

# BROKEN PENTACLE

EDEN RIVERS

Loose Id

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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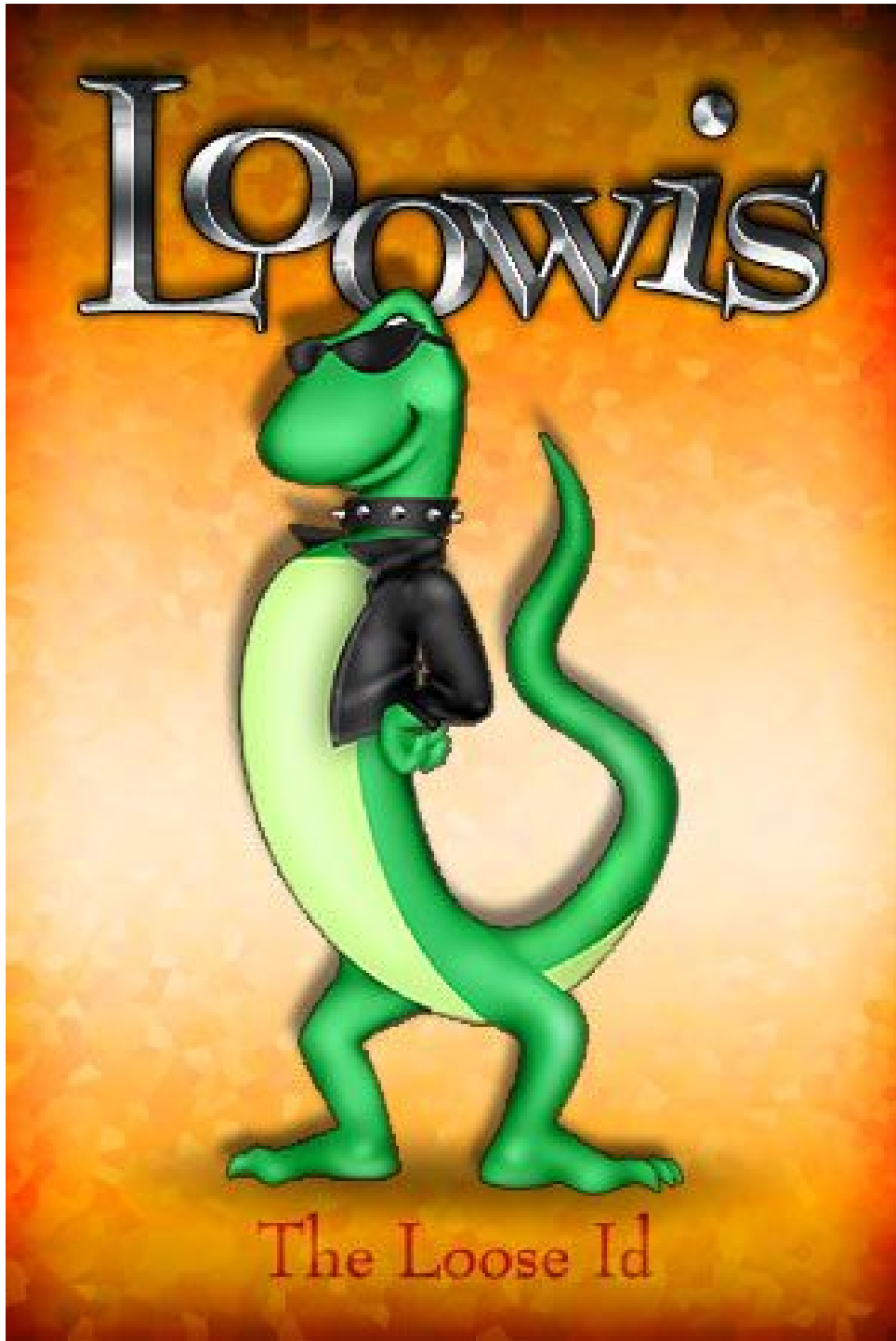
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ISBN 978-1-59632-760-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Ann M. Curtis  
Cover Artist: Anne Cain



