Odors of leather and sweat and Laasya's flowery perfume soon swamp the new-car smell.

The Merc's cream interior could house a small family. The leather seating is ample, but my chest tightens when Flanagan shuts the door. I take in a long, deep breath and exhale slowly. Riding inside a car isn't the issue it once was, but I'll always prefer a motorbike and the wind in my face.

Flanagan shouts to the driver, and we pull away. He catches my eye and hovers his hand over my leg. I sigh and jerk a nod—we won't be going far if he doesn't do his Grounding thing.

Once he settles his huge palm across my quad, the Flame energy rushes through my body to meet his touch. It takes my breath. My head lolls back against the headrest. I have to shift in my seat to adjust myself.

"Breathe," he suggests.

His strong fingers curl into my thigh, pushing my leg against his. A gesture of reassurance, I think. Yeah, not helpful. It leaves me wanting his hand in a very different place. Which is bloody confusing.

I decide firing off questions is my best coping tactic.

"I don't think I really get what this Flame is. You called it a supernatural energy. What does that mean?"

As I am squashed against him, Flanagan's baritone vibrates my chest. "The Flame sustains supernatural life. Without it, any creature like the Anlu'kyr will die. Ordinary humans cannot see it or feel it, but they are vulnerable to its effect. Channelers can both see it and use it."

"So how come no one else here needs Grounding, then? Aren't you all Channelers?"

"Experienced Channelers learn to contain the Flame and can travel with ease. It's the untrained who cause the problems, especially Wielders. A Wielder's body absorbs Flame like a battery."

"There are different kinds of Channelers?"

For an answer, he lifts his chin at the captain. "Show him, Seonu."

With a creak of leather and a clunk of weapons, Seonu shifts forward in her seat, her shiny bob sliding across her jaw like black silk. She offers me a deadpan expression and holds out a slim hand, palm up. A spark flashes over its surface. From nowhere, a silvery-white flame appears.

My jaw drops. No way.

The inch-tall light flickers and bobs in the center of her palm like a gas flame.

I shake my head, wide eyes glancing between the light and the woman's steely-blue gaze. The way she's looking at me, you'd think I had horns. Or

fangs. She doesn't trust me any more than the sergeant does.

Before I can ask one of the dozen new questions now hustling for attention in my mind, Mason gently wipes his palm along the underside of Seonu's hand, and the flame blinks out, extinguished by his touch.

Flanagan explains, "Seonu and Mason are both Channelers, but Seonu is a Wielder, and Mason is a Grounder. A Wielder's body collects and concentrates the Flame they absorb, and they can use it in a similar way to the Anlu'kyr—Haze, stun, burn, even kill. Mason's body grounds the Flame. He absorbs the energy but immediately diffuses it into the earth and the environment around him or into his Wielder if she needs more. This ability makes Grounders resistant to the energy's effects." He fixes me with a look. "This is why we need Channelers, Michael. Their ability makes them effective soldiers when facing supernatural creatures of any kind. We protect the vulnerable from the Anlu'kyr and anything else that wishes to take advantage."

There are other kinds of supernatural creatures? My mind races through an inner Wikipedia of possibilities. Fairies? Ogres? Dragons? If vampires are real, what the hell else is out there?

Flanagan's waiting for me to answer his implied invitation. I get the impression he's testing me, but I blink away from his sharp gaze. As cool as it sounds, I have no desire to be somebody's super soldier or to join an organized operation with uniforms and rules. My plan is to check out this Blackriver place, learn what I can about my parents, and once I understand how to control this crazy energy, find a way to leave.

I gesture to Flanagan's hand resting on my thigh as though it belongs there. "So, you're a Grounder too, I take it?"

He does a slow nod. "That's right."

His pale gaze hasn't left my face. He's still weighing me up, watching my reactions, assessing my authenticity.

"And what? The Flame energy doesn't affect you?"

"Grounders are still at risk. They can be Hazed or overloaded. Too much Flame can cause their bodies to short-circuit. I'm a rare type of Channeler, called a True Grounder. Any amount of the Flame can pass through me. I

feel it, but I'm not at risk of any side effects. A Neutral—that's any human with no ability to Channel—is easily Hazed and can die within seconds if overloaded."

"Shit. How come vampires don't rule the world, then?"

"Similar to other Flame-born creatures, the Anlu'kyr keep themselves hidden from the eyes of Neutrals. They may be powerful, but their procreation is slow. If they went head to head with humans, they might lose because of numbers alone. Plus, they're not invincible. Silver is a mild poison to them. Piercing their heart with anything will incapacitate them. Decapitation will end their life."

Good to know at least bits of the legends are true. I need to get me some silver. Or a nice fat stake.

Seonu settles back in her seat and continues her scan of the streets. The two soldiers sit with rigid postures, alert to every passing car. I'm already tense myself, my stomach's a twisted knot, and their edginess is ramping up my jitters. It's coming off them in waves thick enough to warp the air. I can't imagine what we're about to face. I have no reference except horror movies, but given the soldiers' unease, I don't think these vampires are the sparkly ones.

Laasya doesn't seem to share her colleagues' discomfort. She's looking out the window and humming an off-key tune to herself as though we're on our way to a Sunday picnic.

When I turn back to Flanagan, I find my gaze wandering along the line of his muscled thigh and lingering over the generous bulge in his crotch before I force my eyes upward. I have to tamp down the sudden desire to run my fingers across the stretched suede and get a feel of the muscles beneath. I take in the shape of his massive chest dressed in hard leather, the long rippling neck, and those thin plaits running through his blond hair at the side of his head before I finally meet his eyes. When I do, the heat I find there punches fresh arousal straight to my groin. He's watching me like I'm prey he's ready to devour. A soft knowing smile pulls at his lips again.

I jerk my eyes away. What the hell's come over me? I've never ogled a man in my life. Terry would rib me sore if he knew I was eyeing dick.

Flanagan doesn't seem the least self-conscious about this random erotic tension between us. Maybe it's a normal response to being Grounded. I bloody hope so, or I've got some serious navel-gazing to do.

I scramble for a cover to my blatant leering. "So what's with the whole *Lord of the Rings* look anyway? And that symbol on your shoulder?"

Flanagan's lips curve even more, but he runs with my deflection and taps the silver design on his vest. "This symbol is the Guardian motif—the wolf, the jaguar, and the wings of a raven. And I'm sure you've already experienced how uncomfortable normal clothing is for Channelers."

I huff a laugh. "Yeah, no kidding." My whole wardrobe is so itchy I've given most of my clothes to the secondhand shop. Wearing anything but organic cotton is like wearing a hair shirt. I've even abandoned underpants, preferring to go commando so I'm not constantly scratching my ass.

"Any material preventing the Flame from flowing freely irritates the skin. Only leather and thin natural materials are comfortable for Channelers. The Flame is highly concentrated at Blackriver, which makes it even worse. We have a specially made linen Channelers can wear. Otherwise, it's leather for everything."

"Right. Sounds great," I say without enthusiasm.

"You'll get used to all these changes. New Channelers usually adjust to the Flame within six months or so."

Six months? I was hoping more like six days.

Laasya gives me a friendly poke with her elbow. "Yeah, don't worry. You'll soon be a dab hand. Once you get used to constant discomfort, that is." She offers a comical grimace that makes me smile.

At least there's one friendly person in this group. Seonu and Mason are write-offs. Flanagan, I haven't worked out yet. The intense pull between us confuses me, and his friendliness is laced with suspicion. The shadow warned me not to give him the name on the parchment. The name that is possibly my true surname. I'm not going to trust a creepy shadow, but I can't trust Flanagan either.

The car takes a left, and we pull off the side road into the abandoned industrial site Flanagan mentioned. An old steelworks by the looks of it.

The lifeless bones of Lancaster's industrial era.

"Is this Blackriver?" I ask, peering out the window to spot the half-realm dimension thingy. I can see a distant high wall with a roof and castle turret jutting behind. Is that supposed to be hidden? In the foreground, broken windows stare back at me from hollow red-brick buildings. The eerie shells loom above crumbled concrete grounds and piles of discarded rubble. The old steelworks resembles a spooky ghost town from a zombie apocalypse.

I don't get an answer to my question. A deeper tension fills the car. Laasya stills beside me, Mason and Seonu curse, and Flanagan's hand grips my thigh. My stomach flips over—I'm pretty sure I know what's going down.

"How many, Laasya?" Flanagan asks.

"A lot," she answers. "Anlu'kyr too."

"Fuck," Mason says, checking his knives. Seonu does the same.

Flanagan shouts at the driver to stop the Mercedes, and I'm thrown against the seat belt as the van screeches to a halt.

"Is Nelson's unit here?" Seonu asks.

Laasya shuts her eyes. "There are, I think, three units of Guardians and three witches, Captain."

Flanagan unfastens his seat belt and throws it aside. "Seonu, Mason, get yourselves ready. Peters," he shouts to the driver, "follow Seonu. Laasya, call the witches together." All the doors fly open, and the team shoots off to follow his orders.

Flanagan turns to me as the doors thump shut again. "Michael, you must stay inside the car."

My gut's a clenched fist, but I'm not sitting this out like a damsel in distress. "Let me help."

"You're not trained. And it's you they're here for. I'm not about to make their task easier. Stay in the car until it's over."

I glance around the inside of the four-wheeler. Its chassis has an extra frame, and the glass looks strengthened but... "Is this thing vampire-proof, then?"

“No. But if you’re in one place, it’s easier for us to protect you. And Laasya and her sisters will probably set a ward around it. This will be the safest place.”

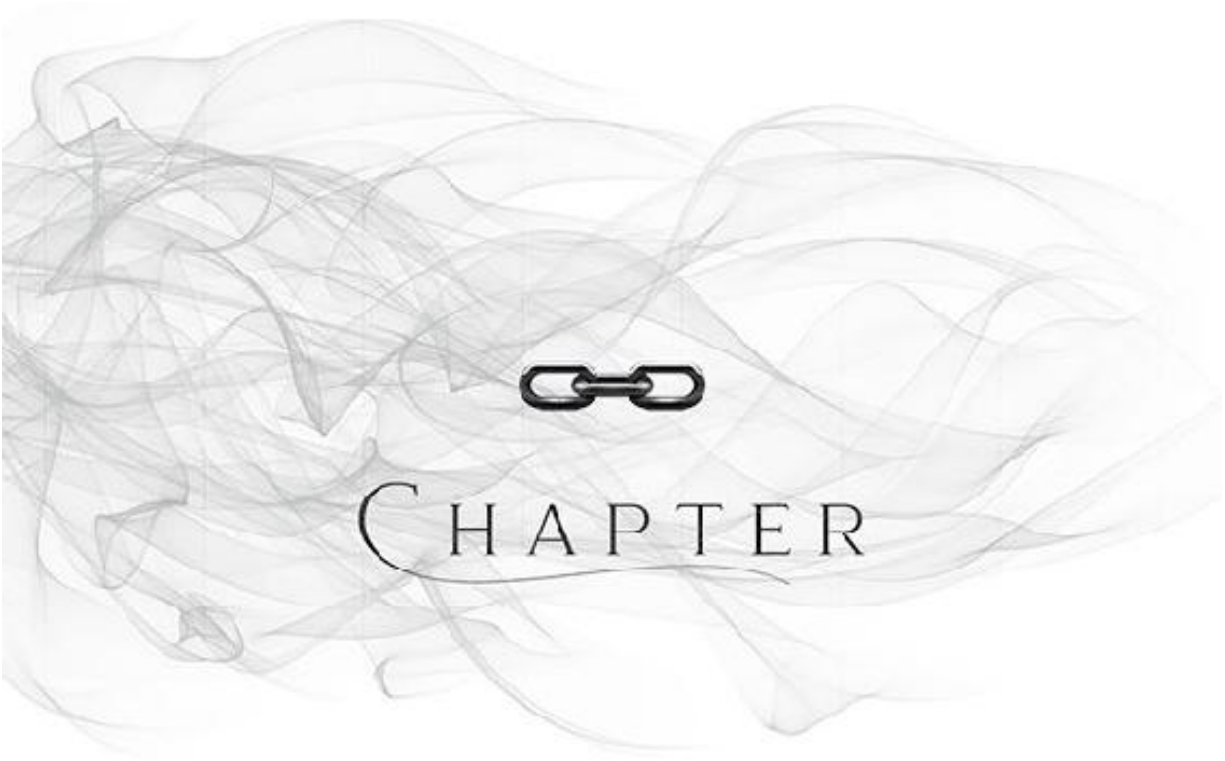
I’m going to feel like a sitting duck waiting inside a car while everyone else does the fighting, but Flanagan’s got a point, and the Guardians don’t want a newbie running around causing them extra headaches.

“Can I at least have a weapon?”

Flanagan squeezes my shoulder. “I understand your trepidation, but you won’t need one. They won’t be taking you today. Stay in the car for me so I know you’re safe.”

He opens the door and twists around to say something else, but a howling shriek from across the industrial site cuts over his words. The unearthly sound tears through me like razor-sharp claws, hitting my innards with a visceral terror. No human could make that nightmarish noise. My body trembles with an instinctive recognition of mortal danger.

Suddenly the car doesn’t seem such a bad place to be.



6

Flanagan slams the door closed and strides across the concrete, yelling orders at his men. The Mercedes' thickened glass muffles sound, creating an eerie haven of quiet. I perch on the edge of the seat, gripping the leather.

As I stare through the glass like a cloistered spectator, the wasteland outside transforms into chaos. Roaring Guardians in brown swarm like disrupted ants from the empty buildings, and a screaming mass of black-clad Blood Servants thunder into them from all directions. At least sixty of each merge like dark rivers across the concrete—sword, ax, and body clashing in a frenzy of violence so shocking and rapid it's difficult for me to follow.

Soldiers and Servants bound from one opponent to the next, jumping impossibly high before crashing into their targets. Bolts of silver-white

lightning and flames arc across the scene from both sides. It's a whirling dogfight. A mess of men and metal and craziness.

And every black-leather-clad fighter is pushing his way toward the Mercedes.

Shit. My heart thumps wildly, muscles clenching with the strain of sitting still. The need to run almost overwhelms me. I wouldn't get far, but instinct screams for me to flee. Or fight. I'm wasted here. I'm not a trained Guardian, but I could fire a crossbow or wield something sharp.

Captain Seonu battles not far from my door. She's locked in a one-to-one with a lanky Blood Servant swinging a mace. Yeah, a mace. Spikes and everything. But with nimble footwork and a knife in each hand, the elf-like soldier holds her own, a whirlwind of flashing metal and silver Flame.

Mason stands at the other side, biceps flexing as he fires off crossbow bolts at any Servant who comes within ten feet. Laasya sits behind him, cross-legged on the ground. Three older women have joined her. They wear the same brown linen, their hair tied high in ragged dreadlocks. The four of them hold hands in a circle—heads bowed, eyes shut tight, faces straining in concentration. Their mouths move fast over silent words. I can't imagine what they're doing. Some kind of witchy thing, obviously. But what? Hiding us from passers-by? Protecting us from the vampires?

I can't tell which of the black throng are the vampires. How do you tell the difference between vampires and Blood Servants? All the brutes in black look the same: big, rough, and mean.

At the far side of the grounds, on top of a grassy rise, four dark-haired women sit in the same pose as Laasya and her colleagues. Alyona is one of them, eyes closed, mouth moving. The morning breeze tousles her long hair. Are the witches in some private battle of their own? Invisible to everyone around them but as deadly as a sword fight.

When I look back at Seonu, I take in a sharp breath. She's not doing well. Her previous opponent lies dead beside her, his own mace buried in his head, but another grisly brute flattens her to the concrete. Silver flames lick along the blade soon to be buried in her throat. She's grimacing with the effort of keeping it at bay, and he's grinning with the triumph of a victor.

She needs help. I clasp the door handle with my sweat-slicked fingers, eyes darting around to spot any potential aid. There's plenty of action around her, but nobody free. Mason stands with his back to her, firing at a group of Blood Servants storming toward the witches. The witches are lost to their chanting. Seonu is on her own. Flanagan asked me to stay in the car, but I either sit here like a candy-ass chicken and watch her die, or I do something.

I throw open the door and rush across the rubble-strewn ground. I may not have a weapon, but if I only distract the bastard, it'll help.

I don't make it.

There's a blur of black from my right, and I almost swallow my tongue as my throat slams into a large open hand. I claw at the offending wrist, but the Blood Servant squeezes until my eyes bulge in their sockets. My toes scrape the ground as I dangle from the end of the man's beefy arm.

I deliver a quick, hard jab to the soft skin on either side of his elbow with my knuckles, forcing him to jerk his hand away.

He snarls at me. "Aah, ya fucker."

As he straightens, I spring forward to punch his exposed throat, but the giant moves freakishly fast. He clamps my wrist, pulls hard to lift me through the air, and crashes me down onto the concrete. Air explodes from my lungs. A rib cracks. And crapping bitch balls, it hurts. I barely manage to block the fist headed for my face. I suck in a lungful and kick out, aiming for his nuts. The heel of my boot sinks with satisfying accuracy into soft flesh, and the man doubles over, grabbing his groin with a curse.

It doesn't stop him.

With a smug grin, he thumps a foot onto my chest, pinning me to the ground. I jab at the man's calf and squirm beneath the vise-like hold, but it's useless. I might as well have a van parked on my chest.

"Keep still, little Channeler." He draws a blade from his boot and raises it above my thigh.

My breath freezes, every muscle in my body turning as rigid as the concrete beneath me. I squeeze my eyes shut and prepare for pain.

A whoosh of air rushes over my body. The pressure releases from my chest. Metal clatters. Followed by the thunk of a heavy object hitting concrete.

When I open my eyes, my attacker lies in a sprawled heap several feet away, mouth slack and out for the count.

On my other side, Laasya lowers her arms. She winks. “You’re welcome.”

I blink up at her. She’s too far away to have hit him. What did she do to him with? “That was you?”

The tiny woman smiles and shrugs. “Never judge a witch by her size.” Her head whips around to her fellow witches still holding hands and chanting. “Oh no, I need to go. Get back in the car. I’ve warded it.” She rushes off.

A strained shout draws my attention back to Seonu. The woman’s to my right, grappling with the Blood Servant. They’re both lying on their sides facing each other now, but he still has the knife pointed at her throat, and she’s seconds away from death.

Flipping to my feet, I hiss and clasp my back as pain stabs me from the damaged rib. But I jump forward, raise my foot high, and ram a hard kick into the side of the man’s face. The Blood Servant swears loudly, his head jerking around. He pulls his knife away from Seonu and sweeps it out toward my legs. The blade slices my jeans as I jump from the strike.

The kick accomplishes the needed distraction. Seonu rolls clear and scrambles to her feet, but the Blood Servant’s murderous attention shifts to me.

He springs to a crouch and offers an almost playful grin. He’s shorter than the last one, thinner too. His long face and buck teeth give the impression of a leering rat. His ankle-length coat flaps in the wind as he stalks forward.

“So you’re the Channeler the prince wants, eh? Well, won’t he be pleased when I bring you to him, all wrapped up in chains and crying like a little girl.”

I step back from the Servant, widen my stance, and squat in readiness to dodge his blade. “Bring it on, shit face.”

Instead of springing forward, the man arches back, arms flailing as he tries to grab at something behind him. Deep-red liquid seeps from a mouth twisted with agony. His confused brown eyes search my face for an explanation. It’s only when he sinks to the ground that I see Seonu standing behind him.

Her blue eyes flash with triumph as the man hits the concrete at her feet. When she’s sure he’s dead, she fixes me with a fierce glare, dripping knife still in hand. “What are you doing out of the car, Channeler?”

Um, saving your arse. I open my mouth to say just that but think better of it. She’s still brandishing the dagger, with an I’m-not-afraid-to-skin-you expression on her face. Instead, I flick a thumb and say, “I was just on my way.”

“Get back to safety. And stay there.” She doesn’t wait to see if I follow the order. She spins, and with a bounding run, throws herself at the nearest Blood Servant. She raises the knife high and brings it slicing down into his shoulder.

I back up slowly, the woman’s ferocity transfixing me. The craziness beyond her also draws my eye. The battle is now a chaos of unfettered violence. Clashing metal punctuates harsh cries and gurgling screams as soldiers and Blood Servants work hard to kill each other. Is this mayhem truly about me, a random new Channeler? Somehow, I don’t think so. This is the raving passion of hate. An antagonism that runs deep. I’m simply an excuse for the two sides to tear each other apart.

My cracked rib needles me with every breath, but adrenaline protects me from the worst. I’m able to ignore it. My body has always been fast to heal, so a bit of damage doesn’t worry me. Thanks to Mason and the crossbow, or possibly Laasya and her fellow witches, there remains a good ten-foot gap around the car. The young woman is forcing a route back to her fellow witches. With a flick of her wrist, she sends any Blood Servant who approaches her flying through the air and landing on the concrete with a

thud. She doesn't even glance their way. That is not a woman you want to mess with. An unassuming lioness in glasses, that one.

I back up toward the vehicle and turn to eye the enclosed interior. It looks...small. Flanagan admitted it isn't vampire-proof. I'll be a rabbit in a hole, waiting for claws to rip my cover off. Instead, I search around to see where the big guy is. When I spot him, the sight is so astonishing I stumble to a stop.

He's at the far side of the grounds cutting a path straight through the middle of the turmoil like some merciless creature from hell.

Painted in the crimson streaks of his enemy's blood, his expression wild with savage joy, he vaults from one kill to the next, his long hair flying around him in a halo of burnt gold. He jumps, grabs a Blood Servant's head, rotates it on his way through the air, and pulls it clean off the neck. Then with the sure-footed grace of a tiger, he lands, tossing the head away like useless rubbish before leaping at another.

It's an impossible technique. A man would need the strength of three bears, but Flanagan executes it with brutally efficient ease. It's kind of magnificent.

For a moment, I'm unable to tear my eyes away.

Until another impossible sight distracts me. Wolves. Six of them, spread out through the bedlam around the commander. Massive, gray-haired, vicious-looking creatures, fighting on the side of the Guardians. Are they war animals? I know dogs are sometimes used that way. But wolves?

One launches itself at a Blood Servant, pins his sword arm with its immense jaws, and holds him still while a Guardian takes him out with a slash to the neck. The pair pounce on the next Servant, executing the same move as though they've practiced it a hundred times. It makes me wonder which side is winning this craziness. Surely the Guardians if they have freaking wolves fighting with them. As well as Flanagan, the one-man killing machine.

An oil-slick shadow passes over the scene in front of me, sliding across the ground and blanketing the site in eerie twilight. Black clouds twist and race over the sky, blotting out the sun like the giant hand of some

malevolent deity. Within minutes, the summer morning is transformed into pre-storm gloom.

What the hell?

Every hair on my neck stands to attention. Cold fingers run the length of my spine. My body screams danger, leg muscles tensing for escape.

Across the flat roof of the nearest building, a row of tall, dark figures appear. Watching with unnatural stillness. Observing the scene below as gods might survey their land.

At a glance, they could be mistaken for humans. Their long hair and knee-length tailored jackets, cinched by a sword belt, give them an exotic look. But their faces, as pale as porcelain, seem luminous against the dark sky. The Flame in their searching eyes shines like silver fire. They resemble visiting aliens, foreign to this industrial backdrop. There's no mistaking what they are.

Anlu'kyr. Vampires.

The Flame energy rises through my body, humming beneath my skin, pulsing like a second heartbeat at the base of my spine. My belly flutters with elated giddiness. My heart pounds with excitement as well as fear. I have to grab onto the car to prevent myself from following an urge to move closer to the creatures. I don't understand my reaction.

"For fuck's sake, Channeler, get in the car." Mason's bellow expels me from my mesmerized state like a jolt from a deep sleep. He strides across the concrete, crossbow balanced on one arm. "We can't protect you if you're running around like a fucking idiot."

I blink at him. Stay in the car. Yes, that's right. No. Small space. I need to stay out of the car. Don't I? I grip my temples. My thoughts are a sludgy mess.

Mason grabs my shoulder. "It's the vamps. They give off Flame to overwhelm their prey. Just get in the car."

"I'll stay out here," I say, taking a few fast breaths, determined to shake off the vampires' freaky influence. It doesn't work.

"For crying out loud." Mason grabs the back of my jacket and wrenches me toward the car door. Sharp pain lances across the fractured rib, ripping a

cry from my throat.

“Watch it,” I snap.

Mason snorts, reaching for the handle. Before he pulls it, an unearthly high-pitched shriek comes from the Anlu’kyr on the rooftop. The piercing sound echoes across the space, loud enough to shatter glass. I cover my ears. “What the hell?”

Mason swears and looks up, wide eyes sweeping the sky. “Shit. So he is here?” He backs away from the car, crossbow pointed at the clouds.

“Who?”

“Prince Alexei. Thank fuck the commander’s with us.” He throws me a scowl. “Get in the car.” He turns and marches off, bellowing warnings to the soldiers who can hear him. I’m left with my hands on my ears.

Who is this prince they keep mentioning? And why would Mason look up to find him? I scan the sky. All I can see are creepy clouds and the Anlu’kyr lining the rooftop, lofty vultures screaming a deathly call across the grounds. The vampires’ presence seems to affect the Guardians, slowing their efforts, causing the battle to shift closer to the Mercedes. I search for Flanagan in the bedlam but can’t see him.

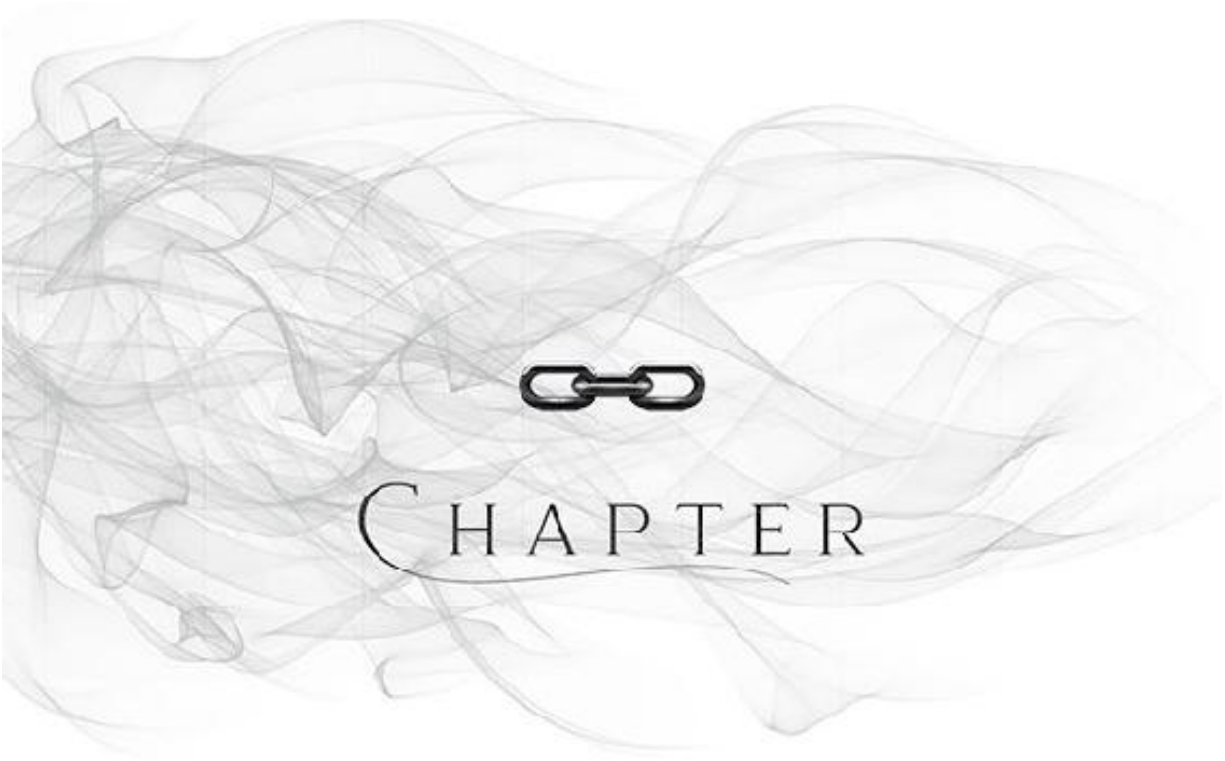
No way am I getting in that small enclosed space. I’d prefer the chance to run. Where? I have no idea, but even though I know the vampires want to capture me, not kill me, for some reason staying feels like certain death.

Spidery gooseflesh ripples across my back, taking my breath.

The sensation stills me.

My hammering heart beats a loud whoosh in my ears. An odd silence takes hold of my awareness, the battle noise falling away.

And then I feel him.



7

What alerts me to his presence isn't the abrupt increase in Flame electrifying the air nor the wave of tingling energy that rushes my nervous system, forcing a deep shudder to rack my shoulders.

It's the switching-on effect, my cells igniting with an acute awareness of his arrival.

And the palpable sense of an unwavering gaze on the back of my neck.

Michael. His voice sinks into my mind like a stone into water.

"No." I scramble at the door handle, suddenly determined to get in the car. My sweaty hands fail to grip the metal.

Precious one.

God, I know that honeyed voice. I've never heard it before, but I know it. The way I know my own heartbeat. Every cell in my blood yearns to draw as close as possible. My instincts scream at me to flee.

Come to me.

No. Fuck no. I wrench the door open. A wave of Flame slams into my back and floods my limbs like fire, buckling my knees.

Come to me, my love. Ugh. That voice, like a sweet oil sliding under my will.

“No. No.” I grip the door frame, determined not to turn, but my shoulders move of their own accord.

At the center of the battle, untouched and composed amid the chaos, stands the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. He’s tall and lithe in an immaculate black three-piece suit that contrasts with moonlight-pale skin. A shock of midnight hair falls across dark eyes. This vampire could never be mistaken for human.

Rising from his back, arching over the space that surrounds him, spread giant black wings. They must span seven feet across, with taut leathery skin stretched over claws, like the wings of a bat. Or a demon.

He’s not like any vampire I’ve read about in horror books. Aren’t they supposed to be monsters? This guy’s stunning, by anybody’s standards. And his presence stirs in me an overwhelming desire to kneel. To fall to the ground and lower my head.

I turn my back, every muscle clenching as I grip at the car door frame in an effort not to move. The cracked rib feels like a serrated knife in my chest. “No. No.”

The urge to be near him steals my breath. What the hell? I hold on harder, metal biting into the pads of my fingers.

Shake it off, Blakeley. Shake it off.

A third wave of Flame bursts like lightning through my veins to the tips of my toes, and I sink against the car, all desire to resist slipping away.

Despite the shouted warnings in my mind, I turn, breath ragged, heart thumping against my ribs, and shuffle toward him. Fists tight and jaw clenched, I refuse to look up from the ground, but I can’t stop myself from walking forward.

I glance left and right, hoping to find someone close to grab me and pin my backside to the ground. There’s no one. The soldiers are locked in

battle. No Flanagan or Mason close by.

Once I leave the band of untouched space around the car, I fall to my knees, driven to the concrete by an inner demand too strong to ignore.

Master. The word wants to tumble from my lips.

I clamp my mouth shut. I don't know what this disturbing influence is the creature has over me. Some vampire voodoo shit. But no fucking way am I ever going to call it master.

I kneel and hang my head and wait. I have to. I want to. There's an elation in my chest, as though I'm about to meet a secret beloved I'm only now remembering. My attention draws upward, compelled to the stunning creature. I couldn't look away if my life depended on it, but I avoid meeting his dark gaze.

With unearthly grace, the vampire saunters toward me, his eyes riveted to my face. The closer he comes, the more the battle slips into the background. It could be only the two of us here in the steelworks. Weapons fly around him—bolts and swords whistle through the air, heading for his chest, but stop midflight before they can meet their target and clatter to the concrete. He doesn't spare them a glance.

The nearer he stalks, the harder my heart pounds. My breath comes in shallow puffs. Cold sweat soaks my T-shirt. My nails puncture the soft flesh of my palms. I feel defenseless.

And I realize who this is. Certainty grips my chest as surely as his presence. This vampire creature is my shadow. The one who has tailed me for the last three months.

The prince now stands in front of me, close enough to touch, a towering demigod, his immense wings creating a shadowed cavern.

I force my eyes down, fixing them on a patch of crimson blood painted across the concrete. I resist a baffling urge to lean and rest my head against his hip.

Strong, elegant fingers cup my chin to lift my face. I tense, my stomach twisting with panic. I'm certain that once I meet those black eyes, it's over. His fingers burn hot against my chin. The touch tingles my skin like

champagne. I melt into his hand and look up, finding two pools of darkest night. My resistance vanishes.

Master. The word hangs in my mind.

The prince's beauty rocks me. The sight of his exquisite face sucks the air from my lungs. Pale, almost ethereal, as though a sculptor stole moonlight and chiseled it into the perfect form. A strong face, masculine, but high cheekbones and full lips give it a delicate, almost feminine quality. And his ears rise to a definite point. Do all vampires have pointed ears?

He appears young. Maybe eighteen, no more than twenty. But the eyes... the eyes are ageless. This creature is far older than he seems.

"Sabel," he says with a soft exhale, wonder lighting his face.

Surprise almost brings me back from the drunken state I'm drowning in.

"How? How do you know?"

The prince runs his thumb along my jaw. His sensuous lips slide into a half smile. "You think I would not recognize the beautiful face of a Sabel child? Feel the quickening in my blood as I near you? I know what you are, Michael Sabel, because you belong to me. You were born to be mine." His English accent is softened by a lyrical quality, something foreign I can't pin down. He gives my chin a gentle tug, encouraging me to stand. "Come closer."

I stumble to my feet, my body eager to obey, my mind screaming to resist. He circles my waist with a slender arm as strong as a steel girder and gathers me against him, against his fiery heat. He wraps us both in his wings, shut away from everything around us, and I sag into him, shuddering with relief. This is where I belong. I've docked into my home port after floating aimlessly for centuries on foreign seas.

The prince rests his forehead to mine. We're the same height, though he seemed much taller when I knelt at his feet. He glides the back of his fingers over my cheek. "I knew you would return to me, beloved," he says with the barest whisper.

And something about his words draws a deep breath of relief from my chest.

The battle continues as a distant, irrelevant noise. Inside the haven of his wings, I tremble with the sheer strength of the energy coursing through me from his closeness. It pulls a moan from my lips. My eyes roll upward. The burning pulse in my spine bursts along my veins, melting every muscle, like a never-ending orgasm. My granite-hard arousal presses against the prince's thigh.

I circle his waist, fingers brushing leathery wing, and pull the vampire closer, crushing our groins together.

He responds by slipping a hand beneath my clothes, palming the skin of my lower back. The other slides into my hair, gripping it firmly. His tingling touch melts me further.

"Your master is called Alexei," he says. Then he waits as if expecting me to confirm it.

I clamp down on the "yes, master" that surges up from my heart and grit my teeth to stop my mouth from forming the words. I'll die before I ever let myself call him master.

The vampire's rich scent drives me mad, an exotic perfume reminiscent of figs and chocolate. I want to taste, to kiss those luscious lips. Shit. I want to fuck the creature right here in the middle of the battle. I clamp my arm tighter around his waist to push into his crotch. When a long, hard length presses back from beneath the suit trousers, I let out a deep groan, need burning my insides.

"Let me fuck you," I hear myself say, breathless.

Stroking stray hair from my face, he lifts his mouth, heated breath ghosting my ear. "Submit to me, precious one."

I groan again. I want to. I'm on fire with desperation for this exquisite man. I yearn to rip his clothes off and lick every inch of his pale skin, then push him down into the nearest hard surface and pound him mercilessly until we're both senseless and spent. I'd let him do the same to me.

Thankfully, some whisper, some remnant of self-preservation deep in my mind flares.

"No," I hiss.

Mikhail. The name strokes me like a lover's caress, sending a shiver through me. "You want to. I feel it—your hunger to submit to me."

I shake my head. It takes everything I have. "No."

He sighs. "A stubborn one. We will have to change that when you come home." He tips my face until our lips are a breath from each other—his with the same unusual heat as the rest of his skin, a scorching fire against my mouth. "You are mine, Michael. You know this."

He speaks the truth. I feel it in my blood, in my bones. I don't understand it. Is the vampire compelling this intense belonging? Or is it something else, something deeper? However strong the attraction, though, however wrecked my mind, I'll never give in to it willingly. I belong to no one.

My forehead still pressed against his, I raise my eyes to those obsidian pools. "Never." The word burns my throat.

Alexei takes a long breath. "Stubborn bloodline." He runs a finger over my cheekbone. "No matter. Your heart is already mine. In time, you will accept this."

I hope to God that's not true. "You're him, aren't you?" I say. "The shadow. You've been following me."

Alexei smiles, slow and sensuous. Something calculating glints from the black depths of his eyes. "I was guarding my precious treasure until he found you. There is something I need you to do for me. Gabriel will take you to Blackriver, and I have no doubt he will care for you himself. Draw him close, youngling. I promise I will come for you soon. For now, let me gift you—an awakening, a protection for my beauty while we are apart."

There's a faint click, and the vampire pulls back his upper lip, exposing two long fangs. I feel a surprising lack of shock at this stark evidence of the creature's true nature. He strikes me as even more beautiful. Fierce and feral.

Alexei punctures his bottom lip, drawing a single pearl of deep red liquid, and with the fist in my hair holding me in place, he kisses me.

I'm enveloped in the scent and taste of figs and chocolate and groan with relief as he sweeps his tongue into my mouth. He pushes deeper, and I revel

in it: the heat, the moisture, the vampire inside me. Seized by a furious need for more, I crush my lips to his. He receives my passion with sensual ease.

A coppery richness hits the back of my throat, and my world explodes.

A bomb of light and heat detonates inside me, bursting through every nerve and synapse. My eyes roll, and I slump, head lolling onto Alexei's shoulder.

He strokes my face. *This gift will awaken your strength. Your true nature.*

The commotion outside the vampire's wings comes to me as muffled noise. The prince throws his wings back with a sharp, leathery crack, and a hot pulse shakes the air. There's a loud *woompf*, and every soldier gathered around us, every Blood Servant trying to protect their prince, is hit with a force of Flame that bends them double as they hurtle from the ground and land again, yards away.

Commander Flanagan stands in the aftermath, a few feet from us, a sword in his hand. He's covered in blood, his hair a wild mess around his shoulders, his face an impenetrable mask. He's untouched by the vampire's show of power, as if the wave of force blew through him.

Flanagan steps forward, diamond-silver eyes glittering with a hint of the savagery I witnessed before. He raises his sword and rests the point to the vampire's neck. "Let him go, Alexei."

Alexei ignores the blade pressed to his skin. He says nothing at first, only clutches me to his body, kisses my forehead, smooths my hair.

I'm lost in a sea of sensation, all details far away. Like light on the surface of a lake, I'm floating free, barely attached to my body. There's no more pain or discomfort, but color seeps from my world. I'm losing consciousness. I don't care.

Eventually, Alexei turns his black eyes on the commander, his smile altogether too pleasant. "Why, Gabriel, so good to see you again. You know, when you tire of running with the dogs, you are welcome to come home."

Flanagan's eyes harden. "Let him go, Alexei."

The prince sighs long and deep. "You will care for this one, Gabriel? I am leaving him in your trust."

Flanagan answers with a growl. “He doesn’t belong to you, Alexei. None of them do. Now hand him over.”

Alexei’s eyes grow darker, a black storm of night and anger. “That is where you are wrong, Lycan. This one most certainly belongs to me.”

Flanagan meets Alexei’s intensity with his own. Not moving his eyes for a second, he throws the sword at the nearest Guardian and steps forward to peel me from the vampire’s arms. He sweeps all of my hundred-eighty-pounds-worth of lean muscle into a cradle lift as if I weigh nothing, then walks backward. “You can leave now, Alexei. And take your blood slaves with you.”

The two rivals glare at each other, the air between them ice-cold and potent. I sense the weight of unspoken history, some hidden communication only they understand. The Blood Servants gather behind their prince, the Guardians behind their commander. I have no idea which side won the battle. If any.

After an age, the vampire’s gaze falls back to me. Then with one mighty downward stroke of his wings, he lifts from the ground.

Remember, beloved, do not tell the Lycan your true name, I hear in my mind. His precious council will only fear the name Sabel.

The Lycan? Is Flanagan the Lycan? It’s a struggle to understand. I don’t even have the strength to lift my head from where it’s flopped against Flanagan’s neck. I can only watch through a thickening dullness as the prince’s graceful strokes take him farther away. With every beat of those wings, my heart squeezes with longing. Why the hell did I say no to him? I must be deranged. Of course I should be with the vampire. I belong to him.

I turn my eyes to Flanagan, who’s watching me, brow furrowed. The friendly twinkle has gone, replaced with something colder.

“What?” I slur, my vision dimming fast now.

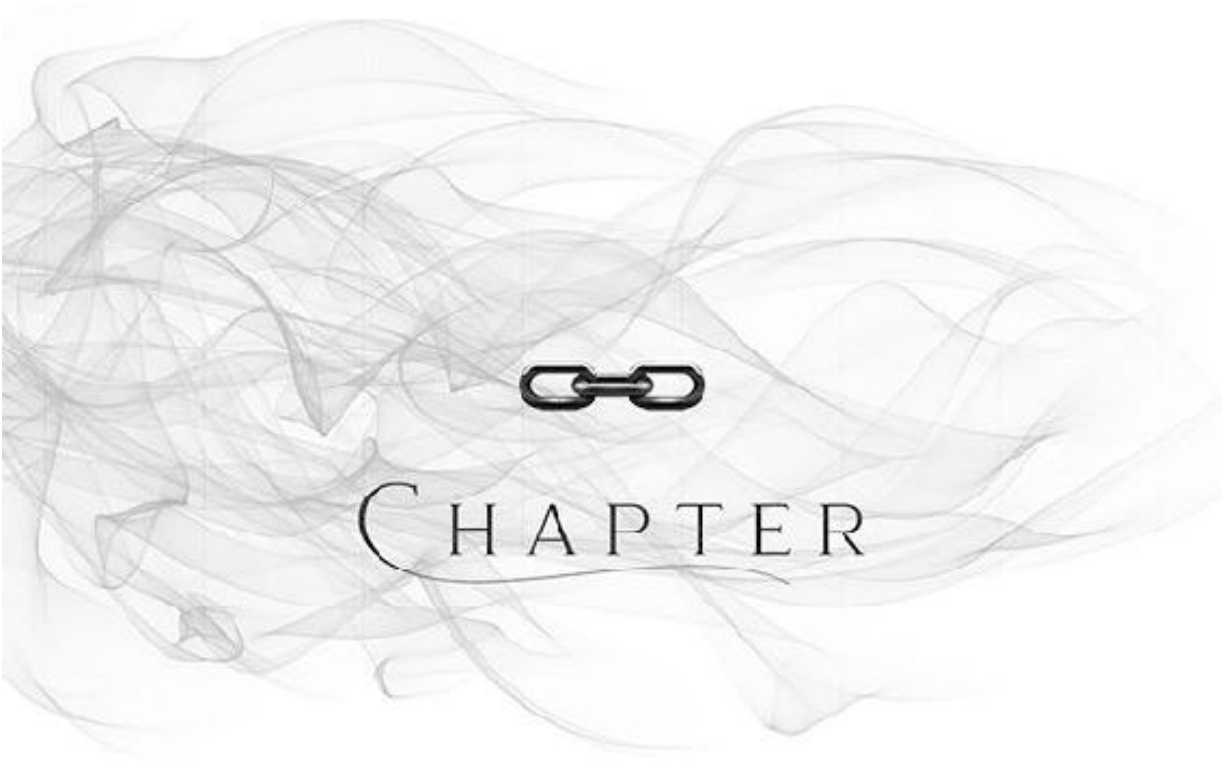
Flanagan takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Michael. This has to be.”

I don’t understand what he means. Sorry for what? That I can’t be with Alexei? I’m unable to think straight as my mind unravels. My thoughts slide away from me like melting wax.

Flanagan turns to Mason standing at his shoulder. “Sergeant, bring the irons from Nelson. And the chains.”

Wait. What?

I don’t get to ask. The world goes black.



8

Distant voices penetrate the dark hole I'm floating in, drawing me toward a dim light. I rise from the depths of a bottomless lake, and it's not until the haze becomes a dazzle, pricking my eyeballs like tiny needles that I realize it's sunlight.

An image of oil-black eyes and moonlight skin blazes into my mind, followed by a sharp silver gaze and those last words.

Sergeant, bring the collar. And the irons.

My eyes fly open. A row of thick, shiny bars fills the view above me. I'm lying on a high, single bed at the edge of a square cage that's maybe four yards wide, contained inside a large room.

I'm in a cage?

I try to sit up. I can't move. Iron cuffs my wrists and chains me to either side of the bed. Leather straps fasten me across my bare chest to the

mattress like I'm a mental patient in some bizarre asylum. Electric panic sweeps through my body, stealing my breath.

But that's not everything. A cold, rigid presence presses against the skin of my neck. A collar.

What. The. Fuck.

"Flanagan!" I yell the name at the top of my voice, but it comes out a dry screech.

"Oh, shit. He's awake," a male voice behind me says. "Go get the commander."

"Yeah. Go get the commander!" I shout. The bastard has some explaining to do.

The room is bare, apart from the cage. An empty fireplace dominates one wall, and two floor-to-ceiling windows fill another, but the slate floor is clear of furniture, and the rough-hewn walls bare of decoration. Through the window, I catch a view of wide lawns bordered by tangled woods.

I struggle against the straps and chains. My rib must have healed because there's no pain, but my efforts to escape are still useless. "What's going on?"

"Calm down, junkie, or I'll tighten those straps," the man warns.

Who the hell's he calling junkie?

"No. I won't bloody well calm down. Untie me." My heart races like an engine, chest heaving against the straps. The walls close in with every breath. The cage is bad enough, but the straps are hurtling me over the edge. "You need to get me out of this. Now."

"I don't need to do anything, you filthy blood whore. Calm down and shut the fuck up."

Blood whore? What the hell is he going on about?

Fury swells, and I'm about to fire off again, but then a door creaks open, and Flanagan's Scandinavian accent echoes through the room. "How long has he been awake?"

"He just woke, sir. He's agitated again. You want me to get a witch?"

"No, thank you, Boyce. Wait outside, please."

"Yes, Commander."

The door closes with the thump of heavy wood. Keys jangle and clang against metal. I strain my head up to peer behind me, but in this position, the collar constricts my windpipe.

“What’s going on, Flanagan? Why am I tied down like this?” I try to keep my voice steady, but panic makes it wobble.

I catch the scent of forest and rain and something else I can’t place—I’d call it moonlight, but moonlight doesn’t have a smell. Flanagan comes into view, his imposing size blocking daylight from the window. He’s wearing the same hard leather vest and suede trousers, his dirty blond mane tied back into a knot again with the three thin plaits running through it at the side.

His expression is grim, his eyes the color of mercury. “Calm yourself, Michael.”

“No, I won’t motherfucking calm myself.” I twist against the straps. “Untie me. Now.”

He removes one of his dark suede gloves and lays his giant hand on my abs, his fingertips rough against my skin. The Flame inside me responds to his touch like a pet running to its master. It floods through me, gathers at my navel, and rises to his hand, filling my torso with that sherbety tingle. Tension sluices from my limbs. My head flops back to the mattress. Though my stomach growls with hunger, and my bladder twinges, my heart rate slows, and my breathing softens. I’m grateful to lose the rising panic, but I’m no less furious.

I pin him with a glare. “What the bloody hell is going on?”

He remains calm in the face of my anger. “You’re in the Old Keep at Blackriver. One of our lockdown rooms.”

“What? Why? And why am I strapped to a sodding bed?” Mentioning the ties sends my heart racing again. Anxiety tightens my chest.

“Shhh. Settle. I will untie you if you agree to stay calm.”

I take a shuddering breath, then another. I want a damned explanation, but all I care about right now is getting these straps off.

“Fine. Just get them off me.”

I pull in lungfuls of air as he unfastens the buckles on the chest straps.

“Why am I tied in the first place? I’m not Hannibal fucking Lecter, Flanagan. What do you think I’m going to do behind metal bars and thick stone walls?”

“We strapped you down for your own safety, Michael. This is your third lockup in three nights. The others are damaged, strewn with broken furniture because of your rages.”

Rages? “I’ve been here three nights?”

“Yes, it’s Wednesday morning.” He unbuckles the leg straps.

I rattle the chains on my wrist and ankles. “What about these?”

He unfastens both sets of manacles from the bed frame but leaves them on my wrists with the length of thick chain strung between. Same with my ankles.

“You’re not serious?” I fling out my arms, but the links only allow me to open as far as my hips.

“It’s protocol. Sit up on the side of the bed.”

I rise and swing my legs over, metal clattering against metal, and perch my backside on the edge of the bed. I take a few deeper breaths, feeling less claustrophobic. Until I roll my shoulders and cold metal bites the skin of my jaw. The chains jangle as I grab at the collar.

“What’s this about?”

The metal band feels an inch wide with a smooth texture and an eyelet at the back for a chain. A repeated pattern etched into its surface feels rough beneath my probing fingers. I exhale long and slow to keep my heartbeat steady. A collar is even worse than straps.

Flanagan hooks the keyring onto his belt, removes his other glove, and stands over me, close enough for his knees to touch mine. He folds his arms, his biceps bunching up like tree trunks.

“The collar suppresses your Flame. Prevents you from burning my soldiers.”

I look up at him, exasperated. “I don’t even know how to use the Flame. So why would I need a fancy collar?”

“I have four soldiers in the infirmary who prove otherwise.”

My brow scrunches. “Because of me?”

“Yes, Michael. Because of you.” His eyes narrow. “How long have you been a Blood Servant for the Anlu’kyr?”