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## Chapter One

*Blood dripped down Sky's forearm and along her wrist, pooling in her cupped palm. She stared at the lash mark along her forearm, trying to make sense of the wound. She couldn't remember receiving it. As she fought toward full consciousness, she bucked against the leather straps securing her to the rough stone wall.*

*"Fuck. Oh, gods, please! No more! Anything, I'll do anything! Just fucking stop! Please -- oh, gods..." A crack of the whip, and Alec's voice trailed off into a tortured moan.*

*Snapping her head up so fast she smashed the back against the wall, she stared in horror as the rogue witch tore a final strip across Alec's back. Red flecks spattered Jaimis's white shirt, and his mouth twisted into a cruel grin.*

*"No." Her voice caught in her throat, parched and raw, and she dragged her tongue across her cracked lips, seeking moisture.*

*"No!" Louder this time, but Jaimis paid her no mind as he cleaned the vicious length of leather with a bloodstained cloth. Trembling, Alec slouched against his chains, making sounds like a wounded animal.*

*Oh goddess, make it stop! As the rogue witch placed the whip on a low table and reached for his belt buckle, Sky struggled against the leather straps that cut into her chest, wrists, and ankles.*

*Reaching so deep that she shook with effort, she searched for some remnant of power. But the dampening spell held her in a stranglehold, choking off not only her magic, but also her will. Even though she closed her eyes tight, Alec's panicked whimpers and the rouge witch's exalted groans painted a grisly tableau.*

*"Get off him! Leave him alone, you sick fuck!" The urge to kill roared through her, alien and bitter. But even if she could escape the dampening spell he'd set, she sensed the rogue witch had carved out some vital part of her when he'd peeled away select memories,*

*leaving her not only battered and bleeding but also unable to recall specifics of how he'd violated her. Her back was peeled raw, yet she couldn't recall the cut of the lash.*

*"Leave! Him! Alone!"*

*As Alec's cries rose to a crescendo, reason gave way to instinct, and she opened her eyes -- and watched Jaimis run his fingers along the bloody stripes on Alec's back as he rode him like an animal. Although Alec swore and pleaded, the dampening spell locked him in its stranglehold, rendering him unable to help himself.*

*Worse than all those horrors, Sky felt Jaimis's power swell like a tidal wave, swirling through the confinement of the dungeon in a wall of heat and victory. Feeding on Alec's blood -- on their blood -- augmenting his inborn gifts as he bled their power.*

*Screams ripped from her throat, and rage burned hot and thick as the world seemed to dip and buck around her, gravity and reason itself upended by terror.*

*"Sky, stop! Enough!"*

*Kill.* "Harm none" ceased to exist as a rational edict in a world where hell walked and betrayal wrote itself in blood. Confused, she felt her magic gather itself to strike -- horribly off center, broken, but unhindered by the dampening spell. Wind brushed her hair against her cheeks as her power tried to find the proper channels to surface, balked, and then threw itself upward, raw and uncontrolled.

"You're safe -- Skyler, stand down!" The command in the voice triggered a rush of defiance, but when warm fingers lifted her hair away from her face and stroked her cheek, her fury fell away, and she pulled the coil of energy back into herself. As the world bucked around her again, he cupped her chin in his palm and pulled her close with his other arm, his scent blocking out the remnants of fear.

Sky fought the urge to curl into a fetal position and whimper like a wounded animal. "What the fuck?"

"First part -- hell of a bad dream." Zach continued to stroke her face as she trembled through the aftermath of the recurring nightmare. "Second part -- air turbulence. Thunderstorms all across Minnesota. Now lean back and let me get your seatbelt latched."

Although she'd never met Zach before he showed up in Mexico to escort her back to the States -- as healed as she was going to get after a year's ministrations by the witch healers -- her body reacted to his scent like a child seeking candy. Once he had her seatbelt secured, he held her against him as the plane tilted and plunged. Rain lashed against the windows, and lightning ripped through the clouds

"Damn, we're going to die."