“What?” Astounded by the question, I laugh. I expect to see a twinkle in his eye, but his somber expression would suit a funeral. “Is that a serious question?”

He searches my gaze a long time before he speaks, his brow a tight crease. “Your confusion is convincing. It might be you’ve suffered memory alteration, but we saw you kneel to the prince, and we know for sure you’ve been drinking Anlu’kyr blood for decades. So there is little point in continuing this charade.”

I stare at him, flabbergasted. Decades? “What charade? Of course I’m not a Blood Servant. I didn’t know vampires were a thing until you told me.” I shake my head, glancing around at the bars, the walls, the cockroach skittering over a tile in the corner. I can’t believe this. It’s like I’m caught in some elaborate prank.

“I didn’t want to go anywhere near the prince. He did some vampire magic shit on me. Surely you get that?” I ignore the way my heart squeezes upon mention of Alexei.

Flanagan watches my face, the same way he did in the van, weighing the truth of every sentence. “Even the prince, strong as he is, can’t compel an action unless he’s looking straight into a human’s eyes. That’s not enough of an explanation.”

“But—”

“What I get, Michael, is that you’ve been screaming your master’s name for the past three days. What I get is that we had to tie you to the bed to stop you from throwing yourself at the bars to reach him.”

My mouth forms around a silent *what*? No wonder my throat’s wrecked. I glance to the bars behind him. At the far side, they’re bent outward and warped as if a car rammed them.

Flanagan follows my gaze and nods. “Yes. That was you.”

I search my body for bruises. I should be black and blue, but my skin’s clear. “Are the bars hollow?”

“They’re solid iron, coated in silver. You’ve had many wounds these last three days. They all healed.”

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“I assure you it was you who bent those bars.”

I stare at the twisted metal with my mouth open. That can’t be true. What the hell’s going on?

Flanagan observes me but leaves me to my thoughts. After a few moments, he reaches out and tilts my face up with a finger beneath my chin. I tug away, scowling.

“Settle.”

“Fuck you.”

Fast as a viper, he grips the back of my neck. I try to bat his arm away—almost hitting myself in the face with the chain—but he tightens his hold and pins the chain to my lap, his Hulk-like strength preventing me from moving.

“I do not intend to hurt you.”

“Then get your fucking hands off me.”

My neck warms from the press of his fingers, and in a gush of fiery pleasure, the Flame rushes up through my body to meet his hand. A deep groan leaves my throat as I slump forward. He catches me and holds me against him, pressing my forehead between the dual mounds of his pecs.

“Shhhh.” His rumble echoes through his chest.

He glides a hand over my hair, crooning to me, and I’m enveloped in the scent of moonlit forests, floating on an ocean of dark bliss.

“I want you to tell me the truth, Michael.” He leans down to my ear. “How long were you a Blood Slave?”

I struggle inside the dark blanket smothering my mind. Try to rise, to push out from his hold, but my body feels like liquid lead.

“Shhhh,” he whispers.

His hand cups my neck again, and the Flame rises through me with a fresh euphoric wave. I sink deeper.

His breath warms my ear. “If your master kept you against your will and you’ve somehow escaped, I promise you, you can trust me. I’ll help you.”

As though somebody struck a tiny match, a glimmer of light penetrates the velvety darkness. This feels similar to the prince's compelling influence. A force inside my mind. I shove back. Push at the internal weight confining me. I'm bracing myself against an avalanche, but I'm not having my will messed with again. Flanagan's hand tightens.

"I'm not a Blood Slave," I grit out. "And he's not my master."

Flanagan expels a harsh sigh. "You're a strong one." His hold relaxes. The desire to slump into his solid presence almost consumes me, but I pull up, and he lets me go.

I suck in air and shake off the daze. "What did you just do to me?"

Flanagan regards me with renewed suspicion. "I'm a True Grounder. That was a Flame Hold. You shouldn't be able to break away from it."

"Yeah, well, you shouldn't be forcing me against my will." I rub at my neck as strength returns to my limbs.

He folds his arms, standing like a statue of Thor. "What happened at the steelworks?"

"How the hell should I know? He gave me blood. I tasted it when he kissed me. It did something weird. Isn't that why I was crazy for three days?"

Something dark ghosts across Flanagan's eyes. "One taste of the prince's blood would not leave you screaming his name for three days. It takes years for a bond of that strength to grow. I understand if he's interfered with your memory, leaving you confused, but even the prince cannot wipe decades from you. You're lying to me, Michael, and I don't know why, but I can't help you until you trust me with the truth."

Lava-hot fury rises in my gut. "For fuck's sake, Flanagan. Where are you getting this 'decades' thing from? I'm twenty-fucking-six. I don't understand why you suddenly think I've been a Blood Servant for millennia. It's madness." I throw up my hands, the chain clanking. "One minute you're all 'let us help you. We're here to keep you safe.' The next minute, you're like 'get the chains and collar, Mason. Let's lock the fucker up.' It doesn't make sense. You don't make sense. If this is your idea of protecting Channelers from slavery, it fucking sucks."

He leans forward, dark menace bleeding into the silver of his eyes. “I chained you because it’s protocol to chain a blood dependent, something I knew you were as soon as I saw you with the prince. I collared you to control your Flame, *only* after you scorched two of my men. I caged you because you are dangerous. I was prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I have your blood tests, and I know, Michael. There is no point to this pretense.”

“Blood tests?”

He straightens and folds his arms again, towering over me. “We took a sample the first day you were here. Over forty percent of the blood in your veins is Anlu’kyr. A human has to drink for decades to incur that amount of change. You’re on the verge of a turn, Channeler. And it will take very little blood to push you over.”

I frantically try to sort through his words to understand. “That’s...that’s got to be wrong. Your results are wrong.”

Flanagan takes a slow breath. “We took three vials of blood. The lab ran numerous tests. We are not wrong.” He raises his finger and thumb, a small gap between them. “You are this close. Another year with your master and you would have started the transformation. Or did you already know that?”

“I haven’t got a master,” I bite out, but I can tell by his stony expression he doesn’t believe me. “There has to be another explanation for those results. I’ve never even seen a vampire before that psycho bitch in the alley. And anyway, what do you mean, change? I thought you said they were a different species?”

“They are. But enough of their blood causes a biological shift in Channelers. It’s a way the Anlu’kyr procreate. I’m surprised you’re not already showing symptoms.” He pauses, then shakes his head. “There is no other explanation. You can’t have been born that way. Anlu’kyr and human couplings are infertile. You have to be lying or the victim of a memory assault.”

Shit. This is messed up. I’ve woken into a world as bent out of shape as those silver bars. The thought I could be a bloodsucker leaves me sick. How the hell have I gotten vampire blood in my system? Maybe my head really

has been messed with by one of those creatures. As far as I'm concerned, I'm one hundred percent home-grown human.

I'm about to have another go at convincing him I'm telling the truth—they need to do those tests again—but the oak doors open, and Laasya walks through them.

“Yes, Laasya?” Flanagan asks without taking his eyes off me.

The waif-sized witch looks the same as she did the last time I saw her—frumpy brown linen dress and cardigan, wild dark hair, thick glasses in place. She's carrying a bottle of water, a flask, and a paper bag. My stomach gurgles with the hope it's lunch.

She glances over me with pity in her big brown eyes before speaking. “Councilor Quinton has arrived, Commander. He wants to see Michael in his office as soon as possible.”

“Good, good. Send one of the guards to tell the councilor you'll escort him over as soon as he's had something to eat.”

“Yes, sir.”

Laasya leaves, and my attention shifts back to Flanagan. “Councilor Quinton?”

Flanagan nods. “The High Council's strongest witch. If he can't tell us whether your memory has been altered, nobody can. As soon as he heard about you, he wanted to meet you. You will answer every one of his questions truthfully.”

“And when he discovers that I'm not a Blood Slave?” I ask defiantly.

Flanagan pauses a long time before answering. “I hope that is true. You are certainly convincing. But if you are not a willing Blood Servant or an unwilling slave, then you are something else, and we will need to know what that is.”



9

While his words choke my mind, Flanagan tugs on his brown suede gloves and walks toward the cage door. As soon as the keys jangle, panic hits my chest like a punch from a heavyweight. I can't stay in this cage alone. It'll kill me.

"Wait." I push off the bed and stand. "You can't just leave me in here."

He turns to face me. "This cage is a necessary precaution."

"It's not right." I shuffle toward him, the heavy chain between my ankles pulling tight on every step. "I don't deserve a cage. I haven't done anything." Panic raises my voice to a shout.

Flanagan's tone softens. "Michael, I know you fear enclosure. I've been helping you with your claustrophobia since your first day."

His sympathetic look pisses me off. I lean in and jut my chin up. "I don't fear the damn cage, all right? I'm just not a pissing dog."

He steps close enough for our chests to almost touch and looks down at me. I stand my ground. I'll not be intimidated—even by a man who can rip my head off. But his eyes stay gentle as they roam my glare.

"This is not a punishment. The precautions are for your safety as well as ours. Have something to eat and rest. I'll meet you in Quinton's office."

The care in his tone unsettles me more than his anger. It has a familiar intimacy I don't understand. I back away with a scowl. "I need the john. Or do prisoners not get their basic needs met here?"

Flanagan lets out a slow breath, then points to the end of the bed.

I follow the line of his finger to a bucket on the floor. "You're kidding me. Where's the toilet?"

"You had a toilet. You used it as a weapon. Now you have a bucket."

I check his face for what must be a joke, but his expression lacks humor. "I used the toilet as a weapon?"

"You yanked it from the floor and threw it at me."

"I did?" I try not to sound so pleased with that image.

Flanagan gives me a dry look, arching an eyebrow. He turns to leave the cage.

"I don't remember any of that," I fire at his back. "You could be making that shit up for all I know."

Laasya returns, and when he's locked the cage, he hands the keys to her. As he exits the room, his boots fall on the stone floor with almost complete silence. He moves with a grace that doesn't belong to a man of his size.

Pulling my gaze away, I take in long breaths. The collar feels like a noose. My fingers tingle with the warning a panic attack is imminent, and nausea roils my stomach. I'm used to these symptoms, though. I just need to keep my mind focused on other things. Like this upcoming interview and getting out of this cage. But mostly discovering what this Blackriver place has to do with my parents. That's the main reason I'm here. How I'll pull that off, though, I've no idea.

Laasya's watching me through the bars. Her tilted head and soft frown suggest I'm a dangerous but wounded animal in need of special care. "I'm right here, Michael. We won't leave you alone in the cage. I brought you a

sandwich.” She pushes the paper bag through a gap. “It’s not much, but it’ll do for now. Then we can walk to Councilor Quinton’s office.”

I ignore the twinge of shame that Laasya feels the need to reassure me and tramp over to take the package. I catch the scent of sweet spice from the bag and a breath of Laasya’s rose perfume. I can smell her sweat beneath it and some kind of herbal shampoo. My sense of smell seems as acute as a dog’s since I woke. She passes me the bottle of water and the flask, but they both remind me how much I need that leak.

“Sorry, I’ve really gotta...” I trail off, indicating the bucket with a sideways nod.

“Oh, yes. Of course,” she says, cheeks pinking, and turns her back.

I shuffle over to the other side of the cage, dumping my lunch on the bed, and after a lot of awkward fumbling, manage to relieve myself in the bucket. Did I really wrench a toilet from the ground and throw it? Talk about Jekyll and Hyde.

When I’m done, I perch on the edge of the bed. The iron shackles cause a funny sort of weakness in my limbs, as if the metal sucks the strength from my muscles. The Flame energy seems to avoid the parts of my body where the iron touches my skin, gathering in my shoulders and hips, causing a tightness at the base of my skull. And I’m sure the iron pressing against my skin is partly responsible for the nausea in my gut.

Laasya turns around again. She must notice me rubbing the back of my neck. “Don’t worry. The commander will Ground you later. Take any discomfort away.”

I give her the barest twitch of a smile. I know she means well, but, yeah, Flanagan touching me again, not a comforting thought. I’d rather endure pain.

After opening the bottle of water, I give my fingers a quick rinse before chugging the rest down in a matter of seconds. It’s fridge-cold and delicious and soothes my sore throat. In the paper bag, I find a chunky beef sandwich. Onion and some kind of jerk sauce hit my taste buds like a sweet fire. My supercharged sense of smell isn’t the only change. Is this another side effect of Alexei’s blood?

“Thanks for the grub,” I say to Laasya around a mouthful.

She’s standing on the other side of the cage door watching me eat, hands shoved into the pockets of her cardigan. “My pleasure. I prepared the beef myself.”

“Yeah? So you’re a cook as well as a witch.”

She gives a self-conscious shrug. “I like cooking, but I don’t really get a lot of time for it these days.”

“Because you’re Flanagan’s witch?”

She nods. “It’s an all-consuming role. The commander doesn’t often go out with us on collections, though. Most of the time Captain Seonu is in charge.”

I grimace. I can’t imagine working every day with Miss Sour Puss or Mr. Happy. “Yeah? And does she ever smile?”

Laasya huffs a laugh. “I know Captain Seonu is pretty severe, but she’s a dedicated soldier. She just doesn’t trust you.”

“Oh, ya think?”

“Last year we collected a Channeler from Lancaster—older, like you—and he seemed genuine. His memory was tested and appeared untouched. But he turned out to be a plant, prepared by the prince as an assassin. He didn’t know that’s what he was. They’re like time bombs. After only a few weeks, his buried instructions were tripped, and he killed five soldiers before we could stop him. One of them was Captain Seonu’s Compatible. He was also Mason’s best friend.”

The chunk of sandwich I’m chewing dries in my mouth. No wonder they don’t trust me.

“Shit. That’s really heavy. I’m sorry.” That prince must be a sly nemesis. Not surprising those two are edgy.

Laasya sighs. “I don’t think Seonu has smiled since. And Mason does whatever Seonu does.”

“What’s a Compatible,” I ask, taking a fresh bite.

“Evenly matched Channelers. Grounders help Wielders handle their Flame through Sharing. What the commander was doing for you in the van. So they tend to pair up. When the pair’s strength is equal, they’re called

Compatibles.” Her cheeks color. “Apparently, this can make them, um, irresistible to each other. But it also makes them a perfect team for the battlefield.”

I think about that as I chew. The craziness at the steelworks. The crackling streaks of Flame. I feel like it was yesterday, not days ago.

“Do the Guardians fight that many Blood Servants every time they find a new Channeler?” I ask.

“Gosh, no.” She adjusts her glasses, which seem to tip to one side. “The Guardians haven’t had a battle that fierce in years. Certainly not with Anlu’kyr present. And the prince rarely makes an appearance.”

No wonder Flanagan and the soldiers doubt my ignorance. I’m pretty sure the prince only turned up to make the Guardians think he was making an effort. He had no intention of taking me that day. The crafty bastard wants me here at Blackriver for some reason. But he can’t have changed my memory. I’m sure of it.

I devour the last bite of the best sandwich I ever remember eating, then finish off the rich, nutty coffee from the flask. It’s delicious. I can taste caramel undertones.

Laasya watches in silence. When I’m done, she says, “Councilor Quinton’s office is on the other side of Blackriver. He can’t see you here because the iron bars interfere with his abilities. We’ll go the back route, but I can’t promise we won’t meet anybody on the way.”

I clap my hands. “Bring it on.” I’m just glad to be getting out of this cage.

She unlocks the cage door to let me out, then hunkers down to unfasten my ankle chain. That’s a relief. I’m still left with the manacles weighting my legs, but I had visions of my face meeting the stone floor when I tried to walk any distance.

She leads me out to the stairwell where we’re joined by four guards, all in black Guardian garbs: hard leather vest and suede trousers with heavy boots.

They throw me wary looks—the wild beast has left his cage. Once they place themselves two ahead and two behind, we set off down the stairs.

On the ground floor, we enter a long, straight corridor with windows down the right side and huge paintings dressing the opposite wall, mostly war scenes and portraits.

Outside the windows, Blackriver mansion curves away into the distance—a three-story colossus of glass and sandstone. The building resembles a Georgian palace. The kind of place rich folk and butlers live. Very different from the castle-like keep holding the cage.

Cultivated gardens and lawns stretch down a hill toward a high wall on one side and a creepy-looking forest on the other. The scene has a super HD quality as if 3-D glasses enhance my eyesight. I can count every brick in that distant wall, and it must be at least six hundred yards away. What the hell did Alexei do to me?

I push the thought aside and turn to Laasya, who's watching my examination of the mansion. My chain swings and clinks as I point to the outside. "The wall around the grounds only goes as far as those woods. Aren't you worried about prisoners escaping through the trees?"

Laasya's eyes widen with surprise. "You can see the woods?"

I frown. "Why would I not be able to see them? It looks like you've got Fangorn from *Lord of the Rings* at the end of the garden."

She laughs. It's a cute laugh, a sort of snorty giggle. "Yes, that's their nickname. They're the Border Woods—a protective barrier around the Fae forest to keep out unwanted visitors from the Faelands. The mansion was purposely built beside them. They're invisible to most. People without the sight only see the wall."

"The Faelands?"

Laasya puckers her mouth as she ponders. "Think of it as another country, but a country only certain people can access. With different species and, um, different physics."

Different physics? I give her a look. "What kind of creatures?"

"Well," she says as if preparing for my reaction to her answer. "There are hundreds of creatures who live there, but it's governed by the Fae."

Fae? I let out a long sigh. "You mean fairies, don't you?"

Her smile borders on a grimace. “Yeah. I know it’s hard to take in when you’re new to all this, but don’t worry. You’ll soon take the supernatural world in your stride.”

I shake my head. Bloody fairies! As if vampires and witches weren’t enough.

As we march through one of the heavy double doors dividing the corridor into sections, I can’t tear my eyes away from the dark clump of trees. Not an attractive escape route. The disfigured giants look gnarled and unnatural. They leer over the pristine lawn as though intent on corrupting it. I can’t imagine them being invisible.

“Not a place for a picnic,” I mumble. The sight feels somehow repugnant and fascinating at the same time. The Flame circulates through my body, excited, wanting to tug me closer.

“No, definitely not a Sunday lunch venue. It’s enchanted. Only those with Fae blood can pass through safely. Anybody else who enters without permission will never return.”

Okey-dokey. Don’t go into the dark woods, Mickey boy. Not the way out.

I rake my hand through my hair and scrub my face, the iron chain stings cold against my skin. I feel like I’ve woken into a bloody fairy tale.

Laasya still watches me with that gentle frown.

“So, I’ve been a bit on the crazy side these last few days, huh?” I say.

She laughs. This time it’s a breathy sound. “I think that might be the understatement of the year.”

We both glance down at the heavy wrist manacles. “I don’t remember any of it, you know.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t hurt you, did I? Flanagan said I put a few of his guards in hospital.”

“You’re unlikely to hurt me. You did knock out four guards, though. It was in the first two lockdowns. You threw one across the cage after snapping his crossbow in half, fried two of the others with waves of Flame. And the third fell and hit his head as he tried to run away.”

The two front guards turn to throw me a quick glare as she says that. I get the impression I'm not Mr. Popular with the Keep Guardians.

"It's why the commander and I looked after you," Laasya continues. "And obviously why you gained the collar. I think something unusual must have been happening. People aren't usually violent when gripped by a Haze. Quite the opposite."

"A Haze is that sexual trance thing?"

"Yes, it happens when a Channeler is overwhelmed by too much Flame."

My brow knots as I try to imagine what that might have looked like. Overwhelmed by a need to spank one out while Flanagan and Laasya looked on. Did I beg for help or jack off while they watched? I'm not sure I want to know. "It was definitely me who hurt those guards? It sounds like some crazy doppelgänger."

Laasya laughs. "Yeah. You're really strong. But nobody's stronger than the commander. And I can take care of myself."

Yes, she certainly can. I've seen it. And there's more to the Scandinavian Hulk than meets the eye.

We leave the corridor, climb a ridiculous number of stairs—not easy with heavy irons cuffing my ankles—and enter another long corridor. This one has a thick red carpet and vases as well as more of the paintings.

Only a few doors down, Laasya calls a halt and dismisses the guards. They obey her command without question and march away.

She unlocks one of the dark wooden doors, and we enter an office, a colossal space with floor-to-ceiling Georgian windows looking out onto the Border Woods. An oak desk dominates one side, bookshelves cover every wall, and a giant brass pentagram inlays one half of the wooden floor. But it's the colorful array of crystals, ornaments, and stranger objects littering every available surface that catches my eye. It looks like one of those occultist shops that always smell of burning grass. This room smells of dusty books, though, and burnt paper, with a hint of chlorine.

Laasya points to a chair. "You can take a seat if you want. The councilor won't be long."

I study the woman the guards have left alone with me. The stick of a girl with a mess of dark hair, thick glasses, and doe-brown eyes. She looks like a puff of air might break her, but I saw her throw giant men across the steelworks with a flick of her finger.

“I’ve seen you take care of yourself, but should the guards be leaving you on your own with me? Aren’t I supposed to be dangerous?”

She cuts me a sideways glance, chin rising, a flash of fire in her eyes. “I’m a lot stronger than I look, Channeler. I may not seem like much, but I am a battle witch. Witch-born from both sides and from two of the strongest Indian lineages. I’m not in any danger.”

The fact that a woman as slight as Laasya can defend herself because of magic amazes me. I’ve only seen shit like that on television. But how fast is she?

“Even in chains, though, if a prisoner grabbed you by surprise, he could hurt you pretty easily.” I raise the links between my wrist and simulate a choke hold.

Her mouth quirks, eyes twinkling. “Is this a challenge?”

I grin, recognizing a fellow competitor. “Yeah. Yeah, okay, it’s a challenge.”

She spins to turn her back to me. “Go.”

I lunge, chains rattling. I have no intention of hurting the woman, but if I can nudge her back before...

The blow hits my chest like a truck and sends me so far across the slate floor my sprawling body crashes against the far side of the office. Iron chain clatters wood as the invisible force then lifts me off the ground and flattens me to a bookshelf. Crystals, vials, and thick tomes crash to the floor. The pressure of the push is so strong I can hardly catch a breath. My fingers scrabble at my chest in a fruitless attempt to pull the invisible hand away. And inside my body, some answering force, like a deeply buried fist, asks for permission to punch back. Instinct screams at me to release it, but fear for Laasya’s safety holds me back.

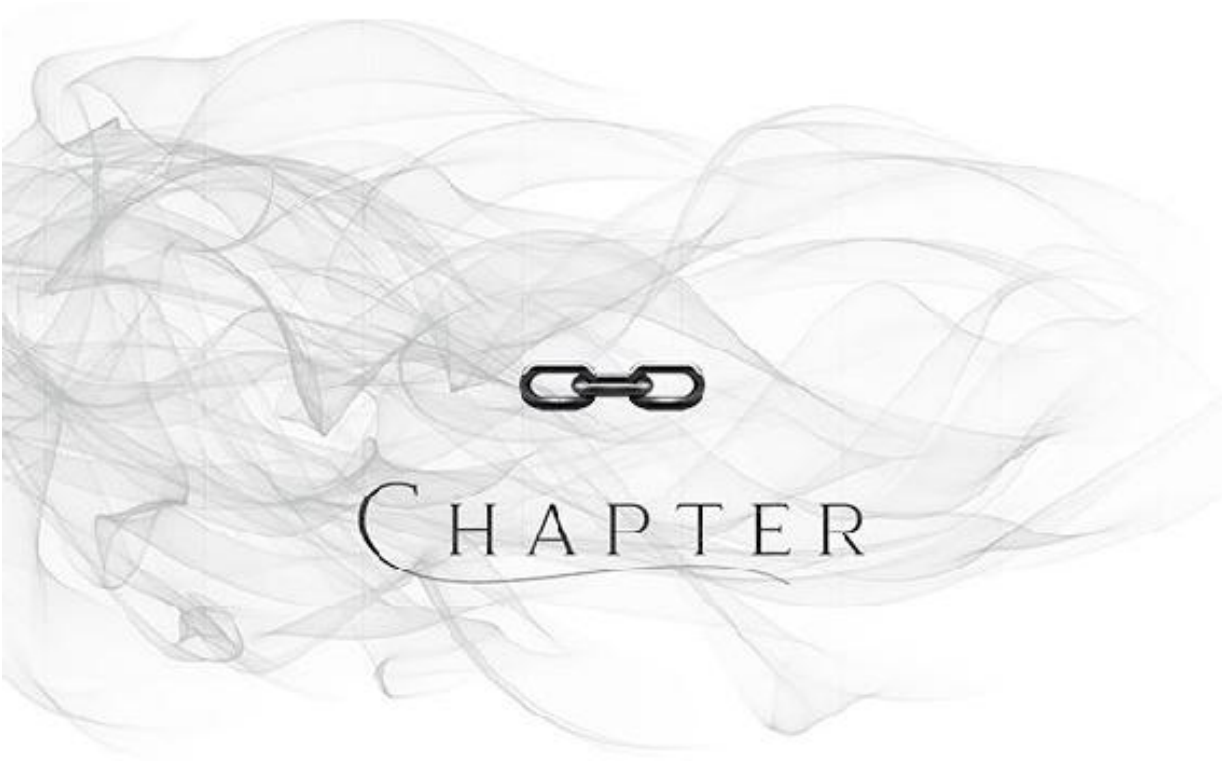
Laasya stands with both hands buried in her cardigan pockets. Apart from the concentrated stare, she seems relaxed. I begin to wonder if she’s

going to let me go.

The office door opens and a rich English accent cuts through the room. “You can put the boy down now, Laasya dear. I think that you have made your point.”

Laasya flusters. “Councilor.” She lets go, and I tumble to the wooden floor with a clattering thump, gasping for air. “Sorry, Councilor Quinton. Michael wanted to know if I was safe with him alone.”

Yeah, and now I know.



10

“**W**hat happened?” Flanagan’s Scandinavian growl fills the room as he enters.

I lie slumped against the bookshelf, rubbing my chest. My back’s smarting where my trip across the floor scraped the skin, but I’m seriously impressed with Laasya’s witchy mojo.

“Sorry, sir,” she says. “Michael wondered if I was safe left on my own with him.”

“No need for concern, Gabriel. They were playing, nothing more,” the new voice says in perfect Queen’s English. He steps farther into the room, and I get my first gander of the High Council’s most powerful witch. If Laasya can throw me across a room without touching me, what the hell can this guy do?

He’s not what I expected. Not that I knew what to expect—long black robes and a pointy hat, maybe. I don’t know. But the man presents himself

more like a fashionable Oxford gentleman. He's somewhere in his fifties, tall and thin, and wears a green tweed three-piece suit with leather waistcoat. His immaculate finish gives the impression of an older model from a men's magazine—including a silver cane and brown fedora, the hat tipped to a rakish angle.

When his gaze fixes on me, an emotion I might peg as triumph crosses his face. His eyes are odd, shadowed, and difficult to meet, but the potency of his stare leaves me uneasy.

Flanagan strides across the room and reaches down to help me stand. "Are you injured, Michael?"

I jerk my arm away from his reach and stumble to my feet, using the bookshelf instead. "Nah. I'm fine. Taken a lot worse."

"Thank you, Laasya dear," Quinton says, "for your sterling care of our precious new Channeler. You may leave us now." He comes closer to peer at me, and I smell mothballs and ink and that chlorine scent.

Laasya gives the councilor what can only be described as an adoring glance. She stammers her words, and her cheeks flush. "Th-thank you, Councilor Quinton. I'll go, shall I, Commander?"

Flanagan gives her a vague nod. "Thank you, Laasya."

With a quick wave to me, the young witch leaves the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Michael, this is Councilor Quinton," Flanagan says. "Head witch of the High Council and their lead interrogator."

Interrogator?

Quinton offers me a slender, manicured hand. "I am delighted to meet you, Michael." The firmness of his shake takes me by surprise.

"Right," I answer curtly because I have no idea if this meeting will be a delight or a disaster.

"You can remove the irons," he says to Flanagan without moving his eyes from me. "They will not be needed."

Flanagan grasps the chain between my wrists and uses it to pull me closer. "Behave."

I scowl at the condescending bastard. “I’m not raving anymore, Flanagan. I’m a normal human being you’re unlawfully keeping in a cage. Just take the fucking chains off.”

He arches a sardonic eyebrow, a glint of warning in his eyes as he unfastens the manacles. I glower at him, but it’s like staring into two diamond suns, and I’m forced to pretend his gloved hands are more interesting.

Quinton stands to the side, leaning on his cane. He ignores his books and crystals now strewn across the floor from my clash with his bookshelves and studies me instead. His wrinkled forehead suggests I’m a rare curiosity he can’t quite believe he’s seeing. Power emanates from him, a dull wave that registers as a tingle across my skin. His mouth tugs with a brief smile, private and knowing.

“This treatment may seem unfair, Michael, but it is prudent to be cautious. For your benefit as well as ours. And Commander Flanagan has not chained you unlawfully. The High Council may deal with any supernatural creature however it sees fit. The public may be ignorant of the supernatural world, but I can assure you governments are well aware of the dangers and how vital the Guardians’ role is.”

I lean against a shelf so Flanagan can unlock my ankle restraints. “Well, with respect and everything, I’m not a supernatural creature.”

“You are a Channeler. This places you well within the High Council’s jurisdiction. But human Flame-born are precious, both to us and to the wider supernatural community. We only restrict your liberty while we establish risk.”

Yeah, somehow that doesn’t reassure me. With that amount of power, if Quinton decides I’m too much of a risk, what’s to stop him from locking me up and throwing away the key?

When Flanagan’s finished, I rub down my wrists, relieved to be free of restraints. The Flame settles into a more even spread throughout my body, softening my muscles. Without the iron’s oppressive burden, my limbs feel feather light, and the nausea subsides.

Quinton gestures to a chair beside his oak desk with a graceful wave of his hand.

“Please, Michael. Take a seat. I would offer you tea, but I do not think our commander can spare us the time.” He side-eyes Flanagan, who stiffly shakes his head.

I retreat to the nearest window. “I’ll stand. Thanks.” Folding my arms across my chest, I lean my shoulder against the edge of a glass cabinet filled with weird, shiny objects.

Quinton adjusts his suit and perches on the edge of the desk, back straight, one hand molded around the smooth black stone at the top of his. Is that a slight tremor in his fingers? Flanagan steps up beside him, looming like a blond monolith, arms folded across his pecs.

“It is quite all right, Gabriel,” Quinton says. “You can leave now.”

Flanagan pauses, eyes on me. “I’ll stay. I can stand by the door.”

“There really is no need. I will call you when we’re finished.”

Flanagan doesn’t budge. “Even so, I think it best if I stay, Councilor.”

I feel a rush of anger at the man. “I don’t think you need to worry about me harming a bloody witch, Flanagan.”

Quinton’s lips twitch. “You misunderstand the commander, Michael. It is not my welfare that concerns him. It is yours.”

Oh. What the hell does this test involve? I cast the big guy a quizzical frown, but though his attention is all on me, his expression remains unreadable.

Quinton twists to face him. “I promise you the boy is not in any danger from me, Gabriel. I know you worry his mind may be fragile due to memory damage, but it is far safer if I am alone with him.”

Flanagan remains hesitant, but he says to me quietly, “I won’t be far.”

He still doesn’t leave until I answer. “Okay.” Then he walks away without a word to the councilor. He glances back at me once more before leaving the room.

Quinton must notice my perplexity because he says, “The commander takes his responsibility to the Channelers in his care very seriously. He took over from me as head of Blackriver when I was promoted to the High

Council because new Channelers are of special interest to him. Beneath that Finnish brawn, there is ever the lion concerned for his cubs.”

“He *is* Scandinavian, then? I wasn’t sure. His accent has an odd lilt to it, and his name’s Irish.”

Quinton rests his cane against a chair, then takes off his hat and lays it on top of a stack of papers. He runs his hand over dark hair, styled to sit neatly against his head. “His father was Irish, his mother Finnish. He is over three hundred years old. I am quite sure in that time his accent has been influenced by his many travels.”

“*Three hundred years old?*”

Quinton gives me a wry smile. “Very few people in the supernatural world are the age that they appear.”

I scrutinize the man on the desk, wondering if his words apply to himself. He has a sharp-faced, prep-school look, with just enough hint of the rogue to make him interesting. I can’t see what color his eyes are. When I try to focus on them, my gaze slides aside like a magnet attempting to connect with the same pole. He looks no more than in his fifties, though.

He seems undisturbed by my close inspection and answers the obvious question with a warm smile. “I celebrated my one hundred and twenty-second birthday two months ago. An old man, but a stripling compared to the commander. And witches are human, but some can extend their lives.”

“Right.” That’s a serious age. But three hundred years old is unimaginable. No wonder Flanagan’s got a stick up his arse.

Outside the windows, the summer sky is a perfect baby blue, vividly contrasting this dusty room with its cluttered bookshelves. My fingers tingle with the need to escape, to feel fresh air on my face.

“So, when does this test start?” I say to the witch.

He’s watching me intently. I catch fascination or wonder in his expression, but he shutters it away before I can pin it down. “Oh, my dear boy, the test began the moment I arrived.”

Goose bumps ripple my arms. Does that mean he’s reading my mind?

He smiles, a tight curve of his lips. “I can read your mind if I wish, but a lot can be garnered from an individual’s reactions and responses.”

Is he showing his hand? I try to lock eyes with him but frustratingly find myself staring at his nose.

“Fear not. I am a friend. An ally, Michael.”

Yeah, right.

Leaving his cane, he saunters over to join me by the window. He moves with smooth precision, as if avoiding the barest disturbance of air. I suppress the desire to retreat to the opposite side of the room.

“Tell me,” he says. “What do you know of the supernatural world? Has no one shared its presence with you before?”

“Why would they?” I sweep a hand toward the line of twisted trees outside. “How would I know anything about this crazy shit before I met the Guardians? I knew nothing. Now, though. Now I know I’m channeling an energy I don’t want. Fairies aren’t just a fairy tale. Witches are a thing.” I glance at the door. “And giant Scandinavian arseholes exist.”

He slides a smile onto his face. I’m not sure he believes me. “So much to learn, then. So much to explore. I think you will enjoy reading the... alternative history. The wars, the battles, the fascinating characters who have shaped this world.”

He’s probably right, but what’s that got to do with getting out of that cage? I wait to see where he’s going with this.

“I’ve written history books myself, you know?” He goes to touch one of the dusty shelves, then thinks better of it and snatches his fingers back. I catch the slight tremor again. Too much coffee? An alcoholic? “I specialize in one particular historical figure we call the Warlock.” He side-eyes me and waits as though expecting a response. When all I do is raise an irritated brow, he continues. “I’m quite the expert. The Warlock was a mixed-species Channeler with witch blood. So powerful, he won a rare secret, and nearly single-handedly conquered the supernatural world.” He gives me another funny look. “I think you will find his life story to be quite enlightening.”

I frown. What has some witchy megalomaniac got to do with me?

“Listen,” I say with a twinge of irritation, “thanks for the info, but am I getting out of that cage or not? If you can read my mind, it must be obvious by now I’m not a Blood Servant.”

He snorts and waves a hand. "Oh, I know for certain you have never been in the hands of the Anlu'kyr."

I narrow my eyes. "But Flanagan's convinced? He thinks I've had my memory sliced to pieces."

"I assure you your memory is intact, dear boy. No, it is something else entirely that sets you apart from other Channelers."

What's he talking about? "You mean the blood tests?"

He levels me with a heavy gaze. "Come now, Michael. Open your mind to me. I am quite sure the High Priestess has informed you of your heritage. We both know how special you are."

I'm not aware I've closed my mind. Heritage? And who's the High Priestess? Is he talking about the name Sabel?

Crap. I try to force the word away, but the other man slowly smiles.

"Do you have any knowledge of your origins, Michael? Anything at all? What brought you to Lancaster?" His eyes are boring into me now, and an image of my piece of parchment blazes into my mind, the names Lancaster, Blackriver, and Sabel written across its yellowed surface in cursive script. It hangs there between us as clear and distinct as though it manifested in the air.

The breath stalls in my lungs, and my heart pumps faster. I hear a repeat of Alexei's warning in my mind.

Do not tell the Lycan your true name, Michael Sabel. His precious Council will only fear you.

Quinton is the Council, and I'm pretty sure he knows I'm a Sabel. I have no blasted idea why that's an issue, but if it's something that's going to keep me in chains, it's something I don't want him to know. I step back, try to force the image down. Bury it. It won't budge. It remains in the front of my mind, glaring at me.

Quinton shakes his head and makes a *tsk* sound. "Now, now. As I told you, I am an ally. You need not hide your identity from me."

I swallow. "I'm Michael Blakeley," I say, ignoring the fact that the witch is peering straight into my mind. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Quinton steps toward me, his brow creasing, lips pursed. I try to avert my gaze, hide from his penetrating attention, but it's as if he's rooting me in place with his eyes.

For what feels like minutes, I stand there, unable to move, breath shallow, heart pounding, sweat prickling my skin. His presence sifts through my mind, the lick of his spotlight illuminating dark corners that should be private. After an age, he releases me, and I have to grasp a cabinet to steady myself.

"No," he says. "You really don't know what I speak of, do you? She left you a letter, but her words to you were ruined. Even so, I think it best if we take precautions." He stills, then glances behind him at the door. His expression tightens. "Deary me, we're about to be disturbed. I thought I would have more time. Quickly now." He steps closer and holds out his hands. "Give me your hands, Michael. Come quickly now."

I'm still recovering from his mind assault. I blink and shake my head. No way am I giving him my hands.

Quinton's voice takes on a deeper, echoing quality. "Michael, you will comply. Put your hands in mine."

Without knowing why, I walk forward, and he clasps my wrists.

"Forgive me for this, my boy, but it must be done. Most witches in Blackriver will be able to read your mind, as well as others, and this puts you in grave danger. Look at me."

I raise my eyes, unable to do otherwise, and I'm met by two green orbs—jade green, the same color as mine. They hold my attention with an iron grip, and everything else falls away. I'm absorbed into an ocean of sea-green fire.

"Michael, you will not remember any mention of the name Sabel. You will not remember it as your true name. You will not remember that piece of paper or the words written upon it. That paper never existed."

No! My mind jerks away, bolting for a door, any door, to escape what I know he's doing. He's altering my memory the way Flanagan thought the vampires had. Panic grips my chest. The name, the parchment, it's all I

have. If I lose it, I lose everything. Any chance of knowing more about my parents and finding their killer will be gone.

His tone sharpens. "Keep your mind still."

"No." I growl, but not out loud. I can't move or speak. My hands are fists inside his steel grip.

"This is necessary. Obey me."

I feel a dark intrusion, as sharp as a knife, slice into my mind, and I can't escape the searing pain. It goes straight for the parchment.

Get out, I shout.

It's futile. I watch with horror as a swish of that cold blade severs the memory from its anchor and the image falls. Down into darkness, into nothing. A blinking star ripped from its place in the sky and sent to the bottom of a black lake. And as the light falls, my heart breaking for something I knew was essential but is now lost to me, a slender hand snatches it from the dark and disappears. As fast as a shaft of sunlight and so smooth, the move goes unnoticed by the witch, who now wears a satisfied smile.

"I am your friend, Michael. Your only true ally here at Blackriver."

Quinton releases my hands, and I'm left blinking in the afternoon sunlight. I grasp the bookshelf, breathless and soaked with sweat. I can't remember why.

The man standing beside me smiles.



11

The door bangs open, and Flanagan strides in with a grim face. “You’ll have to bring the interview to a close, Councilor. We may have a situation brewing at Longreach.”

“Aaah,” Quinton says. “The prince is making a move, no doubt?”

Flanagan doesn’t reply. His eyes are fixed on me. “Michael?” He stalks across the room to me.

I’m staring at my hands, still trying to make sense of my rapid heartbeat and the sweat soaking my skin. My fingers lack the familiar tingle of a panic attack, so it can’t be that, but I feel as if I’ve been pumping iron or fighting some unseen opponent.

When I turn to look up at Flanagan, his stern face is out of focus, but my heart gives a little kick when his pale eyes meet mine.

“I’m—I’m okay. I think.”

Flanagan cups my chin to raise my face. I let him draw me into his space. Even when he cradles my head between his hands to examine me, I don't resist. I grip his wrists and rest into his touch, my lips parting as I take in a deep breath of that luscious rain-washed-forest scent. A stirring begins in my groin, but mostly I'm reassured by the solid strength of Flanagan's presence.

"Look at me, Michael."

I raise my eyes. His masculine features come into focus: the dark blond curl of his clipped beard; his full lips; his thick brows, drawn tightly together. But my thoughts are sluggish, and I can't quite make sense of the fury in his eyes.

"What the hell did you do, Quinton?"

The councilor throws open his hands. "There is no need for concern, Gabriel. Michael will return to his bright self in only a few moments."

Quinton reaches out to touch my shoulder, but a low rumble, so deep it seems to rise from beneath the ground, emanates from Flanagan's chest. Is that a growl? I can feel it vibrating through the bones of my feet.

Quinton steps back. I catch a flinch. "Gabriel, I examined the boy's mind. The process has consequences, but I assure you he is unharmed."

While Flanagan's worried eyes roam my face, I smooth my hands along the lean muscles of his forearms, enjoying the brush of fine hair beneath my fingers. My gaze falls on the three neat plaits at the side of his head, gathered into the untidy knot he favors. The style should be feminine but somehow accentuates the man's fierceness. Fallen strands of hair burn amber in the afternoon sun, caressing the muscled line of his neck and highlighting the vein beneath his sun-gold skin. I want to lick that vein. I want to bury my face in lush blond hair and taste the man's scent on my lips.

"Michael." His deep voice breaks through my hungry trance.

"Huh?"

He moves a hand to the back of my head, heat from his palm spreading deep beneath my skin, and the Flame responds, streaming a burn through my spine to meet his touch.

“Come back to me,” he whispers.

I feel the request as a gentle push against my will. In response, my mind eases into focus, waking from its daydream. I notice the candle chandelier, its crystals catching the sun’s glare. The grisly tribal masks hung above the bookshelves. Quinton’s shadowed eyes. Flanagan holds my head in his hands, his huge body way too close for comfort. He’s stroking my face.

What the fuck?

I bash his hands away and jump back. “Get your hands off me. What the hell?”

“Aaand he’s back,” Quinton sings. “As I said, no damage.”

I glare at Flanagan, but he’s looking at me with what can only be described as affectionate amusement. My frown twists into a scowl.

“What’s going on?” I demand, steadying myself with the shelf behind me.

“You are simply recovering from the effects of a mind scan,” Quinton replies. “Nothing more.” He motions to a chair. “Please, sit down. Rest for now.”

“I’ll stay here, thanks.” I’m still glowering at Flanagan.

The bastard remains unaffected by my anger and addresses Quinton. “Alexei’s Blood Guard and four units of Servants have left Dvamira Castle. Headquarters believe their intention is to hit Longreach. You don’t seem surprised they’re on the move. Is that because you think it has something to do with Michael?”

My heart thuds at the mention of Alexei, a mixture of fear and elation filling my chest. I keep the response away from my face.

Quinton gives a nonchalant shrug. “Alexei will no doubt assume we have moved Michael to one of the laboratories for testing. He has never tolerated the incarceration of his own, and the Anlu’kyr will most definitely consider a half breed their own.”

My breath catches. Is he talking about me?

Flanagan’s rumble echoes through the room. “Speak plainly, Councilor.”

Quinton’s smile gives the impression he’s won his own secret competition. “Young Michael is not, and has never been, a servant of the

prince. He is what he professes to be, a new Channeler, three months into his ability and innocent of your suspicions. The blood tests have simply exposed his heritage. The prince awoke Michael's latent Anlu'kyr DNA."

"What?" I push off the shelf to step toward Quinton, but Flanagan stops me with a hand on my chest. "That's bullshit," I fire at them both. "Your tests are bullshit. I'm not half bloodsucker. I'm human." I shove Flanagan's hand away and throw him a warning glare.

"I'm afraid not, Michael," Quinton says. "In fact, when we sequence your DNA, I suspect we will find more variance. Maybe another species. I suspect you to be hardly human at all."

"Hardly hu—" I can't even finish the words.

"I'm sure you have always been stronger than your peers, even before your latent DNA was roused. Able to jump higher, run faster, heal far more quickly. You are twenty-six, and yet you appear to have barely entered your twenties. You are far more than human, and I think it is something you have always suspected but did not have the understanding to verbalize."

I reach back to grasp the shelf again, needing its solidity to keep myself upright. I'm shaking my head, but the man is right. I've always been stronger and faster, different. Not massively but enough to be noticeable. It's how I won all those martial arts competitions. Why I was once accused of steroid abuse. And yeah, I did wonder when the aging process would finally hit me, if I was destined to spend the rest of my life with the face of an eighteen-year-old. I told myself it was good genetics.

But part vampire? Hardly human? Yeah, I can safely say that explanation never occurred to me.

"So my parents were what? Vampires?"

"I suspect one of your parents was Anlu'kyr, possibly a turned Channeler. The other is quite the mystery."

One of my parents was a bloodsucker? Well, fuck me. And I thought this day couldn't get any worse. Would that be the reason they were murdered?

Flanagan watches Quinton with narrowed eyes. "What are you not saying?"

“Gabriel, there *is* no more to tell. That is why Michael knelt for the prince. His blood reacted to the presence of royalty. Obedience to the Royal Blood Call is an imperative the Anlu’kyr are born with, and Michael will feel this too.”

“Michael has been screaming for his *master* for three days. Not his prince.”

Quinton gives a dismissive flick of his wrist. “Is the prince not a *master* to his people?”

Flanagan folds his arms, his brows tight. “They don’t call him that. Not unless he *is* their master. There’s something off about this, Quinton. There is no such thing as a human half breed. The Anlu’kyr are barely fertile with each other. They don’t produce half breeds with humans.”

“And this is why I believe Michael to be the mix of more than two species.”

“That’s even less likely. Channelers this strong are human. The only mixed-breed Channeler with any strength I know of historically was the Warl...” Flanagan looks between me and Quinton. “You mean Michael is mixed breed like the Warlock?”

Quinton shakes his head. “A coincidence only. The Warlock’s bloodline ended five hundred years ago, and his particulars were purposely designed. Created through years of experiment and hybridization. Michael will simply be the result of an unusual coupling of which we have yet to discover the details.”

Flanagan scrutinizes Quinton. I get the impression he’s still not buying the witch’s explanation. I don’t understand why he’s making such an issue out of it. Quinton’s explanation seems pretty bloody straightforward to me. He thinks I’m part monster, and that makes me want to kneel to a bloodsucking vampire prince. In other words, my life is now epic shitballs.

I rub tension from my temples. My head throbs. This is too much. Too fucking much. I’m not sure I even believe it yet.

Flanagan sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “If this is true, they will come for him. It gives Alexei the perfect excuse to attack Blackriver. In fact, it begs the question why he’s hitting Longreach instead.”

“We do usually move those we assume are slaves to Longreach for treatment,” Quinton says.

Flanagan shakes his head. “He knows Michael is here.”

“Alexei cannot attack Blackriver directly, not without permission from his grandmother. And the Fae Queen respects her treaty with us. So maybe he attacks Longreach to give his position more weight in her eyes.”

Alexei’s grandmother is the Fae Queen? So the vampire prince is part fairy. Is that the reason for his pointed ears?

“Alexei doesn’t ask permission,” Flanagan rumbles. “He will inform her, but if Michael truly is a youngling, he will come for him regardless.”

My heart races. An ache for the prince I can only describe as longing pulls at my chest. I stamp on it with an imaginary boot. It’s the blood. Has to be. I may feel an unfathomable attraction to the vampire, but I have no desire to become his mindless slave or join his ranks.

“I’d like some time alone with Michael,” Flanagan says. “If you could wait outside, Councilor.”

Quinton gracefully nods his assent. “I will wait downstairs.” He turns to me with a warm smile. “We will meet again soon, Michael.”

I return the smile, but it’s awkward. I know he wants me to see him as a friend, but something about him unsettles me. He collects his hat and cane from the desk and leaves the room, swinging his silver stick like an Oxford toff.

Flanagan stands unmoving, silent until the doors close again.

I wait for him to speak, still gripping the bookshelf. I feel like I’ve been hit by an avalanche. I have a gazillion questions, starting with *What the ever-loving fuck?* But this isn’t the right moment. Not if Flanagan’s people are about to be attacked and he should be elsewhere. I stay quiet, determined to be patient with whatever he has to say.

“I’m going to return you to lockdown for now.”

Okay, apart from that. “Why? Quinton’s just told you I’m not a Blood Servant. I can’t help my blood. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You may not be a Blood Servant, but I now realize you are undergoing a transformation, and until that settles, you remain potentially dangerous. You

put four of my guards in the infirmary.”

“I don’t remember that. I have rights, you know. What about my job, my life?”

His expression softens. “I’m sorry, Michael, your rights have changed. As a supernatural, you are subject to a different set of laws. We already informed your employer you won’t be returning. Your rented flat will be paid off, your belongings taken care of. I’m the one responsible for you now. You may only be in the cage for one more day.”

A day? It might as well be a year. A surge of fury rises. What right do the Guardians have to tidy away my life without even asking me? I know I don’t have much. I barely have enough stuff to fill my one-room flat, and I hated that café job, but it’s not the point.

“So that’s it? Instead of a slave, I’m a prisoner. You know, I’m not seeing how this is a rescue right now, Flanagan.”

He bends to retrieve the chains from the floor, and my stomach lurches. “You need to be patient, Michael. Your circumstances will change when I know you are stable.”

Panic bubbles into my chest. I want to scream “I’m not a bloody supernatural, and I’m not subject to your fucked-up laws,” but maybe I am. Maybe I’m a mixed-breed vampire freak like they’re telling me. What the hell else is in my DNA? Shit. This whole situation is messed up. Not to mention the attack on this Longreach place might have something to do with me.

“If your labs and Blackriver are at risk because of me, why don’t you just hand me over to Alexei? Then nobody has to fight him—or die.”

Flanagan looks up from sorting the chains in his hands, the glint in his eyes so hard it jolts me. “You are not his, Michael.”

“I know that.” *I think*. “But if you believe I’m just some dangerous creature, surely my life isn’t worth more of your Guardians dying?”

Flanagan goes quiet. The click of metal chain echoes through the room as he prepares the manacles to be fitted. I’m watching with my stomach stuffed in my throat.

“Most of the Guardian ranks could be classed as ‘dangerous’ creatures,” he says quietly. “Whatever species you are, your life is important and not something I would ever throw away. It might be you are the reason Alexei marches on the labs, but his reasons are always complex and devious. His actions could be about something else entirely.”

He steps toward me, the chains dangling from his fist. I lean away, but my back thumps the hard wood behind me. I shake my head, desperately searching the room for a viable escape route.

“I can’t do this, Flanagan. I can’t.” I tamp down on the plea, determined not to show weakness in front of a man who probably fears nothing. Instead, I ball my fists and grit my teeth. If he wants to chain me, there’s nothing I can do to stop him, but it doesn’t mean I have to make it easy.

He comes close enough for his unusual heat to prickle my skin. His eyes, soft with surprising tenderness, flicker over my face. “You can handle this, Michael. I can help you, and I won’t be leaving you alone. I’ve instructed Mackenzie’s team to stand guard. He’s a soldier I trust. His team will take you to the showers, give you a hot meal, stay with you till I return.”

A shower and a decent meal. Yeah, under different circumstances, that would be peachy, but it’s useless to me if I can’t breathe and I’m going through a panic attack. I ram the heels of my hands into his chest to push him back. I ignore the fact that he doesn’t move an inch and it’s like hitting granite. “Fuck your shower, and fuck your decent meal. I’m not going back in that cage.”

He arches a brow, eyes sparking. “Is that so?”



12

I'm lying on the bed in the cage where Flanagan left me, the overbearing, girly-haired, freakishly strong bastard. It took little effort and all of a minute for him to hold me down and fasten the manacles to my limbs. Then he threw me over his shoulder—yeah, no joke—and carried me, fireman-style, down the long corridor and back to the lockdown.

I got a few strikes in. I bit his thumb hard enough to draw blood but almost broke my teeth—that man's skin is as tough as boiled leather. I twisted in his grip, squirmed ferociously. Beat my fists on his back. It was all useless. I've trained for years to build fighting skills and the muscles to back them up, but I feel like a lightweight twink against Flanagan's insane strength.

To make matters worse, the asshole remained infuriatingly calm throughout the whole procedure too, his eyes soft as he fastened the chain.

Once in the cage, he pacified me with that trick he does, his hand on the back of my neck. The Flame rushed to his touch, and with a few whispered words, he sucked the rising panic straight out of my chest.

Now, instead of plotting my escape or freaking out about my sudden promotion to supernatural vampire mutant, I'm staring up at the dust motes sparkling in the sunlight.

There is no escape anyway. Not from him. I'm not getting out of these chains till he believes I'm trustworthy. It kills me to admit this, but I need to stop fighting him. Best behavior is my best plan. Once he knows I'm safe, he'll relax the constraints, and I can check for potential ways out of Blackriver.

Why did I agree to come here in the first place? What the hell did I think would be here that had anything to do with me? Was it only information about the Flame that drew me to Blackriver? It's funny because I'm sure there was something, some important reason, but all I have is a discomforting emptiness in my chest and no clue.

I push myself up to sit on the side of the bed, chains clinking as I roll my shoulders and try to shake off the mental haze. Flanagan said he wouldn't leave me alone, but I've been lying here for at least an hour, and there's no sign of this Mackenzie guy he mentioned.

An eerie quiet rests over the room, the only movement the shifting sunlight across the dark slate floor and sandstone walls. My eyesight seems so much sharper than it was before. Before I met Alexei. I always had excellent eyesight, but now it's as though a high-definition switch was flipped while I slept. Everything appears crisp and clear. I hope to God it's not because I'm turning into a blood-sucking monster. Surely one drop of the prince's blood wouldn't do that. Would it?

My sense of smell is off the charts. The scents of sweet wood polish, coal soot, and tangy metal keep drawing my attention. I can even smell the stone that surrounds me—a bitter scent. I didn't know stone had a smell. Also, chlorine, lemon, and timber, and all the meaty body scents left by people who've been inside this cage.

My ears pick up every nuance of sound. The shifting of feet on stone. Breaths echoing in a hallway. Whispering. There are two guards on the other side of those oak doors, and I can hear their nervousness. Feel it. Are they anxious about guarding me or about something else?

As I listen, two more sets of boots arrive. Quiet voices. There's a pause. Then a key rattles the lock, and the double doors open. Four men walk in, swaggering like they own the place, their expressions a mix of self-satisfied cockiness and wary amusement. They wear the hard leather vests and suede pants of the Guardian soldiers, the silver Guardian symbol glistening on their shoulders. Odors of sweat and tobacco drift into the cage, along with stale beer and vinegar. Heightened senses have their downside.

The tall one at the front—built like a heavyweight—with reddish hair and a prominent nose, claps his hands and rubs them together. “This show is now on the road, lads,” he declares in a well-spoken accent that doesn't fit his words. “You ready for your shower, little blood whore?”

My muscles tense, the warning prickle across my back bringing me to instant alertness. Is this the man Flanagan told me he trusted?

“Are you Mackenzie?” I ask, cautious.

The man's broad grin displays a set of wolfish teeth. “Aaah. I'm afraid Mackenzie can't make it today. Something unavoidable came up.” He glances around at his companions. “Or did it come down?”

They all grin, pleased with themselves. And it leaves me worried for this Mackenzie bloke but a damn sight more worried for myself. I don't know what these idiots have planned for me, but I don't think it's going to be fun.

The tall one, the leader of this little gang, judging by the way the other men look to him, unfastens a small crossbow from his belt and loads it with a bolt. His friends do the same, two of them spreading out around the cage and training their weapons on me. The third man follows the leader as he steps up to the cage door.

“I'm Sergeant Belanger,” the leader says. “But you will call me *Sir*. Now stand up, turn around, and lean on the bed, spreading your hands and feet as far as they'll go.”

I don't move at first. I keep my eyes fastened to the floor, bottom lip between my teeth, and steal a moment to weigh the situation. I'm pretty sure my shower and hot meal is a dead hope. I'm probably in a deep pile of shit. But how deep? A beating? An accident in the shower? A thwarted escape attempt that ends in my death?

"You deaf as well as stupid, blood whore?"

I sigh, long and hard. I'm supposed to be following my new "best-behavior" plan. Looks like it's getting its first road test.

Throwing Mr. Call-Me-Sir a withering glare—I know I shouldn't, it'll only make him worse, but let's face it, the guy's a twat—I slip off my perch and follow his instructions.

"Very good, boy. But where was my 'yes, sir?'"

Bollocks. My best-behavior plan starts to smoke, its edges catching fire from the heat in my gut.

When I say nothing, he adds, "Well?"

I grimace, images of red rags and bulls coming to mind. I'm in a whole heap of trouble, but a man can't help the way he's made. "Go fuck yourself." Yep, a whole heap of trouble.

He chuckles. A dry, humorless sound. "I was hoping you'd say that."

His answer draws my attention back to him. His metal-gray eyes gleam with a wild hunger, the cold curve of his lips suggesting a man with sickly appetites and a fondness for cruelty. Great. This day just gets better and better.

Keys clatter against metal, and Belanger swings the door open. "Stay exactly where you are. Move without permission, you get a bolt in the leg. Understand?"

I nod. But of course, it's not the response he wants.

His long legs eat the space in a few strides, and the force of his fist meeting my kidney buckles my knees. Pain bursts through my back, and I go down, hands gripping the wooden edge of the bed to catch my fall.

"Answer me correctly, boy."

Pushing myself up to stand again, I purse my lips in mock thoughtfulness. "Yes, Dickface?"

The next punch to the same place drops my knees to the stone, a firm boot toppling me all the way to the ground. I roll away from the second kick meant for my lower back, but with one step, his foot meets my side anyway.

I can take a beating. Always could. I scrapped my way right through my childhood. Had to. A foster kid learns how to fight early on or becomes a punching bag for every bully. Taking a beating was how I won my first major competition fight. How I gained my fighter's name, the Rocket. My opponent was stronger and more skilled than me. He beat me to a pulp. But when he'd exhausted himself, thinking he'd won, and everyone watching thought the fight was over, I came back at him as hard and fast as a man in his first round. "Like a rocket," the local paper had said.

But I'm not in a fighting ring now. This is more like a schoolyard gang event, and Belanger clearly came to this room with one intention: to rough up the prisoner he thinks is a Blood Servant. He's targeting the same vulnerable body part, hitting my kidneys with every strike. He wants permanent damage. It hurts.

"Five Guardians died at the steelworks. Good soldiers who thought they were saving a new Channeler, not a dirty fucking blood whore. And you think it's a joke?"

The skinny blond guy loitering behind him nods his agreement.

I try to roll away and rise to my knees, but every move is thwarted by the chains, and he follows without effort. Another booted thump to my lumbar region has me crying out from the sharp pain that shoots through my back.

"I'm not a Blood Servant," I grit out. I know it's useless saying it, but it is the truth.

Belanger chuffs and shakes his head. "We know about the blood tests, you little slut. These soldiers watched you kneel to the Prince of Filth with their own eyes." Another kick to the back draws a cry from my throat. I curl into a protective ball. "You're just a dirty human whore. What happened? You get bored of servicing a prince? Thought you'd try fucking your way into the Guardians' good graces instead?" Another deep kick, straight into my side. My organs shudder. "If it's that bastard Lycan you're after, I've got

news for you. It takes a lot more than a pretty face to get Mr. Untouchable into bed. He doesn't do weak little humans. Too scared he'll break them. And he certainly won't be interested in the prince's leftovers."

What the hell is he on about? After another hefty strike to my lower back, I've had enough.

When Belanger goes in for the next boot to the same place, I whip around, wrap his ankle in chains, and roll, taking him with me. I'm risking one of those bolts in my leg, but I can't afford another hit to my back. I expect to pull him off his feet, to see his body crash to the ground. What I don't expect is my move to swing him and smash him into the silver bars on the other side of me.

Metal clangs. His crossbow flies from his grip and clunks across the ground. Belanger curses. When he raises his face from the sprawled slump he's in, the shock in his gray eyes mirrors my own.

Turns out my heightened senses aren't the only upgrade. I'm a damn sight stronger too.

I'm about to take full advantage, twisting around to plant both feet into Belanger's face, but cold metal against my temple freezes my move. The skinny bloke has his crossbow pressed to my head.

"That's it. Keep going, you little bitch," Belanger hisses, pulling himself up to a sitting position. "I'm not against putting a hole in Flanagan's pet project. Can't help damaging the goods if it tries to escape."

"How can I escape in chains, you prat?"

I really don't like the smile he gives me. "Keep the bow on him, Collins."

Belanger tugs at the foot I still have wrapped in a hold, and for a moment, I consider resisting his release, but he eyes me with a killing glint, and I let him go. Better to choose my fights.

He uses the bars to pull himself up to a stand. His face twists with a sneer as he steps forward to sink another kick into my side. I roll over, folding inwards to protect my torso with arms and knees, and his steel-capped boot slams into my exposed forearm instead. It's better than taking another strike to my back, but the blow lands hard enough to almost break bone. "That's

for the bruise on my arse,” he declares. He hunkers down and, gripping my ankle in a meaty hand, unlocks the cuff.

I watch with narrowed eyes as he unfastens both manacles, slides them away across the stone, then starts on the wrist locks.

“Um, whatcha doin’, Sarge?” the man with the crossbow pressed against my forehead asks.

Belanger expels an ugly laugh. “Making sure this blood whore gets what’s coming to him.” When he’s finished freeing me from my restraints, he says, “Get up.”

I leap to my feet, more confident without the chains. I’m still in serious danger, but at least I have a chance to fight. I step back into open space, watching for any coming attack.

“Open the cage and unlock the doors,” Belanger orders.

The men’s eyes dart between the sergeant and each other, but they follow the order. Collins opens the cage door, leaving it wide enough to meet the bars. One of the men outside the cage unlocks the double doors.

I give Belanger a questioning frown. He returns it with another one of his smirks. I want to kick it off his face.

“Put your crossbows away and step back, boys,” he orders.

There’s a long pause, the men sharing doubtful glances. They’re as confused as I am. But they do as he says, folding away their small bows and hooking them back onto their belts.

Belanger turns to me. “The cage is open, the double doors unlocked. The entrance at the base of the stairs is also unlocked. And outside this keep, you have a clear run across the grass and over the wall.” He grins, showing off his bright teeth. “You have two choices, blood whore. Make a run for it and take a chance at escape. You never know, a fit man such as yourself might just make it out the gate. Or you stay here and take what’s coming to you.”

So that’s what he’s doing, creating the pretense of escape, a believable excuse to work me over.

I glance between him and the open cage door. The part of me that yearns for air and sky clamors with a need to take his offer and make a run for it.

I'd make it out of the double doors. I'd probably reach the bottom of the stairs before one of the men had a crossbow ready.

But would I really find the doors to the outside unlocked? Probably not.

And if the doors were unlocked, would there be a clear run outside the place the Guardians keep prisoners? Unlikely.

I assess the soldiers surrounding me, their postures tight as coiled springs, ready to chase. Their eyes shine with the hungry glint of predators. These men want payback. They want to see the Blood Servant bruised and cowed. Running will get me a bolt hole in my leg for the trouble. Staying will involve a fight I can't possibly win.

I look at the door one more time, burying the wistful longing for grass and trees instead of walls, as well as the shower and hot meal I was promised. Yes, I could run for it, but my chances of escape are zero, and I've never run from a fight in my life. I'm not going to start now.

I turn to Belanger with a sigh. "Shall we just get this over with?"



13

Belanger turns to his men. “Get in the cage, lads. Let’s teach this little bastard a lesson. Vander, bring the spreader bars.”

The dark-haired grizzly man enters the cage. The stocky bloke with muscles and cheap tattoos collects a long chain and two iron bars before following. Iron bars with manacles on either end. An icy chill buries itself in the base of my stomach.

As the soldiers crowd into the enclosed space, the stench of stale sweat and testosterone fills my nose, mingling with Belanger’s tobacco stink. The stocky bloke, Vander, drops the bars on the slate floor, the metal clang like a punch through my gut. Belanger falls back, letting his men step forward.

“I want him strung up and kneeling,” he says to his men.

I’m in trouble. A beating I can take; bruises, I’ll weather; broken bones, I’ve had before. But restraint with bars and manacles is straight out of my nightmares.

My heart already hammers a romping beat, but the broken rhythm of panic stutters in my chest. Rivulets of sweat wet my cheeks. I lower into a ready stance, knees bent, fists high. Four on one is more than I can handle, but whatever. I'll just give it all I've got. Their win is a certainty, but they'll feel the bite of this prisoner's teeth before they celebrate.

They approach slowly, circling just outside my reach, moving with the light-footed ease of trained fighters, their bright, hungry eyes eager but cautious. They remind me of wild dogs cornering prey—knowing they have their lunch but wary of their victim's last desperate burst of violence.

It's the skinny blond, Collins, who strikes first.

He comes in fast and sleek, expecting his feint to my head to distract from his intended punch to my stomach. I kick high through the gaping hole in his defense and ram my heel into the side of his head. My kicks are strong, my well-developed thighs a result of hours with a drop bag and nothing better to do. But my new super strength lands a whopper, and the man flies sideways so hard his feet leave the ground before he crashes into Belanger, taking them both to the floor. Holy shit.

Belanger swears and pushes the lad off him. "Stand up, you fucking idiot."

I don't get time to relish the moment. The other two soldiers come at me together. I block their punches and elbow strikes and manage to get in a few of my own. But they soon crowd me backward. I'm against the bars before I score a successful kick straight into Grizzly's stomach.

His feet leave the ground, and he slams into the cage bars at the far side, his head thumping metal before he slumps to the stone.

Taking full advantage of the distraction, I send my foot out again and ram it into Vander's exposed balls before he can respond. He doubles over with a cry, both hands grasping his groin, and falls back to recover.

And for a few wonderful moments, I'm winning. Gotta say, I'm loving this freaky new strength.

Belanger shouts at them, "For fuck's sake, get him tied down."

"He's strong, Sarge." Vander clutches his nethers with a scowl on his face.

Belanger's not impressed. "He's just a human brat." He turns to the grizzly guy. "Adams, show the little shit who he's messing with."

I raise my fists. I assume Belanger means for Adams to take another run at me, maybe show me some fancy Guardian moves, but the man begins to strip. He unties his leather vest, drops it to the floor with a thud, and unbuckles his trousers. What the hell is he gonna do? Slap me with his dick?

When all his clothes lie in a pile on the ground, and he's stark bollock naked, his bright eyes fix on me. His mouth twists with a cocky smirk.

I feel a sudden change in the Flame. The energy pulses and swirls, agitated, excited, the heat in my spine flaring. The air around Adams shimmers, silver sparks dance around his fingers. He looks me dead in the eyes. Then his whole body ignites into a rage of silver-white flames.

While I watch, mesmerized and dumbfounded, his body seems to fold in on itself, shifting and changing, half man, half beast. When the blaze of Flame leaves in a sudden gust, the creature left staring at me with the same feral glint in its eyes as Adams is a wolf.

A motherfucking wolf.

A massive, dark gray, grizzly thing, with paws like plates and teeth like a dinosaur.

With a deep growl, it runs straight at me and pounces to crash me back against the bars. Its gnashing jaws are level with my face, spraying spittle across my mouth. A stench of fur and fury assaults my nostrils. I grip the thick scruff at the side of its head and force its jaws back, but even with my added strength, I'm no match for this monster.

"Keep him there, Adams," Belanger shouts. "You two, get the bars and get him cuffed."

The two soldiers follow orders and grab a bar each. While I'm stuck in this position, keeping the creature from tearing a hole in my face, Vander fixes a manacle to my wrist. Collins fastens his to an ankle.

Frantic terror derails my strength. I lose my hold.

The wolf snarls, teeth scraping my jaw, but before he can make minced meat of my head, Vander pushes him off me, then jerks me by the manacle

to swing me around and slam my face into the bars.

He kicks my legs apart, and Collins tries to cuff the second ankle. No. Fuck no. I struggle wildly, keeping my foot out of his reach, stabbing back with my elbow into Vander's ribs. He buries a hard punch into my back, clubbing the same bruised area Belanger laid into. The strike shudders my bones. It nearly floors me, but I bite down my bark of pain. He twists my arm behind my back, forcing it upward.

"Keep the fuck still," he says in my ear. "Or we'll let Adams damage that pretty face."

My fear of the wolf is nothing compared to the terror of being manacled and strung up to the cage ceiling. I keep struggling, but Collins fastens my other ankle, and with the bar forcing my legs apart, I'm finished. I can barely stand. Vander takes full advantage, gripping my collar and using it to yank me backward. The move chokes away the curse on my lips, and I land on the ground with a crash of metal.

Belanger laughs. "Now we've got you, you little shit. Strip him and string him up," he says to his men.

My stomach tenses. *Strip him?*

Collins fastens my other wrist to the end of the bar and leaves me lying on the floor in an enforced star shape. I can barely breathe, gasping against the frantic panic threatening to burst through my chest. I arch off the floor and twist, but I'm not getting out of this. Belanger's right. They have me. And whatever Belanger's idea of a lesson is, there's not a thing I can do to prevent it.

They rip my thin shirt off and cut the leather trousers away with a knife. I hiss as the blade slices skin. Once I'm naked, Vander drags me by the wrist bar across the floor. The slate ground scrapes skin from my back, pain searing the flesh beneath. I grit my teeth, clamp down on my cries. I'm not giving the bastards the pleasure of hearing me suffer.

While the wolf breathes stinking hot breath on my mouth, Vander attaches chains to the spreader bar, and I'm flipped and hauled upright. I'm left kneeling on the stones, my feet spread wide by the bar between my ankles and my arms open above my head. Then Vander adjusts the chain

length, stretching my body upward as far as it can extend from my knees, leaving my chest open and my junk on full display.

“Nice,” Belanger says, his eyes raking my form with a sick, lustful grin. He steps forward and crashes his fist into my jaw. The blow jolts my head sideways, pain crashing through my teeth, blood and spit spraying the gray stone.

“That’s for the bruises,” he states. He grips my chin, forcing me to look up at him. I taste copper. “And now, you little blood slut, the fun really starts.”

My hope that it was only a beating Belanger planned drowns in the tide of rising terror. Even the dreaded fear of enclosure tightening my chest pales into the background. Belanger’s hungry expression leaves no doubt.

He runs his sweaty hand across my pecs. “Nice,” he repeats. “I’m going to enjoy this. Go and lock the door, Collins.” Without taking his eyes or his hand off me, he gives something to the skinny soldier. “And throw this.”

My stomach clenches. Is that the key to the manacles?

Belanger pinches my nipple between his fingers and twists, hard. I bury my cry behind tight lips and jerk violently in the restraints, but there’s no give in the chains and no way to escape his filthy touch.

“Get your cocksucking hands off me, you twisted pervert.”

His chuckle is deep and dirty. “You’re ours now. We’re gonna give the whore what he deserves. You tried to escape, remember? Beat us up. We’ve got bruises.” He stalks around me as he speaks, his eyes tearing strips off my flesh as he ogles my naked body. “That bastard Commander Flanagan doesn’t like it when Blood Servants beat on his Guardians. Doesn’t like it at all. You can kiss your chances of ever getting out of this cage good-bye.”

Vander, standing a few feet away, nods his agreement and snickers. Collins runs back from locking the double doors and joins him. The wolf sits between them, a permanent snarl exposing long canines.

I’m beyond the effect of his words. I don’t know if Flanagan will believe me. He doesn’t trust me, but I can’t deal with that right now. The thud of Belanger dropping to his knees behind me steals my concentration. His stench of stale tobacco smothers my senses. When his dirty hand swipes

down my back to the cheeks of my arse, my stomach convulses. I clench tight and struggle in the restraints again. The metal digs into my wrists and ankles, but my efforts are useless. “You sick bastard. I’ll kill you for this.”

I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe the bastard’s going to rape me in front of his men. What kind of place is Flanagan running here? Helpless rage burns through me like bubbling acid. I want to kill something. I want to rip Belanger apart with my teeth and torch every piece of him to a cinder. But I’m helpless. I’ve got no way of stopping this.

Call the Flame to you, precious one.

That stills me. Did I just imagine Prince Alexei’s voice in my head?

Belanger mistakes my sudden stillness for surrender. “Lost your fight? Or have you decided you want a soldier’s cock inside you after all?” I hear the clink of his belt unbuckling.

I can’t do this. I can’t.

Then call the Flame. That’s definitely Alexei. I’d recognize that sing-song English accent anywhere.

“How?” I ask the air.

“You’re about to find out,” Belanger mutters, irritated. “Now keep still, or I’ll get Adams to hold you in place with his teeth on your balls.” He grabs my arse cheeks and squeezes them as though he’s testing the ripeness of fruit. I clench them so tight my hips ache.

Call on the Flame? How? The energy buzzes inside me, hot and agitated in response to my ramped-up emotions. But I’m wearing this suppressing collar.

Flame prickles from the hands exploring my butt cheeks too. Belanger must be a Channeler or one of those wolves, but I have no clue how to call on the energy to defend myself against these sick bastards.

I close my eyes and, fixing my attention on the pulsing heat at the base of my spine, direct it toward my fingers. A tingling cascade of power runs through my body and out to my limbs, but it only gets as far as my elbows.

Shit. It won’t go near the iron.

Then it seeps away and evaporates as if extinguished. That’s the effect of the collar. How am I supposed to use the Flame in iron cuffs and this collar?

Belanger grips my hips to pull me toward him. He's not getting past my clenched muscles, but how long is that going to last.

Alexei's tone rises, sharper. *Call the Flame to you, Michael. Now.*

"I tried!" I close my eyes again. *Flame*, I say in my mind, feeling like an idiot but determined. *Come to me. I'm calling you.*

"Argh," Belanger shouts, jerking away from me. "What the fuck?"

"What's wrong, Sarge?" Collins asks, his hand stilling on his crotch.

"He fucking nipped me. He just pulled Flame from my skin."

Vander and Collins share a look. Vander says, "He's a Wielder, Sarge, but he can't do nothin' with that collar around his neck."

"He didn't burn me, for fuck's sake," Belanger growls. "He stole Flame from my hand."

Collins shifts his feet. "That's impossible, Sarge. He probably just burnt you."

Belanger slaps the back of my head. "Behave. Whatever the fuck it was you just did, don't do it again. Adams will enjoy feasting on your balls for his dinner."

The wolf pads forward and growls at my groin.

I ignore it, my mind still caught up by what just happened. I did feel a heated prickle of Flame sink into my hips from Belanger's skin. Was that because I called it to me?

I don't get time to explore.

Belanger circles my hip more firmly this time and forces a tilt in my pelvis that prevents me from gripping my cheeks. No way. No fucking way.

Michael!

Fury tears through me like a firestorm. "Flame!" I yell at the room, desperate. "I'm fucking calling you!"

Yes, a soft female voice in my mind says. I feel a chasm open inside me, deep in my being, a dark and endless depth, expanding, deepening.

Silver light arcs through the air toward me, sucked from the bodies of the soldiers, and blasts into my chest, a scorching torrent of power. Screams fill my ears. The wolf wails. I'm blinded by searing light, and agony tears through my mind. I hear my own shriek join the howling cries, my body

shaking uncontrollably as the rampant energy forces its way through skin and muscle. I'm overwhelmed by a sudden expansion, the pressure wrenching veins apart. My chest, my brain, my limbs are about to explode.

Then it stops. Silence.

I'm left a gasping wreck.

When I pry open my eyes, time has stilled, and the scene around me stands frozen. Belanger's soldiers, including the wolf, sprawl like corpses across the ground. Mouths wide, faces fixed into contorted cries of agony, their skin wrinkled and ruined. Unmoving blood seeps in rivulets from ears and noses and pools on the stone. Suspended bolts of silver-white fire arc out from each body toward me. The ground burns with unmoving flame.

Has Alexei frozen time?

This is not me, my beauty. Surprise and humor lighten his voice.

"How are you talking to me?"

Do you wish to take the lives of these Shifters?

I look at the bodies of the soldiers, their faces ashen and withered. They appear half-dead already. "No. No. They're bastards, but I won't kill them." They're not worth the inevitable angst.

Then you must cease from taking their Flame.

"How?"

You know how. You'll be in pain, but the Lycan will help you.

Flanagan.

I will come for you soon.

My heart wrenches. "What? Are you going? No, don't go." I don't understand the strength of my reaction, Alexei should be the last person I want with me, but I feel a desperate need to know he's near.

You are mine, precious one. I will never be far.

When he leaves, like a blink of light before darkness, the strange stillness collapses, and the room erupts into a maelstrom of flashing Flame and screaming agony.

I tense my jaw against the onslaught. "Stop."

As though my word pulled some plug, the arcing fire snaps back into the prone bodies of the soldiers. The flames flutter and disappear. The room

falls silent again. I'm left with an ache in my chest and burning pain. My body convulses as fire rips the length of my spine. Molten lava scorches a path through every vein. The searing heat wrenches a scream from my throat.

As if from a distance, I hear the double doors bang open.

A stranger's voice echoes through the room. "Oh my God. What the hell? Contact the commander," he shouts. "Now."



14

“C hanneler... Channeler.” A female voice, cool fingers tapping my face. “I think he’s coming round.”

Light flickers. Colors gather and solidify into two figures. As I pull my attention from a vague blur, I’m assaulted by body-wide heat and agony. Fire scorches along my spine. Pressure crowds my head. A sunburn sensation cooks every inch of my skin.

“Too hot,” I croak.

“I know. It’s Flame Fever. Commander Flanagan is on his way. He’ll help you.” I recognize the dry Japanese accent now. It’s Captain Seonu, the fierce black-bobbed scowler with sky-blue eyes.

I peer at her through a red fog. I’m still in manacles, suspended from the ceiling in the same kneeling position, thighs wide, arms above my head. Every joint aches.

Seonu crouches in front of me, examining my face, her long black eyebrows drawn tight. She smells of leather and peppermint. Laasya stands beside her, face crumpled with worry.

It's twilight. The two windows show star-speckled blue outside. The soldiers' bodies are gone. Only pools of blood remain, shiny and black in the honeyed light flickering from the oil lamps on every wall.

How long have I been hanging here? I'm still mostly naked, my Flame-fueled boner sticking out like a flagpole. Someone has tied a shirt around my waist to maintain my dignity, but I'm in far too much agony to give a shit about that anyway.

"You're safe now," Laasya reassures.

Safe? I don't think so. I'll never feel safe here. Especially not while wearing chains and a collar. I try to ask a question, but my sand-dry mouth won't work, and I end up croaking out a moan.

"Here," Laasya says. She holds my chin up with gentle fingers and places a bottle of water to my lips. I glug its contents like a desert survivor. My tugging swallows spill the water across her hand. The liquid sloshes into my stomach with a welcome cooling sensation. When I've drunk as much as I can, Laasya pulls away, and my head flops forward, not enough strength in my neck to hold it upright.

"Will he be okay, Captain?" Laasya sounds anxious.

"I don't know. I wish I understood what happened. I do know if we don't lower this Flame Fever, he'll burn out his nervous system. This Haze will certainly last a few days."

"Can't Sergeant Mason help?"

"He tried—it was too much for him."

"But the Sergeant's a Class 6 Grounder?"

"Exactly. If Michael can hold too much Flame for a Class 6 to handle, what the hell kind of Class is he?" She smoothly rises and steps back. I want her hands on my face again. I need touch, my body yearns for it, even more than it longs for cold.

"Oh, Commander, thank the Goddess," Laasya says, turning toward the door. "Michael isn't well."

“Report, Captain.” Flanagan’s growly voice is even deeper than usual. He stalks across to me, his potent presence dominating the room. He’s in his usual light brown leathers but clear from any battle stains. He must have washed and changed since returning from Longreach. When he peers down, I feel his intense gaze take in every detail.

I must look a sight. I imagine my body to be a blue-black patchwork, with scrapes down my back from the drag across a stone floor and dried blood on my thighs from the knife cuts. I can taste a split lip, feel the bruise from Belanger’s punch like a swollen brand on my cheek.

“We don’t know exactly what happened, Commander,” Seonu says, resting both hands on her knife belt.

“Then tell me what you do know.” Flanagan circles me, examining my state from every aspect. When he’s finished, he returns to the front and stands close enough for his suede-clad knees to brush the top of my abs. His forest scent envelops me. He cups my face between his gloved hands, flame sparking between us, and slides his thumb across my bruised cheek.

“Michael,” he whispers.

When I glance up, his eyes burn with a silver fury. I’m not sure whether he’s pissed at me or his soldiers. I offer him a glare. Even within my red-hazed agony, anger burns. This is all on him. If he hadn’t left me in this cage—in chains—I wouldn’t have been at the mercy of his fucked-up soldiers.

“Well?” he snaps at Seonu. “Why the hell is he naked?”

“We’re not sure, sir, but it doesn’t look good. Miller heard screaming. He found the double doors locked, the cage open, and Michael secured like this, Belanger and the other Shifters half-dead on the floor around him. Adams was in full wolf. Miller contacted me because you weren’t back from Longreach. When I arrived, Michael was like this and overwhelmed by Flame Fever. I had the unconscious soldiers taken to the infirmary. Belanger woke briefly. He told me Michael was raging and tried to escape, and they had to secure him.”

“And what the hell was Belanger doing in my compound when I’ve left strict instructions he’s not to be permitted access?”

“I don’t know, sir. It’s Garrett and Lyons at the gate.”

“They’re both suspended, as of now. Cover the gate with the next shift. And what about Mackenzie?” Flanagan rests my head against the top of his solid thigh to take his gloves off. Flame prickles between us as he strokes back my damp hair. My nostrils fill with the smell of leather and male musk. It’s a delicious combination, sending a bolt of arousal to my already straining cock. It seems the stronger the Flame, the more desperate I am for touch and sex. I’m caught between wanting to pull my head away and a desperate need to bury my face in his groin and take a deep breath. I’m too weak to fight his hold, as gentle as it is, anyway, and when the Flame tingles from my skin to meet his fingers, cooling the fire in my brain, a sigh leaves my lips.

“We haven’t found Mackenzie yet, sir,” Seonu says. “His men don’t know where he is. I’m worried. I think something may have happened.”

“Find him. Get Miller’s team on it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about Michael?” Laasya asks. “He needs medical attention.”

“He needs Grounding, Laasya,” Flanagan says. “Then we can take care of the rest. Have you got the key to the manacles?”

“We can’t find it, sir. We think Belanger might have thrown it. It’s one of his tricks.”

That jerks my attention from Flanagan’s touch. “No.” The thought of being stuck in these spreaders and chains fills me with a black dread.

Flanagan strokes my head, pressing it into his thigh. “Shhh. Don’t worry. Once I’ve cooled that fire, I’ll break them myself if I have to.”

“Is it wise for us to release him, sir?” Seonu asks. “Belanger and the Shifters nearly died with the Wielder wearing a suppression collar and irons. How? Belanger was out of order, but if it’s true that Michael raged again and tried to escape, shouldn’t we keep him secured?”

“He’s not well,” Laasya argues.

Flanagan kneels in front of me, takes my head in his palms, and holds my face up to his. The fire in my body rushes to his hands and anywhere his

skin touches mine. I lean into him, wishing he would press against me. “Michael. Look at me. Did you try to escape?”

I raise my gaze to his. “No,” I rasp.

A thunderous expression crosses his face. He takes a long, steadying breath, his hold on me tightening. “Did he touch you?” A muscle ticks in his jaw. “Belanger. Did he touch you, Michael?”

I can’t meet his eyes.

Flanagan rests my head on his shoulder, pressing my forehead into his neck. He smooths my hair. It’s a while before his breathing settles again. The two women wait.

“I really don’t like those Belangers,” Laasya mumbles.

Eventually, in a quiet, dangerous tone, Flanagan says, “I want Belanger arrested. As soon as he recovers, I want him in a cell. Along with those fool Shifters who follow him.”

Seonu pauses before answering, “They’re in bad shape, sir.”

“They look like they’ve aged,” Laasya adds.

“Aged?” I can hear Flanagan’s frown in his tone.

“Yes, sir. Their hair has turned gray, and their faces are wrinkled like old men.”

“You’d have to see them to understand what we mean,” Seonu says.

Flanagan nods. “I will. I need to see to Michael first. Put a guard on their beds. They go nowhere without an escort. I don’t care how hurt they are, transfer them to lockup as soon as they recover. And find me another key to these manacles.”

“Yes, sir,” Seonu says.

“You’re both dismissed. Put your team on the door. Nobody comes in until I leave.”

Seonu asks, “Do you want me to inform Councilor Belanger, sir?”

“I wouldn’t subject you to her wrath. I’ll contact her myself after I’ve been to the infirmary.”

The two women leave, locking the double doors behind them.

When we’re alone, Flanagan places a hand on either side of my head and raises my face again. He strokes my cheekbones with his thumbs as the fire

in his pale gaze softens to a gentle heat.

“Michael, I need to Ground you. This requires skin-to-skin contact. Do you understand?”

I nod. If it means touch and getting rid of this burning, I’m up for anything.

“Nothing will happen that you don’t want,” he continues. “But you’re holding an enormous amount of Flame. It’s too much for you. I need to Ground the energy from your body before your nervous system crashes. Do I have your permission?”

Permission? I’m not sure I have a choice. I need Grounding—skin to skin or not. I can’t take much more of this hot pressure threatening to explode my insides, and I want his touch so badly, I ache for it.

“Yeah.” I nearly add please but clip it. I might need him, but I’m still angry.

Flanagan picks up the bottle of water from the floor and raises it to my lips. “Drink first.”

He supports my head while I guzzle down every drop, the cool liquid a balm to my dry throat. Once done, he discards the empty bottle and unties the shoulder straps of his vest. He lifts the hard leather over his head and drops it to the floor. I watch with open hunger as the action reveals his glorious torso. Like a man starved, my gaze slides over every perfect contour: the defined eight-pack, the wide pecs dusted with fine hair, the broad muscled shoulders and rippling arms. The golden skin. Fuck, he’s gorgeous. I want to eat him.

He moves close enough for his chest to be flush against mine and wraps one arm around my middle, his large hand clutching my waist. Laying his other hand on my nape above the collar, he pulls my head to his shoulder again. I shudder as he folds me into his strength, and gladly sink into a gentle hold that’s a world away from Belanger’s grasping hunger.

The Flame streams more slowly toward his touch—a champagne river rather than a molten rush—and the body-wide tension softens in response. My fear of restraint melts away into satisfied pleasure.

His hold is tender but firm enough to ease the pressure on my wrists, which suspend my heavy torso from the bar above my head. He pushes my hips into his, and his skin—usually so hot—feels cool against mine. Flame tingles through every point of contact. My hard cock, aching for friction, is squeezed against his groin. It's way more intimate than I've ever been with a man, but I fucking love it.

"Is this okay?" he whispers into my ear, his deep husky tone making me shiver. "I can hold you from the back if that's easier for you."

I nestle my forehead deeper into his neck and push my hips forward. In response, he leans closer, his arm tightening around my waist. When I'm stronger, I plan to give him hell about this whole day. Worst day of my life. I should be railing at him, refusing his attention. But I don't have the strength or the desire. I want this. I want more than this. I want to lick his juicy neck while I fuck myself against him, spill my cum across those fine abs.

What the hell am I saying? The Flame is in full control of my faculties. If he offered to fuck me, I'm not sure I'd be able to refuse him.

I let myself sink further into his hold but try to keep my hips still. I ignore the luscious scent of rain and moon and musk and close my eyes against the onslaught of desire.

As the minutes pass, he holds me to him with an almost possessive tension. "Forgive me," he whispers against my hair. "I have you. Everything will be okay now."

I don't believe him, but I soften further as the rumble of his deep voice strokes my insides. His breathing shifts his chest against mine with a steady rhythm.

We rest like that for a long time. The buttery light flickers. The room becomes darker. Flame tingles from my skin into his, and my body cools. The painful burning becomes a pleasant heat. The throbbing in my brain feels milder now, the pulsing in my spine strong but not painful. Even the ache of my joints and the soreness of both knees slip into the background.

My boner stays the same—a hard presence wedged between us. Even though I'm drifting into sleep, my hips have settled into a gentle rocking

motion, shifting my length against the leather of his trousers. I can't help it. Quiet moans escape my lips as I move them over his warm skin. His delicious smell, his colossal strength, the hardness of the muscles pressed against me, turn me on so much I yearn to bury myself deep inside him. I need release so badly I think my balls might explode.

He seems at ease with my attempt to dry hump his hip. His fingers combing the hair at the base of my head follow the rhythm of my movements. The hand clutching my waist slips lower, providing subtle pressure against the top curve of my buttocks. His warm breath ghosts across my ear. He's enjoying these silently shared sensations; the proof of his pleasure is the solid, substantial length branding my thigh. He must be uncomfortable, squeezed inside those tight trousers. I want to unzip his fly and pull him out, see how big he is, explore him with my hand. And my mouth.

For crying out loud. Since when am I into dick? It's Flanagan. There's something about him. Something that draws me to him, even though he's a man. He's so fucking gorgeous to me in this moment. Plus the fact that I need to come so badly it hurts.

He notices my growing tension. "Are you okay, Michael?"

"I need more," I say into his neck, my voice stronger but still rasping.

"I know. You're sinking into a Haze. You were like this when you first arrived at Blackriver." His arm tightens, pushing me deeper against him but still allowing my rocking motion. "I will help you if you want me to, but maybe not now. Not after Bel—I need to see to your other needs first."

What other needs? What could be more important than releasing the pressure in my balls? But I'm too weak to say such a long sentence. I only manage a croaking moan of complaint. I tongue his neck and undulate against his groin, against the hardness I feel there, hoping he'll get the message.

His fingers tighten on my waist. He presses his lips to my hair. "I know. I know," he murmurs. "But you're exhausted, Michael. I need to get you out of these chains so you can sleep."

Sleep? Is he kidding me? I can't sleep with an erection like a hot pipe about to burst. My balls are gonna drop to the stones they're so heavy.

"Please," I breathe, prepared at this point to beg for what I want. I pull against the restraints to thrust more deeply, metal clinking, and lick the length of his neck. He tastes of citrus body wash and midnight. I feel a swell of satisfaction when he shivers beneath my tongue.

"Jumalatar auta minua," he hisses to himself—Finnish swear words, I presume. His fingers slip into my hair to clench it. There's a long, tense pause as though he's fighting some inner battle. Then he lets out a steadying breath.

"You're going to be the death of me, Wielder," he murmurs against my ear. "Tell me what you need. I want to hear you say it."

"You," I reply. "I need you. Need to come."

Keeping tension on the grip in my hair, he unwraps me from his arm hold and slips his hand down between us. He tugs the shirt from my waist and lets it drop to the floor. I lurch against him as his fingers brush my shaft. He palms my hardness, pushing it into my abdomen and rubbing. It leaves me with only a hint of the pressure I long for.

I whimper a complaint against his neck. "Flanagan." I don't recognize my breathless voice.

"Shhhh. Patience." There's a touch of humor to his tone. "And my name is Gabriel."

"Gabriel."

His huge fist envelops my whole shaft. A shudder runs the length of my body. Using my hair, he tilts my face to his, leaves his mouth so close to mine we're sharing breath, and strokes me slowly, twisting his grip on the rise, sliding a thumb across my sensitive glans, then plunging deep, pulling my foreskin all the way back before returning. My shaft burns with building pleasure. But it's not enough. He's taking his time, watching my face as I grimace with agony and need.

He parts his lips to catch my moans, brushing them close enough to share moisture. Wisps of his beard caress my skin.

"You're a beautiful man, Michael Blakeley."

“Please.”

“And I like hearing that word on your lips.”

Without warning, he jacks me hard and fast. My hips lurch in response.

“Oh, fuck.”

With his lips a hairbreadth from covering my open mouth, a fist buried in my hair, he jerks his other hand with a relentless pace. His tight grip gives a satisfying pain. Without restraint, he drives me mercilessly toward my climax. Pressure builds. My balls ignite. I’m thrusting as much as I can to meet his fist.

“G-Gabriel. Oh, fuck.”

“That’s it. Let it come.”

Fiery pleasure bursts through my shaft. Agony sweetens to release. Warmth splashes upward to coat both our abs. Flanagan keeps stroking, milking every drop from me until I’m spent.

When I’m done, I collapse onto his shoulder, exhausted and wrecked. My head throbs. My muscles ache. After gently cleaning my skin and his hand with the shirt from the floor, he holds me to him, cradling my head until my breathing steadies.

“Is that better?” he asks.

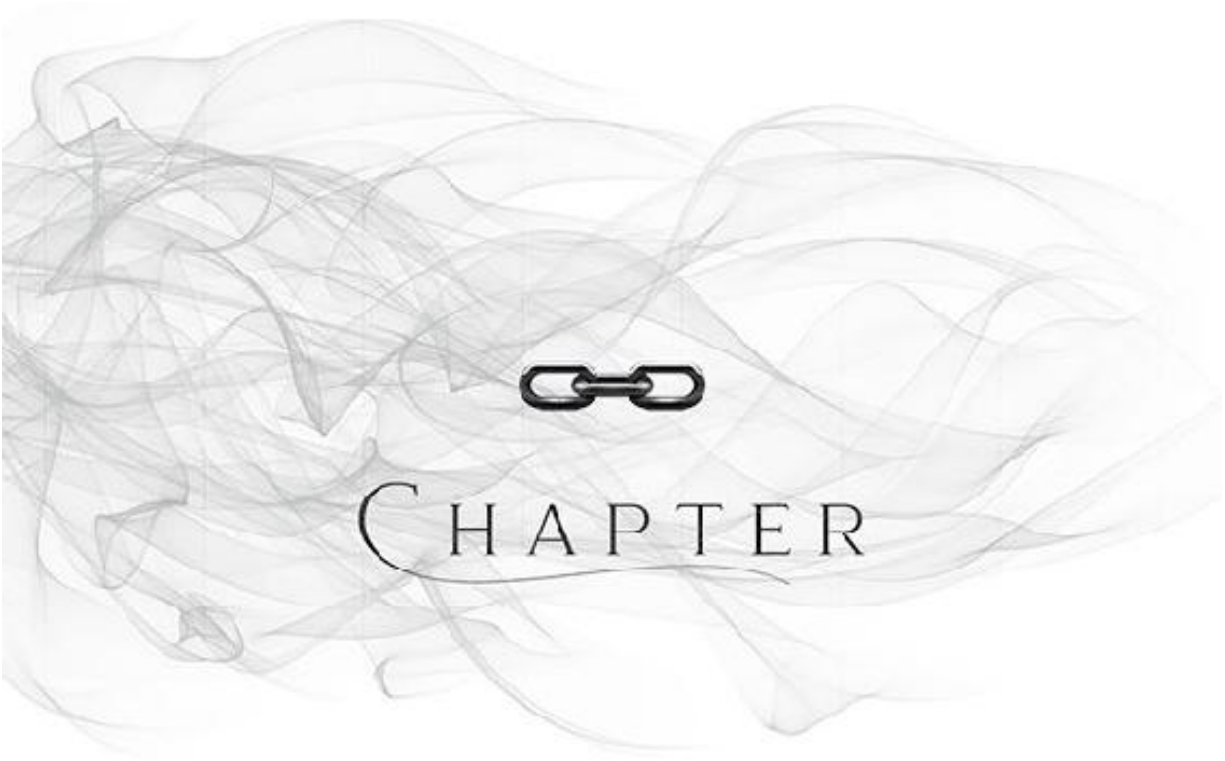
“Fuck, yeah,” I say with meaning. I never thought I’d be so grateful for another man’s hand on my dick. For *Flanagan’s* hand on my dick.

We fall silent, and he rocks me as I slide into sleep, my body slumped against him, my head resting on his shoulder.

“I hate you,” I mumble into his neck.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through my chest. “Rest. You can shout at me when you wake from your Haze. I promise with all my heart I will keep you safe.”

And in my Flame-drunk postorgasm stupor, I believe him.



15

As I float to the surface of a dense fog, my senses meet raucous summer birdsong, soft fur against skin, and a mellow breeze caressing my nostrils with the loamy scent of woodland. I take in a long, delicious breath. Nice.

Stretching out my legs, I take hold of my morning wood to give it a few lazy strokes. Snatches of dreams chase across my eyelids: the touch of elegant hands, a velvet voice, chocolate-covered figs and warm cream, but it's all lost to the mist.

It's the intense heat of a large body pressing into my back that snaps me to full alertness. My wrists and ankles weigh heavy, and something drags at the cold metal banding my neck. I spring upright.

Where the hell am I?

I only catch the briefest glimpse of a bedroom before a muscled arm braces my chest to push me back down to the bed.

“Stay calm, Michael.” Flanagan.

A clinking sound has me raising both hands to check out what the hell’s behind me. I find a chain connected to the eyelet at the back of my collar. When I twist my head up to follow the snaking path of heavy metal links, I find it attached to the stone wall above the wooden headboard.

“What the f—?”

I spring to my knees and tug at the chain with both hands. It’s locked fast to a thick metal ring bolted to the stone wall. I lean back and yank on it furiously.

“Michael, calm yourself.” With an arm around my waist, Flanagan grapples me to the bed. Kicking and punching, I try for a lock, but he uses barely any effort to fend off my assault and pins me to the furs. He fastens down each of my manacled wrists with a hand and secures my thighs with his knees. Then he looms over me, strands of blond hair falling over his face.

He’s naked! The full length of his golden muscles ripple above me, and a hard cock the size a horse would be proud of juts from between his legs, long enough to brush my stomach.

“Fuck!”

“Settle. I will free you as soon as I am sure you’re composed. You have no reason for alarm.”

“I’m naked and chained to your bed, Flanagan. With you in the raw. I’d say that was reason enough for alarm, wouldn’t you?”

His eyes glitter, but he sighs. “I will explain.”

I struggle again, arching up to free my legs from his hold, but all I manage to do is press my traitorous boner against his morning glory. That soon has me dropping back to the bed.

“Then start explaining,” I demand instead.

“Are you going to stay calm?”

I glower up at him. “That depends on what you tell me.”

He adjusts his hold but keeps a firm grip on my limbs. His movements cause his long cock to bob above my own. He doesn’t seem the least bit

self-conscious about its presence between us, but I peer down and fixate on it as though the thing might rear up and bite me.

“What do you remember?” he asks.

The memory of a scorching fire pulls my gaze away from his giant salami. Pain. I remember pain. “The cage. Belanger and his cronies lying on the floor and...” I’m not sure how much I want Flanagan to know. I don’t want him asking questions about Alexei’s intervention. He’ll think I’m on the vampire’s side for sure.

Flanagan studies my face. “And that’s all? You don’t remember Seonu and Laasya coming to the cage? You don’t remember my help?”

The deepening of his voice makes me check his eyes. He’s watching me intently.

“No. Why? What help?”

A tight smile tugs the edge of his lips. “Never mind. I thought—I thought you’d at least remember that.” The fall of his brow suggests disappointment, almost sadness. “It’s Friday. You’ve been recovering from nerve damage since Wednesday evening. That was a lot of Flame you absorbed—it had consequences. It pushed you into a deep Haze, and I’ve been helping you. It’s common for new Channelers not to remember what occurs during a Haze. The memories will come back to you. But I assure you nothing happened that you didn’t want.”

Didn’t want? What would I want?

“And this *help* requires you to chain me to your bed naked like a sex slave?”