"Not by half. The elder witch hires on ex-military as pilots. I've seen Sorren's little jet come through hurricane-force winds. There was more risk you'd rip us apart with that fickle energy of yours while you were surfacing from your nightmare than of a plane crash." He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face until she met his eyes. "Back with me now?"

“Yeah, I’m back.” Zach let go of her chin, and despite herself, she settled into his embrace, turning away from the chaos outside and focusing on more interesting details.

Zach looked every bit the badass witch in his black jeans and black T-shirt, and she decided if push came to shove, she wouldn’t mind having him at her back. Seeing as the brimming-with-power, ex-cop bodyguard with Asian features and a body like a pro wrestler might end up being the only one standing between her and Jaimis, his steady strength reassured the hell out of her.

As for why his musky male scent worked its way through her and called up long-dormant flutters in her belly, at the moment, she’d be better off focusing on the wildly careening plane than the sudden surge of her libido. Fuck, the only thing she hated more than flying was putting her fate in someone else’s hands.

Sky risked a glance out the window as lightning licked across the sky and hoped the pilot felt more confident than she did. “We’re going to die.”

“Nope. Landing’s in ten minutes. Just enough time to go over the plan one more time.”

“The plan...” Sky clenched her hands on her lap. *Right. The plan.* She tilted her head forward so her long hair covered her face in a black veil, hiding her expression, though probably not her fear, from Zach.

Every mistake comes with payback, and hers had been colossal. But bottom line, she’d volunteered for this. Determination warred with fear. And won. She wiggled free of Zach’s embrace -- hell, the man’s biceps were nearly as big as her thighs -- squared her shoulders, and bit her lower lip.

“Right. The plan.” She began reciting, almost by rote. “One rogue witch, half insane from the blood rites he’s used to augment his power. As his ex-lover, I know him like no one else. Or at least, the part of him that’s still sane. As his victim, chances are I can lead Sorren’s people to him, following the blood tie the asshole carved between us so that the elder witch’s people can bring the rogue to heel.” Death would taste sweeter, in Jaimis’s case, but damn, she’d settle for justice.

Scared as she was, she had no regrets about signing on for this mission. For what Jaimis had done to her, to Alec, to countless others, she’d travel to hell and back to stop him and his followers from painting the land in blood.

The plane tilted perilously. She swallowed hard as she watched forks of lightning flicker past the wing. “As an extra bonus, the bastard will do anything to find me and finish me off, eager to seek revenge for the scars Alec pasted across his face while I distracted him, and we got the fuck out of there.”

Zach reached for her wrist, and she allowed the caress as he stroked his fingers along her wrist. “I’ll keep you safe, Skyler. I swear I will.”

“Right. Your job -- bodyguard. My job -- bait.”

\* \* \* \* \*



Sky shivered as hot water pelted her. Tilting her head to the side, she shifted her hair over her shoulders until it covered her breasts like a black cloak. The pulsing shower spray pounded the knotted muscles across her back and shoulders.

Without warning, power sizzled across her senses, rising unbidden. Although she couldn't detect any obvious signs of danger, her instincts simmered on high alert.

"Chill!" Closing her eyes, she grounded the energy, repeating the litany that had kept her sane from the moment she stepped back onto U.S. soil eight hours ago.

*I'm safe. I'm safe. I'm safe. I'm fucking safe.*

Dropping her psychic shields just enough to get a feel for her surroundings, she found everything as it should be. Despite her overprotective bodyguard's reluctance to leave her alone for so much as a shower, at the moment, Zach didn't have much more on his mind than a midnight snack and snippets of past sexual encounters. Quickly raising her shields to block out unwanted psychic chatter and feeling guilty for spying on her bodyguard, Sky leaned back into the spray and willed her tight muscles to relax.

Seeking comfort, she let her mind stray back to Zach's arms around her, like warm bands of steel, easing her from her nightmare. Something inside her stretched like a waking cat, arched its back, and luxuriated in his scent -- sharp, like crushed dandelions, yet warm with a touch of male sweat and brushed with overtones of cinnamon. Scents she associated with strength. And kindness.