“You’re naked because when Hazing, a Channeler cannot handle any kind of clothing. You’re chained to the wall because you are a lot calmer with the door open, but the prince can call you at any point. If he does, you could hurt yourself charging at the Wards to get to him. Or disappear into the Border Woods.” He indicates with a nod to concertinaed glass doors folded back, opening a whole wall to the lawn outside. “The manacles are still in place because they suppress your Flame.”

“And why are *you* naked, then?”

“Because I was...Grounding you, helping you. It requires skin-to-skin contact.” His mouth curves. “And you would not have accepted me wearing clothes.”

“What? Why not?”

He shakes his head, one of his long plaits falling forward over his shoulder. “You really are a different person when you’re lost to the Haze, Michael. The feral cat is replaced by an incredibly sweet man whose sexual preferences are somewhat broader.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What the hell happened, Flanagan?”

“I’ll explain. Are you going to settle?”

I expel a harsh breath. Fury swirls like hot steam in my belly, and I want to yank the chain from the wall and use it to strangle him, but I know the overbearing ass is strong enough to do what he wants with me, so there’s no point arguing. And even Flanagan’s bed is better than a cage.

“Fine, I’m calm. Get the fuck off me. Do I get clothes? Or is this standard dress in your bedroom?”

He raises a brow, something dark flashing across his eyes, but without a word, he releases me, smoothly rolling aside and off the bed. He stalks over to a door in the wall—a walk-in wardrobe by the looks of it—and disappears inside.

I scramble to my knees, cover my junk with both hands, and survey the room. It’s massive. Three times the size of my whole flat. Big enough to dominate this fur-covered bed, which is the width of a small island. The decor has a Scandinavian feel—all wood with tasteful stone-colored textiles and leather couches. One whole wall is covered by shelves, each of its alcoves stuffed with a multicolored row of books. At the far end, an open wall looks out onto decking and a lawn bordered by green woodland.

It’s a nice pad. Somewhere I would live myself. Given the height of the ceiling and its size, I assume it’s a room in the main building. It’s got a comfortable, sanctuary feel to it. Somewhere I’m sure Flanagan escapes to when being the big boss man becomes a headache.

Flanagan returns, wearing light suede trousers but no shirt, his hair tied up into a messy knot. He carries a pile of folded clothing to the bed and

drops them onto the furs. “Here,” he says. “I had these prepared specially. But you may wish to shower first.”

A hot shower, finally. Though I can’t have gone two nights without a wash because I don’t feel that sweaty. Which means what? Flanagan washing me? Shit. I don’t even wanna go there. “Sounds good. Does that include the chain?”

He digs into his pocket and pulls out a key. “Come.” He indicates the edge of the bed.

I bury the “I’m not your fucking pet” retort. I need this chain off. Best to keep the cheek level down to a minimum for now. I haven’t forgotten my best-behavior plan. I shuffle across the furs on my knees, swing my legs around, and sit on the side of the bed. All while keeping my hands fixed to my bits.

When I look up at Flanagan, he’s grinning.

“What?” I ask with a scowl.

“Your shyness. You’ve been naked with me since Wednesday evening. I’ve washed you, fed you, helped you pee, and slept beside you. You accepted my care gladly. Yet now you hide from me.”

My eyes widen because I only heard one thing in that list. “Helped me pee?”

His grin broadens. “You were weakened by nerve damage. You couldn’t stand without my help and had a permanent erection. You needed my assistance.”

I grimace and shake my head. Flanagan helping me take a leak. Nope. Can’t cope with that image. “Just get the chain off.”

He steps closer, the fierceness returning to his eyes. He towers over me and cups my jaw to raise my face. I try to pull away, but he’s holding me too firmly. “Listen to me, Michael. Blackriver is gated, warded, and surrounded on two sides by the Border Wood. You do not want to run into that forest. You will die there. If somehow you make it past the wards, I can follow your scent with ease for miles. I run faster than a race car at top speed. I will catch you.”

Faster than a race car?

I give him a sour glare. “I have no intention of escaping.” I add *yet* in my mind because as soon as I’ve learned everything I need to know, I am gone from this joint the first chance I get.

He must see something in my expression because his eyes narrow. “I want to believe you. But I’m not sure I do.”

I huff. “I have my own reasons for wanting to stay.”

“Hmmm. You need to learn control of your Flame. Find out what exactly you are. And then?”

The man is far too astute. I tug my chin from his grasp, and he lets me go. “I should be free to leave. I haven’t done anything wrong. You do get that?”

“You’ve put eight Guardians in the infirmary. Four of whom may never fully recover. You are a half breed Anlu’kyr, vulnerable to the prince’s Blood Call and therefore a danger to other Channelers. The Guardians’ role is to police the supernatural and keep humans safe. I can assure you they are not safe from you. Not yet.” He takes a breath, his eyes softening. “I know you will not believe me, but I’m trying to protect you. I can only do that while you’re here at Blackriver under my jurisdiction.”

“You mean from Alexei?”

“And the High Council. They’ll not tolerate an untrained mixed-breed Wielder running rampant in the world, and believe me, their lockdown facilities will make ours seem like a holiday resort.”

Crap. If I ever do get out of this mess, I’m going to be on the run from all sides. I’m coming to dislike this High Council and their high-handed powers. I do need training to control the Flame—of course I do—but after that, I want my life back.

Flanagan lifts the key. “Turn around.”

I shift sideways to present my back, and he unlocks the chain from the collar. When it falls away, I stand up from the bed and shake off the ghost of its heaviness. “What about the manacles?”

“They stay on unless you’re training.” When I scowl again, he adds, “We need to suppress your Flame. But you won’t be going back in the cage. You’ll be staying here with me.”

“And what? I’ll be chained to your bed?”

He steps into my space, looking down at me with a challenge in his eyes. “Not unless you attempt to escape. But if you do, I will chain you to my bed and leave you there. Your choice.”

My fists clench, rage churning hot. My nakedness forgotten, I stare daggers at him. “The only reason those bastard soldiers are in the infirmary is that they tried to rape me.” I jab a finger into his chest. It feels like jabbing marble. “That’s on you. You’re the one who locked me in the cage.”

He’s not cowed by my fury, but his sternness seems to collapse. He raises a hand to cup my face but drops it when I shoot him a warning glare. “No apology is good enough for what you went through, Michael. I take full responsibility. Quinton has interrogated Sergeant Belanger, and I know the details of what happened. I will use every influence I have to ensure Belanger is punished for his crime. You are not the first. He thinks he’s untouchable.”

My face warms with shame. Flanagan knowing the gory details somehow makes it worse. “Is he? Untouchable?” I say through gritted teeth.

“Not if I have anything to do with it. But his family is...influential.” He rubs his eyes. “I know you are not to blame for what you are, but you’re still an unknown and a danger and therefore under the custody of the Blackriver Guardians. You will have every comfort you need, but I do have to secure you.”

“A comfortable cage. Sound peachy. How exactly is that better than being with the vampires?”

“Believe me, you have no idea.” He sweeps up the clothes from the bed and thrusts them at my chest. “Go and shower. We’ll eat breakfast on the deck and talk.”

I make no move to take the clothes. His explanation for stealing my liberty is nowhere near good enough. I lock eyes with him, but as usual, I can’t hold his intense gaze without feeling like my eyeballs are cooking.

I let out a harsh breath. It’s not as though he’s ever going to concede my point or bend to my demands. Only the long game is going to work in this situation.

Snatching the clothes from his hands, I say, “I want to know what happened at the labs.”

“I will tell you.” He points to the far side of the room. “The shower’s that way.”

I throw him a last poisonous glare. I hate his guts right now, but I need to get on the bastard’s good side, and a hot shower will calm me down. I turn without another word and tramp across the wooden floor to the door he indicated.

It leads into an en suite—a huge modern bathroom with a walk-in shower room attached. I’m still too hot with anger to pay much attention to it, but I get a sense of sandstone tiles and natural furniture.

As I dump my clothes on a stool, I catch my reflection in the wall-sized mirror above the sink and stalk over to get a better look. A gasp leaves my throat when an unrecognizable man peers back at me. There’s no evidence on my skin anywhere of the beating I received. I’ve lost a bit of weight, the muscles of my arms and chest more defined because of it. The dark gray metal collar sits around my neck like a brand of ownership. Symbols curl across its dull surface resembling silver filigree.

But it’s my face I don’t recognize. The weight loss has accentuated my cheekbones, not unusual, but my pale skin has an odd luminescence, as though I’ve swallowed a light bulb. My eyes glow such an unnaturally intense green they shine out from beneath my dark eyebrows like jade-colored jewels lit from behind.

A nauseating certainty creeps into my awareness. I know it’s the Flame energy causing the glow. But the eyes. That’s my vampire blood. I look like a vampire.

I curl back my upper lip to check my teeth and expel a breath when I find no pointy bits at the end of my canines. Grabbing the soap, I run the tap and foam up a lather, then rub my face like a mindless psych patient attempting to scour away an alien presence.

My hands freeze midscrub.

The citrusy soap smells of Flanagan’s skin, and I’m hit by an image of licking the taste off his neck while chained in the cage. He’s holding me

against him, his warm lips a hairbreadth from mine. His huge fist strokes me as I thrust and beg for more. And I'm loving it.

My cock swells with the memory. His scent, his strength, his tenderness. His perfect grip.

Gabriel.

I grab the edge of the sink with both hands, breath quickening. Is that what he meant by helping me? Holy beast balls. No way.

I shove the memory aside and slam a door on it. I can't cope with that right now. But after only a second, I find myself sliding it out to take another peek.

Flanagan jacked me off? And I enjoyed it?

I relished a man wanking me to release. Bloody loved it. Is the Flame turning me gay? Or does it just leave you so desperate you don't give a shit who helps?

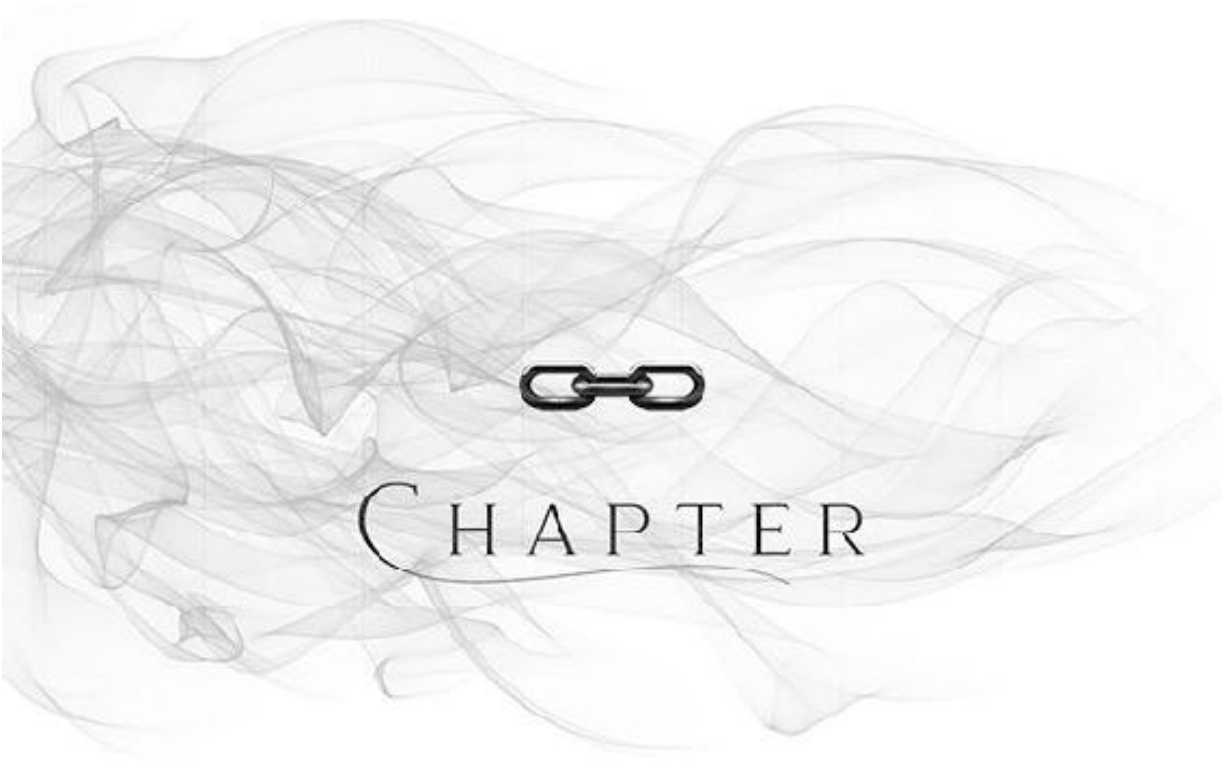
Me and the big guy. Just no. It'll have to join my "what the fuck?" pile along with all the other madness from the past week.

After another frantic scrub and a rinse, I finger comb my mess of dark hair back, but the weirdness continues to stare at me. A shiny stranger with electric green eyes. Reality hits me in the chest like a brick. I've been so busy surviving I hadn't truly taken in the blood test results. I hadn't processed what Channeler means. What part human, part vampire, and part some other ghastly thing means. How different it makes me.

I was always different, though. As a child, I could sense things my friends couldn't—weather changes, voices in the wind, the buzzing energy that comes off the earth and the plants. I'd suppressed all that by the time I was a teenager. Life was hard enough without being a weirdo too. I don't suppose much has changed in that sense. But this...this is on another level entirely.

I look at my face again, at the Flame creature staring back. My life has irrevocably changed. If I ever escape from Blackriver, there's no more normal.

There's no going back.



16

A thorough shower scrubs the stench and memory of Belanger from my skin, replacing it with lemon zing and determination. The stink of stale tobacco will haunt me for some time, but I'll not let the bastard take my pride.

After drying with Flanagan's fluffy white towels, I pull on the clothes he's provided. Dark suede trousers like the Guardians wear and a loose, collarless button up. The smooth gray fabric of the shirt is soft to touch and a strong, close weave. It looks like expensive cotton, but it can't be because it doesn't make my skin itch. It must be that specialized material Flanagan mentioned.

I glance one last time in the mirror to check out the stranger before I leave the bathroom. It's with a churning stomach and a troubled mind that I return to the bedroom.

Flanagan stands with his back to me, talking on a mobile phone. I'm ready to go another round with him about the manacles, but I'm stopped by the tattoo across the back of his right shoulder.

I hadn't noticed that before, but then, the image isn't painted in the usual black ink. The flare of curling fire around his shoulder joint and across his scapula has a silvery shimmer, as if someone branded him with Flame.

The image has an odd effect on me. The Flame in my spine burns hot in response to the sight.

I catch Flanagan saying the name Councilor Belanger and a tension in his voice before he finishes the phone call.

He places the phone inside a small metal cage, like a mini birdcage, then turns. His brow creases as he looks me over. "Are you well?"

I'm sure I look like I've seen a ghost in the en suite. Or a vampire—which I have. But I say, "Fine. What's with that tattoo on your back?"

His eyes widen. "You can see it?"

"Of course I can see it. It's massive. I've never seen ink like it."

"It's not ink. It's the mark of Velnushka the Flame Goddess, and should be invisible." He continues to examine my face. His eyes remain gentle. "You saw yourself in the mirror."

I let out a breath. "Yeah. Bit of a shock, that." I can't meet his gaze.

"The changes came on during your Haze. You are still part human, Michael. And as long as you never drink Anlu'kyr blood again, you will stay that way."

He means well, but his logic isn't reassuring. One suck of a vamp's neck away from becoming a monster is one suck too close. And he's wrong. I'm not still human. If I'm honest, I felt different the moment I woke in that cage. I'm something else. I just don't know what yet.

Angsting over my monster heritage will have to wait anyway. I've got enough to deal with. I change the subject. "There's a Flame Goddess?"

Flanagan points to the table outside on the deck. "Let's sit. Eat breakfast."

Beneath the trees and the filtering sunlight, plates of food wait for us. How did I miss the savory smell pervading the room? Bacon and coffee.

Two of my favorites.

I fold my arms over my chest. “I want answers, Flanagan. I want to know what the plan is and how long you intend to keep me in these manacles.”

He motions to the table. “While we eat.”

“I also want access to information about this world I’m now in. Its history.” I’d like to know more about that Warlock character too, if he’s the only other mixed-breed Channeler to have existed.

Flanagan nods. “We have a library. I have books here you can read. You’ll have an opportunity today.”

I drop my arms. That’ll have to do for now. I feel a strange sort of exhaustion, and a chasm sits where my stomach used to be; I’m that starved. I make my way to the deck and the round wooden table. Flanagan snags a white linen shirt from the back of a chair and shrugs it on as he follows.

At the table, half a pig has been sliced and fried and stacked onto a serving platter, as well as homemade bread, scrambled eggs, and sausages. I pull up a chair and fall on the feast with single-minded enthusiasm. After stuffing a whole strip of bacon into my mouth, I munch on it while piling my plate with enough grub to feed a family. I make a dripping sandwich with two thick slices of bread and bite out a chunk. Familiar smoky sweetness and nutty depth burst against my vamp-heightened taste buds.

A cacophony of color and noise assaults my souped-up senses from the surrounding garden. The birds sing with piercing clarity. Bees buzz over the lawn like petrol engines. The feet of tiny insects sound like razors scraping sandpaper. My iron manacles clink against the china plate as loud as a fog bell. It’s incredible. I feel like I’m wearing Superman senses, but the cause is too much of a downer for me to enjoy it.

From the corner of my eye, I watch Flanagan’s every move as he sits in the chair beside me and helps himself to breakfast. My skin tingles with his close proximity. A charge between us strains the air. Even when his gaze is elsewhere, I feel the pressure of his attention. I won’t be admitting to him I remembered the cage.

He lumps his plate with a mountain of food twice the size of mine.

“That’s some appetite,” I say. “You going to eat all that?”

He gives me a wry smile. “It takes a lot of calories to keep this body working.” His words suggest vanity, but there’s a resigned tone.

His open shirt displays the meaty muscles he’s referring to, his upright posture puffing out his obscenely developed pecs. I let my gaze wander down the lean contours of his torso, lingering on the bulge in his trousers—a hint of the beast I saw on the bed. Fire swells in my groin. I yank my attention back to his face, catch the heat in his eyes, then quickly fix my gaze on my food. My reaction to Flanagan is so fucking confusing.

As usual, he seems at ease with the weird sexual vibes between us, but his posture displays the deeper tension I’ve noticed—the barely leashed power beneath his calm exterior.

When I finish my sandwich, I ask the question I’ve had on my mind since the steelworks. “What are you?”

He stabs a sausage with his fork. “We can talk about that later.”

“You said you’d answer my questions. Are you a wolf? Like Adams? Can you change like that?”

He makes me wait while he demolishes his pile of grilled meat and eggs. I stare at him.

Eventually, he dabs his mouth with a napkin and sits back. “Adams is a Shifter. A large percentage of the Guardian ranks are Shifters. They’re all natural Channelers. Wolves, cats, birds.” He swallows and licks his lower lip, his attention wandering up to the early sunlight breaking through the canopy. If he wasn’t built of immovable stone, I’d say this conversation was making him uneasy.

“And you?” I prompt.

His eyes flit toward me, then away. “I am a Lycanthrope.”

“How is that different?”

He picks up the carafe and fills both our mugs with steaming dark coffee. Its velvety rich smell smothers the scents of damp soil and cut grass. On sight of his giant fist, the memory of what that hand can do thumps arousal through my middle. I avoid Flanagan’s eyes.

“Shifters are born. Werewolves are made. I was born human, but at the age of thirty-six, I was bitten.”

“By a werewolf?” Obvious question, but what do I know?

“Yes. The venom of a werewolf carries a supernatural virus. It rearranges human DNA.”

I rest back in my chair. This conversation has a surreal quality, but I’ve seen enough evidence to know he speaks the truth. “Did it hurt?”

“Yes.”

The gravity of his one-word answer draws a shiver from me. “So, before that, you were a normal human being living a normal life?”

“Not so normal. I’m a True Grounder, a very rare type of Channeler. Considered a prize by the Anlu’kyr. And I’m from a bloodline of Grounders. My family lived in constant fear of abduction. But I was happy. A hunter, a husband, a father.”

“A father?” I say with surprise.

He lets out a long sigh. “I had twin daughters—Enka and Silja. They were sixteen when I left.”

I shake my head. Flanagan, a father. I have to reorder his image in my mind. Change the dominant asshole and badass supersoldier into something softer and more rounded.

He’s watching my response with a somber expression.

“What was your wife’s name?”

“Anna,” he says softly.

“Anna.” Our eyes catch for a moment. My chest twinges. I can’t help wondering what the wife of Flanagan would be like. Beautiful and strong.

“Did you have to leave them when you were bitten?”

He nods, looking down and away. “I’d been lost to the curse for thirty years before I returned to the village.”

“Thirty years. That’s a long time.”

The edge of his lip twitches in a smile. “It was for the best. A Lycan’s early years are a blur of blood and death. I would have slaughtered my family and most of the village if I’d gone back.”

Tragic. I want to know more, but he’s avoiding my eyes again.

“And that was three hundred years ago?”

“I’m three hundred and fifty-nine. I was born when Finland was part of the Swedish Empire.”

I explore his profile as he takes a sip from his cup. He doesn’t appear to have aged a day.

“That is seriously old. You’re a fossil.”

Flanagan turns a twinkle-eyed smile on me. “I’m far from the oldest. Prince Alexei is nearly eight hundred, his father over two thousand. And his grandmother, the Fae Queen, is so old even she doesn’t remember how long she’s been alive.”

The usual twinge of longing clutches my heart on mention of the prince. It’s the blood. I ignore it. “So Alexei is part Fae?” I ask, glad to change the subject for Flanagan’s sake.

Flanagan settles back in his chair, cup cradled in his lap. My hands prickle with a need to touch him, to stroke his thigh or twist his golden highlights between my fingers. The feeling has a familiarity. Is it because of the intimate day I just spent with him? What the hell happened between us? I fold my arms across my chest.

“Yes. His mother is Fae royalty. After the Thousand Year War in which the Anlu’kyr and the Fae nearly wiped each other out, peace was forged through marriage.”

“Is that why he has wings? Or do all vampires fly?”

“He’s the only Anlu’kyr with wings. Another product of his mixed blood.”

I go quiet, watching the leaves rustle. Vampires. Werewolves. Fairies. Fucking vampire fairy princes. I’m living in a fairy tale. When I turn back to Flanagan, I catch him roaming my features. He looks away, but not before I see an unexpected softness in his gaze. Does he feel this too? This pull between us. A need to close the gap. To touch.

I clear my throat. “And what about this Flame Goddess? Where does she come into it?”

He takes his time topping off his drink before answering. Then he sighs, a long soft sound that suggests the letting go of reluctance.

“The Flame is considered a Goddess by many of the species,” he says eventually. “Not all. The Shifters refuse to recognize it that way. For them, it’s a natural energy, like electricity or heat. The Anlu’kyr revere the Flame Goddess, so do the Fae. She has a temple dedicated to her in the Faelands. The High Priestess is a good friend of mine.”

Something in his voice alerts me to a deeper meaning. “A good friend, huh?”

Flanagan’s broad grin crinkles the edges of his eyes and lights his face. It makes him look even more handsome.

Where did that thought come from?

“Just a friend,” he says, taking another swallow of coffee. He scrapes off a splinter of wood and dusts it away. There’s something about this subject making him uncomfortable.

I push my plate aside and lean my elbow on the table.

“So, that tattoo. What does it mean? Why are you marked by this Goddess?”

Flanagan puts his cup down to fold his arms, muscles bunching. He looks out at the garden. “When I returned to the village, my wife had died from an illness, and my daughters had long since been abducted by the Anlu’kyr. To rescue them, I sought a favor from the temple. After I served them for one year and fulfilled a specific task, the High Priestess, Elwyn, granted me freedom from the moon’s curse and protection from any direct witchcraft.”

“So did you get your daughters back?”

His smile drops away. He brushes crumbs from his thigh. “That’s a long story, Michael. For another time, I think.” He pushes his plate away. “Have you finished? We should go.”

The relaxed mood we’ve fallen into shatters. “You said you’d answer my questions.”

“Later.”

“What happened at Longreach?”

Flanagan’s hands curl into fists. “Alexei’s forces hit the labs. He destroyed them and managed to abduct four Channelers. We also lost an important scientist and his technicians.”

“So he attacked the labs for the Channelers?”

“Longreach is where we treat rescued slaves for blood addiction, but it’s a new move. I don’t yet understand the change in tactics.” Flanagan looks at me as he says that last part.

“You don’t still think I’m in league with him, do you? For fuck’s sake, Flanagan—”

“I know you are not willingly his servant. But I believe you’re the instigation for this renewed engagement. And I don’t believe it is entirely to do with your half-breed status. At the steelworks, he relinquished you far too easily. I worry about his intentions, what his next move will be.”

“Well, I certainly don’t know his intentions. My memory of meeting him is almost a blank. I remember him saying you could go home anytime, though. What did he mean by that? And what’s with you and him anyway?”

“There is nothing with me and him,” Flanagan says, averting his eyes.

Yeah, right.

“Why would he call his place your home? He must have meant something.”

Chair scrapes wood as Flanagan rises. “Have you finished? We need to leave now.”

“Wait a minute.” My question has clearly hit a nerve. “Why the sudden rush to leave?”

“We need to be going. We’re already late.”

“Late for what?”

“Your test. Every new Channeler is tested before we start their training. I wasn’t going to bother. I know how strong you are, but the head trainer advised we follow protocol. We will have time later for more questions.” He stalks away into his bedroom.

“I want to know what’s with you and Alexei,” I say to his back. There’s something he’s hiding. I can’t help wanting to know what it is.

He stops to slip off his shirt. “Your boots are in the closet. Put them on, please.”

I shuffle round to face the lawn, sit back in the chair, and drum my fingers on the table edge.

“Michael.” Flanagan’s growl deepens his voice.

Humming a random tune, I stare up at the blue sky.

Flanagan lets out a harsh breath. Without turning, he says, “I was a Blood Servant. For nearly a hundred years, I lived with Alexei at Dvamira Castle. It was a very long time ago.”

“No way.” That’s a shock. Flanagan seems so upright. Invincible.

“I would like you to move, please.”

I walk inside to face him, to look straight into his stern regard. “Did you get them back?”

He briefly closes his eyes. “No.”

“The Goddess’s favor didn’t work, then?”

Flanagan answers with a monotone inflection to his voice. “It worked. I rescued my daughters. But they’d been with the Anlu’kyr for nearly thirty years.” He pauses, his expression strained. “I had to take them back to Alexei.”

“Why?”

He meets my gaze, his eyes two pools of gray water. “I don’t speak of this. It was many years ago, Michael. I’ve already told you more than most people.”

I’m desperate to know more, but not wanting to push, I just rest my hand on his shoulder and squeeze.

He clasps my wrist, and after a long out-breath, he says, “In those days, we had no means with which to treat blood addiction. They sickened and almost died. The prince promised me their welfare if I served him. I stayed nearly a hundred years.”

I’m speechless. What must it be like to rescue your daughters, only to have to take them back? Guilt stirs for demanding answers.

I leave my hand where it is. “I’m really sorry.” I feel pathetic saying something so banal, but I mean it. He’s been through shit I can’t even imagine. And though I resent his manacles and the metal collar pinching my neck, I feel sympathy for him.

“Thank you,” he says, swallowing as he meets my eyes. And for a moment, we’re just two men sharing an understanding.

Then he says, “I will need to chain you when we go to the testing room.”
I snatch my hand back. “What the hell for?”

“Lady Belanger has seen her grandson, and she’s demanding you be taken to the labs for lockdown and study. She insists on witnessing your test. I denied her permission, but she’s attempting to pull rank. The Belangers are an old and respected Shifter bloodline. I need to show her I have you under control.”

My stomach twists. A cold tendril of fear penetrates my chest. “The fucking labs? I’m not a rat, Flanagan.”

“I know that.”

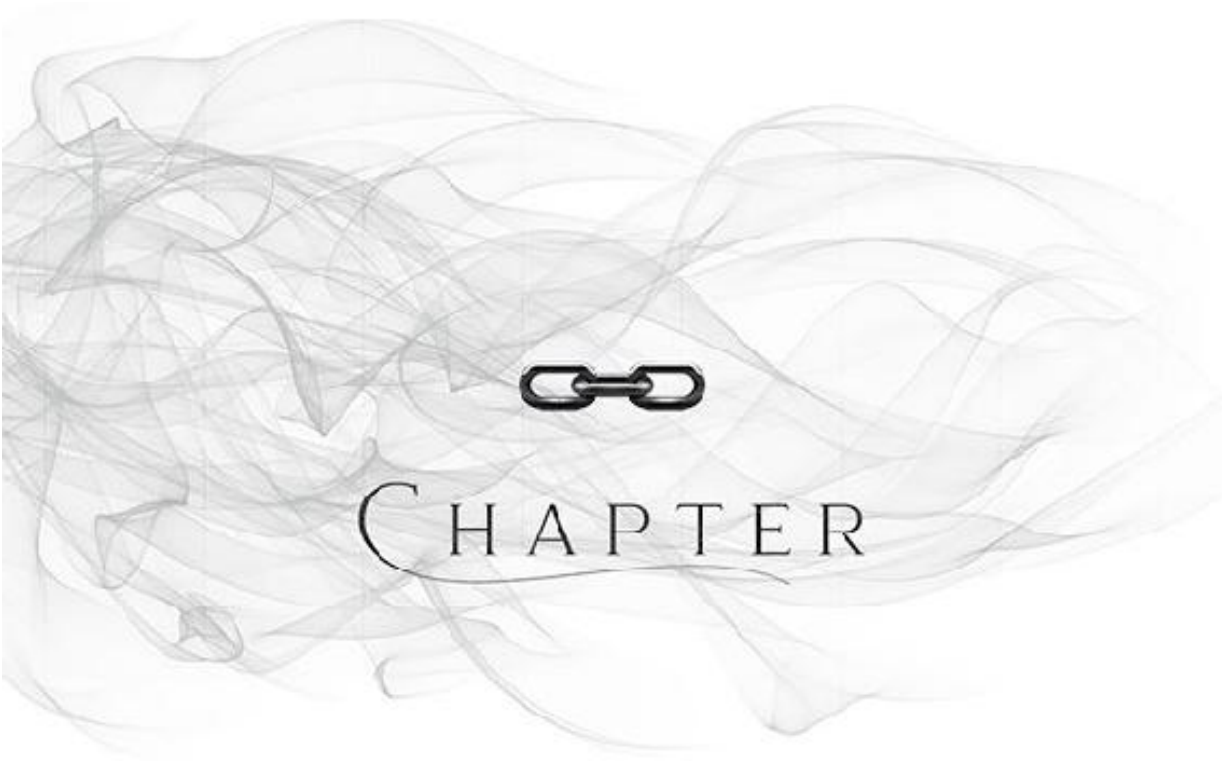
“How likely is it she’ll get her way?”

He reaches to touch my shoulder, but I step back.

“How likely?”

“I promise I will do everything in my power to prevent it. But I cannot guarantee the Council won’t override my authority.”

For crying out loud. This situation just gets better and better.



17

After changing into his hard leather vest, Flanagan fastens a chain between my wrist manacles, leaving my ankle manacles free. As he guides me to his door with a hand resting just below my collar, I can't help feeling like a dog on a leash.

The look I level him could crumble concrete, but I keep my words in check.

Best-behavior plan, Blakeley. Best-behavior plan.

We leave his room and follow a long corridor with plush red carpet and fancy paintings—more portraits and battle scenes. Outside the windows, at the far end of the mansion, the Old Keep stands like a turreted castle, dominating the cultivated lawns beneath its towers.

Beyond the garden rises the tangled trees of the Border Woods. The warped branches of the dark impenetrable mass reach out across the lawn

like gnarled fingers. The Flame flares through my limbs, wanting to tug me closer. I shudder.

As we pass through a set of double doors, shouts and the ring of metal on metal cut through from outside. The gardens change from rosebushes and topiary to a row of dirt-laid rectangular enclosures. Within them plays a scene from a kung fu movie. Groups of soldiers in the tight Guardian leathers clash in practice pairs while a trainer bellows instructions from the sideline. Others practice with swords and knives.

On the last terrace, young men and women of every size and color follow their trainer with moves similar to Qigong. They all wear loose-fitting clothes in the same gray fabric as my shirt—students, I assume. Silver-white Flame sparks around their hands. Some hold small balls of light as they move through the graceful changes.

When trainers and students spot their commander passing inside the house, they stop to salute him with a sharp nod. Flanagan nods back. They stare at me with open curiosity.

As we enter the main building, we pass more groups of Guardians. All greet Flanagan with straight backs and stiff nods but study me with a mixture of fear and hostility. My chains rattle like thunder in the hushed silence. A gaggle of young girls in the corner titter and bat their eyes as I pass, but I'm relieved when Flanagan leads me through more doors into a wide, empty corridor.

"Do they all know?" I ask him.

"I've only informed Seonu's team and the head trainer that you are part Anlu'kyr. The rest know you as the former Blood Servant who put eight Guardians in the infirmary." He glances sideways at me. "Your smell and your looks will confuse them. They'll be wary of you, but it's preferable to the alternative. The Shifter families have been at war with the Anlu'kyr for four centuries. A converted servant they can accept. A mixed-breed Anlu'kyr, they will consider an enemy."

"Great. Friendly lot, these Shifters."

Flanagan shrugs. "The Anlu'kyr kept the Shifter species as slaves for more than a thousand years. Bloodlines lived and died, knowing nothing

else. It was only after the Warlock years, when so many Shifters had been slaughtered on the front lines, that they rebelled and broke away.”

He stops at one of the enormous paintings set back into its own niche and points to the intricate war scene detailed on its surface. His finger lands on a figure in the center, wearing shiny armor. “General Belanger, an important leader in the war. Afterward, he led the Shifter rebellion against the Anlu’kyr. His daughter founded the High Council, which brokered democracy and lasting peace between the species, including humans. It’s why the Belangers are such a respected family.”

“So this is a battle scene from that rebellion?”

“No, this is the Battle of Cullen Marsh. A decisive moment in the war with the Warlock.” He points to a tall figure in black, standing on the central hill. “That’s the Warlock.”

I peer closer to get a better look. Leather armor wraps his tall body, enormous antlers rise high from a skeletal mask, and dark flames dance along his outstretched arms. Giant ravens fly around him, circling a spiral into the sky. He’s a sinister-looking dude.

I step back to study the war scene.

Around General Belanger, a mass of grim-looking men and women fight in black leathers. A zoo’s worth of wild animals stream around their legs—wolves, lions, tigers. Large birds fly overhead. Shifters, I presume. His troops press against a mass of tattered humans with ripped clothes and ruined bloodless faces. They almost look like...

I point and turn to Flanagan with a frown. “Are they...?”

The solemn weight in his eyes says it all. “Animated corpses. The Risen.”

“Zombies! No. Fucking. Way.”

“Valentin Sabel was a Flame Whisperer. A rare type of Channeler able to call the Flame. The Anlu’kyr interbred one of the Whisperer bloodlines with a witch line, then fed them powerful water from a magical lake in the Faelands, and this gave them unusual abilities.” Flanagan points at the horned madman. “In his case, it gave him power over the dead.”

“Shit a brick. That’s heavy. The army won in the end, though? I mean the dude is dead, right?”

“At the cost of many lives, they won in the end. Though some in the supernatural community considered him an overking, the Sabel bloodline was outlawed and ended when Valentin’s daughters were executed. A shame, but for obvious reasons, his line had to be terminated. The Fae believe the reason we haven’t known a Whisperer since is that the Goddess was displeased with that choice.”

Sabel. Sabel. Why does that name sound familiar? Like a distant memory I can taste but can’t find.

I study the ancient figure again, dark flames licking along his arms to the shoulder. A Flame-wielding witch who could raise the dead. Great stinking fuck balls. I’m beginning to understand why the Guardians are so suspicious. I “called” the Flame. That’s how Alexei put it. “*Call the Flame, Michael.*” Does that make me a Whisperer? I’m a mixed-breed Channeler too, just like this Warlock guy. I can’t be like him, though. That was five hundred years ago, and he was the result of a Frankenstein breeding plan. Plus, his offspring were killed, so his unique version of fucked up is now over.

Flanagan watches me. I feel an urge to confide in him about what happened in the cage. Alexei’s voice in my head. Calling the Flame. But I can’t. He’d give me to Councilor Belanger to lock away for sure.

To the left of the painting, a navy-blue banner dresses the wall. The glittering silver symbol of the Guardians embroidered on its surface—the circle of runes filled with a howling wolf, a growling cat, and outstretched wings.

“The Guardian motif,” Flanagan says.

“No werewolf in there, I notice. Or do you look just like a wolf Shifter?”

“We look...different. The werewolf is not a natural creature. The mark of the Goddess is the only reason the Council allows a Lycan to command Blackriver. Retribution from the temple for harm to its chosen is instant and ruthless. If it weren’t for that blessing, I would have been exterminated years ago.”

“Seriously? Because werewolves are so hated?”

“Because werewolves are monsters. When the moon is high, we know only slaughter.”

His words make me think of the metal rings plated to the wall above his bed. “Is that why you chain yourself to your bedroom wall?”

He smiles. It’s a sad smile. “Yes. The Goddess granted me the freedom to change at will, but the moon still affects me deeply. I prefer not to take chances.”

The image of Flanagan in chains blazes into my mind. Fastened in a star shape to his bed, muscles rippling as he strains against his bonds. For some reason he’s completely naked.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Huh? Yeah. Fine.”

He lifts a hand to my shoulder. “Show me your placid side in the test today, hmm? No matter what Councilor Belanger says, stay calm. Can you do that for me?”

Probably not. “Yeah. Course.”

He raises a dubious eyebrow but says no more, leading me to the double doors at the far end of the corridor. We descend two flights of stairs to a basement. At the other end of yet another corridor, this one plain with tiled floors and gray walls, we pass through a heavy wooden door and enter a red-brick, bunker-style room with a low ceiling.

My breath stalls. The space is small, like a police interview room, only without furniture, and the one window looks out onto darkness. Two-way glass?

Flanagan notices my reaction. He clutches the back of my neck and pulls me closer. “This won’t take long. I promise we’ll leave the basement as soon as this is over.”

My heart pounds. It’s the type of enclosed space that would have guaranteed a panic attack ten years ago. He waits while I take in deep lungfuls of stale air. When the tingling in my fingers settles, I nod, and he leads me across to the far side. Two lines of eight wooden rings with leather straps attached run parallel along the wall.

Flanagan pulls the manacle key from his pocket. He releases the irons on my ankles and wrists, letting them drop to the floor with a clunk, then unfastens the collar. As the metal ring hinges open, I breathe a sigh of relief. It's good to have that thing off. That bitch is itchy.

While I rub my neck, a light comes on through the glass window, exposing a smaller room with four people watching. Not two-way glass. I've obviously watched too many cop shows.

Mason and Seonu stand at the side with folded arms and sour faces. Laasya finger waves with a warm smile. Quinton, wearing a deep blue version of his tweed three-piece, silver-topped cane in hand, greets me with a doff of his hat.

"How are you, Michael?" he shouts. He doesn't need to—with my supersenses I can hear a gnat scratch its ass through a brick wall. "How are you feeling?"

As though my life has been exchanged for someone else's. Someone who was very, very bad in a past life. "Surviving."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it."

The door opens, and a giant of a man steps into the room. He's nearly as tall as Flanagan and even wider, with copper skin and a mass of dreadlocks falling to below his shoulders. He wears the garbs of a Guardian soldier, dark suede trousers and hard leather vest.

The two men greet each other with an elbow grasp, genuine pleasure in their smiles.

"Good to have you back, Zahir," Flanagan says.

"Thank you, Commander. It's good to be back." The big man's baritone sounds like crashing rocks. He turns to me. "So this is Michael, our new Wielder?"

"Yes," Flanagan says. "Michael, this is Major Zahir. Blackriver's head trainer."

The major pins me with his golden eyes. He smells of spice and oranges and cat fur. He must surely be a Shifter.

"Very pleased to meet you, Michael."

"Thanks. Same." I offer my hand, and he engulfs it with his firm grip.

His gaze flickers over my collar as he gives my biceps a friendly pinch. “Cub’s got some meat on him. What’s your background?”

I shrug. “Some krav maga, some jujitsu. Mostly kickboxing.”

He grins, teeth bright against dark skin. “Good skills for a new Channeler. I look forward to training you. No need to be nervous about this test, Michael. It’s routine. Every new Channeler is tested this way.”

He motions to the straps, about to speak when the door bangs open. In marches a tall stick of a woman with white-gray hair pulled back into a tight bun, wearing a vintage-style wine-red skirt suit. Chin in the air, shoulders rigid, her imperious demeanor suggests she owns any room she enters. Unwavering gray eyes—the same color as the bastard who nearly raped me—narrow in on my face.

“Is this the creature?”

Flanagan speaks without turning. “Good morning, Councilor Belanger.”

“Good morning, Councilor,” Zahir says. He points to the window. “It will be safer for you to watch from next door.”

Quinton swans into the room behind her, urgency in his step. “Gloria, how good of you to join us. We’ll be witnessing the test from the observation room.” He motions to the door, attempting to ferry her away, but she continues to glare at me, her lips a tight slash of crimson. I’m surprised ice doesn’t form on the walls.

When Quinton gently touches her arm, she whirls on him. “Gregory tells me you interviewed him. How dare you scan my grandson’s mind without my permission.”

“Gloria, dear. I know you are upset, but let us take this conversation next door and leave the major to conduct the test.” He takes her arm, but she’s not moving.

“I want an explanation, Crispin. You interviewed him alone. Against protocol.”

Quinton tilts his head, his charm cooling a few degrees. “I was simply minimizing your grandson’s distress, my dear. The incident happened inside Blackriver. Therefore the only permission I needed was the commander’s.”

She spears a plum-painted nail in my direction. "Have you interviewed that? Scanned its mind? Exposed its lies about my grandson?"

Lies? I lunge forward, mouth open to lay on the heat, but Flanagan steps in my way. He blocks my view and raises my chin with a finger.

"What did I ask you?"

"Fuck's sake, she's—"

"What did I ask you?"

I take long breaths. Try to calm the fire churning in my stomach. I want to give her a piece of my mind, but a tiny voice of reason urges me to follow Flanagan's lead. I grit my teeth and nod.

He strokes my jaw with his thumb. "Trust me."

"There is no need to be so unkind, Gloria," Quinton says. "Michael is not responsible for the circumstances of his birth."

"The creature is clearly an anomaly. He should have been taken to Longreach and locked down for containment and study. Why wasn't he?"

"The commander and I decided it would be safer if Michael stay within reach of a Grounder strong enough to assist him. And now, alas, the facilities at Longreach are no more."

"Yes," she says, eyes narrowing. "His prince made sure of that."

Flanagan calmly turns to address her, his deep voice echoing off the walls. "I did not invite you to this test, Councilor Belanger. You will need to leave before we proceed."

Her mouth falls open, but she soon recovers. "Have you seen my grandson? His fellow soldiers? The young men you have handcuffed to hospital beds, even though they can barely walk. This"—she points at me again—"this thing nearly killed them. While in irons and a suppressing collar. It has done something to them even the doctors don't understand. I want its mind scanned. Then it should be moved to Headquarters, where my son can adequately contain it."

It? I grit my teeth and swallow the hot lump of expletives burning a hole in my throat. Not going to help.

Flanagan stalks past her to the door without sparing her a glance. He holds it open. "Michael acted in self-defense. Your grandson suffers the

consequences of his actions. I'd like you to leave the room now, please."

The councilor straightens to full height. She's much shorter than Flanagan but manages to peer down her nose at him. "My grandson was Hazed by a raving vampire mongrel. He has probably had his memory interfered with too. His actions in that cage were justified. I'm Vice President of the High Council and outrank you, Lycan. If I want the creature moved to Headquarters, where Commander Belanger can more adequately contain it, you cannot prevent that."

"You do not outrank me in Blackriver," Flanagan says, remaining composed. "And as far as I am aware, the High Council is still a democratic body. Commander Belanger may be in charge of Headquarters, but he does not have full jurisdiction over new Channelers. I do. Michael stays here. Councilor Quinton will interview him at the first opportunity." He motions for her to leave.

Quinton places his hand on her shoulder, but she shakes him off. Stiff as a rock face, lips like a shriveled grape, she strides to the door.

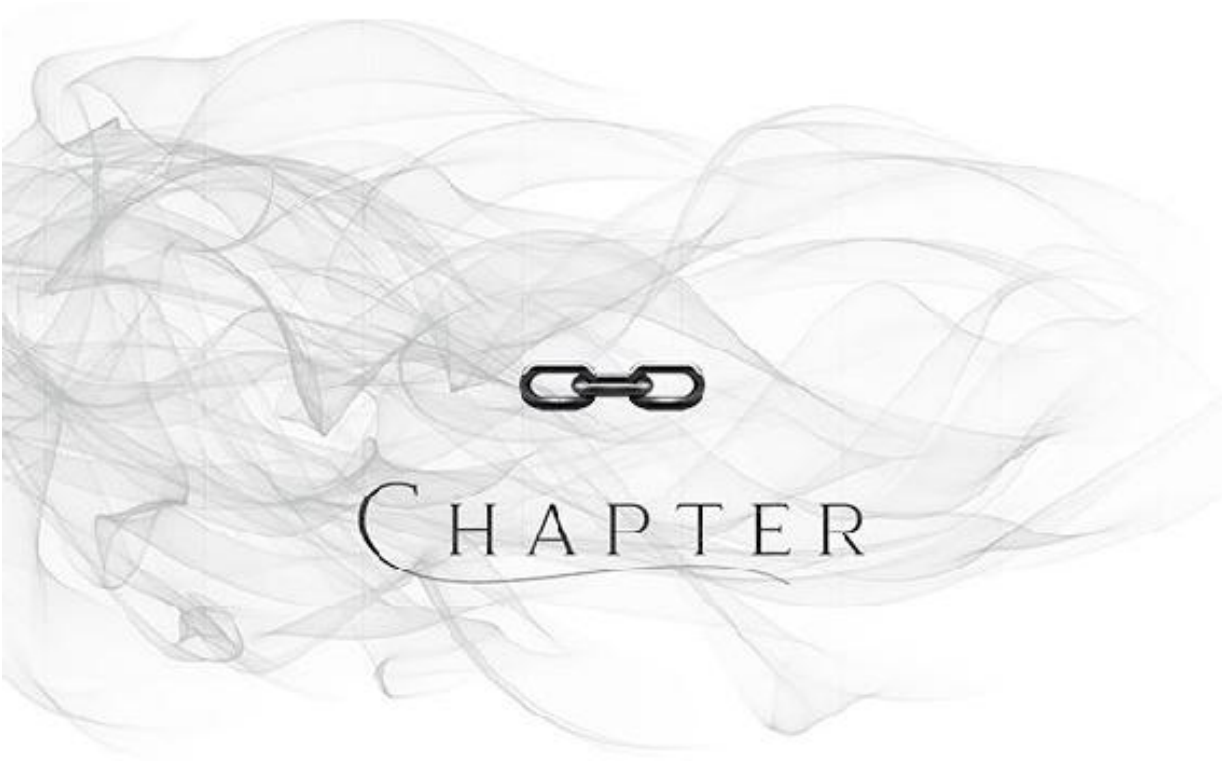
Before leaving, she says, "I will secure a vote from the Council and have your authority on this overridden, Werewolf. It's quite obvious this half-breed monster has you wrapped around its little finger." Drawing her chin high, she marches from the room.

Flanagan shuts the door and raises his brow at Quinton.

The councilor tilts his head and shrugs. "Gregory has always been the apple of Gloria's eye. Her fires may cool if he recovers. I would follow after her, try to change her mind, but I think it best if I stay with Michael."

Nothing's going to change that woman's mind. She knows what she wants. Me locked down in a lab.

My veins boil with rage, but cold nausea creeps through my insides. Her threat might scare the living shit out of me, but Quinton's impending interview sends a deeper terror seeping through my limbs. Flanagan and Quinton might be protecting me now, but when they find out what happened in the cage, with Alexei's intervention, and me calling Flame from those Shifters, they'll be the ones throwing away the key.



18

“Please begin, Major,” Flanagan orders.

He stands at the back of the room in his statue of Thor pose—arms folded, expression unreadable. Quinton watches through the glass window with Laasya and the two soldiers.

Zahir places a steadying hand on my shoulder. I appreciate his solid presence. He reminds me of my jujitsu trainer—a colossal African-American with a physique Conan would be proud of. My trainer didn’t have golden eyes, though. He didn’t smell of cats either.

“It’s probably best if you hold on to the leather straps. The first test is to show us how much Flame a Channeler can hold. This will increase with experience, but for now, it will tell us your training level. Captain Seonu will provide the Flame. All you need to do is let us know when it becomes uncomfortable. Have you any questions?”

“Yeah, I have, as it happens. What exactly is the Flame?”

Zahir's eyes widen. "That hasn't been explained?"

I flick a glance at Flanagan's stoic face. "Sort of. I've been told it's a supernatural energy, but it's all been a bit crazy since."

He nods, black brows pinching together. "In essence, the Flame sustains supernatural life. Without it, Flame creatures would not exist. Shifters, Anlu'kyr, the Fae, Elementals—all depend on it. But unless humans are Flame-born, they cannot see the Flame and can easily be Hazed or harmed by its influence. For instance, humans cannot enter the Faelands without deleterious effect. Channelers can. Which is why Guardian soldiers must be Channelers. Make sense?"

I give a heavy sigh. The only thing I got from that was the reminder that I'm a supernatural creature dependent on the Flame. Was I always? Just how human am I? And how royally fucked in the ass is my life?

When I stare at the floor, Zahir squeezes my arm. "This new world will take adjustment, Michael. Be patient with yourself. Is there anything else before we start?"

I ask another question on my mind. "So, there are like, what, four types of Channelers? No other kind?"

"There are only two types of Channeler. A Wielder and a Grounder. But the strongest of both have their own names. The True Grounder is the strongest Grounder. Commander Flanagan is the only one we know of. The strongest Wielder is called a Whisperer. Not only can they wield the Flame, but they can also draw it to themselves, call it. Is that what you needed to know?"

"Only Whisperers can do that? Sort of call the Flame?"

He chuckles. "Don't worry, Michael. You're not a Whisperer. There hasn't been one in hundreds of years. The Whisperer bloodlines have all died out."

My stomach clenches. I'm sure I called the Flame, and with the Warlock association, I'm really not sure how they're all going to react to that news. But his words reassure me. Maybe I'm just a strong Wielder with a few extra quirks because of my mongrel blood.

“I’ll be happy to answer any more questions you have,” Zahir says. “We’ll set time aside. How does that sound?”

I manage a smile, and he claps me on the shoulder. “You’d best take your shirt off. You’ll be more comfortable with less clothing. And you might want to use the supports.”

I strip off the gray top, throw it onto the ground, and grab a leather strap on either side of me. I hope this test doesn’t make me burn the way I did in the cage.

Zahir stands beside Flanagan, mirroring his posture.

Seonu comes into the room, her expression grim. She doesn’t meet my eyes as she readies herself about two yards away. Another one who thinks I should be locked up. Given the loss of her partner last year, though, I can understand her suspicion.

She spreads her feet, sinks into a stance, and begins performing the Qigong-type katas I saw the students practicing outside.

Her palms ignite with silvery-white flames, and her shiny bob shifts like black liquid as she sways through the moves, arms sweeping in wide circles. The mysterious Flame glints like dancing starlight in the dim room.

Seonu gathers the energy from inside her and creates a ball of swirling fire between her hands. When the orb reaches the size of a tennis ball, she shoves it toward me. It hits me square in the chest. Tingling warmth washes through my torso.

When my only response is a blink, she begins another round of katas. She builds the swirling silvery fire to the size of a football. When the energy hits me, I feel heat but no discomfort.

Seonu frowns. She hunkers lower and draws enough Flame to create a fiery beach ball. Her blue eyes flash with venom as she shoves the ball in my direction. This time the burning prickles through my arms to the end of my fingers. A pleasant sort of heat, like a warm bath. It softens some of the tension gripping my shoulders.

When she gets no reaction from me, Seonu huffs. I might be enjoying her frustration just a little.

The next ball of Flame takes longer to generate. I can't help watching the line of her tight curves as she rocks through the moves, her arms twirling and circling. The clinging brown leathers accentuate her fine, muscled legs. She's a stunning woman, except for the permanent sneer.

Once she holds a mass of glistening silver fire, she steps closer to thrust it into my chest. This time, I feel the impact. I grip the leather straps as my back thuds the wall behind me. The heat bursts through my body like hot gas and leaves me with a suffusing warmth all the way to my toes. It seems to concentrate in the abdomen and groin area. It's nice.

When the heat settles, I grin at Seonu. She narrows her eyes.

"Are you feeling any symptoms of overload, Michael?" Zahir asks. "This would be an uncomfortable burning or symptoms of a Haze."

On the mention of Haze, every eye in the room dips below my waistline to check out my rising semi. For eff's sake.

"No. Nothing," I say firmly. "Bit warm, that's all." I feel buzzed, though, like I've downed a few vodkas.

Zahir and Flanagan share a look.

"Continue, Captain Seonu," Zahir orders.

Seonu throws me a stinging glare before addressing the head trainer. "I'm sorry, Major, I'm out. If I use any more, I won't be able to shift tonight."

She's a Shifter, then. I wonder what kind. Something fierce. Though her thick black eyebrows do bring to mind a disgruntled crow.

"That's fine, Captain," Zahir says. "I can take over."

She leaves the room and enters the observation space. Laasya smiles when I catch her eyes. Quinton watches intently, a hand resting on his chin, his brow tight. Mason's face resembles a small storm. If looks could kill, I'd be sausage meat.

Zahir steps forward, his huge size blocking my view of the observation room. He offers me a warm smile and dips into the same low stance as Seonu, feet spread wide.

His golden eyes spark. "Let's find your edge, shall we?"

"Bring it on," I say with a grin. I like Zahir's playful glint, but I bet the big guy has a lot more power up his sleeve than Seonu.

His lower arms ignite, Flame streaking through the air as he performs the katas with an unexpected grace. The long ropes of his hair sway across broad shoulders. Even though half his arms lick with fire, no light casts into the dimly lit space. It's as if the Flame isn't really there. He generates a massive orb of silver-white energy, more dense and agitated than Seonu's.

I grasp the leather straps and grit my teeth. This one might sting.

He sends the ball of fire toward me with barely a nudge, but the hit drives me back against the brick. The burn floods my whole body. I close my eyes while heat sizzles the length of my veins. But the feeling settles, leaving me warm and swaying on the straps.

"Are you okay, Michael?" Flanagan's husky baritone.

I offer a floppy nod.

Zahir sends two more of those light balls my way. The heat grows stronger each time. A pressure builds in my lower back. The trail of liquid burning along my spine fizzles and stings. It's not unbearable, though—nowhere near the scorching agony I experienced in the cage. In fact, it feels good. I feel good. My thoughts slide around like I've been mixing spirits, and my stiffy might be swelling in front of everyone, but I can't find it in myself to care.

While Zahir generates yet another giant orb with his moves, my attention wanders to Flanagan. He's watching me intensely, arms folded, biceps bulging. The clinging suede of his trousers hugs every delicious curve of his wide thighs.

I glance between the two giants. Zahir's physique is that of a weightlifter, bunching, bulbous muscles, cobwebbed with veins. He exudes the raw power of a wild but graceful bear. Flanagan's limbs are long, stretching his smooth muscles to a contoured length. More like the sleek potency of a lion. Ripples dance across his body when he moves. Flanagan's muscles are lickable. I'd like to follow each rise and fall with my tongue.

Crap. Think I might be Hazing.

"Michael." Zahir's concerned voice.

"Huh?"

"Are you sure you're not feeling any symptoms?"

I give a vigorous shake of my head. “Naaah. M’sorted. No burning.” I wave my hand in the strap. “Keep’t comin’, Cap. I mean, Maj.”

Flanagan strolls across to me. “If I can have a moment, Zahir.”

“Of course, sir.” The head trainer retreats to the back of the room.

Flanagan steps into my space, close enough for his luscious body to brush my chest. His pelvis nudges my shaft with tantalizing pressure. I breathe in forest and rain and moonlight.

He takes my head in his hands, sparks crackling between our skin, and gently smooths my cheek with a thumb. Feels nice.

“How are you feeling? Hmm?”

I give him my best goofy grin. “Yup. Never better. Totally slorted. I mean, sorted.”

He smiles, eyes glittering. “You’re slipping into a Haze. We’ll move on to the next test now.”

“Naaah. M’ good. How’d you know I’m Hazy?”

He chuckles. “Because you’re drunk, and because you’re looking at me as if you want to eat me.”

My brow crumples as I turn that thought over. “Yup. Yup. Maybe with honey.”

His beard cracks with a wide grin. He’s so handsome when he smiles it lights his face.

“You know, you really should smile more,” I inform him. “You’ve got a resting don’t-fuck-with-me wolfy face.”

“Is that so?” He runs his thumb across my brow. “You have a permanent scowl. Or at least you do with me.”

“Nooo, I don’t. I’m totally laid back, me.”

His bark of laughter echoes through the room. “Your middle name is don’t-fuck-with-me.”

My smile feels all lopsided. “Why d’you keep fucking wi’ me, then?”

He leans down to my ear. Even with my superhearing, I only just catch his whisper. “You’ll know when I fuck you, Michael.”

His words draw a shudder from me. I’m not sure if it’s with fear or need. He subtly presses closer, trapping my hard cock against his pelvis. When

his eyes return to my face, they spark with heat and humor.

A playful Flanagan, this is new. His words should scare me witless, but a thrill bubbles through my belly.

“I reckon you’re all talk,” I whisper back. False bravado, works every time.

His laughter vibrates my chest, and I’m caught by his dancing silvery gaze. I’ve seen humor in Flanagan’s eyes, but never laughter.

I let go of a strap to stroke the three thin plaits at the side of his head, running my fingers over the bumpy texture because I realize something.

“These are for them, aren’t they? Your family?”

He gives a subtle nod. “Yes.”

I stroke them slowly as he watches my face. Three plaits for a wife and two daughters. “I wish I could have met them.”

He brushes hair from my eyes. “They’re gone,” he says, tone as flat and dry as sand.

“Commander? Shall we continue.” Zahir’s deep voice shocks a jump from me. I’d forgotten where I was.

“Hm? Yes. Yes, of course.” I think Flanagan had forgotten where he was too. “Move on to the next stage, please.”

Zahir swaps places with Flanagan, and as he approaches me, he can barely suppress his grin. Whatever he thinks he just saw, he’s chuffed about it.

“You can let go of the straps now, Michael. I want you to follow my movements.” He spreads his legs and dips into a stance. I mirror the posture, already missing Flanagan’s warmth.

With palms facing inwards, Zahir draws his hands up from his belly to his shoulders, then sweeps them out into a circle and repeats.

I’m familiar with the stance—a standard posture for most martial arts, but I’ve never done anything like Qigong before. I feel a bit daft, if I’m honest. Zahir makes it look easy, all grace and sweeping gestures. My awkward, exaggerated version is more like a boxer trying ballet.

But after a few minutes of the same move, I feel a change. The Flame shifts and flows inside me, whooshing through my body to follow my hands

like an invisible fiery river. It shimmies with excitement, as if enjoying my attention. The river expands until it swallows my whole width. I find myself dipping lower to catch the blissful energy and send it out in wider circles.

“Very good,” Zahir says. “You’re feeling the Flame respond to you?”

“Yeah. Feels amazing.”

“Good. You’re a quick learner.” Zahir’s whole arms ignite, making me jump.

His grin has a challenge to it. “I want you to imagine a flame in the palm of your hand, Michael.”

I remember Seonu in the car on the way to the steelworks, showing me that flame bobbing in her palm. I imagine my hand lighting the same way. The Flame responds, buzzing through my muscles like a swarm of trapped fireflies.

Nothing happens.

I try harder, eyes tightly closed. The Flame spins down my arms. My hands flare with heat. I open my eyes to check, but there’s no bobbing flame. “It’s not working.”

Zahir’s brow creases. “Okay. Don’t worry. You feel the Flame inside you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it feels good.”

“Draw it from within you. From here”—he taps his abdomen—“and direct it out to your hands. Know that it follows your will. Then imagine your hands are on fire.”

I do as he says. Eyes open this time, I draw the heat up from my belly and send it out, watching my fingers as I move them through the air. My arms burn with inner Flame, hot enough to rage with fire, but nothing appears.

I stop my movements to squint at my palms. “It’s not happening. Should it be?”

“Let’s rest a moment.” Zahir lays his huge hands on my shoulders. “You’re tense, Michael. You’ve been through a lot. Take a few deep breaths.” He gives me a friendly rub, and I shake my arms out, sucking air in.

“I will admit it surprises me,” he says. “You’ve absorbed enough Flame to light the room on fire.” His brow dips. “Are you afraid of the Flame? Or maybe worried about hurting someone?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.” My words still slur.

Quinton shouts from the side room, “I think I may know the problem, Commander. May I come in?”

Flanagan shakes his head. “No, Councilor.”

Quinton shrugs, indifferent, but I’m sure I catch a curl to his upper lip.

“Here, right now, you’re safe, Michael,” Zahir says. “I want you to think about some of the things that worry you.”

I raise an eyebrow. That’s a lot of worries.

He smiles, a warm, friendly smile. “This may seem counterintuitive, but let your concerns rise to the surface. Then let them float away for now so you can completely relax. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I close my eyes and flicker through the catalog. Councilor Belanger obviously. Is she right? Am I a dangerous freak who should be locked in a dungeon? Will I grow fangs? Start craving blood? Am I gay? Will I let Flanagan fuck me? Whoa! That’s a scary thought. Will I ever get away from Blackriver? Am I somehow linked to a raving egomaniac who controlled zombies?

The image of the Warlock—standing on the hill, arms alight with dark flames—rises to my mind. My chest tightens. I shove the image away.

I think of the Flame instead, the burning presence in every cell. I know I can light it, as sure as I know my own name. So why won’t it respond?

Come on, Flame, I know you’re listening. Give me an answer.

A clear-cut image of Alexei strikes the front of my brain. I’m in his wings, lost in his beauty, in the black expanse of his eyes. A pearl of blood glistens on the pout of his lower lip. He leans forward to kiss me. When his mouth touches mine, the Flame flares to life.

I ignite.

Zahir leaps away so fast he stumbles. Flanagan grabs him to pull him back. Even the four behind the glass step away, mouths open.

My whole body rages with silvery-white fire. The roaring flames shoot outward across the ground, spreading like a carpet and licking up the walls to cover the ceiling. A flicker dances around my eyes. My face is on fire!

“Uhm, guys?”

Flanagan motions for Zahir to stay back and strides across to me.

He steps into the flames without concern and takes my head in his hands again. His touch extinguishes the flames around my face. He smiles, eyes bright with something like pride. “Stay calm.”

I grasp his biceps, knuckles white. “How do I turn it off?”

“Let it be for a moment. It won’t harm you.”

I close my eyes. There’s no discomfort, no burning. In fact, the tingling heat all over my skin causes blissful waves of pleasure and cools the heat inside my body. My thoughts have snapped from a drunken sway into crystal clarity. My arousal had settled too until Flanagan came close.

I let out a giddy laugh. “Whoa. This is wild.”

“The Flame follows your will.”

“Right.” I try to imagine the fire going out, but the image of Alexei’s oil-black eyes floats into my mind again, and they intensify. Thoughts of the prince seem to fuel the Flame.

When I check, the curling fire has spread to the far side, covering the window, forcing Zahir into a corner. I have no idea how to stop them.

“Flanagan, how—?”

“Shh, I’ve got you. Take a deep breath.” His calm rumble soothes my panic.

A knock at the door sounds, and a soldier’s head pokes into the room.

“Get out!” Zahir shouts.

Flanagan sweeps his hands over my body. Pats me down, the way you would an ordinary fire. Where his hands touch, the flames disappear. I stand stock-still while he works his way down my legs and round to tap my back. The flames in the room flicker out. When he’s finished, I’m left with only tingling and everyone staring at me in silence.

I check my skin for any sign of damage, but it looks untouched.

“Is that normal?” I ask.

Zahir's booming laugh sounds like a clap of thunder. "Normal for you." He turns to Flanagan. "Well, I think we can safely declare Michael an above-class Wielder. He's clearly beyond a Class 7. We'll have to train him with qualified soldiers."

Flanagan grips the back of my neck and gives me a gentle shake. "I think our new Channeler has invented his own level."

Our new Channeler? An unexpected smile stretches my lips.

The knock at the door sounds again. This time more urgent.

"Come," Flanagan calls.

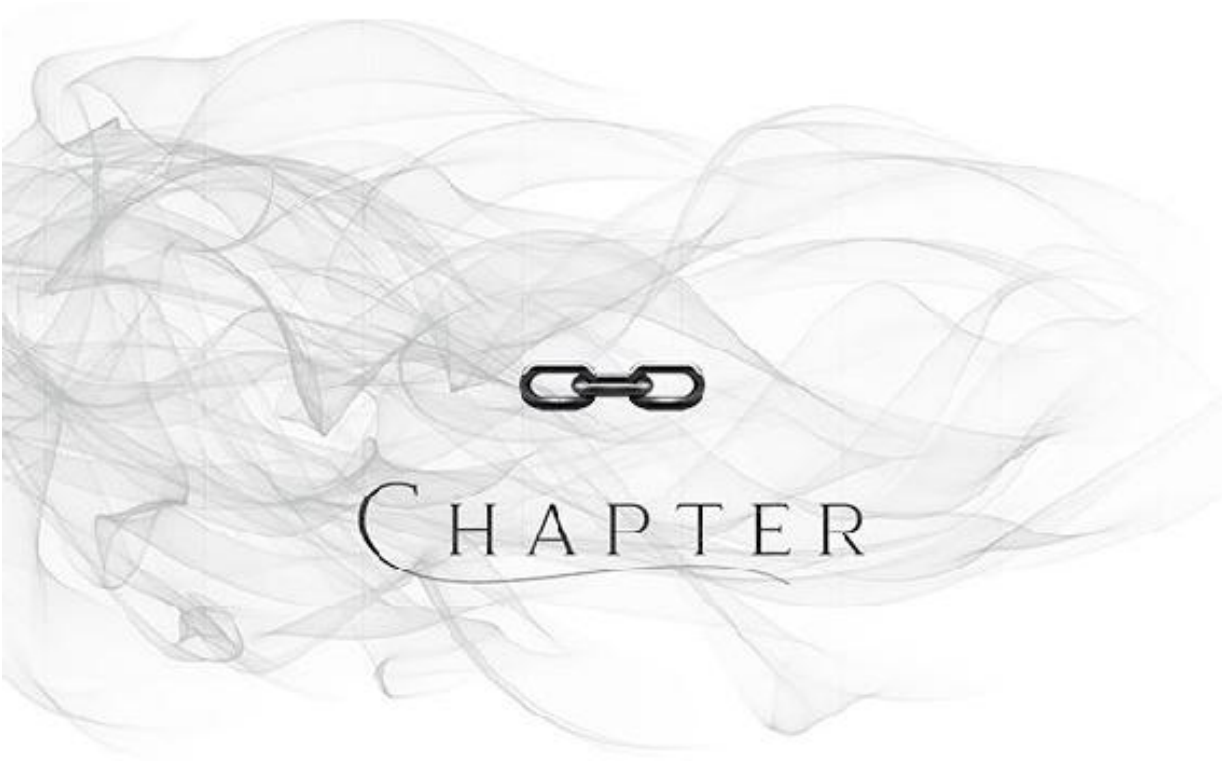
A young soldier with a mop of blond hair steps into the room, eyes wide, shoulders hunched as if he's entering a war zone. He glances at me with a mixture of fear and wonder.

"What is it, Matthews?" Flanagan snaps, making the poor lad flinch.

"I'm sorry, Commander. Captain Nelson sent me. The Blood Guard have hit the labs at Headquarters, sir."

My heart lurches. Is Alexei attacking the labs for me? I dismiss the thought. Of course he isn't. It'll be some other devious ploy.

Though judging by the way everyone glances at me, I'm not the only one asking that question.



19

“Will you take Zahir up on his offer?” Laasya strides six stairs ahead of me, swallowing two at a time, dress hoisted to free her sprightly legs. She bounces without effort and makes stairs look easy.

I’ve got iron manacles on my ankles and a heavy chain between the ones on my wrists—Flanagan also replaced the collar to be on the safe side, much to my growling complaint—but even with the extra weight, I expect to climb steps faster than Laasya. She’s just so small and slight. I’m not sure how we started racing. It took us over on the first set of stairs.

Laasya’s taking me on a quiet route to Quinton’s office to show me his library. I asked her for books on the supernatural world and its history, and Quinton’s extensive collection offers an alternative to the public library downstairs that will no doubt be choked with students.

Flanagan has rushed off to London with Quinton. The councilor is Gating him there, whatever that means. He left me in Laasya's care and said we would start training when he returned.

After one of Laasya's sandwiches, produced from her cloth bag, she brought me to these stairs. She seems to know every secret passage through Blackriver's complexity of corridors. We avoided most of its occupants, but not all. Their reception varied between curiosity and suspicion. Some Guardians treat me like a visiting superstar, pummeling Laasya with questions. Others are warier, their expressions suggesting I'm a criminal escaped from lockdown.

We reach the top of six flights, and though I'm sweaty and panting, Laasya looks like she's been strolling through a park.

"How...?"

Her smile takes a mischievous edge. "I'm a telekinetic. I cheat."

"That's some cheat."

She leads me down the red-carpeted hall with its posh vases and many paintings toward Quinton's door.

"You didn't answer my question," she says.

Before we left the testing room, Zahir offered to be my mentor. Apparently all student Guardians have one. I like the guy. He's the friendliest soldier I've come across since arriving in Blackriver, and I appreciate his offer. It would be cool to train with him. But I can't imagine the Guardians ever accepting me into their ranks, especially if my blood leaves me vulnerable to Alexei's call. Not a convenient trait to have in the field. And I don't know if I even want to join the Guardians. I haven't let go of the drive to get away from Blackriver the first chance I get. Away from chains and collars. But after seeing my face in the mirror earlier, the strength is seeping out of my urgency. Where would I go?

"You realize," I say to her, "I'm a freak, even by Guardian standards?"

She flicks her hand. "Tah! Different is normal in the Guardians. It's why I feel so at home. Nobody bullies me here because I'm respected for who I am."

“Bullies you?” I can’t imagine anybody stupid enough to bully Laasya. “But you’re from a world of witches. Surely weird is normal.”

“Yes, but most young witches don’t accidentally throw their teacher through a window when they get upset. I was aberrant, even by witch standards. Thankfully, Councilor Quinton saw potential and taught me control. He’s always been a mentor to me.” Her voice takes on a breathy quality, her cheeks darkening.

“What is it with you and Quinton, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know. You like him. I wondered if the feelings were mutual.” I think he’s way too old for her, and I haven’t noticed any interest on his part, but I’m hardly an expert.

She stops to look at me, her eyes wide. “I don’t like him like that.”

“Yeah, ya do. I’ve seen the way you look at him. You fluster every time he speaks.”

She raises her chin. “I admire him.”

“Oh,” I say, exaggerating my tone. “You *admire* him.”

Her face scrunches with a playful scowl. “Well, what about you and the commander?”

That stops me. “What about me and Flanagan?” I ignore the twitch in my pants, even from the mention of his name.

Laasya rolls her eyes. “If it gets any more intense between you two, you’ll set Blackriver on fire.”

“Inten... There’s nothing between me and Flanagan. It’s just the Flame messing with things. And anyway, why would I be attracted to the most infuriating man I’ve ever met?” Never mind that he is, in fact, a man.

“Oh,” she says in the same dramatic tone I used. “He’s *infuriating*.”

“He is.” It’s my turn to scowl.

She stops at the heavy wooden door to Quinton’s office and pulls a key from her cardigan pocket. “Yes, and I’m sure you want to show him just how *infuriating* he is. While in his bed. With no clothes on.”

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. I don’t expect that kind of comeback from someone as innocent as Laasya.

An opposite door opens, and two women step into the corridor. Both wear the same brown linen dresses as Laasya, their salt-and-pepper dreadlocks piled high with leather ties. When they spot us, they walk straight over.

Laasya stiffens and pushes me behind her, but she greets the two witches with a friendly cheek kiss. They turn to me with immediate interest.

“Is this the Wielder?” asks the older lady with quick brown eyes.

“Yes. Tulsy, Petre, this is Michael. We really must go.”

The women hustle past her and peer up at me. I feel like a rare curiosity under their squinting gazes. A prickle passes over my neck, and I sense the fumble of fingers poking into my mind.

Laasya grabs my arm. “Yes, well, it’s very nice to see you, but we must get on.”

Without thought, I stamp an imaginary foot at them both.

The fingers jerk away, and the eldest witch blinks, stepping back.

“Bye.” Laasya shoves me into the room and slams the door behind her.

She leans back against it, straightening her glasses. “I’m sorry about that. They were attempting to read your mind. It’s not allowed, but witches don’t have many scruples when it comes to collecting gossip.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” Note to self, avoid witches. “Can you read my mind?”

Laasya sighs, shoulders sagging. “It’s an ability that never developed for me. But every other witch in Blackriver is psychic to some extent. So I think we should just avoid them from now on.”

I quirk my head in agreement. “Sounds good.” I don’t want some random witch seeing what happened in the cage. They’ll think I’m in league with Alexei. I know I’ll have to face Quinton’s all-seeing gaze soon, but I’ll deal with that when I get there.

The councilor’s office hasn’t changed since I was last here. Dust still covers every surface. It still smells of burnt paper and chlorine. The line of fancy pens, the inkwell, the stack of papers are in exactly the same position on the desk. Something about that memory causes a shudder. I don’t know why it should. Quinton is eccentric and unsettling, but he’s been friendly so far.

I examine the nearest shelf of peculiarities. I have to surreptitiously adjust my pants again, still suffering a mild Haze after the test room. Not enough to turn me into a memory-disabled sex maniac, but my semi keeps threatening to swell, and Flanagan's words *you'll know when I fuck you, Michael* are playing on a loop in my head.

It's funny. The heightened sexual awareness gives me no interest in anyone else. No matter how pretty the women I met today, nobody piqued my interest. All I can see are silver eyes. I'm fixated—on a man. On a six-foot-seven Scandinavian werewolf man with King Kong pecs. Either I'm not as straight as I always assumed, or the Flame has it bad for True Grounders.

I study the skull of some humanoid creature with protruding tusks and try for distraction. "Does Quinton ever use this office? How come you have a key?"

"He lets me have access to his grimoires. He doesn't really use it anymore. This was his office when he was head of Blackriver."

Careful to avoid knocking things over with the chain between my wrists, I pick up one of the odd-looking tribal masks—an ugly demon face with its tongue hanging out.

Laasya picks up a different mask, this one with blue horns, and places it in front of her face.

"Yup," I confirm. "Definite improvement."

She peeks from behind it and sticks out her tongue. "Liar."

"Quinton was head of Blackriver?" I ask, vaguely remembering him mentioning that fact when we last met. I find it difficult to imagine the debonair witch commanding soldiers.

"Yes, for forty years." Laasya hangs the mask on a hook and wanders to one of the other shelves. "About twenty years ago, the Council offered the commander any position he wanted. They asked him to be Guardian General, but he turned it down and requested Blackriver instead. So they promoted Councilor Quinton to the High Council."

I examine a feathered wand wedged behind a massive quartz pyramid. The wand is one of many, all brightly colored, and beside them hang copper

incense holders and various sized bells.

“This place is like one of those hippie shops.”

“Councilor Quinton tends to collect things.”

She pulls a fat tome of a book—leather bound with gold lettering—from a nearby shelf and begins to read the contents page.

I survey the rows of multicolored options. “So, which books should I start with?”

Without looking up, she says, “Well, what do you want to know? What has you the most curious?”

I think about that. There’s really only one answer. “The Warlock dude seems an interesting character.”

Laasya’s offers a bright smile. “Yes, that would be a good place to start. The Warlock wars shaped the modern supernatural world.” She waves a hand at the shelves in the far corner. “I think that section is the history of the Warlock years.”

I clink across the room and study the shelves. Many of the books have a modern appearance, like something you might find in Barnes and Noble, but the worn spines of the leather-bound books suggest they’ve been alive as long as Quinton.

I tilt my head to read the titles. “It surprises me the Council offered Flanagan any position he wanted. I get the impression the Belangers have a problem with him.”

“Oh, they have a problem all right. He doesn’t bow to their orders. But he carries the High Priestess’s blessing, which means they can’t get rid of him, even if they wanted to. He’s the only soldier strong enough to fight the prince one on one, and the Goddess mark gives him high standing in the supernatural community. Anyway, General Nenge and the other council members believe he’s an invaluable asset, so the Belangers have to put up with him. He took the Blackriver position because he’s passionate about helping new Channelers.”

I halt my scan of the books to look at her. “The Belangers seem powerful. Why couldn’t they get rid of him?”

When she glances up from her grimoire, her frown suggests I'm being a bit thick. "He carries the mark of Velnushka, the Flame Goddess. She won't hesitate to punish any supernatural who harms her servant."

"So she's actually real, then?" She must be one serious chick. "What would punishment involve? Lightning bolts?"

She thumps the tome on the desk and pulls out another twice as thick from the shelf. "The gods are conscious natural forces, but they're as real as you and me. More so. We have a man in Blackriver town who stole a golden bowl from the temple. He has sores on his hands that never heal. Another man I heard of hunted and nearly killed a sacred animal. A unicorn. No matter what he eats, his food tastes like it's rotting."

"There are unicorns?" Of course there are fucking unicorns.

"They're Flame Elementals," she says with that matter-of-fact tone she uses. She motions to the shelf behind me. "Have you found anything yet?"

I shake my head. "There's nothing here about the Warlock. Just books about some guy called Valentin Sabel."

"Yes, that's his name. He only became known as the Warlock when he began spelling against nature."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Flanagan did mention his name just before my test. That completely went out of my head for some reason." I pick up the first in a trilogy of biographies.

Valentin Sabel, Child of the Jade Waters.

"Quinton wrote this," I say with surprise.

"He's the world expert on the Warlock Years."

I pull out the next. *Valentin Sabel, Monster or King?* Also by Quinton.

The manacles and the chain between my wrists hinder every movement as I pile a collection on the desk. I don't know why Flanagan bothered to order me chained again. It's not like I could ever overwhelm little *Laasya*, even if I wanted to. It's all for that Belanger woman's sake.

The last book on my pile carries the title *Valentin Sabel. The Son of Three Species*. Another biography. Quinton's certainly prolific.

"Flanagan told me the Warlock's daughters were executed," I say, not sure why that should occur to me.

Laasya stands after retrieving a massive grimoire from the bottom shelf. She slaps it on top of her others and swipes her hands to clear the dust. “Yes. Thank the Goddess.” Her response surprises me.

“Isn’t that a bit harsh? It’s not like children are at fault for their parents’ power-crazy antics. Or were they as unhinged as their father?”

She shrugs. “They were teenagers when General Belanger killed them. He caught them on the run to the temple and killed both girls on sight.”

I stare at her, dumbfounded. “So they were murdered?”

“They were executed. A cross-species law was agreed after the war that all Sabel children of either gender should be terminated on sight without trial.”

“That’s barbaric.”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is. But the supernatural world produces very dangerous creatures, and the law needs to be clear-cut about dealing with them. The infamous Anlu’kyr experiments—feeding Sabel-bloodline Whisperers with Jade water—produced the most dangerous creatures of all. We don’t want another zombie-raising Warlock.” She grabs a new fat tome from a shelf and rifles through its pages.

I stare at my pile of books while I process her words. Seems to me the Warlock was as much a victim as a perpetrator if he was experimented on and fed something against his will. “What’s Jade water?”

She thumps another book onto her pile. “Waters from the Jade Lake. Renowned for gifting whoever drinks them with immortality and exponential power. Sounds great, but most of the crazy people who drink the waters die. The rest go quite mad.”

“Or turn into megalomaniacs,” I add, and she chuckles. “What’re you looking up?” I ask her.

“I’m trying to find a precedent for dealing with the Blood Call. A spell that might free you from Alexei’s influence.”

“You think there is such a thing?” I’m not sure how I feel about being spelled, but freedom from a lifetime under Alexei’s yoke sounds good.”

“Mind training will probably give you your best chance, but there might be something to reduce the strength of Alexei’s pull. A talisman maybe or a

brew of some kind. Councilor Quinton will come up with something. I'm sure of it."

"Of course you are," I say with a wink.

She wrinkles her nose at me.

I collect my pile of treasure and tramp toward one of the reading chairs by the window. When I'm halfway across the brass pentagram inlaid into the floor, a body-length streak of bright light materializes in the air.

"Step back!" Laasya shouts.

I jump to the side so fast I topple onto the desk. The books thump to the floor. I'm about to ask *What the hell?* when a tweed-dressed leg appears, followed by Quinton's slim form. The light widens to the shape of a door, and Flanagan's giant mass towers behind the Councilor.

With my mouth open, I grip the edge of the desk as the scintillating light shrinks to a point and blinks out, leaving the two men standing in the middle of the pentagram.

Laasya giggles.

"I apologize, Michael," Quinton says. "I forgot you were both here. I should have sent a signal."

"How...?" I'm speechless.

"Gating," he says by way of explanation. "The ability to walk through from one point in spacetime to another."

Through spacetime? Holy Star Wars.

My attention switches to Flanagan. He doesn't look like he's been in a fight. His blond hair remains in its knot, leather vest appearing clean, but the silver of his eyes has a feral glint. His intense gaze is fixed on me. He pulls a key from his pocket, strides over, and without a word, proceeds to unlock the manacles on my wrists and ankles, then releases the collar.

"What happened at Headquarters?" I ask, wondering if it has something to do with this sudden change of heart regarding the chains.

"Nothing happened," he answers in a clipped tone. "It was over when we arrived."

"Are they all right?" Laasya asks.

Quinton shakes his head. "Nine Guardians lost their lives. The laboratories are now in ruins. But the Blood Guard did not leave with any Channelers. I suppose we might consider that a minor win."

Laasya throws her hands up. "Why didn't they call on us? We could have helped. Was the prince there?"

Flanagan's jaw tightens even more. A cold fury rolls off him like steam.

Quinton sighs. "Commander Belanger is a proud man, Laasya. Fortunately, the prince was absent from this attack."

Flanagan marches to the door, the chains dangling from his fist. I'm not free of them yet, then. "Come, Michael. We're leaving."

The words *I'm not your fucking dog* burn my lips, but I keep them back. I've got a feeling I'll be doing that a lot in Flanagan's company. "Where are we going?" I ask instead.

"Training."

"What about the interview?" Quinton asks. "I could do that now."

"Tomorrow, Councilor." Flanagan throws the door open and exits the room. "Now, Michael," he barks from the corridor.

Quinton's lip twitches, but he reaches down and retrieves one of the books I dropped on the floor. "This is the book you need, Michael."

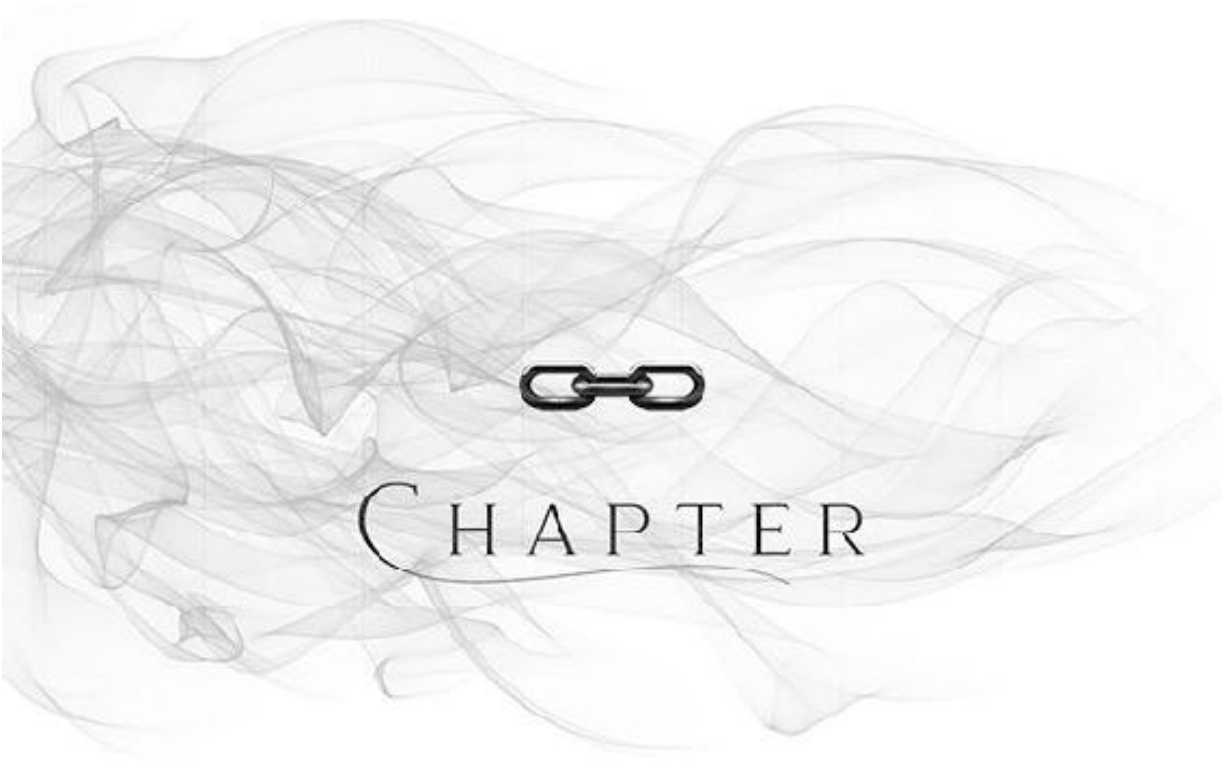
Valentin Sabel. Monster or King.

"Okay, thanks." I try to take the book from his hand, but he holds on to it. "You can collect this tomorrow when you come to see me. We will talk, you and I." His gaze meets mine, and I catch a flash of jade green.

Be careful. Quinton's voice seeps into my mind. *You cannot trust anyone but me. Not even the commander.*

I glance Laasya's way, but she's tugging out another one of the massive grimoires. I give Quinton a slight nod, though I'm not convinced by his words.

Quinton gives me the faintest return nod. Out loud, he says, "Run along now, Michael. You don't want to keep the commander waiting."



20

Flanagan marches me to a training room in the north wing of the mansion, a large dojo-type space with a springy wooden floor, white curtains covering the windows, and a wall plastered in weapons. Midday sunshine floods down from skylights in the high ceiling, streaking the floor with a patchwork of gold. I'm more used to a boxing ring, but I've spent enough hours rolling around shiny wooden slats to feel at home in a room like this.

"So, you've brought me here to whoop your ass, have you?" I'm hoping light humor might break through the concrete-level tension in Flanagan's demeanor. I can guess he's pissed at Alexei. Or the Belanger at Headquarters. Or himself.

He cuts me a look. "I need to assess your training requirements."

"With weapons?"

"With your new skills."

“Meaning my new vamp strength with all its jazz?” I walk across the room to check out the weapons. Multiple blades dress the wall, from daggers to longswords and everything in between. Beyond the line of swords, neat rows of hooks hold axes, spears, tridents, and even whips.

Flanagan locks the door, dumps the manacles on the floor, then comes to stand beside me. “Your new abilities may surprise you even more than they have already.”

I *am* curious about the changes my awakened DNA has brought. Back home, my new strength and speed would render me a Class A competitor. I’d win every competition. Here, it only equalizes the field. Not with Flanagan, though. I get the impression his insane strength is rare, even by supernatural standards.

“Better prepare for an ass-kicking then, wolfman.” I step back to flourish some nunchucks, whipping the batons in circles as if I know what I’m doing. “I’m gonna show you how this shit’s done.”

Flanagan chuckles, eyes crinkling. I like seeing some of that stoic rigidity he carries drop away. When I woke chained to his bed this morning, I’d have given anything to come at the guy with a sharp edge. Especially knowing he’d “helped” me through two nights and a day of a sexual trance I don’t remember. But somehow the overbearing bastard has sunk beneath my skin.

“You do have experience, though?” he asks.

“Not with weapons. But I started with hand to hand when I was ten.” I hook the nunchucks back, not a weapon I’d ever choose. Other than fists, give me a sharp blade.

Flanagan leans his shoulder against a patch of clear wall, a little too close for comfort, and studies my face. I force my eyes away from scanning his tall form for the twentieth time. I can feel the edges of a Haze. If I ogle those bulging muscles too much, I’ll be climbing the man.

“Who introduced you to martial arts?” he asks.

I run my hand down the length of a katana. “John. My adoptive dad. I got myself suspended from school for fighting—the first week he took me in. My third suspension in three years.” I sneak a peek at Flanagan’s face,

expecting some kind of judgment, but he's just listening. "I was sure he would beg the agency to place me with another family. I'd only been with him for four days. That night I took a bike from his neighbours garage and ran away. Pedaled as fast as my little legs could on a bike meant for a six-year-old..." I trail off, remembering the cold rain and the burn in my thighs.

"How far did you get?"

"About three miles outside town. Then it turned dark. It was pissing down with rain. I had no jacket, no food, and no hope. So I turned around and pedaled back to face the heat." I pull a small sickle from its hook and examine the ornate blade carved with swirling symbols.

"And what happened?"

"And nothing. When I slunk back into the house through the back door, John was drinking tea at the kitchen table. He told me he'd saved dinner and asked if I wanted a bigger bike. I'd never known anything like it."

"You expected a scolding?"

"I expected a beating. Wouldn't be the first. But he brought me dry clothes and lit a fire so I wouldn't be cold. Then warmed my dinner." I shake my head at the memory. "I spilled the beans. Told him all about the boy I'd put in hospital—a hard-nosed shit who preyed on shy girls and anyone weaker. John listened without saying a word. He just nodded and hummed and let me go to bed. The next day he took me to the kickboxing club. Said if I was going to fight, I needed to know how to do it properly. I never looked back. Changed my life."

"Where is John now?"

"Dead," I say, picking at a scratch in a throwing star. "Heart attack. When I was eighteen."

Flanagan goes quiet. I feel his attention like heat on my face. When I check, his eyes have softened, anger exchanged for something else.

"I'm sorry, Michael. That must have been very painful."

I shrug. Finding John's body in the garden ripped my heart out, but it's not something I talk about. "Go on," I push instead.

"Go on what?"

"You want to ask me something."

He has the same look the child therapist wore when she wanted me to “share.” Concern mixed with heavy inquisition. “*Why are you afraid of small spaces, Michael?*” she used to ask. I never had an answer. Still don’t.

I test the edge of an ax with my thumb and earn a line of crimson for my curiosity. I suck the blood away, and heat flashes across Flanagan’s gaze.

He takes a slow breath. “I’m wondering what it is you want.”

“What do you mean, want?”

“With your life. What do you hope for?”

I shoot him a withering glare. “Let me think. To live without chains or that fucking collar. That would be a start.” To find out who my parents were and why they died. That would be a prize, right there.

He sighs. “These circumstances are temporary.”

“Are they? Because my bloodsucker DNA isn’t temporary, is it? And fuck only knows what else I am. When will you decide I’m ‘safe’?” I use air quotes, even though it always pisses me off when people do that. “When I’m old and gray and useless, no doubt?”

His thick brow dips, and he blinks at me. “Michael, there is no old and gray for you. I assumed you understood that. Even if you haven’t inherited immortality, you will live a very long time. Hundreds of years.”

I fumble the ax I was lifting, and it clatters to the floor. I stare at him. Could he be right? Am I going to live as long as he has? As long as Alexei? The possibility hadn’t occurred to me. “But I’ve still got human in me.”

“Even so. You will live long after your peers are dead and gone.” He bends to retrieve the ax and replaces it on its hook. I watch every fold and stretch of his giant body—a body still supple and strong after three hundred years. My brain struggles to even process that I could live as long and stay as fit.

“You haven’t answered my question,” he says.

“What question?”

“What is it you want?”

“A life. What else would I want?” I grab a short, sturdy sword with a pummel hilt and stalk to the center of the room. “I thought we came here to fight.”

Flanagan raises a blond brow at me, then strips off his hard vest. The sudden sight of his sculpted chest makes my cock twitch. I clear my throat and study the ceiling for cracks.

Flanagan chooses a small dagger and joins me. “Do you want to marry? Have children? What about a career?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Marriage and career are probably off the table now, though.”

As soon as he’s close enough, I raise my sword and bring it down in an arc. He stops it with his blade, the clang of metal echoing through the room, and I swipe again. A volley of clashes ensue. I move faster than I thought possible. Then he does some swirly trick, and my blade flies from my hands and skitters across the wood.

“You’re holding the hilt too tight,” he tells me.

I frown at the sword, now lost to the far end of the room. “Not tight enough, it looks like.”

Flanagan leaves his own blade against the nearest wall and returns to stand in front of me. “They don’t have to be off the table. If that’s what you want.”

It takes me a moment to remember what he means. Wife. Family. Career. “What is this, Flanagan? Twenty fucking questions? What is it you want to know?”

I jump forward and throw a high kick to his face. He blocks but doesn’t counter. I follow with a rally of kicks and punches, Flame sparking silver from every contact. He defends with such ease, using only hands and forearms, he barely has to shift from the same position.

“Where were you going?” he doggedly continues. “On the bike? Where did you want to go?”

Why is he asking that? “I don’t know. Away.”

“Away where?”

I step back and throw my arms open. “For crap’s sake, Flanagan. I don’t know where I was going. I was ten. Somewhere else. Somewhere free, safe maybe.”

“So you wanted a safe place?”

“I wanted a home.”

I fly at him again, giving every combination of punches and kicks I know. After another useless round of striking my bones against his rock-hard forearms, I’m gasping for air, and he isn’t even breathing hard.

I produce some flashier moves from my repertoire. A flying sidekick, higher than I’ve ever jumped before. He swats it with an elbow. So I drop to a low-spinning heel kick—the move doesn’t shift him an inch and nearly breaks my ankle.

Limping away, I gulp air and shake out my foot. “Aaah. Ya…”

He grins and refastens his top knot, sweeping up fallen hair and the three plaits to fold them back into their leather tie. The action accentuates his pecs, making them rise and ripple. My mouth waters. From the corner of my eye, I let my gaze wander over every ridge and shadow of his abs down to his crotch. A punch of arousal hits me deep when I see that bulge of his. I tear my eyes away.

Calm it, Blakeley. Keep it in check, man.

When I glance back, humor dances in his eyes.

“You’re not even trying to fight me?” I accuse.

“I think it’s you that isn’t trying.”

“What? I’m giving everything I’ve got.”

“This is a very long way from everything you’ve got.” He opens his arms. “Here I am. You’ve wanted to hurt me since I chained you. Use any move you want.” He points at the wall of metal. “Any weapon. Show me what you’re made of, half breed.”

I growl and throw myself at him, doubling my kicks and punches, pummeling faster than I ever have in my life. I even try the dirtier moves—a jab to his throat, a swing at his crotch, a knee crunch. He throws me off like I’m a five-foot twink, not a six-foot fighter with a hundred and eighty pounds of muscle to hurl.

I grab a wooden baton from the wall, then charge at him with a yell, my whole body behind the strike. The baton shatters against his arm.

“Shit, Flanagan! You’re like bloody Iron Man.”

“More!” he shouts.

I chuck what's left of the baton away and sweep up the dagger he discarded. Screaming like a mad man, I charge at him, blade raised. At the last moment, he steps out of my way and leaves me heading straight for the wall. I leap, run along the brick—the entire length of the wall—then, pushing off, flip in the air and land like a cat.

“Whoa!” I laugh with shock. “What the hell?”

“Good. More!”

I run at him, dagger raised, but at the last second, jump and climb him like I did the wall. Wrapping my legs around his neck, I grab fists of his hair and spin, purposely toppling over to take him down with me. We crash onto the springy wooden floor in a tangle of limbs, both laughing. But I still have the dagger in my hand, and I felt its blade slice his shoulder as we landed.

“Shit, shit. Flanagan. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Let me see.”

“I'm unharmed. You did well.”

Somehow, I'm underneath him. That wasn't the plan. Panting from exertion, I push his chest up to check his skin. I expect to see a red line across the side of his neck, but it's clear.

“I got you. I know I did. I felt it.”

His lip curves. “There is no injury.”

“What the hell are you made of, Flanagan? Kevlar?”

“A steel blade cannot cut me.”

I check his eyes for what must be a windup, but he's wearing his serious face. “So you really are made of metal, then?”

He smiles—that resigned smile I saw at breakfast. “Silver is the only metal that can break my skin.”

“Really, that's—that's incredible. You must...”

Flanagan's furnace-like heat, his immense power, and that rain-washed-forest scent are storming my senses, sucking the breath from me. Tingling Flame causes pleasure to ripple between us at every point of contact. I bury a moan as my cock swells rock hard against his thigh.

Fuck.

I swallow and slap his upper arm. "Okay, well, let's get on. I need to kick your butt, remember?"

He lowers closer, caging me with his arms, and shifts to give me more pressure, watching my reaction as his firmness meets mine. My hips jerk up in response, and that moan escapes my throat.

"Flanagan."

I grip his biceps with every intention to push him off but only dig my fingers deeper, squirming to find friction. My hard cock meets his, and without thought, I push into it.

A tremor runs the length of his body. "Michael." The name leaves his mouth as a whisper. He searches my face, diamond fire lighting his eyes. "What is it you want? Hmm?"

Digging my nails into skin, I rock my hips against him. Pleasure shoots inwards with every thrust. A blinding, unmet hunger I've had for this muscled giant since we met rises like a geyser. The raging need destroys all thought.

"Fuck's sake, Flanagan. You. I want you." I want him naked and sweaty and panting. Screw the fact that he's a man. The fact that it's the Flame driving this electric need. I just want him.

He huffs and gives me a wry smile. "You already have me, Michael. You've had me since the moment I met you. Since 'Dude, I'm not into men.'"

I grin at the memory. "I'm not!"

He leans down to my ear. "You're into me," he says, pushing deeper against the hard evidence.

A bolt of wild need drives me to thrust back. I am into him. So into him I can't think straight.

He sweeps his lips across mine, sharing moisture, his beard prickling my skin. "Tell me what you need." In this position, his baritone vibrates my organs.

"Skin. I need skin."

His fingers deftly undo the buttons of my suede trousers, and I sigh with relief when he peels them open to free my straining cock. He tugs them

down and all the way off and throws them aside with my boots. Then he helps yank my shirt off.

I lie on the wooden floor naked and desperate, hips still seeking friction. A rumbling growl leaves Flanagan's throat when I take hold of my exposed shaft and pump a few strokes, unable to do otherwise. Need leaks from the slit and pools onto my stomach.

"Your trousers, Flanagan. Get those fuckers off."

He makes quick work of his fly and shoves the suede down his thighs. His giant fence pole of a cock bounces out and juts proudly. I stare at the thick, tall, rock-hard beast and lick my lips. I need to taste that. I want to feel its size filling my mouth.

Shit. Shouldn't these thoughts be freaking me out?

He lowers himself again, lining his hard shaft with mine. A palpable relief floods between us when smooth skin brushes smooth skin. We both groan. Flame sizzles through my groin into his.

"Michael," he breathes.

I fold my legs around him and lower my hands to grip his firm ass cheeks. Loose strands of blond hair fall across his shoulders. I raise my chin to chase the heat of his mouth.

"Need to come," I say against his lips.

He shifts his hand to cradle my head and, with his other hand on my lower back to force me closer against him, begins to thrust. His fat cock rubs me just the way I need. Delicious. I'm nowhere near satisfied.

"More." I pant. "I need more."

He growls and jerks deeper, hard and relentless, balls slapping balls until every thrust slams me into the floor. I'll have bruises when we're finished, but I don't give a shit. Pleasure explodes through my body with each pump of his hips. The heat, the pressure, the friction, hurtles me toward release.

"Is this enough?" His eyes stay riveted to mine. "Or can you take more?"

I tilt my chin and tease my tongue across his open lips. "Harder."

He takes my mouth with a sudden violence that thrusts his tongue to the back of my throat. His arms hold me so tight to him, hips hammering me into the floor, he steals my breath. I'm enveloped by heat and strength and

ferocity. Utterly dominated by animalistic power. It's obliterating. I fucking love it.

I hold on, fingers gripping flesh, thighs tight around his waist, my mouth full of his penetrating tongue, and let him thrust me to climax.

Heat builds to a scorching pressure, and when my moans become panting cries, he releases my mouth to watch my face.

"That's it. Let it go."

"Oh, fuck. Flanagan!"

Muscles clench. Fire rips through my cock. Flame surges and breaks across my skin in a storm of bliss.

Hot liquid shoots into the tight space between our shifting abs. He doesn't stop thrusting. He keeps going until I collapse beneath him like a spent rag. My dick's gonna to be a red raw sausage after this mega rub, but I don't fucking care.

He takes my mouth again, a thorough searching kiss. Sliding his lips over mine and exploring with his tongue as if he wants to own every corner. I return the intensity, sucking him deeper, our tongues clashing. The beard is novel—a soft tickle across my skin. I'd expect to be repulsed by man fur, by a man's lips smothering mine, but kissing Flanagan is hot as hell.

He finally stills, panting against my ear.

When I can breathe enough to speak, I laugh. "Man, that was mad... Wait. Did you come?"

"I'm fine." He presses a soft kiss to the side of my head.

"What? You're not fine." I try to push my hand down between us, intending to take his dick in hand to finish him, but he grasps my wrist and fastens it to the floor.

"I'm fine, Michael."

"Why?"

"You're in a mild Haze. And I'm... It's best this way."

What was he going to say? "I'm not Hazing. I'm totally with it." *Mostly.* I struggle against his grip. "Let me give you what you need."

He looks into my eyes with a soft, desperate heat I can't quite name. "What I need is for you to trust me. Don't run away. I promise that you're

safe here. With me. Your circumstances will change, improve.”

What does he mean? It’s not like I have a choice. I search the emphatic sincerity in his expression. “I’m your prisoner, Flanagan. Chained. With a collar. I couldn’t leave if I wanted to.” I don’t succeed in repressing my scowl.

“That’s not—” A loud knock at the door cuts him off.

“I’m sorry, Commander.” Seonu’s clipped, Japanese accent travels from the corridor with ease. “There’s an emergency. It needs your immediate attention.”

Flanagan sighs, clasping my face to press a soft kiss to my brow. “Thank you.”

He pulls a cloth from his pocket and wipes my stomach, then peels himself away to yank up his trousers. I scramble to my feet and pull on my discarded clothes.

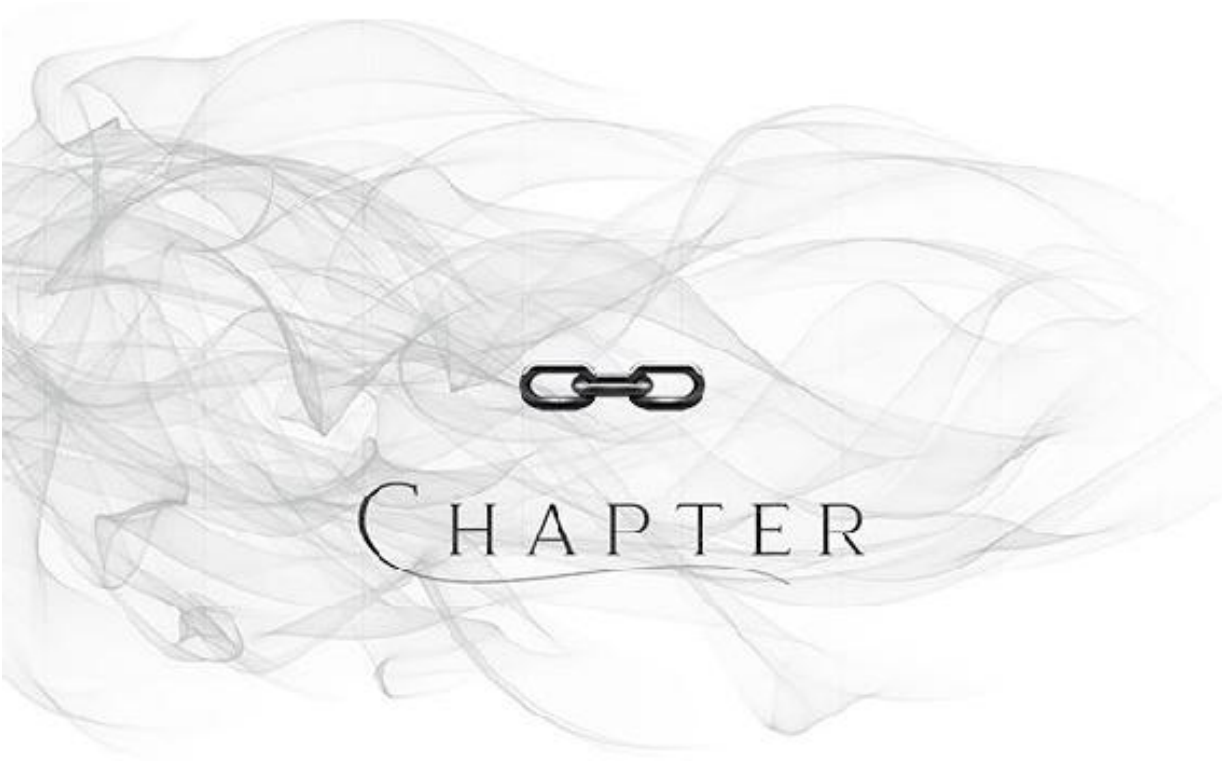
When I’m ready, he shouts, “Come in.”

I’m still fastening my fly as Seonu unlocks the door and steps into the room. Mason, Laasya, and a young soldier I don’t recognize follow behind her. Four sets of eyes take in the scenario. Their commander half-dressed, his hair ragged. My feet are bare, my shirt’s crumpled, and my hair must look like I’ve been sweeping the floor with it.

Seonu scowls. Mason pointedly ignores me. Laasya gives me a private smile with a quick brow raise. And the other soldier looks like he wants the ground to swallow him.

“What is it, Seonu,” Flanagan snaps. He remains as unruffled as ever.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, sir.” The captain’s sharp gaze flicks to me, accusation spearing me from across the room. “Prince Alexei is at the gate.”



21

My stomach lurches, heart booming against my ribs. Now that I'm not distracted by Viking pecs, I realize I can feel Alexei's pull on my blood—that magnetized sensation I felt at the steelworks.

Is he here for me?

When Flanagan glances at me, his eyes echo the same question.

Quinton steps into the room, silver cane in hand. "Captain Nelson asked me to report to you, Gabriel."

"Alexei's at the gate," Seonu tells the councilor.

Quinton's eyebrows rise to his hairline. "Aah. I see." He shares a look with Flanagan.

"How many?" Flanagan asks Seonu.

"Well, that's just it, sir. It's only Alexei and two witches—Alyona and Fentis. He just walked up to the gate with them and asked for parley."

Flanagan frowns. "Have our witches reported?"

"Yes, sir," Seonu says. "They're certain it's clear for miles. No vamps anywhere. No other Glamours. No witches."

Flanagan takes a long breath. He speaks to the young soldier I don't recognize. "Tell Captain Nelson I want everyone on high alert, covering positions as though an army stands at the gate. Get the students into the basement. I'm coming up now."

"Yes, sir." The soldier gives a sharp nod in salute and leaves.

Flanagan wipes his beard with a hand and sighs. "I have to let him in. The Blackriver Treaty states that Fae-born must be allowed access to parley unless aggressive intent is shown."

"That's crazy," I say, astounded. "You can't just let him in. It's obvious he's up to something." I ignore the excitement threatening to burst through my chest, every nerve ending singing with Alexei's closeness, even as my stomach cramps with fear.

"Parley with him outside the gate," Laasya offers.

Quinton shakes his head. "Under the treaty, Fae-born have the right to access with the company of two others. Alexei knows this. He has, of course, chosen his strongest witches."

"Commander, it's broad daylight," Mason says, arms folded. "The vamps are weak. There are five witches in Blackriver, including the councilor, fifty trained Guardians, and you're here. Even the prince has no chance against those odds. I say let the bastard in."

"After his attack on the labs," Seonu adds, "we have the right to incarcerate him, sir."

"Not when he is here under parley, my dear," Quinton corrects.

Seonu buries one of her scowls.

Flanagan stares at the ground, hands on hips. When he looks up, his eyes meet mine with an intensity that jolts me. "We'll meet him on the front field. Councilor Quinton, you're with me."

Quinton side-eyes me, his forehead briefly scrunching. I can't tell if his concern is for me or about me.

Flanagan grips the back of my neck and pulls me toward him. Without moving his eyes from mine, he speaks to Seonu. “Captain, take Michael to lockdown. Do not leave him at any point. Mason and Laasya, go with him.”

“Why am I going to lockdown?” I try to tug away from his hold, but his fingers tighten. The heat of his grip burns me like a brand.

“Michael, he will call you—to prove you are Anlu’kyr. To give him the proof he needs to attack Blackriver. Now that he’s woken your blood, his Call will be far stronger. Lockdown will help you.”

“I don’t need the cage. I’ll fight it.” But even as I say that, the fear knots tighter. The tingle of Alexei’s presence already tugs at my willpower.

Flanagan’s expression hardens, but his tone remains quiet. “You knelt before him at the steelworks.”

His answer feels like a punch. I know he’s right. I just hate the cage. And I hate that I’m useless. I need to know I can fight the prince’s pull. I give a reluctant nod, and he draws me closer for what I know would have been a kiss to my forehead, but he stops himself and squeezes my shoulder instead. His throat bobs with a swallow.

“I think it wise if I go with Michael,” Quinton says. “I can help him with the Blood Call.”

Flanagan shakes his head. “Alexei brought Alyona. I need you with me. Take Michael now, please,” he says to Seonu. “And hurry.”

Outside the testing room, Flanagan strides up the stairs with Quinton. Seonu locks both sets of manacles to my limbs, but only strings a chain between my wrists. She leaves the collar with Mason. The two soldiers flank me as we march off in the opposite direction, Laasya taking up the rear.

As we traverse Blackriver’s matrix of corridors, heading toward the Old Keep, we pass soldiers running in every direction. Guardians shout orders at each other and prepare weapons, their expressions a mix of fear and determination. Some of the soldiers corral groups of frightened-looking students toward safety.

Mason mutters to Seonu, “The prince turns up at Blackriver gate for the first time ever, and I’m left babysitting his half breed.”

“Michael’s blood isn’t his fault, Mason,” Laasya argues. “It’s our job to protect him.”

“If it’s Michael the prince wants,” Seonu says in her dry tone, “then out of principle alone, I’m happy to make sure he doesn’t take him.”

I want to punch Mason in the face, but I can’t even join the discussion. My mind churns with another concern.

Alexei’s closeness.

The vampire prince has stepped inside the walls. I know because the proximity burns like an alarm through my veins. My heart battles between relief and terror. The confusion robs me of breath. He hasn’t even called me, and I already bristle with the urge to go to him. A warning crawls across my scalp. An ominous sense of dread trickles through my gut, sucking it into my boots. He’s up to something, and whatever it is, I’m at the center of his schemes.

“Guys,” I say. “We need to hurry.” The two soldiers check my face with surprise, but I push on ahead. “Is the Keep this way?”

“Michael?” Laasya asks, wariness edging her tone.

“Get me to the cage.” I break into a run. They have no choice but to follow.

Through the next set of doors, rough-hewn stone replaces painted walls, and I know I’ve reached the Keep. I swallow the stairs three at a time.

“Channeler, stay in line,” Seonu orders, rushing to keep up.

I charge on ahead, climbing six flights as if I’m flying. I only pause to assess my direction. Relief fills my chest when I recognize the double oak doors at the next landing. I never thought I’d be glad to see those again.

Michael. Velvet seduction flows into my mind like a warm breeze. The Flame burns through my limbs in response. An image of Alexei’s oil-black eyes swallows my mind.

Oh shit. “Seonu. Cage. Now!”

With an echo of scraping metal, Mason draws his sword. Seonu frees a jangle of keys from her belt and runs to the door.

“Michael, is he calling you?” Laasya asks.

Precious one.

An urge for Alexei crashes through me in a wave of molten need. Oh, God. I grasp at the stone wall. My knees buckle. Flanagan was right; this is stronger. Way stronger.

“Laasya,” I say, gasping for breath. “Don’t let me go to him. He’s planning something.”

Laasya dashes to hold the door open. “Quickly, Captain.”

The two soldiers grab an arm each and drag me to my feet, then half carry, half march me through the double doors. In the center of the room stands the cage, its shiny silver bars glinting in the midday sunlight. My muscles clench, but all I see is safety.

I know I won’t make it.

I am here for you, my love. Come to me.

I spring away from the soldiers’ hold as if injected by a sudden shot of adrenaline.

“I need to go to him,” I hear myself say.

“Oh, no.” Laasya points to the door. “Hurry. Lock it.”

Seonu fumbles with her bunch of keys to find the right one.

Mason raises the tip of his sword to my neck and grasps my elbow. “We can’t let you do that, half breed.”

I wrap the blade with the chains on my manacles, yank the sword from his hand, and sidekick. My boot lifts Mason’s feet from the ground, slams him down on his back, and sends him skidding across the stone. His shocked expression is priceless, but I’m not able to enjoy it.

I’ve got to get to my prince.

I stride back to the doors as the sword clatters to the floor. Seonu pushes a key in the lock. Before she can turn it, I grab her by the neck of her hard vest and throw her aside. She stumbles but recovers to plant her foot in my stomach. As I fold with a groan, she lands a hefty jab to my temple.

Pain bursts through my eye socket. My head jerks sideways, but it’s not enough to stop me. I kick into her exposed side.

She cries out as her body thumps against the door, face twisting with pain.

I grasp the door handle.

“I’m sorry, Michael,” a gentle voice says.

The force of Laasya’s blow hurls me through the air and slams my back into the far wall. It feels like a giant fist squashing my insides against the sandstone. A strangled noise leaves my throat as I flail at my chest to break the invisible pressure.

Laasya walks forward, hands at her sides. Pity furrows her brow.

While I dangle, breathless, from the wall, Mason recovers his sword, and Seonu pulls her knives. Both sets of blue eyes pin me with furious intent.

“Keep him there,” Seonu orders.

“I knew this would happen,” Mason spits. “Fucking vampires.”

Laasya’s big brown eyes plead with me. “Please, fight the prince’s call, Michael. I know you can.”

Her words trickle through the smothering blanket of Alexei’s will and light a tiny moment of resistance. I push against the seductive embrace overwhelming my heart. I want to fight him; his influence scares the shit out of me. But it feels different this time. It comes with more than the all-encompassing pull. A blood-deep knowledge lights my veins that my family stands at the gate, waiting for me. It’s not that I can’t fight him. It’s that I don’t want to.

I wait for you, my love.

My face contorts. I shake with agony as the Call meets the strength of Laasya’s hold. The Flame I absorbed in the test room seethes like a pressure cooker ready to burst. Its hot presence pulses through my veins in response to my need.

And a deeply buried urge, twined like a seed at the base of my abdomen, nudges for release.

Laasya’s brown eyes widen. “Don’t, Michael.” She raises her hands, palms out, doubling the pressure crushing me to the wall. My limbs flatten against the stone. I’m panting gulps of air to avoid asphyxiation.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp.

Power explodes from my center and pulses out like a bomb blast. Silver-white Flame rips across the room. Laasya and the two soldiers speed backward through the air as though struck by a hurricane. All three crash

against the far wall. I hear the crack of a head hitting stone. Weapons smash to the ground.

As I thud to the floor, sucking in breath, I'm hit by an overwhelming exhaustion and a sudden emptiness. But also clarity.

“Laasya.”

I stumble to my feet and stagger over to her. She's unconscious, a tangled heap of brown limbs. Please be okay. I kneel and stroke back her mess of hair. My fingers meet wet warmth. No. God no. But she's breathing. A vein pulses at the side of her neck. I gently shift her thin frame into a recovery position.

You must come now, Michael.

This time, his words bite like an order. With a surge of renewed energy, I snatch the keys from Seonu's unconscious form and unlock all four manacles. Without looking back, I rush from the room, fully consumed by only one need. To be with my prince.



22

I reach the front of the mansion with its wide lawns and gravel driveway.

Blackriver's boundary wall towers over the few trees that line the garden edge. Desperate need crawls through my blood, edging me forward, but leather-clad Guardian soldiers are out in force, scattered across the grounds like chess pieces. Archers line the roof, bows aimed at the three dark figures standing on the grass. I pause at the corner of the building, muscles tight, to judge the obstacle course of armed men blocking my way.

In the distance, Flanagan stands with Zahir and Quinton on the wide stone steps leading to the mansion's main doors. Three witches in brown huddle in a circle on the terrace behind them, holding hands, heads bowed.

On the driveway, at least sixty feet distance from the steps, the boundary wall looming behind him, stands Prince Alexei, his erect but nonchalant posture suggesting indifference to the weapons that surround him on all sides. He cuts the same stunning figure as he did at the steelworks—the

black hair falling into dark eyes, the moon-pale skin, the elegant three-piece suit. Two cloaked figures in black flank his tall form, their faces shadowed by low cowls. But where are his wings?

The parley is well underway. I catch the clipped tones of Flanagan's deep voice and the answering velvet of Alexei's words, but my need to reach the prince distracts me from what they're saying.

I dart along the wall of the building, using the front columns as a cover, hoping to pass by the Guardians unseen before cutting across to Alexei. Not a great plan, but options are limited.

I almost make it to the steps.

"Is that the Wielder from the Keep?" a male voice shouts.

Crap. A group of Guardian soldiers draw weapons and converge on me. Blades and sour faces surround me in the blink of an eye. I bank on the fact that they won't harm a prisoner without Flanagan's permission and duck beneath the swords to charge their legs. Shoving my shoulder into their hips, I topple two of them. Then, leaving a mess of leather and limbs, I scramble to a run and bolt across the grass.

"For fuck's sake, grab the lad," a soldier bellows.

Silence descends as the commotion draws everyone's attention. Fifty pairs of eyes watch as three burly soldiers tackle me to the ground. My chest thuds the hard earth, punching breath from my lungs. Fiery pain scours across my cheek as soil scrapes my face. The men must be Shifters because even with my extra strength, I struggle to push them off. Doesn't stop me from trying.

"Keep him down. Keep him down," someone orders.

One of them sits on my back. Another lies across my legs.

"Get the fuck off me."

Be still, precious one. You have done well.

I stop my struggle, slumping flat while I draw in much-needed air.

"If you harm my own," the prince says out loud, "you declare war, Lycan." He doesn't seem to shout, and yet his warning echoes across the field.

"He is not your own, Alexei," Flanagan answers with a growl.

“So you say. And yet as you see, Michael rushes to be with his prince. He follows his true nature. He is Anlu’kyr.” A few gasps rise from the crowd of soldiers. Of course it’s news they have a part vamp in their midst.

I struggle to rise again, but the guy on my back pushes me to the grass.

“Michael has human heritage and the right to decide what he wants without your influence.” Flanagan must give some signal because I’m manhandled to my feet by two soldiers and half dragged toward the steps.

As I catch Alexei’s dark eyes across the lawn, recognition hits my chest like a starburst. Deeper than the memory of meeting him at the steelworks. It’s like I know the prince in my blood. In my bones. His ethereal beauty is somehow burned into my soul. I struggle against the soldiers’ hold, but with a downward flick of his hand, Alexei stills me.

Be ready.

The soldiers march me across the grass toward Flanagan. Quinton stands next to him, stock-still, leaning on his silver cane with both hands and staring at the witch on Alexei’s left. Fiery orange eyes pin Quinton from beneath the cowl. It’s Alyona. The vampire witch. A smile curves her pouty lips as she battles silently with the councilor. I may want my prince, but I have no desire to go near her.

On the other side of Alexei stands a male. I catch yellow eyes and thin lips from under his hood. Another vampire. The circle of witches on the terrace holds his attention.

When I reach Flanagan, a stony mask has replaced the humor of the training room. He inspects me from head to toe, I assume, for injury.

“Are you well, Michael?”

I look him in the eyes. “Let me go.”

He sighs. “Laasya?”

“She’s alive. So are the soldiers. I need to go to him, Flanagan.” I sound desperate, even to my ears.

He steps forward and slips his hand around to the back of my neck. I try to tilt away but can’t get far enough with his two Guardians holding me. Hot Flame swirls along my spine to reach his touch.

“Come back to me,” he whispers.

The terrible pull on my blood falls away. A wash of fear replaces raging need. I blink as I'm left with a zinging sense of the prince's closeness, but no urge to run to him. I look up into eyes like glinting diamonds.

"He's planning something," I say. "I can feel it."

Flanagan glances at the blue sky and the empty border wall, searching for the attack I'm referring to.

"I can't fight it," I say to him. "Don't let him take me." The plea cracks my voice.

"The royal Call is strong on you because you're young. He's taking advantage of that." Flanagan cups his hand to my face. "I promised I would protect you, Michael."

"You deny the boy his people and compel him against his prince." Of course Alexei can hear the conversation, even though we're speaking softly.

"Release him from the Blood Call, Alexei," Flanagan roars.

"The Blood Call is natural to our kind. Releasing him will not change what he is. He belongs with his own, and I am here to take him home." The prince walks forward a few steps, his witches following, and the air rips with the sound of fifty steel swords leaving their scabbards. Major Zahir, standing behind Flanagan on the steps, raises a hand for calm.

Flanagan looks back down at me. "I need to release you while I deal with Alexei. When I remove my hand, the Blood Call will return."

I shake my head. "It's too strong."

Flanagan grips my neck. "I will not let him take you. Okay?"

I tense my jaw and nod.

Even before he steps back, the force of Alexei's will hits me like a truck. Need roars through my body. I jerk toward him. When the soldiers try to stop me, I yank my arms from their grip and kick out. My heel meets a knee with the crack of bone. Fist thuds against jaw as I take down the other soldier with one punch.

Flanagan reaches to grab me. "Michael."

I leap from his grasp and bolt across the grass. More Guardians jump forward to stop me, but I easily dodge their hands.

When I reach my prince and fall to my knees, the beatific smile he grants me makes all my effort worth it. I lean my forehead into his stomach and grasp his suit on either side as a flood of relief robs me of strength. My panting breaths suck in the rich scent of figs and chocolate. The smell goes straight to my cock, already swelling just being this close to him.

He smells of home.

Alexei takes my head in gentle hands and raises my face. He strokes hair from my eyes. His glowing beauty blinds me. “You have done well, youngling. I am proud of you.”

“Let him go, Alexei.” Flanagan’s voice booms across the mansion garden. “You’re surrounded by fifty Guardians. You have no army, only two witches, and no hope of leaving here without my permission. Let Michael go, and I will let you leave.”

Alexei holds my head close to his groin, letting my face press against his firmness. I want to rip his trousers open and take him into my mouth.

“Mmm. You smell quite delicious, my beauty. What have you been up to?” He runs the soft pad of his thumb across my lips, and I open to let him inside. He presses deeper, letting me suck. Then he glances up. I’m sure I hear one of Flanagan’s growls. Alexei smiles.

When he looks down at me again, I’m swallowed by the dark embrace of his eyes.

I want to take you home, but I need your help, precious one. Return to the Lycan and wait for my instruction.

“What?” His request feels like a kick.

“Trust your prince, youngling,” he says softly.

I do as he asks and rise to walk away backward. As the distance grows, my heart yearns to rush back into his arms. He gives me a faint nod of encouragement. I feel every eye in the field as I move closer to the Guardians waiting on the steps.

When I reach the gravel path that spreads in a circle before the mansion’s entrance, I wait, still facing my prince.

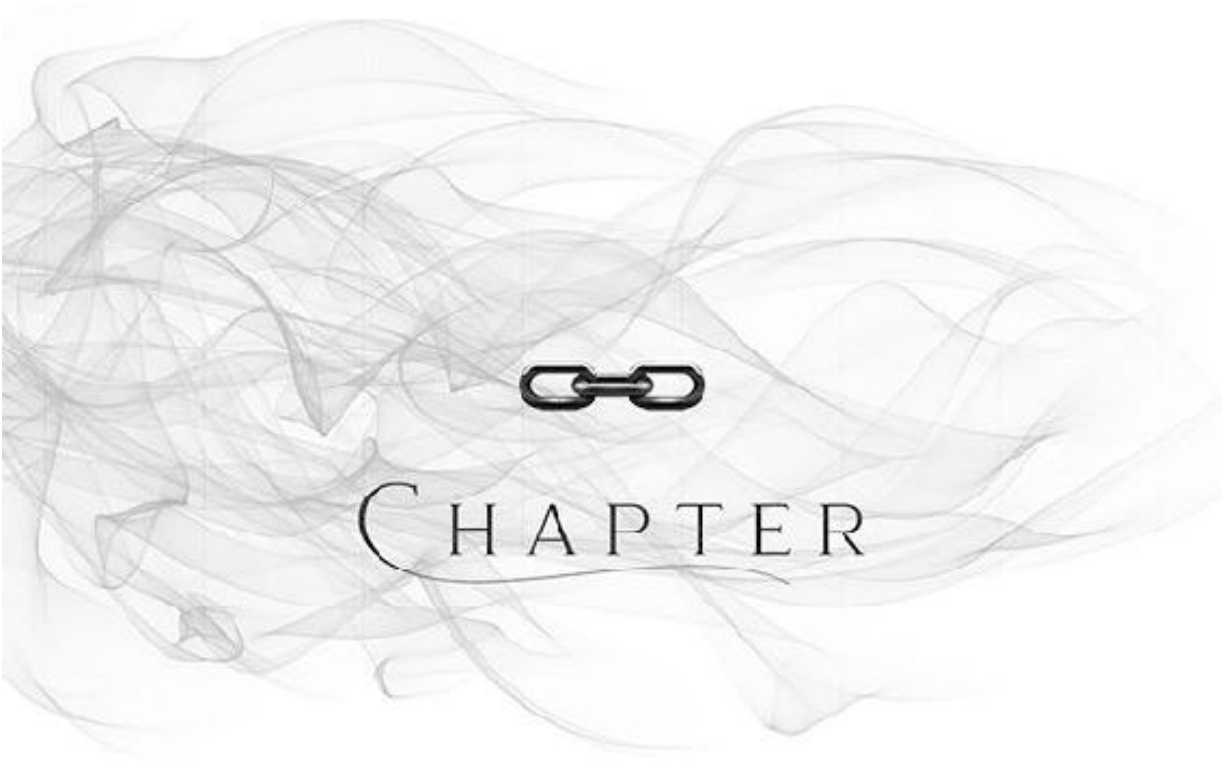
Alexei speaks to Flanagan. A dangerous smile curls his lips. “I require no army, Lycan. All the power I need stands before you.”

Michael, my love. Call the Flame—from my enemies only.

Without conscious choice, I raise my hands toward the soldiers circling the prince on both sides and close my eyes.

The words leave my mouth as a dry, mechanical order. “Flame, come to me. I’m calling you.”

Yes, *Whisperer*, says the Flame.



23

Screams slam my ears as my call strips Flame from every Channeler present. Multiple streams of silver light arc through the air to pummel my chest and back. Bodies convulse, dropping to the grass, and Blackriver's gardens transform into an electric light display. The energy hurtles into me like a river of churning fire that drives me to my knees. Veins cook, muscles fry, nerves melt and fray. My world warps into molten pain, and my back arches as a scream wrenches from my throat.

Something dark inside me wakes, cracks an eye, and prepares to yawn wide, a chasm opening to accept the power raging through my system.

No, Michael. Alexei's voice strikes me like a whip. *Take only their Flame.*

The chasm snaps shut, leaving me with an overload of scorching heat and blinding light. It's too much.

“Michael. Michael.” Flanagan’s forest scent envelops me as he kneels to grab my shoulders. “Call it off.”

His words come to me as a distant whisper. Agony overwhelms my senses. All I can see is a red haze.

“Michael. You’ll kill them. Call it off.”

“Can’t.” I strain the word out through a steel jaw.

He yanks me to my feet and encloses me in a bear hug, standing like an oak while my body shakes uncontrollably in his arms. The Flame streaking from the soldiers spears straight through me to meet his touch. His body sucks the energy from mine and blows open a river of Flame between us. My eyes roll as I drown in overwhelming pleasure-pain. As he absorbs the turbulent energy without effort, the torture subsides, and my thoughts clarify.

His worried face emerges from a red fog.

“I’m sorry,” I croak.

He holds my head against his as I grasp his arms, my nails digging into his skin. His deep voice resonates through my ear. “This is too much. It’s going to kill you, Michael. You have to stop it.”

He has no idea how Alexei’s Call supplants my will. Denying the prince’s order feels like denying my cells oxygen.

“Too strong,” I manage.

He growls with frustration. “I can’t compel you with this amount of Flame flooding through. Fight him for me. I know you can. I know how strong you are.”

Flanagan twists to look at Alexei, then back to me. Fury wars with fear across his features. I feel his urge to lunge across the grass and strangle the vampire, but if he leaves me, I’ll be consumed. He folds me into a tighter embrace.

The prince has his hands behind his back, head tilted as he watches us, a sly smile dressing a face lit by victory. He seems aloof from the sea of agonized soldiers writhing across the lawns around him, disinterested in the turmoil. His attention is fixed solely on me and Flanagan.

The witches beside him stand with their arms out, faces contorted with concentration. Unnatural winds whip their cloaks into billowing wings. When I glance behind me, two brown-clad witches and Quinton are the only people still conscious. Even Zahir rolls across the steps, clutching his chest as my body strips him of Flame.

The councilor remains on the steps, arms out, legs apart, surrounded by an iridescent force field. But his hair lies in damp clumps across his face. Rivulets of sweat drip from his chin. His body trembles with whatever internal strain he's under.

Bodies arch and twist on the grass around me, shuddering as my power sucks Flame from them. The howling screams saw across my nerves like jagged knives.

What am I doing? I'm going to kill every Channeler here. And for what? The prince may give me a weird *home* feeling, but he's just another cage.

A clear image of the test room comes to mind, my body flaming as Flanagan holds my head in his hands. I remember the strange clarity and freedom igniting gave me. I'm not sure how setting myself on fire is going to help, but instinct tells me that's what I should do.

While Flanagan holds me upright, I fix my gaze on Alexei's pale features and imagine Flame consuming me.

I light with an instant gust.

Flames lick over my skin and hair. Pain flips into pleasure. The scorching fire transforms into swirling bliss, and my mind snaps to a sharp focus. Alexei's Call pulses through my heart, but more of a distant invitation than demand.

Flanagan checks my face. He's unaffected by the silver fire pouring across his body. "Michael?"

I draw in a deep, bone-shuddering breath and nod. "I think I've got it."

You must continue, Michael. The prince's order lashes my mind.

No. Fuck no. I'll kill them. I'm surprised when I see the vampire smile at my resistance. He looks more pleased than upset.

"Stop. Just fucking stop," I yell at the Flame.

All the arcs of light snap back to their owners. A sudden silence blankets the field.

Flanagan releases me from his tight embrace to check the men on the ground beside us. My knees nearly buckle with relief when I hear them groan. I haven't murdered a field full of people, then?

Spreading my feet for better support, I raise my hands to the two witches next to Alexei, still locked in their private battle with Quinton. I have no idea what I'm doing, but this seemed to work the first time.

"Flame, I call you."

Yes, Whisperer. The soft female voice caresses my mind like a sigh.

New streams of light leap from the cloaked figures of Alexei's witches and race toward me. I catch terror widening Alyona's eyes before the light hits my chest. This time the energy simply feeds the fire. I stand inside a raging inferno. Silver-white flames engulf me and spill over the ground. Though the vampires' wails ricochet across the field, I'm only aware of bliss and a giddy sense of power. It's wonderful. Like I own the world.

A smile curves Alexei's pouty lips as he watches me. His black eyes shine with pride, as if his favorite toy has outstripped his expectations. He doesn't seem the least bit concerned about his witches contorting at his feet.

I check on Quinton. Freed from his battle, he's collapsed to his knees, panting for air, a grimace fixed to his features. He looks like he's just done twenty rounds in a boxing ring.

Flanagan turns his furious gaze toward Alexei. His fingers sprout foot-long, nasty-looking claws. The guttural roar that rips from his chest vibrates through my feet.

A mighty crack resounds across the field as, in a rush of curling Flame, Alexei's wings appear. Seven feet of clawed dominance spills its shadow across the grass. On the first downward stroke, wind gusts past me, whipping my shirt and nearly toppling my stance.

Flanagan lunges.

Alexei rises unnaturally fast. He tucks in his legs to clear the Lycan's reach. Flanagan's claws shred his black trousers and crimson sprays from ripped skin, but though Flanagan jumps higher than I thought possible, he

misses grabbing the vampire's foot by a hairbreadth. Alexei hisses from the air, fangs exposed, black eyes flaming gold. Flanagan leaps again, but Alexei sweeps away. Far more agile than he should be with seven-foot wings.

We're leaving, Michael.

"What?" Silver fire still engulfs me. I'm standing with legs apart and arms raised in a heady river of power and ecstasy that I never want to end.

Alexei rises higher, his mighty strokes taking him to the far side of Blackriver grounds. His sleek beauty transfixes me as he curves in a wide arc and swoops low. He travels toward me like a bullet, his broad shadow racing over grass and prostrate soldiers.

"Michael!" Flanagan leaps in my direction, but Alyona shoots out a hand, and even as she writhes, grasps his ankle.

"Run, Michael!" Quinton shouts from my other side.

The streaking light plunging through my chest has me frozen. I'm unable to jump from the path of the creature heading my way.

"Stop!" I order the Flame. But it's too late.

Hold tight, precious one, Alexei says.

He strikes with the force of a descending raptor, circles my waist, and sweeps me into the air. Breath explodes from my chest as the ground drops away beneath me. I fling my arms around his neck.

Holy crapping fuck balls.

Hold on to me.

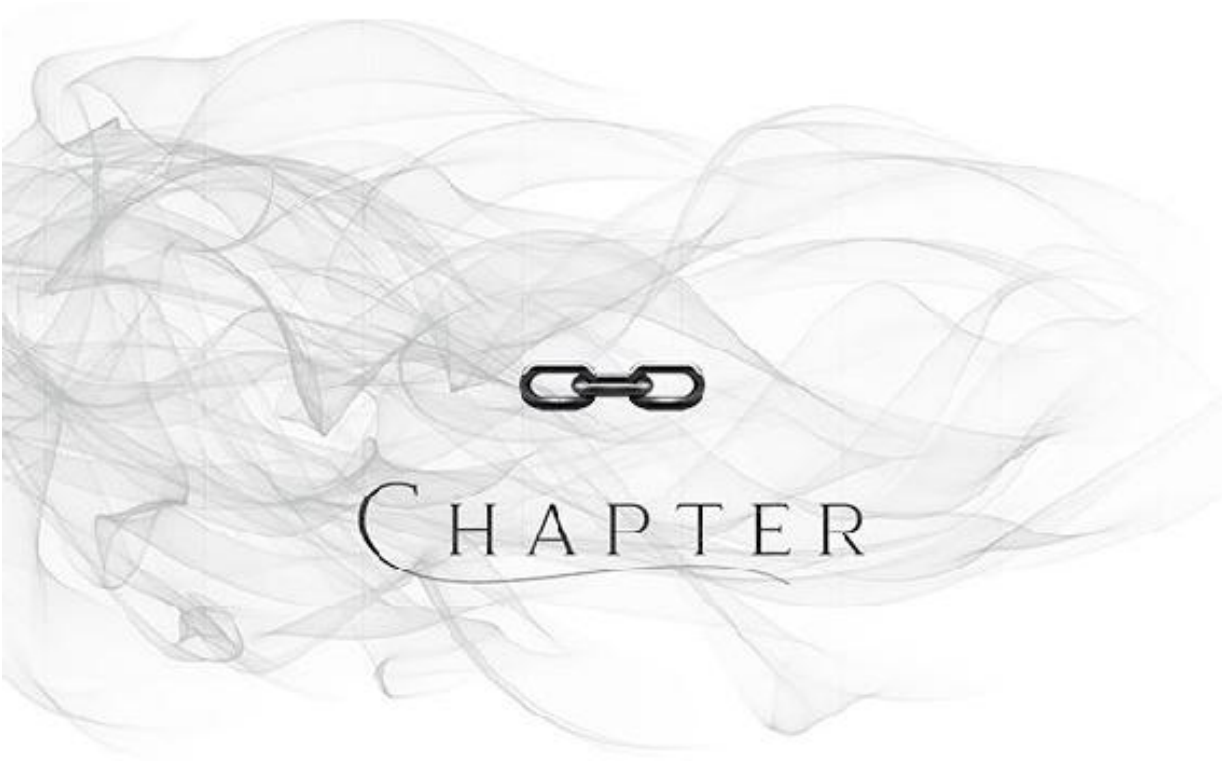
I haven't got a choice. I throw my legs around his hips and cling to him, my thighs solid with strain, knuckles cracking. Cold air whips hair in my face as he takes us upward with alarming speed.

"Michael." Flanagan's cry from beneath sounds bereft. He's free from Alyona, but we're far too high for his reach.

My heart clenches as the tall figure on the grass shrinks to toy size. The wind sucks at my body. I hold on with everything I've got, burying my head in Alexei's neck. I'm enveloped in his rich, chocolate-wine scent. Despite the shock and fury surging through my chest, I can't help the surge of relief. Home.

You are safe now, my love.

Yeah. I don't think so.



24

Alexei rockets us into the blue sky in a spinning blast of cold air and power. Wind roars past my ears, thrashing my hair and shirt. Cloud-kissed sky wheels past below instead of above; green fields shoot by overhead. By the time he opens the full expanse of his wings and banks to level out, I'm dizzy and disorientated and practically strangling him in my effort to hold on.

His arm bracing my waist feels safe as a steel cable, but we rise high enough for clouds to wisp against the edges of his downward strokes. It's a long way to fall, and it's bloody terrifying.

His sultry chuckle tickles my ear. "I have you."

"Fucking show-off," I shout into his neck.

He holds my head to his and caresses my face with his silken cheek, then pulls in a breath from my skin. The gesture seems strangely cat-like. "How

satisfying to have you in my arms at last. It pains me to be far from you, my love.”

The thrill that zings through my chest from his words feels traitorous. I tense my neck to prevent an instinctive urge to lean into his warmth. My cock hardens against his firm heat. It feels as if these responses belong to someone else.

“I could have killed those soldiers,” I say, trying to keep hold of my anger.

He *tsks*. “Did they not deserve to suffer? You were attacked while in chains? Touched by men who should have protected you?” He tucks my head back into his neck. “Those men will die for touching what is mine.”

“Look, thanks for your help in the cage, Alexei, but I’m not yours. I’m not anybody’s.” I try pulling back to scowl at him, but he holds me against his neck.

“You are mine, my love. You know this.”

I ignore the flush of pleasure his words draw from me. His closeness, his warmth, his delicious smell melt away resistance. Somehow that feels more dangerous than chains. I dig deep to retrieve my fury. He used me like a pawn.

“You’ve left your witches back there. Are they just throwaway weapons too?”

“They are not in danger. And neither were you.”

“That Flame could have burned me out.”

“I would never risk your life. You are far too precious.”

“Yeah, a precious toy.”

I twist my head around to see where we’re going. A forest canopy passes beneath. I recognize the twisted black trees of the Border Woods. Rolling green hills and craggy mountains speed toward us.

Now that we’re gliding more than racing, it’s cool to be this high above the world, everything distant and pocket-sized. The sky opens around us like endless freedom. A baby-blue forever. I could get used to flying, certainly wouldn’t say no to a set of wings.

I recognize nothing on the ground up ahead. Especially those mountains.

“Where’re we going?”

“The Faelands. I will soon take you home, but we have a task to accomplish first.”

“Task?”

“See below. He follows like the wind.”

I peer along the line of a pale road that disappears into the distance behind us. Beyond a cluster of multicolored roofs and chimneys nestled within the trees rises the sandstone edifice of Blackriver mansion. It looks insignificant from this height—like a miniature model. At the gates of the road this side of the town, a billow of dust curls into the air, the trail of something speeding into the Faelands.

My heart thuds a beat. “Flanagan?”

“You have done well, my love. And in so short a time.”

Done well?

I lose my next question to a burst of expletives when Alexei makes a sudden arc downward. My stomach lurches into my throat as the ground rises like a promise of death. I squeeze his hips so tightly my thighs tingle with blood loss.

Another chuckle ghosts across my ear, deep and sexy.

“Jerk,” I growl.

Alexei levels out closer to the ground. The ugly tangle of trees surrounding the Faelands gives way to rich green forest. If I reached out, I could run my fingers through the leaves. I can’t see the distant puff of dust signaling Flanagan’s presence anymore, but I know he’s coming. The stubborn bastard won’t be willing to let Alexei win. Even if it puts his life at risk.

“He follows *you*, Michael.”

Did Alexei just read my mind? “What do you mean?”

“You are compatibles. A True Grounder and a Whisperer. He will follow you, and he will die to protect you.”

How does Alexei know I’m a Whisperer?

Wait. Was that a threat to Flanagan’s life? I lean back to scrutinize Alexei’s face. “What’re you going to do?”

His smile glints like a rapier. "Take advantage."

With a sudden swoop, we travel upward again, my breath catching as the canopy drops away. Behind me, the pale face of a cliffside races by as Alexei rises to its height. When we reach a wide rock shelf, he floats down and lands with featherlight grace.

The moment my feet hit the stone, I shove back from his hold, stumbling as I adjust to solid ground. "What are you planning, Alexei?"

The prince's wings crack and rustle as he folds them. "Shh, be still. I would prefer the Lycan to remain alive, and I have no wish to incur the wrath of the Goddess. But I cannot waste an opportunity."

Opportunity?

I peer into the distance, trying to glimpse rising dust. Maybe I can warn Flanagan before he arrives. Blackriver mansion sits like a pale dot at the edge of an emerald sea, but the dense woodland obscures my view of the road. Surely Flanagan can't see where we landed. Maybe he won't find us.

"Oh, he will find us." Alexei slips his hands into his pockets, a smug tone lacing his words.

Is there anybody who can't read my blasted mind?

"It will take him a while. Running a straight line is a challenge in the Faelands, but he will find us."

"How?"

His only answer is a mischievous wink, long black lashes brushing ivory skin. My groin tightens. Everything Alexei does seems to affect me that way. The fact that he's male doesn't seem to register. He looks so young he could be mistaken for an eighteen-year-old, yet those dark, unfathomable eyes look back at me across centuries. I force myself to turn away and take in my surroundings.

The rock shelf we've landed on towers above a dense canopy crowding the base of the cliff and extends wide enough to fit two or three houses. Far beyond the vast blanket of trees, more jagged mountains rise into the clouds. Apart from a distant white dome nestled in the crack of a valley, no buildings mar the rolling beauty. No roads or walls divide the land.

Birdsong fills the air in a deafening pitch. The scent of wildflower weaves amid earthy forest lushness. It's breathtaking.

But at the corner of my eye, everything shimmers and shifts. The canopy undulates in waves until I look at it directly. If I blink, the treeline fluctuates against the hills. Even the mountains seem to alter their shape, one second displaying a sharp edge, the next smoothly dropping into deep valleys.

I'm definitely not in Normalville anymore.

Then again, I haven't been for some time.

The Flame whirls through my limbs, bursting along veins, flaring in my hands, as if celebrating its own presence in the land. A heady elation expands my chest, even as a new sense of being grounded fastens my legs to the earth. I feel strong. Electrified. Vibrant with life. I feel amazing.

Alexei stands beside me, his shoulder pressed to mine. His giant wings rustle behind us. He rests his hand on my lower back, sending a surprise bloom of warmth and safety through my abdomen. Without thought, I tuck my arm beneath the leathery skin of his wings to do the same. I'm still angry, but there is also that desire to be closer. To touch him. To smell his nearness.

Am I Hazing? I don't feel drunk.

"The Fae is a land of Flame," he explains with his soft, hypnotic voice. "And follows a different set of laws. It can cause nausea in those not accustomed to its ways. Humans unable to Channel risk insanity if they stray inside its borders. Even Channelers risk a permanent Haze if not careful." The prince slips his hand farther around to tug me closer and squeeze my waist. His body hums with power and warmth. "Our home, Dvamira Castle, rests in the in-between. Like Blackriver, the castle sits with a foot inside both worlds. You will love it there. One of its many gardens stretches far into the Faelands. A gift from the Fae Queen to her daughter."

Her daughter, the Queen of the vampires. Alexei's Fae mother. I explore his masculine but delicate features. I have no idea what fairies look like, but Alexei seems a balance between organic and ethereal. Between earth and sky. A scorching, undeniable presence yet otherworldly.

When I catch myself leaning closer to breathe in his rich scent, I yank my head away to scan the green horizon again. Deep relaxation has taken hold of my muscles, softening my shoulders, as if the stress of the last ten days is dropping away, seeping into the land to be returned as strength and warmth.

“What’s that?” I point to the white dome tucked into its distant valley. The building keeps blinking in the sunlight as though to catch my attention.

“Temple of the Flame. Protected by the Goddess herself. Its High Priestess, Elwyn, has been alive longer than me.” He examines me as he speaks, his gaze lingering on the curve of my neck. He roams my features with wonder, as if he can’t quite believe I’m real.

“Yeah, Flanagan told me you were ancient.” I’m trying for an insult, but I can’t tear my eyes from the delicate arch of his cheekbones. I study Alexei with the same bewildered awe with which he studies me. How can something so deadly be packaged in such smooth, porcelain-pale skin?

The light in Alexei’s black eyes glimmers. He leans closer. “And yet you think me beautiful.”

I snort, even though my eyes remain fixed to his full mouth. “That’s just a vampire trick. I bet you’re ugly as sin underneath that glamour.”

Alexei throws his head back with a delighted laugh. The tinkling, velvety sound curls through my groin and sucks my gaze to the line of his lithe neck. I want to bite along that arrogant jaw. Kiss those haughty lips. I want to do a lot more than kiss them. Damn it.

His smile curves with sultry invitation. “You may kiss me if you wish. There will soon be time for more.”

“Yeah. I’d rather kiss a piranha.”

One tiny line cracks the perfect spread of his brow. “A piranha? Hmm. Surely, a snake or monster would make the better insult?”

I roll my eyes. “It was the first thing that came to mind.”

“A toothy, flesh-eating fish?”

“Yeah, exactly. Perfect.”

He quietly laughs again—a crystal current of delight that tickles my dick. “A toothy fish you would dearly like to kiss. Hmm?”

Somehow, we're facing each other. I don't recall turning. Our mouths are so close his breath warms my lips. I slip my hands around his waist to push his pelvis into mine. A groan rumbles through my throat when his hardness presses against my own. I want him so badly my hands tremble. The pulse of his presence beats with the pump of my own heart.

Resting his hands on my hips, he leans his forehead against mine, and I breathe him in. His warmth, his rich scent, his thrumming force. He brushes my lips with his, and I claim that luscious pout, sinking my tongue into his silken warmth. He tastes as succulent as he smells, like chocolate wine. I push my tongue farther to explore his sinful mouth. He receives my passion with slow, sensual grace, opening to allow my advances, drawing me deeper.

And I fall. Spinning.

Into a dark sky. Into rich midnight pastures. Into a sensuous world of pure need. Our fingers grip clothing to tug each other closer. Our hips undulate, thrusting to match the rhythm of tongues desperate for deeper entry. A sound not dissimilar to a purr emanates from Alexei's chest. The Flame surges through me, meeting his power with a clash of bliss and light, dancing between us. Heat and ecstasy exchange through lips and hands and minds.

What's happening?

I jerk away and meet black night, eyes like a dark abyss burning with triumph. And something else, something that shocks me. I would describe it as a fierce tenderness, but it's more than that. A deep, fervent love—hot and endless. It echoes an earth-deep memory in my own soul. A recognition.

Panic steals my breath. I lean back. "What is this?"

"Destiny, Michael."

"I don't believe in that crap. You're doing something to me. Compelling me. I'm Hazing."

"Shhh." He strokes hair from my eyes. "I cannot compel you. The Call is your natural birthright. And you are not falling into a Haze. You are falling into me." Alexei moves his mouth to my ear. "Submit to me, beloved. Everything you need is in me."

Master. The word rises from my heart like a whisper. I shake my head. Shove it away. Shit. I've just let him overwhelm me. I step back but have to hold his arms to steady my sinking knees.

"I'll never say yes to that. Never. I'm nobody's fucking slave."

He tuts, his voice deepening. "Your bloodline must have a master, Mikhail. And though you are one of us, all Channelers must belong to a master until first blood. Even you, youngling."

First blood? That sounds bad. Very bad. "Is it not enough you already control me?"

"The Call is a temporary hold. You must give me full control."

"Why? Why the fuck would I do that?"

"Because of who you are. Because of what you are."

I step out of his hold. "I'm Michael Blakeley."

"Of course you are not Blakeley. You know who you are."

When I only stare blankly, he frowns. "You knew your name. Come." The Call tugs me to him like a magnet, and he cups the back of my head. When he peers into my eyes, a warmth spreads through my mind like a gentle kiss, pinpricks of light scattering across my vision. The line cutting his brow deepens. "Hmm. Someone has sliced your memory. Protecting you, maybe. Interesting."

My memory has been messed with? But that's impossible, I've only been at...Quinton. "What the hell did he take?"

Alexei gives a subtle shake of his head. "I will soon answer all your questions. Who you are. Your bloodline. Your capacity. I will teach you. But you *will* submit to me."

I try to pull away again, but he prevents me with a hand behind my neck. He uses the Call to draw my head to his shoulder, and my forehead sinks into the velvet skin of his neck without resistance. He strokes graceful fingers through my hair.

"Shhh. Be with your master."

God, I want so desperately to give in to him. My mouth waters at the thought of his rich blood on my tongue again. My body yearns for his powerful presence firing through my veins. I long to fall into his dark

embrace. Into this enveloping sense of home and familiarity. But I would be diving into a straitjacket. A gilded version of the Guardians' lockdown.

I yank my head from his hands and jump back. I've got to stop this now while I still have a chance. "I'll never drink your blood, Alexei. And I'll never submit to you. I'm not going with you."

Mikhail. His voice slides like liquid persuasion into my mind, and I feel my renewed resistance melt at the edges.

God, he's dangerous.

When he steps toward me, I ignite my hands. Burning Flame engulfs my fingers, licking along my wrist and forearm. I didn't even know I could do that so easily, but they lit with barely a thought. "Stay the fuck back, Alexei. I'm not your toy, your pet, or your weapon. I'm not going to your bloody castle." It kills me to say those words, like a rip through my heart, but this isn't what I want it to be. I want to find family; Alexei wants a slave. And judging by his words, he wants to turn me into a vampire.

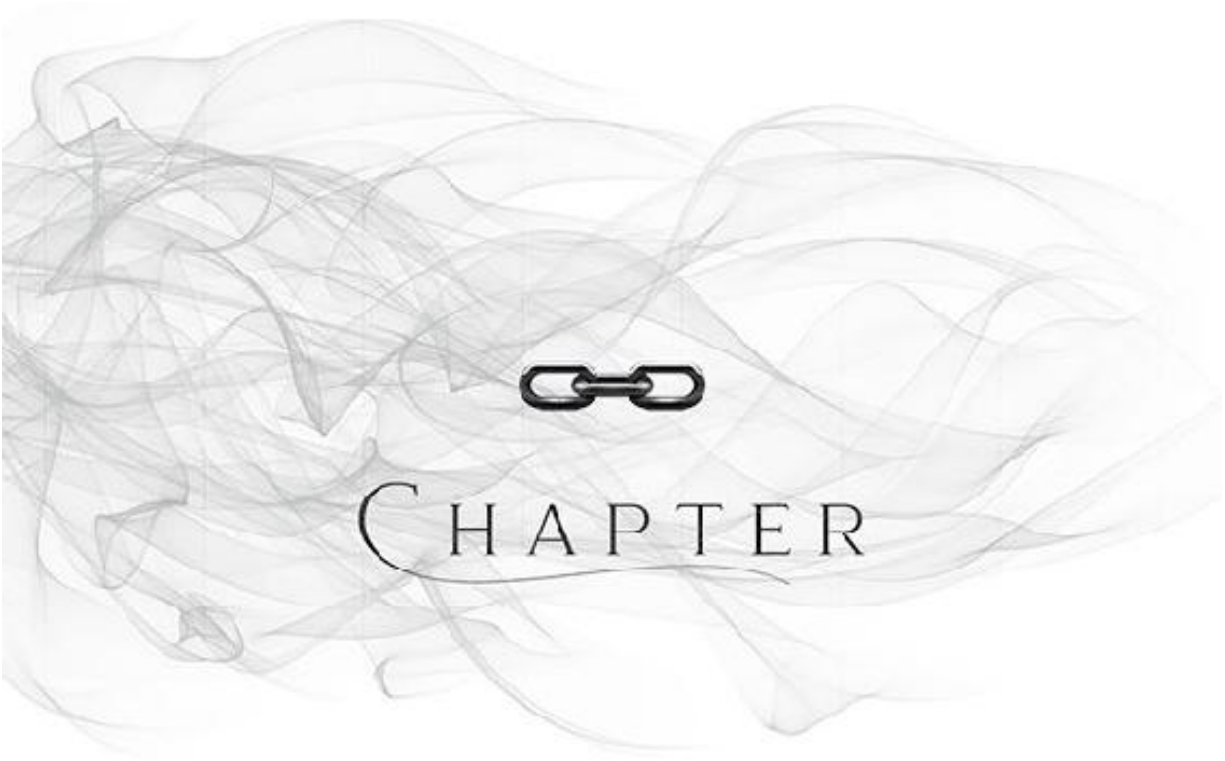
He smiles. Pride and affection glint warmth into oil-black eyes. "You cannot harm me with the Flame, my love. I am your prince and your master. You belong to me."

I'm pretty sure he's right that I can't harm him. Hurting Alexei would be like tearing my own flesh. Instead, I let the Flame swallow my whole body. Liquid fire flows down to my legs and over my shoulders, covering my chest and face, dancing into the air around me. Instant clarity hits my mind. The seductive pull of Alexei's presence falls away. The ground ripples around my feet, and the air dances at the corner of my eye. I hear the notes of a distant melody.

"Beautiful," Alexei says, slipping his hands back into his pockets as though enjoying a show.

The sound of stones skittering against rock interrupts the angry words about to leave my mouth. A cavern-deep growl echoes over the valley, vibrating the rock face.

The prince's mouth curves, eyes flashing with satisfied glee. "Ahh. The Lycan has finally found us."



25

The engulfing Flame evaporates as my heart leaps in my chest. Flanagan's here.

Though what rises over the cliff doesn't look like Flanagan—the stoic, tender, dominant arsehole I've come to respect. He's the same colossus of muscle with wild blond hair and eyes the color of diamond fire, but instead of a handsome face, this towering goliath wears a horror movie visage.

Crazy sharp fangs extend from an elongated jaw. Ears rise at the side of his head like black tufted horns. Foot-long claws fall at his sides from distorted fingers covered by dark fur. And those startling eyes now shine with cold, feral power.

The Guardian-issue suede trousers still cling to his lower half, but the hard leather vest is gone, revealing muscles that roll and ripple over an underlying force, as if encasing a creature clambering for escape.

Ice streaks down my spine, hairs prickling across my neck. Instinct hammers my body. *Monster. Run.* But when my eyes meet his, I find a desperate affection burning in the silver—worry and longing battle with white-hot fury. My heart gives a thump.

“Release him, Alexei.” Flanagan’s voice thunders past my ears, the cavernous growl extending each word.

“Wolfy seems a tad perturbed,” Alexei says to me. “Maybe you should step away.” He indicates the cliff wall.

I pause, caught between protecting my prince from the monster and making sure Alexei doesn’t harm Flanagan.

“Go, my love,” Alexei urges. “Stay well back.”

I reluctantly retreat to the wall side of the rock shelf. I’ve got enough smarts to know getting between these two will only end in pain, but it kills me to stand by while they go at each other.

I should use this opportunity to escape—get my arse far away while they’re both distracted—but my feet stay rooted to the rock. My nerves twist with worry for them both—my two captors. I must have finally lost it. When the hell did I get so caught up in this shit?

As I lean back against the cliff face, something catches the corner of my eye—a wisp of black—but when I check, there’s nothing there.

“The Whisperer is safer with me, Gabriel. He should be with his family.”

Flanagan’s roar vibrates through my chest and dislodges stones from the rock face behind me. “No one is safe with you.”

Alexei tuts and slowly shakes his head. “After all this time, you still blame me for your mistake.”

“Trusting you was my only mistake.”

“He ran from you, Gabriel. Your prison. Your strangling grasp. You value freedom and yet would clip a bird’s wings rather than risk its flight away from you.”

Is he talking about me? I get the impression he’s referring to someone else. But who, if not Flanagan’s daughters?

“You’re the one with slaves, vampire.” Flanagan’s fangs distort his speech into a growling snarl. “Michael will not be a pawn for your

schemes.”

A whipcrack sounds across the rock face as Alexei’s wings snap out to their full size. Arching over the entire width of the shelf, they cast an ominous shadow across the rock. “Then by all means, take him, Lycan.” He flicks his hands, and curling claws extend from his fingers. Not as long as Flanagan’s, but they glint at the tip with a shiny metal. It looks like silver.

With another rock-vibrating growl, Flanagan stalks forward, his sinister glare straight out of dark legends. A cold shiver passes through me.

Alexei greets Flanagan’s looming dominance with the same relaxed dignity with which he handles everything. A smile curves his lips.

With a snarl, Flanagan launches himself at his enemy. The clawed tip of Alexei’s wing nearly slices my face when his downward draft lifts him into the air. The two come together with a bone-breaking slam and rise high in a whirling confusion of wings and claws. They spin and hiss and growl, arms and legs tangled into a scrapping brawl of a fight, a whirlwind of fury and hate. I catch fangs and golden eyes, snapping canine jaws, and a wild spray of blond hair.

They crash to the ground, rock cracking beneath their fall. Alexei lands on top, his wings aloft as he strikes with his fangs at Flanagan’s neck, but the werewolf makes his own play for a bite, and their matching strength locks them into a stalemate.

Alexei hisses. “It’s your fault we lost him, Lycan.”

I don’t know who he’s talking about, but his words have the desired effect. Flanagan howls as though in pain and thrusts the vampire away from him.

“Now!” Alexei shouts.

Three cloaked figures materialize at the edges of the rock shelf, arms extended. Shimmering webs of light coalesce in the air on either side of the two fighters.

So I did see something earlier. Bloody witches.

Alexei gusts upward, but as the iridescent walls close in, Flanagan springs from the ground, wraps his fingers around the vampire’s ankle, and yanks him back down. Alexei hisses, wings flapping wildly as he attempts

to fly away. The glimmering web of light closes and shrinks, his wings beating against its walls. He shrieks with fury, but Flanagan isn't letting go. When the walls snap into place, forming a dome of rainbow light around them, the prince is caught by his own trap.

But so is Flanagan.

He told me he was protected by the Goddess from direct witchcraft. Obviously that's not enough if they get creative.

I scurry along the rock face toward the nearest cloaked figure. I've got to get Flanagan out of there.

I'm met by fiery orange eyes. Alyona. How did she get here from Blackriver so quickly?

Springing forward, I try for a punch. She dodges. I lunge again, but an invisible force pushes me back. Without thought, my hands ignite, Flame licking my wrists. Alyona flinches, then screeches at me, fangs bared.

"I will not be caught again, Whisperer." She raises a hand and points at my neck.

Instant pressure strangles the breath from my lungs, and I claw at a stinging-hot band cinching my throat. My skin burns, and my eyes bulge. Pain throbs through my head. It's like a hot metal wire wants to slice through my neck. My knees buckle. I fall against the rock face, unable to breathe. Black spots drift across my eyes.

"Harm him, and you will die, witch!" Alexei shouts, still grappling with Flanagan.

Alyona spits with outrage, but the pressure releases. The moment I'm free, I suck in air, lurch upward, and jab her in the throat, hard. Her eyes fly wide, a gurgle leaving her lips as she steps backward, grasping her neck. With a sidekick to her pelvis, I send her sailing over the cliff. She twists in the air and lands like a cat on an outcrop of rock. Where her cowl flaps back, the exposed skin crackles and smokes in the sunlight. She wails and tugs the hood to cover her face again.

So vamps do burn in the light, then? Good to know.

I leap at the next witch, fist a handful of hood, and yank. The cotton falls away, and he whips his head around to scowl at me, but his skin doesn't

burn in the light. He's human.

Bollocks.

A fiery sensation rips across my chest, and I cry out with the sting. It feels like it's *my* skin burning in the sun. Bloody witches. I'm about to strike a kick to his knee, but a distant boom pulls everyone's attention toward the edge of the forest.

A pillar of black smoke rises like a mushroom above Blackriver. A cold chill floods my veins. *No*.

Flanagan roars. He throws himself at the walls of his prison, hammering at the hard web of light, but it's useless. Alexei lies on his back behind him with a satisfied smile.

This was his plan all along. An attack on Blackriver. I was his Trojan horse, his blasted decoy. His precious weapon. I look back at the rising cloud of black smoke. Laasya's in there and injured. I've got to get Flanagan back to Blackriver. That means getting rid of these witches.

While the human witch remains distracted, I slam my fist into his face. He stumbles sideways, and the burn across my chest returns.

"Aaah, ya bastard!" I shout.

I strike at his knee with a heel, and he buckles. The heat on my chest releases, but he doesn't go down. I jab a double to his kidney. With a cry, he collapses, and the barrier around Flanagan shimmers but remains. I need to get to that other witch and knock the bugger out. Will calling the Flame affect witches if they're not vampires or Channelers?

"Michael," Flanagan shouts. "He's taking the students. They're defenseless."

"It is done, Gabriel," Alexei says. "Your precious Channelers are mine."

Flanagan's howl rips through my chest. He leaps on top of Alexei, who still lies on his back, and fastens the vampire to the rock. But the prince stays relaxed while the werewolf roars in his face. Alexei's neck lies exposed, but he makes no attempt to fight the wolf off. He only watches, waits.

What is he doing? Flanagan could rip his throat out. And for a moment it looks like that might happen. Saliva drips from Flanagan's teeth onto

Alexei's skin, the werewolf's tight features betraying some inner battle. He bellows in frustration, spittle spraying over Alexei's victory smile as his roar echoes across the valley.

"Michael," he growls. "Go back. Save as many as you can."

I step closer to the glittering dome. "I can get you out. We'll both go back."

Flanagan shakes his head. "They need you. You can call Flame from the Anlu'kyr."

I'm not sure they need me more than him or if I can make it back to the mansion in time to save anyone, but if I let Flanagan out, I let the prince out. Better to get away now. I slip past the witch who's back to concentrating on his force field.

"No!" the prince snaps. "You will stay, Michael."

His order whips my mind, the Call pulsing through my blood, but this time I know the feelings that come with it are a lie. The desire to be with a beloved, to go home, are only a seduction. Alexei doesn't care about me; his feelings are a show. I'm just his one-man arsenal.

I ignite. Silver-white fire engulfs me, and lucid freedom washes through my head. I'm not his. I'm not anybody's.

I've got to get back to Blackriver. He's stealing the students, and it's my fault. I weakened every soldier by calling their Flame, left them vulnerable, unable to defend all those young Channelers. If Alexei can fuck with my mind, what can he do to a teenager?

"No. No. Listen to me," Alexei's voice rises. "You risk your life if you go back."

"I'm going." How the hell I'll get down from this cliff or make it through the Faelands in the deepening twilight, I have no idea. But I'm going. I step closer to the edge of the rock shelf.

Alexei changes tactic. *Precious one. Come to me, my love.*

His velvet voice strokes my mind, my groin. I feel the warmth, the desperate need to go to the one I love, but the Flame somehow cushions the effect. I can look at the urgency and decide not to respond.

"Not this time, Alexei."

“Alyona,” he screams.

“Yes, Highness.” The vampire witch jumps with ease from her rock perch and lands a few yards away. She tugs her cowl low around her face, then raises both hands.

I feel an instant fiery itch throughout my body. A thousand hot ants crawl through my veins. My Flame cuts out. *Fuckfuckfuck*. I tug at my clothing and scramble to scratch every inch of my skin at once, but the itch goes bone-deep, and I almost tear flesh to get to the crawlies.

Alyona struts closer, pouty lips twisted by a sadistic smile, and the ants double.

I throw my hand out toward her. “Flame,” I scream. I don’t get to finish the call. The itch disappears as if never there, and I’m left on my knees, gasping.

Alyona backs away with narrowed eyes. “Don’t you dare.”

I give her a winner’s grin. The vampire witch is scared of a Whisperer. Another good thing to know. I jump up, light my Flame, and walk to the edge of the cliff.

“No. No!” Alexei, still pinned beneath his enemy, grips Flanagan’s arms and shakes him. “Gabriel, you must stop him. He cannot go back. They will hurt him. Kill him.”

Flanagan studies the vampire’s face. “What are you not telling me?”

The prince opens his mouth to speak but snaps his lips shut and growls in frustration.

“I would never let anyone hurt Michael. He’s safer with me. With the Guardians.” Flanagan looks up at me, his face normal again, the fangs receded. “Head southwest to the road. It will take you safely through the Border Woods. Everything around you will change, but you can use the sun as a guide. And, Michael.”

“Yeah?”

“Eat absolutely nothing from the forest.”

Southwest to the road. Eat nothing. Got it. I stand on the precipice and look down at what must be a hundred-foot drop. It’s a rugged wall of rock, not a sheer face. There’s a narrow shelf below this one. I’ll just have to

jump down to that and climb my way to the ground. Then somehow follow the evening sun—even now sliding behind the horizon—through a dense, magical forest. Insane, but it's better than staying here.

"You cannot escape him, Whisperer," Alyona says, keeping her distance. "You were his the moment you were born."

I ignore her. I feel the belonging, but I know it's just freaky DNA. As long as I don't drink any vamp blood, I'll belong to me. Still human, Blakeley.

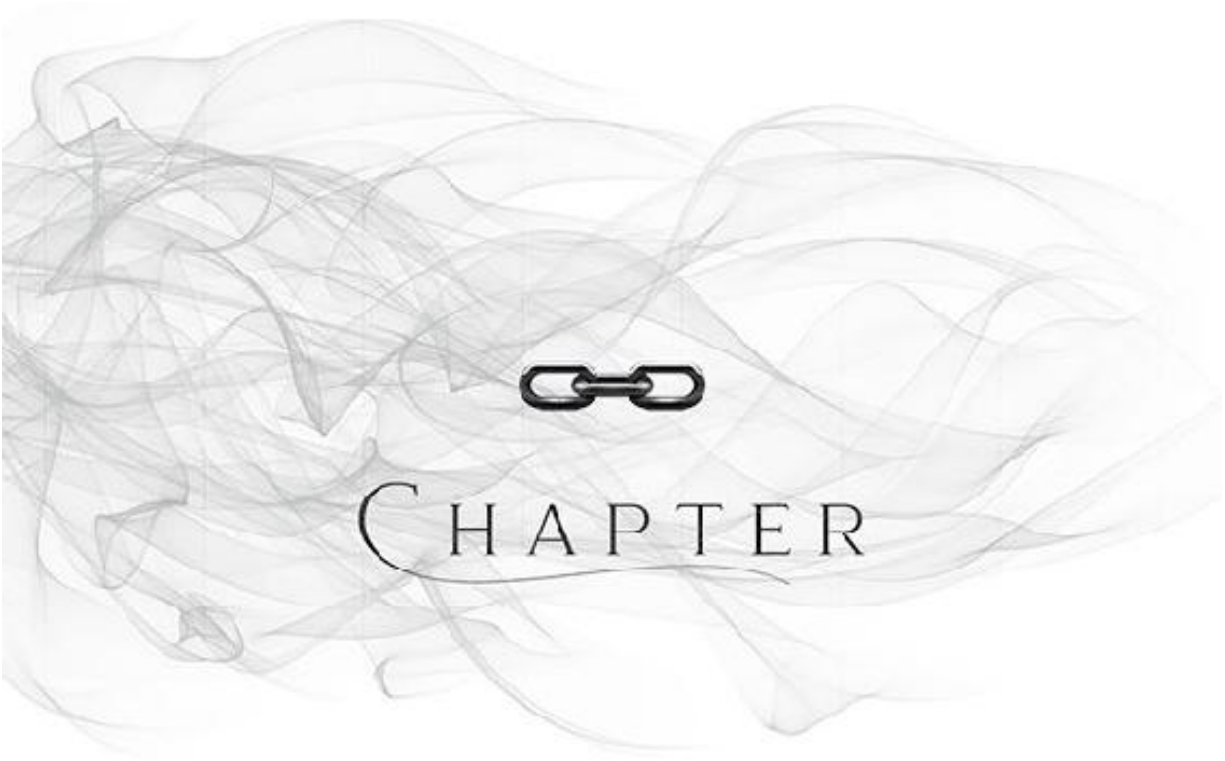
"Beloved, please." Alexei sounds desperate now. I don't look at him. I don't dare. "You are in danger if you go back." *They will execute you, Michael. Your bloodline has been outlawed. You must come home where I can protect you.*

My bloodline has been outlawed? Like the Sabel bloodline? My veins turn to ice. Am I the freaky result of an experiment?

If the Guardians find out I'm a Sabel or like them, yeah, he's right. They'll execute me. Even Flanagan won't be able to protect me. He may not want to.

I'm not letting Alexei take Flanagan's students, though. To use and enslave them. That would be on me. I'll have to risk it.

I jump.



26

The sounds of a growling, hissing fight follow me as I land on the lower ledge. A wave of worry passes through me, but I know the big guy can hold his own. From the narrow shelf, I half scramble, half fall down the rock face, following gullies and crevasses to the forest floor. My Flame splutters out. I can't keep it lit while I concentrate on not breaking my neck. The thick suede of my trousers protects my legs from the jagged stone, but the thin shirt exposes my back to every sharp edge. By the time my boots hit solid ground, my skin stings like I've been flayed.

I head into dense woodland, pungent earthy scents hitting my nose, but after only a few steps, Alexei's Call steals my mind, and my feet trip, dropping me to the damp soil. I stay there, panting on hands and knees. God, the Call's strong. It takes everything I have not to turn around and clamber back to him.

My love. Come to me.

No.

I worry for you, precious one. Spend any longer near the Council, and they will discover you.

He worries for his precious weapon. "I'm going to Blackriver." When I try to push forward, it's like stepping through treacle. "Let me go, Alexei."

I light my body again, letting the flames engulf me, and his hold releases.

Stubborn bloodline. Go if you must. Maybe it is better if you feel the sting of the Guardians' betrayal. But I am your home, Michael. All the answers you seek are with me. If they attempt to harm you, call to your prince, and I will come.

Yeah, not likely.

An echoing emptiness replaces Alexei's velvet presence in my mind, and it feels like my heart just left my chest. I take a deep breath.

Not real feelings, Blakeley. Not real.

Towering moss-covered spruce surround me. Their thick foliage casts deep shadows over the ground and blocks out the dying sunlight, though the fiery tones of sunset shimmer through the trees straight ahead. That means the road must be to my left.

The silver flames across my body cast no light, but I can see clearly, even in this near dark. Colors seep away, but every detail remains sharp.

Night vision. Cooool.

Angling southwest, I set off running, leaping across rocky ground and dodging between the giant trunks. The Flame sputters out again. I can't seem to maintain it while concentrating on something else. The woods pass by in a blur as my speed ramps past record levels. An incredible feeling. Exhilarating. I could develop a fondness for these new abilities. Vamp blood or not, they're awesome. But it will still take me too long to get back to the mansion. Blackriver must be twenty miles away. That's some distance to run through forest. I may arrive too late.

With urgency driving me on, I pick up speed between the ancient trees, noticing something...different. Off.

This isn't a normal forest. Pristine and wild it may be, but the spruce seem...aware as I pass. Alien eyes peek from the shadows. I glimpse

flickering silver veins streaming through the branches and stones, but everything solidifies under direct scrutiny. The mysterious Flame lives everywhere here. It hums in my skin, passes through my lungs, tickles my scalp and fingers. Inside me, it shimmies through my spine, dancing along nerves like a giddy child. The fizzing energy helps me make good ground, lifting my feet until I'm practically flying across the forest floor.

It's when I meet an oddly shaped log for the second time that I realize something is amiss.

I skid to a halt. I'm sure I've passed that log. I remember because it resembles a goat with a mossy blanket on its back. Have I just run in a circle?

Setting off again, I move even faster, making sure the sun stays to my right. I don't recognize any of the trees I pass, and the boulder-strewn ground looks new, but only minutes later, I come upon the same log, exactly in the same place between two moss-covered rocks.

Shit. Is this real or in my head? Alexei said running in a straight line through the Faelands was a challenge. Is that what this is? Or am I coming back on myself? Fear rises, tightening my breath. If I can't get out of the Faelands, how the hell am I going to get to Blackriver?

A streak of light darts behind a tree at the corner of my eye—turquoise and silver. I feel that awareness again, like a gentle weight and a tickle over my neck.

I wipe sweat from my face and shake my head. My overwhelmed senses must be making shit up. I should keep going. The road can't be far now.

As I leap over that damn log—again—and race between the trees, surprising images begin to tumble past my eyelids. It's as if the weighty presence in the forest is purposely washing through me, freeing hidden memories.

The day I lost to my Haze bubbles into my mind as I charge through the trees. Memories of Flanagan washing me, feeding me, and helping me with the relentless need for release. Some of the images are shocking and yet so familiar. I rested on his lap in the shower, same on his couch. I slept beside him in his bed and, because of nerve damage, happily let his strong grip

jack me until I came in his hand. I loved it. I wanted more. To touch him, to fuck him, but he would only give me what I needed and tried hard to take nothing for himself. We got up to some pretty kinky stuff that day. I've got a clear image of gold nipple clamps. And I was all in. I wanted to suck him off at one point and sulked when he wouldn't let me. Shit. Was that really me?

I remember more too. I remember *feelings*. The raw kind, when you fall for someone so fast and completely, you feel exposed and vulnerable. Something deep in my chest warms and tightens. Fairy-flavored fuck balls. At some point I'm gonna have to admit to myself I've got it bad for a man. And not some male femme fatale who looks like a woman but a muscled giant who is definitely not female. I don't know how the hell that happened, but surely it can't all be the Flame, even if I want it to be.

I rub my face and try to shake off the Faelands' distraction. I need to press on. But after my leaping strides have swallowed miles of forest, I slide to a halt in front of that same log.

Fuck's sake?

The air ripples. I sense humor. Somebody's messing with me.

"Right. That's it," I yell. "You can pack that in." I haven't got a clue who I'm speaking to, but I know someone—something—hears me.

The forest stills, seeming to shrink from my anger. Birdsong ceases. Even the leaves stop moving. I get the impression of a slapped puppy.

"Yeah, that's right. I know what you're up to." I wag a finger at the trees.

Movement flits at the edge of my vision, a sparkle in the twilight, a fleeting splash of blue against the shadows. It disappears the moment I look. I speak in that direction.

"I need to get back to Blackriver. They're in trouble. I'm going to run again, and I better not come back to that bloody log. All right?" Silence. Nothing moves. All I can hear is my breath. I nod and keep my finger wagging. "Right. I'm gonna take that as agreement."

That's it, Blakeley. You've finally cracked up, man.

I set off again. Leap over the log.

And my foot hits dark gravel instead of forest floor.

I slip across the change of ground and land with a thump onto my back, elbows burning as they scrape stone. When I raise my head to check out what's going on, I'm lying on a long straight road stretching away in both directions. The gate I saw Flanagan run through stands open only yards from me.

Well, knock me down with a flippin' fairy. That got me here a lot faster than I could have run it.

I jump to my feet and whack dust from my trousers. "Right. Yeah. That's—that's better," I shout, thinking I ought to keep the strict teacher tone till I'm out of the gate.

The leaves rustle. The birds sing again. A puff of wind tussles my hair. This time I get the impression of a puppy wagging its tail, wanting to play. I see how a man could lose his mind in this place.

Were those fairies I just met? That can't be the Fae? Alexei would look a lot different if those little colored lights were his relatives. What do the Fae even look like? I have no idea. I've got to admit I'm kinda curious, though.

I jog down the road to the gateway, eyeing the trees on either side with suspicion. I'm not confident of escape until I pass the towering gate stones carved into the likeness of ravens with human legs.

The world sways a bit, and I have to rest against a chiseled wing. I know I'm skirting the edges of a Haze. I suppress the urge to ram my hand down my trousers and jerk off. A boner's not a useful weapon in a fight, but it'll have to wait. The acrid stink of smoke hits my nostrils. The cries of fighting men and clashing metal drift to my ears from up ahead. Blackriver.

A town lies beyond the gate. Multicolored houses disappear between the trees. All built in a medieval-style with beams and daub and thatched roofs. This must be Blackriver town. I run down a narrow main street, all cobbles and stone paving. Not a soul walks the street. Every door stands closed, wooden shutters barring the lower windows. From the candle-lit upper floors, I catch the twitch of curtains, eyes following my jog down the pavement. The sounds of battle increase with every step.

Another few miles through normal woods, and I come upon Blackriver's twenty-foot high boundary wall and a gate. Or what's left of a gate. The

solid oak hangs off its hinges. I thought magic wards protected Blackriver. How did Alexei's army get inside?

As I rush into the mansion's woodland, into shadowed night, screams and cries of pain echo through the trees. Bellowed orders. Crashing metal. And that haunting shriek the Anlu'kyr give out, the piercing sound hitting my ears like a sharp blade. Thick smoke drifts through the canopy, stinging my nose.

When I break from the bushes at the back of the mansion, the scene sobers me like a dunk in ice water.

The mansion burns. Raging fire swallows the Old Keep, bursting out from windows and licking up the stone. A black sea of leather-clad Blood Servants flood every corner of the grounds. The Guardians meander like brown floating dots, clearly overwhelmed.

The riotous noise is almost deafening. Crackles of Flame flash through the dimness, lighting gray wolves that slink between fighters' legs. A giant brown bear struggles against two Blood Servants. Three Guardians with black-feathered wings fly over the fray, firing arrows into the crowd.

Tall silhouettes watch over the scene from Blackriver's rooftop. Vampires.

I have no idea where to start or how to help. It's chaos. The students in their loose gray uniforms run everywhere, some screaming, some fighting, some caught by servants and carried like sacks of rice. Aren't they supposed to be safe in a basement somewhere?

A click sounds behind me. A sharp point pokes my back. "If you've come to finish us off, half breed," a gruff voice says. "Think again."

Mason.



27

I raise my arms and shout over the din. “I’m here to help.”

Mason snorts. What I assume is his crossbow digs a little deeper into my skin. “You’re a fucking liar.”

“Flanagan sent me back.”

“Seonu knew you were the prince’s bitch. No wonder he let you go at the steelworks. You were the perfect plant for this attack.”

I grimace. The man’s got a point. I was Alexei’s sitting bomb, and I feel shit about it, but I’m not helping while stood here with my hands in the air. I risk shuffling round to face him.

“Why the fuck would I come back if I was on their side?”

Behind Mason, a group of six frightened students huddle inside a wooden gazebo, protected by a line of four soldiers also bearing crossbows. The young Channelers, none of them older than teens, clutch each other with

trembling hands. All eyes watch me—the ticking explosive. Lead-heavy guilt sinks a path through my chest.

I drop my arms. “I didn’t know. I—”

I’m cut off by a blur of black from my right. A puff of air glances off my cheek as I barely dodge an arrow. It skirts over Mason’s shaved head. I block an incoming fist, jab the Blood Servant’s ribs, and take him down with a face tackle. As he hits the dirt, Mason fires, and a wooden bolt buries itself in the Servant’s chest. The guy spits blood and gurgles a curse before he stills, eyes fixed to the dark sky.

Disgust curls my lip. Even in death, the Blood Servant’s grizzled face wears the same wild expression of rabid madness they all do. Is that the effect of the blood they drink? At the steelworks, they were too strong and fast for me, but he seemed to be my equal.

While Mason loads another bolt, we regard each other.

I ask the question eating at my mind. “Is Laasya—”

“Alive,” he snaps. “No thanks to you.”

The relief nearly drops me to the grass. “Where is she?”

“The infirmary. Hopefully it’s still intact. There are blood bastards inside, so I don’t know.”

“What?” I glance back at the mansion. People run past the windows, some in brown, some in black. “I’m going in.”

Mason shakes his head, sidestepping a shiny missile as it skids past his foot. “Quinton’s sealed the place up. You can’t get in. He’ll make short work of the bastards inside anyway.” He gives me a withering once over. “Look, half breed, I can’t kill you. The commander would skin me alive, and we need all the manpower we can get. If it’s true you’re here to help, then face off with your own. They’ll be shit scared of a Whisperer.”

Face off with vampires. Crap. “Where?”

Mason jerks his chin toward the mansion, and I peer over the bedlam to the roof. Vampires line the edge. As I watch, two silhouettes break away from the row, jump to the lawn—yeah, jump what must be a fifty-foot drop, right into the mass of fighting men—collect a student each from the Blood Servants, and fling them over their shoulder the way a hunter carries a deer.

They crawl back up the sheer brick like CGI spiders in business suits. Double crap.

“Right,” I say, not really feeling it. “I’m on that.”

“Don’t call the Flame,” Mason says, pointing a bolt at me.

“Why not?” Without that, I’m next to useless.

“You’re an untrained mess. You slip up and call it from the Guardians, we’re finished.”

Is that true? Could I accidentally call it from the wrong place? I have no idea.

“Just threaten them with the call,” Mason presses. “Trust me, they’ll shit themselves. And if they break you, well, it’s no loss to us, is it?”

Nice. I indicate the Channelers in gray running through the throng like crazy chickens. “You keep the line. I’ll bring back the students.”

As I dash down the rise into the fray, he shouts, “Betray us, half breed, and I’ll put a bolt in your face.”

Yeah, yeah, message received. I’m not doing this for Mason or the Guardians. I’m doing this for Flanagan.

Night sky has taken the sunlight, casting the battle in deep shadow. The half moon is barely a scratch above the trees. My vision remains clear, though, as if I wear night goggles. I can make out the tiniest detail, contrasts, and even shades of color. It’s uncanny. And bloody useful right now. I get the impression Shifters and Blood Servants have some kind of night vision too because none of them are struggling in the dark.

I dodge between fighting pairs and strewn bodies, making a beeline for the mansion. It’s not easy. I’m buffeted by crazy Blood Servants and desperate soldiers. Blood and sweat splatter my skin. I almost trip over a wolf with its jaws clamped to a man’s ankle. I flinch every time the vampires screech their piercing war call. The Flame they’re giving off buffets my nerves. Slinking shadows make me duck as those flying Guardians swoop overhead.

I look up and see a shiny black bob I recognize well. Fuck me. Seonu is a bird! Black feathered wings stretching out, Seonu swoops and grabs an unsuspecting Servant by the belt. She rushes onward through the air, carries

the dangling man to the other side of the field, then drops him, right onto the heads of his fellow soldiers. Go Seonu.

As I watch the captain, a fleeing student stumbles past me. I snatch her by the arm. She spins and pummels my chest, eyes wild with the fear of prey. Flame sparks from her fists. When her tear-filled eyes clock my face, her struggle becomes panic.

“You,” she screeches.

“It’s ok. It’s ok. I’m on your side.” I point to the gazebo. “Get to Mason. I’ll watch your back.”

She can’t get away fast enough, slipping in the mud as she scrambles up the rise. As I keep an eye out for her, I snag another student stumbling through the madness, a short guy with a floppy mess of hair.

“The gazebo,” I shout, kicking a Blood Servant who comes too close in the nuts. “Now. Run.”

I push farther through the chaos. Something sharp scrapes my back, and burning fire shoots through my skin. As I jerk away, a glancing sword slices my arm. For crying out loud, this is mental. I’m not dressed for a battle. I’ve got no weapon, no armor, and zilch experience. And fuck knows what I’m going to do when I reach the vampires.

But by the time I make it to the center of the maelstrom, I’m pumped with adrenaline and barely feel the wounds. The blood, the noise, the violence seems to stoke the Flame. The energy fires through my body, charging from the base of my spine to scorch along my veins, begging for release. I’m revved up for a fight. When two vamps land from the roof with a thunk into the thick of fighters, I head straight for them.

I catch the eye of the tallest, a pale, thin-faced blond with long hair and aristocratic features. He’s dressed in a thigh-length black tunic with a mandarin neck, edged with swirling silver lines and cinched by a sword belt. He breaks into a slow smile, showing long incisors.

Before I can get to him, I spot a young female student struggling with a burly Servant. Long black hair sweeps over determined green eyes as she kicks his shin and bites his finger. He thwacks her across the face with his gloved hand.

I come up behind him and ram a fist into his kidneys. Then, grabbing a chunk of hair, I kick the back of his knee and tug him to the ground.

“Mason. The gazebo,” I shout at her, pointing to a path through the scrum. She nods and makes a run for it.

Pain explodes through my back. I arch and yell out, my knee thudding soil. The shadow of something falling toward my head has me twisting to block. My forearm meets the Blood Servant’s wooden club. How the hell my bone survives the hit, I’ve no idea. The excruciating thud ricochets through my teeth. I swivel my arm to clutch the wood, grab it with both hands, and pull myself to a stand as I yank the man off his feet, then smash my fist into his grin.

Before he can recover, I follow with a volley of punches, not ceasing, even when the guy goes down. Blood splashes my eyes as I sit on his chest and bury my fists in his face again and again. I hear a banshee wail, the satisfying sound vibrating through my body. The man gurgles, and I dig my fingers into his throat and rip, yelping with triumph as a string of gristle comes away in my fist.

It’s only when I raise my gaze and catch the blond vampire’s face that my rage comes to an abrupt halt. His turquoise eyes are lit with what looks like pride.

The red fog recedes from my vision, and I stare at the dripping lump of cartilage in my hand, then at the bloody mess underneath me.

What. The. Fuck.

I throw the flesh away as though it might infect me and jump to my feet, staring down at my kill.

My kill. I just killed a man.

Bile hits the back of my throat, and my stomach clenches. I gawk, wide-eyed at the crimson gunk plastering my hands and arms.

I don’t see the blade coming in from my left.

The blond vampire blurs forward. Metal clashes. The point of a Servant’s sword stops millimeters from my left eye.

“Watch your blade,” the vampire barks.

“Yes, Lord Radomir.” The Servant lowers his sword, bows, and slinks away.

So the vampire’s a lord. That explains the aristocratic features.

“Be careful, youngling,” Radomir says to me, voice gentle. “If you lose your head, you will certainly die.”

I’m still riveted to the bloody mess on the ground. The face I’ve bashed to a pulp. My hands tremble. That unearthly scream I heard was me.

Warmth rests on my shoulder. Flame prickles from the vampire’s touch. “You did well. Your prince will be proud.”

I shake off his hand and step away. That was one of his Blood Servants I just killed. Vampires clearly don’t give a shit about their human soldiers. Figures. I point to an unconscious student on the shoulder of Radomir’s suit-clad companion climbing up the wall. “I’m taking the Channelers.”

Radomir smiles—a curve of his lips that reminds me of Alexei. “Then take them.”

He runs and leaps at the wall. And proceeds to crawl up the brick without hand or foot holds. How the...?

I peer up at the three-story building. As high as it is, I’ve got to get to the top. They must have a whole pile of Channelers by now.

Wiping my hands on the grass, I dodge a servant plowing for my face and jump onto the nearest drainpipe. I used to climb buildings all the time as a kid, one of the many acts that got me suspended from school. I can’t have completely lost my edge.

I scramble up the pipe, hand over hand, boot toes catching the edges of grooves between the sandstone bricks. I have to pause when my vision clouds over. My fingers feel weak, as if I’ve been grasping something for a long time. Maybe a Haze is inevitable, even when I can burn off excess Flame. I just want to see this through before I go all sex maniac.

I glance up from my intense concentration. The suit-clad vampire with his load has long since reached the top, but Radomir hangs off the brick, waiting for me. The humor in his pale eyes suggests I’ve gone mad.

“What?” I ask, annoyed.

“Why do you climb like a monkey? You are Anlu’kyr. Use your Flame.”

Use my Flame? How?

On that thought, the burning energy spirals through my limbs, flaring in my palms. I feel an urge to rest my hands on the brick. When I do, a strong force—a sense of Flame meeting Flame—suctions my palm to the wall. I let go of the pipe and rest my other hand on the brick. It holds like superglue till I decide to move it, then peels away with ease. My feet feel held to the brick by invisible steps. Whoa!

I can't stop a grin breaking out on my face. When I check, Radomir's expression reflects mine.

"Now you can chase us," he says, waggling his pale brows.

The bloody shit's playing with me.

He crawls away, long blond hair contrasting the deep black of his coat as it swings. I follow him, scuttling over the wall like a Marvel superhero. So fucking cool.

When I reach the top, I leap over a stone balustrade onto the flat, graveled roof. The vampires scatter on my arrival. The ones in suits blur away, jumping off the side of the building. The six remaining, all tall and lithe with pale, handsome faces, wear similar tunics to Radomir—rich black material edged with swirling silver.

Only six students remain on the roof. I expected more; the vamps must have taken the rest. Some of the teenagers wander randomly around the rooftop. Others lie on their backs, gazing up at the starry sky. Glazed eyes and slack faces suggest they're all Hazed. The vamps must have pumped them full of Flame to keep them docile. Only one looks at me with sober eyes. A fair-haired girl, maybe eighteen, knees tight to her chest, cheeks white as paper. A mole marks her upper lip. She sits on the gravel at the feet of the farthest vampire. The terror in her wide gaze punches my gut. *Please*, she mouths.

My body ignites.

The vampires step back.

All except Radomir. He watches with interest. "We are not your enemy, Whisperer," he says, voice like silk.

"Then it's simple. Leave the Channelers."

Without taking his eyes off me, Radomir speaks to his brethren in a language I don't recognize—like Russian but more singsong. The vamp next to the blonde girl grabs her by the wrist and throws her over his shoulder.

She kicks and struggles, but it's useless. Her desperate cries rip a hole through my chest.

Radomir watches me.

Is this a test?

I point my hand at the vampire with his squirming load. I have no idea if I can pull Flame without hurting the girl, but I'll have to try.

"Flame! I'm calling you."

Yes, Whisperer.

A sparking bolt of light arcs from the vampire and hits me in the chest. So do two more. Three vamps drop to the ground, bodies contorting, faces twisted with agony. The student yelps with pain but scurries away on hands and knees. I let the Flame surge through me and feed the silver-white fire covering my body till flames lick across the roof. A river of ecstasy tingles my organs and swells my groin. So good.

Every other vampire jumps back, eyes wide with fear.

Except Radomir. He doesn't flinch. *Stop, Michael.* I hear in my mind. *We are your own.*

"Leave!"

He raises a hand. "You have made your point, young one. Let them go. We will leave."

For a moment I contemplate stripping Flame from the other three as well, making sure they get the message, but they can't move while the Flame leaves them.

Stop. I say in my head, and the bolts of light snap back to the vampires. As soon as the gushing energy recedes, my knees give out. I drop to the roof, a bone-deep tiredness overwhelming my limbs. My vision clouds again. Stretching my weakening hands causes pins and needles to chase the length of my arms. I grit my teeth against a wash of pain, my spine burning like it's funneling fire.

Radomir holds out a hand, palm up. “Come with us, Michael. You can feed and be strong. We are your family.” So he knows my name.

I want to roar, *You are not my family*, but the words won’t pass my throat. “Leave the students and get the fuck out of Blackriver.”

He regards me for a moment as if expecting a change of mind. When I rise and step forward, throwing open my hands, he shouts something at his men. One by one, they blur to the edge of the roof and leap, the vamps I sucked Flame from stumbling as they leave.

Radomir calmly follows, slinking backward, that amused smile still curving his lips. “Watch your head, precious youngling. We will meet again.” He glances down at my right hip. Or is it my pocket? “Your prince left you a gift. Use it wisely.”

What does that mean?

He picks up speed, and as he passes the fair-haired girl, he grasps her wrist and swings her into his arms.

“No!” I sprint across the rooftop, far too late.

He throws me a Cheshire Cat grin as he leaps off the building—backward.

I skid to the edge and straight over, grasping a drain as I swing onto the wall. The student’s drawn-out scream becomes a distant wail as the vampire lands and, flipping her over his shoulder like a weightless doll, all but glides across the lawn.

Come on, Flame, give me some juice.

The energy fires down my arms and glows through my palms and fingers, sucking them fast to the smooth stone. My feet rest on invisible steps, and I scurry down the building in hot pursuit. Even if I have to follow the vampires over the boundary wall, I could stop them. I just need to be close enough to steal their Flame.

But something’s not right.

A sharp pain zaps through my limbs. The Flame splutters. For a terrifying millisecond, the suction falters. My hands and boots scrape down the smooth brick, stomach shooting into my throat. Then the heat returns, sticking me back to the wall.

Shit. What the hell? That wasn't funny.

Heart pounding in my ears, I whip my head round to check on the vamps. As I watch, Radomir and his crew ghost over the wall, unconscious students carried away like carcasses.

I'm losing them.

Hurrying down the building, I make it to the second floor, but my fingers shake like an addict's. The pins and needles sensation turns into hot knives. The Flame flickers.

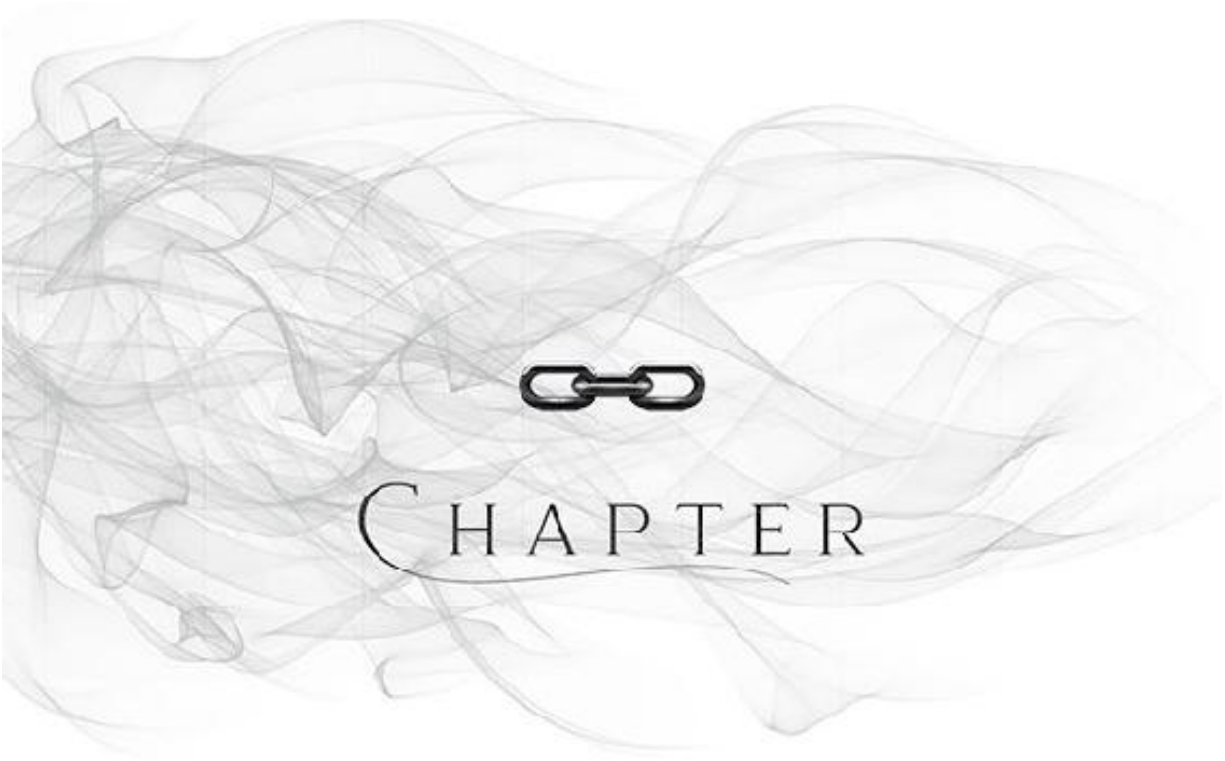
I freeze against the brick. Below me is a drop too high to survive. When I peer down, the stone pavement stares up at me like a silent witness.

Heart rattling in my chest, I take the chance of another few steps. An instant pain shoots through my whole body, ripping a cry from my throat.

Then the Flame blinks out.

In slow motion, my hands slide from the wall, and I slip off the brick, plummeting into nothing. I hear a scream. Air roars past my ears. The top of the mansion hurtles away from me.

Fuuuuuuck...



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I expect to crash onto cold stone. I expect my head to hit unforgiving hardness and explode like a melon. But a soft current of heat envelops my body, lowers me slowly to the ground, then seeps away.

The raucous sounds of battle and crashing steel filter back to my ears.

When I open my eyes, I'm lying on the pavement that circles the mansion, the wall I just fell from stretching up to the night sky.

Ookay. That was handy.

I throw the moment onto my “what the fuck?” pile—no time to examine that right now—and flip to my feet. Or at least, I try to flip. The attempt only lands me back on the ground. What's wrong with my body? Where's my superstrength gone?

With more effort than it should take, I scramble to a run instead, making a beeline for the boundary wall, which towers over the garden at least half a mile away. The vamps have all left, taken their precious loot with them.

Only Radomir remains, standing on the wall, watching me as I stagger over the grass. The girl lies limp across his shoulders, head lolling, arms dangling. What's he done to her?

I speed up. If I can just get close enough.

Hot pain shoots through my spine, the pins and needles sensation returning like a thousand bees stinging me at once. I stumble into the grass, body tense against the burn. I've got no strength. My limbs are weak, fatigued as if I'm attempting to run up a sharp incline.

No way am I letting that Lord Prick leave.

Fixing my eyes on the dark figure waiting atop the wall, I grit my teeth against the pain and force myself forward, lurching over the grass. My breath comes in gasping gulps, the wall seems farther and farther away, but determination drives me forward.

Stop, Michael. You must rest and heal.

"Fuck, you, Radomir." I know he can hear me, even at this distance. "Leave the girl."

This girl is now mine. If you want her, come home to your prince.

Bastard.

It's no good. The burn now feels like fire running over my skin. A sucking weakness steals the last of my strength. A red-hot poker spears my heart. I grasp my chest, grimacing from the tight agony banding my ribs. My face scrapes lawn for the second time today. I try to push up, lever myself onto my knees at least. All I manage to do is plant my face deeper into the grass. Unconsciousness threatens. My sight swims. Darkness rises, ready to swallow me down. No. No.

"Leave the girl," I repeat, mumbling into the grass.

I hear a warm chuckle in my mind. *We will meet again, young one. Rest.*

With a jump, Radomir disappears from the wall, and a crushing anger tears through my chest. The girl will be his slave. A blood bag. A toy. All the students will. That's on me. I should have stolen Flame from every one of those vampires. Why didn't I?

Blackness rises again. I struggle against it, determined to stay awake. Maybe my strength will come back, but the pain and weakness suck me

further down. I fall into a dizzying hole, into a black nothingness that swirls like a pool of night.

And immediately rise again into blinking lights and the musty scent of forest filling my nostrils. Huh?

A cacophony of chirping insects batters my ears. I stretch my fingers, testing strength.

And find them slipping into smooth sand. What the...?

I risk a peek.

The night sky still arcs above me, stars glittering around the sliver of a moon. But Blackriver Mansion has gone. Instead, a rock face looms in its place. The arch of a dark cave.

Is this a dream? Did I die?

I leap to my feet and scan around for the battle scene I left. The vampires. The Blood Servants. The Guardians. A shimmering lake sits on my right. A body of clear green water, stretching from a beach of black sand all the way to a shadowed canopy of twisted trees. Is that the Border Woods? The glowing water shines, even in the dark, as though lit from beneath. An illuminated jade green.

Where the hell am I?

I dust myself off. I'm still in the same clothes—dark brown sueded and the gray student shirt, but my strength is back. No pain, no burning fire. My body feels floaty like I'm in a dream or an illusion.

“Hello!” I shout at the night. “Mason!”

I'm met with only the palpable silence of a forest at night. A silence that seems to remain, even with the chatter of insects and the scurry of invisible tiny feet. The lake waters lap against the sand—a bursting green florescence. The looming trees seem to watch me from around the lake. Silver veins of glowing Flame ripple through the trunks and branches of some. I'm in the Faelands again. How did I—?

Free me.

My head whips round to the cave. Did I just hear...?

I take a few steps closer, feet sinking into black grains. The sand glitters as if peppered with tiny diamonds. My heart trips into overdrive as soon as I

reach the cave. The entrance arches way above my head, maybe ten feet. Trailing ivy smothers the craggy rock, but the entry is a yawning mouth, so dark I can't see beyond a few feet. The black depths suck on me, pulling me deeper. My fingers tingle with the thought of stepping inside.

No way. I don't do caves.

Come. You must free me.

The deep voice echoes into my mind, male and resonant. I'm sure it's coming from inside. A compulsion to step farther tugs at my body. I have to go in there. I have to free him. Free the king.

My feet move of their own accord, and I'm scrambling into the dark, one hand on the jagged rock to guide me. My breathing hitches, my heartbeat rockets. If I can just get far enough inside.

Yes. *Come*, the voice says.

A light flashes in the darkness ahead. Starting as a pinprick glitter in the air, then expanding. Silvery white Flame bursts into a writhing ball of fire. The face of a woman coalesces, shaped from its curling depths, her hair a streaming halo of fire. Her eyes blaze with dancing silver.

This is one freaky dream. I hope this isn't death because it's bloody weird.

Michael.

Her mouth moves, but the words enter my mind—the soft, mature tones of an older woman.

You are not ready.

Impatience twists in my chest. "I have to get in there. I have to free him."

It is not yet time. Return to the Guardians. Learn the strengths of your bloodline.

"Bloodline?"

An elegant hand reaches out from the fire, and the image softens, becoming more like the real face of a woman. Beautiful, older, long dark hair, and metal-gray eyes gentled by sympathy. Her palm presses against my chest.

"I must return this to you," she says softly.

Warmth pulses from her touch, traveling through my body in a wave of blissful tingles. A light bursts behind my eyes.

The image of a scrap of paper with three words written in cursive script opens inside my mind.

Lancaster. Blackriver. Sabel

Grief rushes through me, an old sadness I'd forgotten. Choking fury soon follows as the memory of jade-green eyes and stinging pain returns. He took it. The only clue I have to my parents' identity, and Quinton stole it from me.

"The witch protects you. But be wary, for he serves another." The woman's face fades again, changing into dancing silver Flame.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"We will meet soon. Follow your heart, Michael, not the words of those who would use you."

Dizziness disturbs my sight, and I grasp my forehead. A sucking sensation tugs on my chest. My whole body seems to be folding in on itself.

"What's happening?"

Return to your lover. The True Grounder will help you with your gift.

"Not yet. I need answers."

I grasp the rock, but the cave spins away from me as if sucked through a straw. I'm dragged downward into a tight, heavy space. There's a popping sensation. Then the physical aches and pains of the body crowd my awareness again.

"I've got a heartbeat. His eyes are flickering." Laasya's voice. "Michael. Michael, please come back."



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Voices fill my ears, whispers, groaning, wailing. A bustle of activity vibrates my senses. The stringent scent of alcohol hits my nostrils, closely followed by the copper smell of blood.

“Yes, I think he’s waking.” Quinton’s nasal tones. *Michael. Michael, can you hear me?*

I blink open my eyes. The last echoes of the Faelands with its green lake and dark cave flutter away like a distant dream. The woman’s flaming face. The voice from the cave. My attention snaps back to my throbbing head.

Bright light prickles my vision. I’m lying on my back, a white ceiling with candle chandeliers above me, a circle of worried faces crowding around. Laasya leans close, her hands laid on my body. A bandage wraps her head. She looks exhausted, dark rings showing beneath eyes that glimmer with a wet sheen. Thank God she’s okay. Quinton stands over the bed, brow crumpled with concern. A woman in the traditional nurse’s outfit

of a white dress with apron and cap stands at my feet, holding my ankles. Warmth trickles into my muscles from her touch.

“Where am I? Is Flanagan back?” My voice comes out a croaky whisper.

“No need to concern yourself over the commander,” Quinton answers. “You are in the infirmary. How do you feel?”

I scan my body, stretching fingers and wiggling toes. There’s a weakness in my limbs, though I can move them, form a tight fist, and lift my legs. The absence of the Flame’s heat sizzling through my spine and nerves feels peculiar, but the painful pins and needles sensation is more a soft tingle.

“I’m good. Is Flanagan okay?”

Laasya’s shoulders slump. The nurse expels a breath.

Quinton sighs. “Well, that is a relief. We were very worried about you, my boy.” He looks as tired as Laasya. Deep lines web his cheeks. His usually neat hair curls against his forehead in dark, sweaty strands, and a dirt-splattered shirt with muddy trousers has replaced his tweed elegance. His words sound genuine, but now I know what he did, I see him in a new light. I don’t know if he’s friend or foe.

The nurse turns to the clustering onlookers and shoos them away. “Clear the space, please. Nothing to see here.” She tugs the curtains around the bed closed.

“What about the vampires? The Blood Servants?”

“All gone. Thanks to you, my boy,” Quinton says. “Try moving your limbs.”

I’m aware they didn’t answer my question about Flanagan. I swing my legs around and sit up on the edge of the bed. Stiffness hinders my movements, and my joints ache, but I feel okay. When I rise to stand, my knees give out. Quinton catches my fall with an arm around my waist and guides me back to the bed. I grip his elbows while a wave of dizziness sweeps over me.

“I meant stretch, raise an arm, not stand. You need longer to rest.”

“What’s wrong with me? Was it the fall?” I thought the soft heat sensation had saved me from smashing into the stone pavement.

“You survived the fall without a bruise. It was nerve damage that nearly took you from us. One of the raven Shifters found you unconscious and brought you here.”

I search Quinton’s somber expression. “I nearly died?”

“Nobody can absorb that amount of Flame without consequence, Michael. It overwhelmed your nervous system. You survived only because of your unique physiology. And the talented healers here at Blackriver.” He glances behind me at Laasya.

I blink, shock stealing my next question. Alexei nearly killed me? Did he know that much Flame would damage my nerves? Of course he did. The bastard doesn’t give a shit about me. His silken words were a lie. I hate the disappointment and pain that crash through my chest. The prince is my enemy. I’ve got to remember that.

I stand again and stumble to the window behind the bed. Quinton grabs my arm to steady me. “You really must rest, Michael.”

“I have to see.” I peer outside into daylight at the Blackriver gardens, which stretch down to the woods. Churned dirt has replaced the pristine lawn. Trampled tangles remain where flower beds had circled a duck pond—what was a pond. It looks like a mudslide now. Exhausted Guardians stumble over a chaos of dead bodies, strewn over the dirt like broken dolls. Mostly black uniforms, though, only a handful of brown leather.

“Come back to the bed,” Quinton urges. “Lie down.”

I shake his hands off and lean on the wooden headboard instead. “How many?” I ask, a lump in my throat. “How many died? I saw them carrying students over the wall.”

It’s Laasya who answers. “Not as many as we first thought. But twelve students are still unaccounted for.”

“We have the impression the Servants were purposely holding back,” Quinton adds. “Maiming rather than killing. Then again, the Anlu’kyr were mainly here for the Channelers. They would have left with many more if you had not returned.”

Laasya turns to chat with the nurse, and I take the opportunity to look Quinton straight in his shadowed eyes. I speak in my mind, knowing he’ll

hear me. *I remember everything. I'm related to the Warlock. Aren't I?*

Shhhh, he hisses, his gaze flickering nervously around the room before returning to mine. *How did you—?*

It doesn't matter. Answer my question.

You must be careful, Michael. Guard these thoughts. Yes, you are Michael Sabel, descendant of Valentin Sabel. The Warlock. I wish you hadn't remembered.

I narrow my eyes. *You stole my name from me.*

He flusters, checking the room again before turning his back to Laasya. *It was necessary. You are in grave danger here. And I am your only true ally, Michael. It was foolish of me to think I could keep your bloodline from you. We will talk. But not here. Rest first.*

Anger churns. I still have no idea if he's on my side or not.

At least I have a name. An odd sort of relief floods through me, some tight inner fist I've carried my whole life loosening inside my chest. I may be related to a raving egomaniac who raised the dead, but I belong. My parents were Sabels. Okay, it's a bloodline resulting from some fucked-up experiment, and they were probably murdered for that very reason, but knowing their surname, my surname, is finally something concrete I can call my own.

So the parchment was directing them to Blackriver. Why, if the Guardians would only execute them? What was it they needed here? Who?

Quinton smiles and pats my shoulder, mostly for appearances, I think. "And so you see, you must rest, my boy."

I frown. The councilor was head of Blackriver until twenty years ago. What is he not telling me? I'll wait for our conversation, though. I want him on his own when I grill him.

I slump back onto the bed, sitting still while the dizziness passes, then twist around to Laasya. She's finished her conversation with the nurse and watches me with a tight brow. Her pale face accentuates her glazed eyes. I reach and take her hand. "Laasya, I'm so sorry. I—"

"Don't," she says and shuffles across the bed to sit beside me. She throws her arms around my waist for a side hug, burying her face in my chest. "I

thought we'd lost you."

"Your heart stopped for some time," Quinton explains softly. "It was a shock."

I fold my arms around the young witch and tuck her close. Her skinny frame feels fragile inside my hold. "Hey, I'm all right. Takes more than that to kill me off. What about you? I hurt you. I'm so sor—"

"Don't," she snaps again. She looks up, her glasses askew over intent brown eyes. "It wasn't you. It wasn't your fault. He used you."

Alexei used me, all right. Hot rage simmers beneath the stone in my chest. I can't help feeling responsible, though. I wanted him, wanted to be with him, and hurt people trying to reach him. How can Laasya forgive me so easily?

Her doe-like eyes harden. "I'm going to find an answer to the Blood Call. I'm going to find a way to free you. Then you won't ever have to worry about his influence again."

I believe her. My little witch. I hug her closer and enjoy a breath of her rose scent. "I'm just relieved you're okay," I say.

She flicks her hand, her nose wrinkling. "You were lucky. I'll kick your butt next time."

I smile, not quite able to raise a chuckle. Worry swells again. "Flanagan. You haven't told me if he's okay. Is he back?"

Quinton shakes his head. "Not yet. I am quite sure he is not in need of rescue. You have no reason to worry."

No reason to worry? Alexei and the witches could have killed him. Kidnapped him. Left him trapped on the cliff to die. Why has nobody gone to help him?

I stand again on shaky legs, heart racing. "Alexei trapped Flanagan behind a forcefield thing. I need to go back."

"A witchnet," Laasya says. "Well, at least they didn't use silver this time." *Silver? This time?* What if they did?

Quinton tries to encourage me back down with a hand on my shoulder.

"Mr. Blakeley," the nurse says, stepping forward to persuade me back to the bed. "I must insist you lie down. Your body needs to recuperate." She's

a squat woman with a big chest and stern face. I'm sure not many people would dare argue with her, but I've got shit to do. Rest will have to wait. Why is nobody else worried about Flanagan? He's not invincible.

I push against Quinton's hold, new strength filling my limbs. "I'll lie down later. I can't believe he's been there all night while I've been bloody sleeping."

"Dead, Michael," Quinton corrects, tone sharp. "You were *dead*. You need time to recover."

"Yeah, well, I'm not dead now. I'm going back. You can come with me or not. It's up to you."

Laasya takes my hand. "The commander would be furious with us if we left Blackriver to rescue him. He'll want us here, Michael."

I pull away and, circling past Quinton and the nurse, shove through the curtain.

I'm met by eight men in black.

Prison guards, carrying loops of thick chain. My heart leaps into my throat, and blood sinks to my feet. Blackriver plans to lock me down.

The droning bustle of the infirmary trails off. Every eye in the Nightingale ward turns to watch, patients sitting up on their beds and stretchers. Nurses in white hustle the onlookers to step farther back. A mess of disheveled, injured soldiers, bandaged and bloodstained, fills the room, two to a bed, and others in between. Students in blood-splattered gray mill around, clutching themselves, miserable and scared. The place looks like a war zone hospital camp. I suppose it is. Remorse blooms in my chest, metallic and heavy.

"Hurry the fuck up," a croaky version of a voice I recognize all too well says. A voice that hits me with instant nausea. "Arrest him now before he fucks off." Belanger stands behind the guards, leaning heavily on a cane, wearing Guardian-issue suedes and a black shirt. I suck in a breath, his stale tobacco scent clogging my nose. He looks like a man in his sixties. Gray hair has replaced the reddish brown I remember. Wrinkled skin sags off sunken cheeks. His pallid color gives the impression of a corpse.

Did I do that to him?

His eyes haven't changed. Cold malice still gives the metal-gray a sickly tinge.

I back up as the tallest guard—a muscled, balding man with a scar down his right cheek—steps forward. The chains in his fist clink as he raises them. “I don’t want any trouble,” he says with a brook-no-shit tone. “We’ve been sent from Headquarters with orders to arrest the prince’s servant on recovery and transport him to London. If you would just put these chains on for me.”

Like that’s going to happen.

I scowl and straighten my shoulders to full height.

His five colleagues dip into ready stances, hands grasping their sword hilts.

The guard swallows. “I don’t want to use force, but we will make you put the chains on if we have to.”

Yeah, you and whose army?

I don’t say that out loud. I’d sound like a twat. I look him in the eyes and deliver my words with a growl. “I’m not putting those chains on. And I’m not leaving Blackriver with you.”

The guard pales, but he stands his ground.

Laasya joins me, hands on her hips, chin in the air. “On whose orders are you arresting him?”

“We’ve been sent by Commander Belanger, Miss.” The commander at Headquarters. Bastard Belanger’s father. Figures.

Quinton gives my forearm a squeeze of reassurance. “Captain Trenton, Michael is under my care and will not be leaving Blackriver today. I am very sorry you wasted a journey.”

“With respect, Councilor,” Trenton says, eyes bouncing between the three of us, “I don’t take my orders from you, and Commander Belanger warned me you would try to intervene. I have more men outside if I need them, sir. And a Headquarters Mage to transport the prisoner.”

Quinton gives a long-suffering sigh. “Commander Belanger is not above the High Council. He has no authority here.”

“Commander Flanagan makes the rules under this roof,” Laasya adds.

“Commander Flanagan isn’t here, though, is he?” Trenton counters.

Fear curls tension through my muscles. If a councilor has no power to talk them down, how do we get through this safely? I don’t want to hurt anyone or kick up a fuss in a hospital full of injured patients, but I’m not going anywhere with a Belanger. I knew the cage was in my future, but only Flanagan gets to chain me.

Without conscious decision, my hands fill with Flame. The energy is so weak it barely sparks from my fingers.

Trenton jumps anyway, his chains clattering to the hard floor as he lights his own hands with silver flames. Two of his men do the same. The others draw swords.

“I’m Class 7,” he says. “So are my men. We’re Headquarters elite. We’re not afraid of you, Whisperer. I won’t allow anyone to be injured.”

Quinton grasps my shoulder. “Michael, please remain calm. Gentlemen —”

Shouted orders from the corridor outside the infirmary interrupt his next words. The deep Scandinavian accent resonates into the room, and my heart flips. Judging by the collective wave of relief, I’m not the only one glad to hear Flanagan’s voice. Let’s hope he can talk these idiots into backing off. Even though he may be locking me down himself.



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The crowd parts as Flanagan strides into the infirmary with Mason and Seonu, the commander's tall stature visible above every other head. His eyes search the room till they land on me, and my heartbeat thunders.

Somebody has found him a clean white shirt, but his blond hair lies in a wild mess around his shoulders, dirt streaks his skin, and four open claw marks, wet with blood, run from hairline to neck on the left side of his face. His features are human, but a glimmer of feral intensity lingers in the silver of his eyes.

It's so good to see him. The relief nearly collapses my knees.

Trenton turns to greet him with a piece of paper. "Commander Flanagan, I have orders to imprison the half breed and escort Sergeant Belanger back to—"

“Seonu!” Flanagan bellows, “please escort Captain Trenton and his men off the premises. And why is Sergeant Belanger not restrained?”

Trenton raises his slip of paper. “Commander, this writ has been signed by Councilor Belanger herself, and—”

Flanagan levels Trenton with a lead-melting scowl. The captain flinches but doesn’t back down.

“The Belanger family does not have authority in Blackriver, Captain Trenton, and Sergeant Belanger is under arrest. Unless you are here to help us, I suggest you leave my compound before I have you arrested for trespassing.” He looks up. “Seonu!”

“Yes, sir.” Seonu—now minus the wings—calls soldiers to her, and they form a circle around Trenton’s men. Trenton cuts me a look before he’s led down the ward, complaining in a loud voice to Seonu all the way. I don’t think I’ve seen the last of that captain. Or the Belangers.

Old-looking Belanger throws me a foul glare as Mason takes his elbow to guide him away. I turn aside without giving him a second glance. I don’t feel proud of what I’ve done to him, but I’ll never feel pity for the man.

The bustle of the ward returns, and my shoulders drop, tension leaving me like steam. That was over with a lot less drama than I expected.

Flanagan moves his attention from the parting soldiers to Laasya. He rests a hand on her shoulder and checks the bandage around her head. “Are you well?”

Laasya straightens. “I’m fine, sir.”

“Miss Shakti must lie down now, Commander,” the nurse says. “She sustained a serious head injury, then expended a lot of energy on the Whisperer.”

“No, I’m fine. I’m—”

“Go and rest. That’s an order,” Flanagan says.

Laasya silently squeezes my hand, and I return the gesture before she lets the nurse lead her away. I still can’t believe Laasya helped me after I caused her the “serious head injury.” She’s been so good to me since I arrived at Blackriver. I’d like to return the favor somehow.

Flanagan addresses Quinton. “Anything to report?”

“Tulsy and Petre are replacing the wards. Major Zahir is with the students in the Grounding suite. Captain Nelson and her team are collecting bodies. I thought it best if I stayed with Michael.”

Flanagan nods. “Thank you. If I can have a moment with Michael, Councilor.”

“Of course.” Quinton gracefully dips his head. “I will check on Laasya’s welfare.”

“Come,” Flanagan says and leads me down the ward, past beds of injured soldiers, and into a side office. The small room is only big enough for a petite desk piled with papers and one chair.

He closes and locks the door, then tugs down a blind to cover the window that looks out onto the ward. His intense gaze fastens to mine, and the noise of the infirmary falls away, leaving only silver and the whoosh of blood in my ears. Elation tangles with fear. He must have seen the destruction outside. The dead bodies sprawled across the mud field. I deserve whatever fury he’s about to blast at me.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” I stammer out. “I—”

I’m yanked into a hold so tight it steals my breath. With a hand in my hair, he fastens my head to his neck and circles my back with his other arm. I tense briefly before clutching his shoulders to bury my face in his warmth.

“Fuck, Flanagan. I—”

“Shhh. I don’t want to hear you apologize.” He tucks me even tighter and takes in a shuddering breath from my hair. “Mason told me you fell. They found you... I thought—”

“I’m all right.”

“I thought I’d lost you,” he finishes with a whisper.

My heart skips a beat. He sniffs my skin, a low growl rumbling through his chest. Is he smelling Alexei’s scent on me? Then he lowers his lips to mine. I feel the brush of his beard, the brief heat of his mouth, but draw away. I don’t deserve his kiss.

Stepping out of his hold, I tuck my hands into my back pockets. “I’m all right,” I say again, covering my awkwardness. “Are you okay?”

He searches my face, a crease in his brow, but drops his hands. “Are you injured?”

“No. What about you? Your face?” I reach up to test the crusting claw lines with my fingers, stopping myself before I touch tender flesh.

“It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? You need to get that—”

“You came back.” Soft heat warms his steady gaze.

“Course. Why? You thought I’d make a run for it?”

He twitches a smile. “I wasn’t a hundred percent certain. I was also unsure the Faelands would let you through. I just wanted you away from him. I’m sorry I took that chance.”

“I was fine. Well, I had to circle a blasted log a few times before the Faelands let me find the gate, but it got me here a lot faster than I could have run it. How did you get away from Alexei?”

A shadow steals the brief moment of ease from his face. “He let me go. I assume when the Blood Guard left Blackriver.”

“After all that, he just let you go?”

Flanagan’s sigh sounds pained and exhausted. “He only drew me away from Blackriver for the attack. Once it was over...”

Guilt climbs, drying my throat. Flanagan left the mansion for me. Left his post for the man who nearly killed his soldiers. I’m surprised Alexei freed him. Why wouldn’t he want to lock his mortal enemy in a dungeon somewhere out of the way?

“How did Alexei know when the guard left?” I ask.

“The Anlu’kyr communicate through telepathy. From any distance. It gives them an advantage we cannot match, even with witches.”

Was that why I could hear Alexei and Radomir in my mind? Another reminder that I’m part vamp.

“The Faelands held me hostage longer than Alexei,” Flanagan says. “It kept me most of the night. Until I threatened to murder the Queen with my own hands if it didn’t show me the road.”

I expel a laugh. “Shouldn’t that Goddess tattoo of yours be like a VIP pass? The whole forest is Flame.”

He grimaces. “The Faeland forest is like a conscious entity—troublesome and mischievous. Men have died searching for a way to leave. The Goddess’s blessing gives me some influence, but I am not beyond its impish pranks.” He huffs, shaking his head, and we both grin.

It’s good to see him smile, but it plucks at the heaviness in my chest.

“Look, I—I wasn’t much help. I’m sorry, I tried but...” An image of pleading blue eyes lances my chest.

He frowns. “Mason told me the Guardians were all but finished until you came. And the Anlu’kyr retreated as soon as you climbed to the roof.”

He did? I assumed he’d be the one shooting a bolt up my arse. “Yeah, they left then, but only because the slippery shits already had what they wanted. I tried to follow but...” Ended up in a whacky dream.

He reaches to draw me closer, but I stiffen, and he drops his hand again. “Michael, the Anlu’kyr would have taken every student, young soldiers too, and left every other dead. The only reason they didn’t is that their fear of you was greater than their desire for Channelers.”

I glance up from studying the floor, desperately wanting his words to be true. “I don’t know, Flanagan. Radomir—”

Flanagan sneers. “Radomir.” He says the name with a hiss. “Alexei’s right hand. He’s a royal and strong. He still ran from you.”

I shake my head, unable to accept that the vampire was afraid of me. He didn’t show a scrap of fear. I’m still sure the Anlu’kyr left because their reason for attacking Blackriver was done.

Flanagan’s expression darkens. “Did he say something to you?”

I sigh. “Just the usual. Come home. You’re one of us. Blah fucking blah.” I glance up, and he catches my nervous swallow.

He cups my head and pulls me to him, ignoring my rigid response. His eyes gleam with a fierce light. “You are not his.”

I don’t need him to say the name. I know who he means. His words punch the fear sitting like an alien presence in my gut. “My own blood’s a prison. I can’t... I’ll never get away from them. From him. Ever. One click of that bastard’s fingers and I turn into a monster.”

Flanagan's not letting me go, so I give in and grasp his shirt at the sides, suppressing the desire to grind closer. I'm not experiencing even a hint of a Haze, yet I still feel the intense charge between us.

"We'll find a way to free you from his Call," he says. "I promise."

God, I hope so. Or my life is essentially fucked. And even if Laasya or Quinton do come up with something to block Alexei's pull, I can never not be mixed breed. Full-blown bloodsucker hangs over my head like a guillotine and always will.

I draw back to look up at him. "We're going to get those Channelers back, though. Right?"

His jaw tightens. Ice-cold fury floods his eyes. "I assure you we will retrieve every last one of my students. But it will be a challenge. History is not on our side."

"We've got to. Some of those taken were teenagers. They'll be slaves."

Sorrow chases the fury from his gaze. "I know. Though Channelers are a treasure to the Anlu'kyr, they will be kept in a deep Haze, collared and sold."

Collared and sold? So Hazed out of their minds they won't even fight what's happening to them. My fists clench. White-hot determination burns my insides. There's no way I'm letting Alexei keep those Channelers. Whatever I have to do to get them back, I'll do it.

"I have things I need to see to," Flanagan says. "I don't want you here in the infirmary. I would rather you rest in my room. I have soldiers coming to escort you there."

"Your room? You're not... I thought you might want to, you know, lock me down or something."

His brow crumples. "Michael, we would never have survived that attack without you."

"You would never have been attacked without me."

He gives a slow nod. "Alexei took advantage. And I *will* take precautions. But I don't want you in a cage. I want you with me."

My stomach flutters. I can't meet his eyes. If it were my decision, I'd lock me in a cage and bury it. I'm grateful he doesn't agree.

With his hand still in my hair, he draws me closer. “It was not your fault,” he repeats.

“I just... I’m not...”

My words are cut off when he lowers his lips so close to mine I taste his warmth. “Tell me you’re staying,” he whispers against my mouth.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“You have a choice. Tell me.”

I swallow a gritty lump. He’s right. I could run. I could get on my bike and peddle into the rain as fast as my legs will let me. Away from Blackriver, from the Council. Away from chains. But if I run, I run forever. Into the same cold and lonely night as I did when I was ten. And there’s no escape from Alexei.

If I stay, I either strain against Flanagan’s protection or commit. I might get answers here, might yet discover information about my parents. I’ll learn more about the Flame. I’ll be able to help Blackriver find its students.

Yeah, there are plenty of reasons to stay, but I know the real reason has his lips against mine.

“I’m staying,” I say, mouth parting to breathe in his heat.

“Then kiss me.”

All I can hear is my drumming heartbeat. I want his mouth so badly, but I can’t blame this on the Flame. My body is all out of the stuff. The realization has me frozen. This is me. This pull to press my lips to his is all mine.

“Michael.”

I tilt my chin closer, and when he brushes me with his lips, a floodgate opens. The day’s tension, the fear, the want rip through me, and I grip his neck to bury my tongue in his mouth. If this fierce need means I’m gay or bi or whatever, I don’t fucking care. Flanagan is mine.

He fastens me with a hand behind my head, another around my waist, and lays into my mouth with an urgent kiss. He pushes past my enthusiasm to fill me with his tongue, his fingers clenching my hair so tight it hurts. I know he’s staking his claim. I’m so hard for it it’s painful.

When neither of us can breathe, we break away, and he presses his forehead to mine. “Thank you,” he says softly. “I have to leave you for a while. Please rest. For me.”

“I’ll try.”

Flanagan kisses my lips again. Then his gaze briefly roams my face, one last check that I’m definitely here before he leaves. The door shuts behind him, and I hear him speak to Quinton before his sharply given orders diminish as he exits the infirmary.

The murmur and clatter of the hospital filters back to my ears, and I’m left to my own thoughts. My heart still pounds. The ache from his kiss lingers on my lips. And my groin.

Holy moly. I just willingly kissed a guy. And I want more.

I’m into men! What a head spin.

Finding out you’re part vampire has nothing on falling for two hundred and seventy pounds of raw male. But my life is now a daily dose of crazy town. Unexpected desire is only one of its streets.

My stomach roils with nerves. Flanagan’s soldiers will be here soon, and I’ll have to walk through a room full of people I’ve injured. My hands fist with tension, so I stuff them into my front pockets.

And my right middle finger meets something cold and smooth.

When I tug it out, my stomach drops to my feet, chest clenching.

A vial of red liquid.

I hold it up between my fingers to examine the corked glass. The ruby color glints garnet in a shaft of morning light. I don’t need anyone to tell me what it is. An energy pulses from the vial, and the desire to drink the contents nearly overwhelms me.

Radomir’s words come back. *Your prince left you a gift. Use it wisely.*

Alexei planted a vial of his blood in my pocket when I kissed him. That means he knew I would leave him and come back to Blackriver. Did he plan it that way? Does that mean he wants me here? Or was he just covering his bases? Why would he give me his blood? I know Anlu’kyr blood can heal. Protection? Temptation?

For fuck’s sake, that manipulative bastard.

I should destroy it. Tell Flanagan.

A knock sounds, then the door opens, and a stocky Guardian soldier steps into the office. I snap my fingers shut.

“Um, I’m sorry to disturb you, Whisperer,” he says, eyes darting to my clenched hand. “The commander ordered us to escort you to his room.” The man’s fingers twitch over his sword hilt. I suppose all the soldiers will be nervous with me.

This is my life now—guards, collars, chains. I’ll hate it. I know I’ll push against it. I’ve just got to remind myself that this is where I’m safe from Alexei’s clutches. Flanagan will protect me from the prince and protect the world from me. Here I’ll learn more about my real family—the Sabels.

As long as nobody but Quinton finds out who I am—as long as Flanagan doesn’t find out I’m the descendant of a monster—for now, this is where I belong.

Offering the soldier a friendly smile, I say, “No problem.” I slide my fingers into my pockets to indicate I’m not about to light my hands but also to slip the vial away. I’ll keep it for now. Maybe I’ll tell Flanagan later. Maybe.



Bonus Chapter

Flanagan.

I slam the phone down, the Lycan riding my wave of fury, clambering for escape. Muscles shift, skin ripples. I shove the need for blood down behind the barricades. Force the beast back into its darkness. If I have to deal with Headquarters one more time, I will not be responsible for the death toll.

I'm still growling when I leave the office and head back to my room. Back to the green-eyed wildcat who has dominated my thoughts all day. Yes, Michael is dangerous. I've seen how deadly he is with my own eyes. Yes, he needs containment, but here at Blackriver, not at Headquarters. He's young and lost and vulnerable. We must win his loyalty, not persecute him until he's driven into the enemy's embrace.

A Whisperer needs a True Grounder. The boy is mine to protect. He stays here. The Council can come and take him over my rotten corpse.

Apart from the odd harrowed-eyed soldier, the long corridors lay empty. I would stay in the central building longer, revisit the infirmary, but Zahir is right. There's nothing else I can do. The injured are where they need to be, the bodies collected, the families informed. Extra nurses have arrived from the sisterhood. The Longreach emergency team has everything under control. I'd be with Michael already if it wasn't for that last attempt to force my hand.

I pass Blackriver's once-immaculate gardens, now a ruin. Heavy sorrow extinguishes my anger. Golden-red light from the waning sun almost resembles spilled blood across the churned soil. Wisps of black smoke from the smoldering Keep drift over the lawn like mourning specters. The sour taste of guilt joins my heartache.

This wasn't Michael's fault; it was mine. Even knowing the enemy as I do—his tricky, convoluted scheming—I let him in. Alexei would never enter a Guardian stronghold without superior advantage. The soldiers paid for my overconfidence with their lives.

Though how could I have guessed his plan to use Michael? That the orphan Channeler we found in Lancaster was so rare? So strong? Whisperers were long thought extinct.

I once knew a Channeler who came close. Not a Whisperer but strong and unique. A young man with the talents of a Seer.

A hazel-eyed human I loved with all my heart.

As did the prince.

Jasper was a powerful Channeler who could strip another of their Flame, burn a whole unit of Guardians without consequence to himself. But he could never have defeated fifty soldiers at once. That was beyond anything I thought possible.

How did Alexei know Michael was capable of such a feat?

Michael would have died if I were not there to Ground him. Alexei knew that too.

“Commander.” The two Longreach guards stationed at my door greet me in unison. Both stand straight and nod their salute. I’d prefer to use my own men, but all my soldiers are exhausted, injured, or dead. I only need eyes on Michael. Someone to find Councilor Quinton or myself if he glazes over and heads for the gate. They’re under strict orders not to engage. None of them could stop the Whisperer if he decides to leave.

“Anything to report?” My voice croaks with fatigue. I can’t remember when I last ate.

“No, Commander. He had a shower, then slept all day. We offered to bring food, but he wasn’t interested. About two hours ago, the Whisperer woke from a bad dream, shouted something, made that God-awful vamp noise. But it was nothing. He’s asleep again now.”

The beast rumbles. His anger must seep into my gaze because both guards step backward. “I told you to report any changes to me, Sergeant.”

Garold shakes his head, looking to Private Robbins for support. Robbins checks his shoes.

“It was just a dream, Commander. He didn’t try to escape or set on fire or anything. I didn’t think it was worth bothering you.”

I take a long, deep breath and blow it out slowly. “The Fae walk dreams, Sergeant. And Prince Alexei is Fae-born.”

“I—I never thought.” He swallows and raises his chin. “With respect, Commander, surely the half breed should be in lockdown.”

I ignore the comment and stifle my desire to strangle the man. “You’re both dismissed. Take Jenson and Sanders with you. The kitchen is open. Get something to eat.”

“Yes, sir.” The two soldiers salute and leave in haste.

When I carefully open the bedroom door, the sight that greets my tired eyes steals away the dregs of my anger.

Michael laid out on the bed, naked and exquisite.

My chest warms. My groin aches. I grit my jaw, clenching muscles against the beast’s rush to the surface. The beast wants to ravage what is mine. Mark him. Own him. *Mine*. It takes every ounce of control to push the violent desires back beneath my worn barriers.

Goddess forgive me. *Jumalatar, suojaa häntä*. He's so young, fragile, and I'm an old, tired monster. Yet I still want my precious Whisperer so badly the need burns my insides.

Not yet. Not when he seems at peace.

I step closer and lean against the wall at the side of the bed, stealing this moment to explore his beauty in peace. His permanent scowl softened by sleep. Full lips parted. Those fierce green eyes, always lit with belligerence, closed to the world and its horrors. And he glows—a faint light given off from the skin. Even now, when his Flame is low, there's a hint of the power beneath.

His long, heavy breaths suggest he's in a deep slumber, one arm thrown above his head, stretching his strong, broad chest. Furs wrap his shins as though he's been battling an unseen foe. Otherwise, the pale, smooth skin of his long, muscled contours is on full display. Including his half-swollen cock, ready and begging for my touch.

My beautiful half breed. My Whisperer. Mine to protect, to hold. To pleasure.

What have you done to me, Michael? How did I fall so deep, so quickly? How did Alexei know that I would?

How could I not?

The only request the Flame Goddess ever made of me was "*Protect the Whisperer*." I thought she meant all Whisperers. The rare Channelers are beloved to the Goddess. The only one who came close was Jasper, and I assumed he was my charge. When I lost him, the failure nearly broke me. Though the Goddess mark remains, I thought my service to her might be finished.

Now I'm not so sure.

I strip off my clothes. The garden doors are wide open, as I ordered, and I'm glad to feel the fresh air on my skin. As I slip into the bed, Michael stirs, moaning and tossing his head. "No," he mumbles. "It's too dark. Let me out!" Tossing becomes flailing, and he's soon fighting the air.

Shaking his shoulder, I speak close to his ear. "Michael. Wake up. It's a dream."

He punches my chest, kicking me and the covers wrapping his legs. “Let me out! I need to get out!”

I straddle him to fasten his arms to the bed, pinning his legs with my shins. The constraint may make things worse, but at least he won’t hurt himself.

His head thrashes, his new strength battling to free himself from my grasp. “No, no. I can’t get out. I can’t get out!” And then the Anlu’kyr wail leaves his throat. A high-pitched shriek that echoes into the garden and nearly pierces my eardrums.

I clasp my palm over his mouth. “Michael! Wake up!”

His eyes fly open, the fierce gaze fixing on my face, followed by the requisite scowl. I remove my hand and return it to his wrist.

“Flanagan. What the fuck?” His attention bounces to the garden doors before returning. Always checking his way out, looking for the open window, the nearest escape.

“You were dreaming.”

“Is that why you’ve got me fastened to the bloody bed?” His gaze flickers down my body, eyeing my erection before returning to study my lips.

I can’t help a smirk. He fought his attraction to me, but the instant magnetism between us blossomed from the first look. He undressed me with his eyes, then told me he wasn’t into men. We’re compatible Channelers, opposites of equal strength. Attraction was inevitable.

“What were you dreaming?” I ask, keeping my voice steady, shoving away the beast’s urge to chain the boy down so I know he’s safe.

He checks the open door again. “Nothing. It was—nothing.”

I lower my body over his, aligning myself, letting his wrists go to lean on my elbows and cup his head. He’s fully hard now and hisses as our shafts meet, hips thrusting for friction. The reaction I want.

“Fuck, Flanagan.” He grips my waist, fingers digging into skin.

I stroke his temples with my thumbs and undulate to give idle stimulation. A sigh leaves his lips and mine. My body draws a gentle tingle

of Flame from his. The day's tension falls from weary muscles. Finally, I'm skin to skin with the man who's plagued my thoughts all day.

"It's important," I whisper. "I need to know."

He avoids my eyes. "It was just a dream."

"It was a nightmare."

"Okay, fine, a nightmare. It's nothing. I used to get it all the time as a kid. Thought I was over it. It's always the same. I'm trapped in this dark place with no air. It's black and hard to breathe, and..." He looks again to the open door.

I sigh with relief. It wasn't a visit from Alexei. He wouldn't trap the boy in darkness. He's more likely to seduce him with an orgy of nymphs. "Is it a memory? Do you know why you fear small spaces?"

His frown returns. "I don't fear them. I just don't like them."

His answer draws a smile. He's terrified and severely claustrophobic yet loathe to admit his weakness. I'd like to know the origin of his phobia. The dream sounds like a memory. Goddess forbid I ever meet the person who did that to him. The beast growls in agreement. I will shred them to a bloody mess and eat their remains.

Stroking his lips with mine, I thrust till he grinds against me. I long to be inside him. The beast hungers to pin him down and fuck him till he's bruised and sore. He's never been with a man before me and still fights his needs. I know he wants more because he begged me during his second Haze. Begged for my fingers, my cock. The Flame frees our deepest desires, melting all the conditioned blocks and social insecurities that prevent pleasure.

I glide my mouth across his again, tasting his fresh-apple scent and the salt of his sweat. His lips part. He wants more, but he grimaces.

"What?" I ask.

"You're hairy."

I bury my beard into the sensitive area beneath his jaw, brushing along to his ear and nipping with extended incisors. I'm hairy, and he doesn't have a single bristle. His Anlu'kyr skin is as smooth as a woman's. He feigns a disgusted sound but shivers.

“And you like it,” I growl into his ear.

“It’s all right.”

Leaning away to see his grin, I find myself joining in with one of my own.

Michael reaches to stroke fingers along the claw marks down the left side of my face, no more than white lines now. “It’s healed,” he says with wonder.

“Yes.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” He tilts his chin. “Give me that kiss, Wolfman.”

I take his mouth and bury my tongue, grasping his head to push as deep as I can. He matches my fervor. His fingers slide into my hair, hips arching as his tongue meets mine.

The beast surges to the surface. I’m too depleted to exert relentless control. I soon leave his mouth to bite my way down his neck to a nipple. He squirms beneath my attention. I wrap one hand around his throat and grip the flesh of his waist to hold him still, then suck deep on his hardened nub, applying pressure with sharp teeth.

“Aah. That—that hurts. But it’s kinda nice. Yeah, keep doing that.”

Shifting to knee his legs apart, I settle between them, then push my hand down to his groin. And beneath. “Widen your legs.” My voice grates, the beast riding every syllable.

Michael does as I ask, though his body shudders. When my middle digit meets his sphincter, his grip in my hair tightens. “Fuck, fuck,” he hisses, even as he pushes down to meet the pressure.

I speak into his ear. “Do you want this?” The beast doesn’t care. It would take him regardless, but I will never let it hurt my boy.

There’s a long pause. Though his body squirms against my finger, he asks, “Are you okay? You seem...intense. You know, more intense than usual. Don’t get me wrong, I love it, but I need to know you’re all right.”

My heart aches. “I’m fine. I’m...in need of you.”

He checks my eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Then take what you need.”

The beast howls its triumph. *Jumalatar auta minua*. How I yearn to fuck the man, but he's not ready, and I'm too dangerous. I would only cause him pain. "I will never hurt you."

"I know. I like you intense, Wolfy."

I bring my finger to his mouth. "Suck." With his eyes fixed to mine, he takes in the whole digit and circles it with his tongue.

"Bring your knees up and open your legs." I'm unable to keep the rumble from my voice.

He eyes me, still wary, but does as I ask.

Returning my finger to his tight bud, I watch every change in his expression as I slowly, carefully, push inside.

Michael grimaces, grasps my hair again, and gasps as his rocking pelvis slides it deeper.

I wrap my fist in his thick hair, tug back his head to hold him in place, and take his swollen nipple into my mouth again. I grip it between my teeth, and when he's arching into the bite, I push my finger in as far as it will go, into my boy, into smooth, velvet heat. Then I take his mouth to swallow his moans.

He tenses, gripping me, panting.

"Relax," I whisper against his lips and glide my finger across his gland.

His eyes fly open. "Oh man, that is so... Do that again."

I bury my tongue in his open mouth and give him what he wants, fucking his hole with rhythmic strokes. He shudders and groans into my kiss, writhing to take me deeper.

The beast clambers to ram in hard, add another finger, a fist, and then my cock. I strain muscles to hold back, to keep my rhythm smooth.

He pulls away from the kiss. "I need your mouth, Flanagan. I need your mouth on me. Please. Don't take your fucking finger out."

I smile down at my bossy lover. "My name is Gabriel."

"Gabriel," he breathes. And I see recognition in his eyes. He remembers me helping him in the cage. He never said. I'm relieved. I was unsure how he would react. Does he remember more? The day he spent on my lap. In my bed.

With my finger left in place, I slide down to kneel between his legs, lean over, and without ceremony, swallow his hard length to the base. He smells of musk and sweat.

He cries out, rising to meet my mouth. “Whoa! Flan—Gabriel, go easy.”

I have no intention of going easy.

Deep throating his precious member, I squeeze his hip to encourage him to thrust. I want him to fuck my throat while I fill him. To come so hard he never looks to another for what he needs.

Michael’s tentative, trying to pull out and give me air. I fuck his hole, rub his gland, and suck.

His hips rise off the bed. “Oh, my... What the...? Shit, Flanagan.”

He soon gives in, grabbing my hair on both sides of my head for a hold and thrusting into my throat and back onto my finger. His moans increase. His grip tightens. His thrashing hips fill my mouth with the length of his cock deeper and faster. The beast revels in every cry from his lips.

“Oh, fuck. Gabriel. That feels amazing. I’m—I’m gonna come.” His whole body tenses, he arches off the bed, and with a long cry, hot fluid and Flame shoot down my gullet.

The beast crashes to the forefront, lengthening my incisors, shifting from its tethers. *Mine*.

Michael’s eyes widen as I rise to straddle his chest. He’s still panting from his orgasm. “Flanagan? What—”

I pin him down with a hand over his throat. “Don’t move. Don’t speak.”

Leaning my pelvis closer to his face, I take my hard erection in hand and jerk it with firm and furious strokes. The beast wants to bite. To mark. I can barely hold it back. Anlu’kyr might be immune to the Lycanthrope virus, but humans are not. And Michael is part human. I’ve got to give the beast something. This will have to do.

Michael looks up, watching me, fear in his eyes but also lust and wonder. He strokes my thighs, encourages me with his grip. My heart yearns for him.

Gazing down at his bewitching face through my mess of hair, I stroke myself till my balls burn and fire shoots through my cock. My seed lands on

his jaw, his neck, his lips, and I'm unable to prevent my fangs from dropping or the beast's victory growl from leaving my throat.

Michael flinches from the unnatural sound and pales, but he doesn't take his eyes off me.

I lick his lips clean, then spread the semen from his neck down and across his nipple, gathering enough to cover his genitals. I need him in my scent, not Alexei's.

Michael stiffens, his brow tight, but lets me do this without complaint. I collapse beside him, bone-tired, breathing hard. He strokes my chest as we settle. My fangs retract. Satisfied, the beast slips back into its darkness. Michael watches me as if I'm something new and curious. Fear still touches his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I—I'm sorry." It's all I've got. What explanation can I give? I'm a monster. It's better he understands that.

"Are you kidding? That was off the charts. I didn't know blow jobs like that existed." He grins—one of his handsome flashes of white teeth with which I'm sure he's charmed many a woman. "You know, if you need to go again, I'm here all week."

I manage a weary smile. "Believe me, that wasn't the last."

He goes to slide away, and without thought, I circle his waist to stop him, drawing him closer.

"I'm just gonna get a cloth," he says.

How do I explain? The beast will not let him remove my smell. He'll be wearing my cum till morning, and even then, it will take every ounce of control for me to allow him to wash.

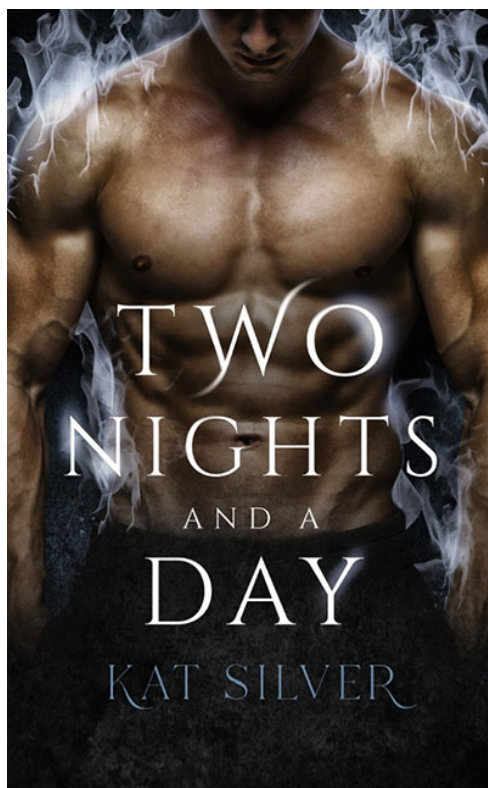
He must see something in my eyes. "It's okay. I'll stay." He gathers my plaits, stroking them away from my face. "Go to sleep, Wolfman. I'll be here when you wake."

Pulling him close, I bury my face in his hair, his sweet scent. "Where did you come from? My beautiful Whisperer."

"I wish I knew," a tired voice says.



Free Extra!



Hi, Fellow Readers. Really hope you enjoyed Book 1 of the Flame Born series. It's such a pleasure to share it with you. Please consider giving the book a review on your favourite book retailer. Reviews help so much. Thank you. If you're interested, there is a complimentary extra to Dark Flame, called Two Nights and a Day. It's a novelette sized story that details the day Michael spent in a Haze trance with Flanagan.

It's completely free to download. However, it is an unapologetic erotica. No holds barred dirty kinky stuff. So, if that's not your thing, best not to read. But if it is, it's nine chapters of in-depth naked naughty with our two guys, Flanagan and Michael.

There are a few chapters in Flanagan's point of view, and important reveals about both guys. Oh, and also a buried clue. But if you prefer not to read this, don't worry, the reveals will come in Book 2 (Dark Fate) as well.

For those who love a touch of in-depth explicit kink, Two Nights and a Day is available on my website.

<https://www.authorkatsilver.com/>

If you don't want to miss news on the next book in series, you can always join my [reader group on Facebook](#). We're very friendly, and don't bite. Much. I post teasers and cover reveals in there, so don't miss out. Join now.

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Thank you so much for reading.

Peace and hugs.

Kat



About the Author

I'm a simple northern English lass with an addiction to writing, as well as all things romance. Also addicted to cats, cat videos, and anything with, you know, cats. And there's chocolate, and tea, coffee too, and rainy Sundays. Okay, I have many addictions. But my first love has always been story in all its forms. From movies to books to anecdotes told over a beer at the local pub, if we're sharing a story, I'm all ears. And if it's fantasy with sexy heroes and vampires and lots of angst, I'm probably drooling. Come in, pour yourself a tea, and kick your shoes off. Let me tell you a story.

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