Fear sloughed off her as she recalled the press of his shoulder against hers, the deep resonance of his voice. Bless it, she hadn't reacted to anyone like that since she and Alec lay convalescing together in the elder witch's gardens during the weeks following Jaimis's attack, over a year ago. She'd explained away her fascination with Alec as a temporary connection between two witches who had traveled to hell and walked out alive, if not whole.

Letting her mind follow the soothing distraction, she imagined Zach's hands on her skin as she dragged the slick bar of soap across her shoulders. Strong. Rugged. Hands as capable of handling a brawl or weaving the intricate patterns of spells. Or tracing lazy circles around her breasts, moving inward in slow spirals until he traced the puckered outline of her areola.

*Crooning reassurance, he cupped her chin with his roughened palm and, coaxing her face up, leaned down to kiss her. He tasted like salt and cinnamon, so tempting that her belly clenched in anticipation. Only a few inches taller than she was, he pulled her against him, pressing his erect cock against her wet skin, just above its target. The kiss lulled her, held off the fear as his tongue traded tender thrusts with hers.*

*His hands traced her spine, playing under the drenched length of her hair and waking more fire than she thought she still held inside her. Not that she hadn't had lovers since Jaimis's attack. She'd made a point of seeking out gentle partners to help further her healing. Mostly women, but she took a man to her bed upon occasion. Still, this felt -- new. Her desire for Zach rose genuine and fresh, not bidden by determination and strength.*

*When he lifted her against the cool tiles of the shower and pressed her back against the wall, she closed her eyes and curled her legs around his hips, wriggling along his body as he eased her dripping pussy over his shaft. She cried out when his thick cock slid home, her arousal tinged with anxiety.*

*Zach held her as if she were weightless, not even straining as he rocked her in his arms. He drew in and out in small motions, dragging his skin across her clit with each thrust. Tilting her head, Sky opened her eyes and let the shower turn her world into a blur of fragmented color. Blue tiles. Zach's honey tan skin. Her raven black hair hanging between them, plastered to her pale breasts and his chest, trailing down until it disappeared from view where their bodies became one.*

*When he hit her sweet spot, angling his cock to press forward and up as he cradled his palms around her ass, she called out to him, frowning at the note of unease that crept into her voice when she yelled his name.*

*He gave her what she craved -- both the safety she needed, and the ardor she'd almost forgotten. His thrusts reached a spot deep inside that she'd thought was dead to pleasure, driving her higher. But then, fear danced around her like blue fog as she panted and rose over the crest, clenching and trembling so hard, she bit her lip and tasted blood. Her climax hit her like shock waves, and she clung to Zach as if only he could keep her from slipping into a black void painted with blood and terror.*

*"Please, Alec, don't leave me!"*

Thrown from her fantasy by the image of Alec's face, golden and wracked with passion, she dragged her fingers in a slow circle around her clit, determined to focus on the warm glow of her release, rather than her fright. As for the rest, it wouldn't do to dwell on why in the name of the goddess Zach had turned into Alec there at the end. *Just a fantasy. Doesn't have to mean anything.*

Bottom line, she'd worked off some stress and grounded herself -- as good a way as any to beat back the trepidation that had been her constant companion since the plane landed. She turned so the shower massaged her breasts, sensitizing her nipples, and flicked two fingers back-and-forth across her clit in feather-soft caresses, reluctant to let go of the erotic buzz. But then, something shifted, a vague disturbance. Sky bent down and shut off the water.

Seeking a source for the subtle shift in psychic energy, she tensed, her instincts on high alert. Unease rose to dread, then dread to choking fear. Without bothering to grab a towel, she flung herself out of the shower and raced barefoot and naked across the wooden floor, driven by pure instinct.

She sensed two agitated intruders, one male, one female. Jaimis's followers, the dark lords? Their unease made it impossible to skim any coherent thoughts, but both were on high alert, their adrenaline pumping, nerves jangled.

Her bare feet padded soundlessly against the carpet as she ran, fear compelling her forward. How could the rouge witch have tracked her down already?

*Flash.* The disconnect came so suddenly that she nearly lost her balance as light seemed to splinter around her. Dragged back to a time when she'd known him as lover -- not as torturer, not as rapist -- she tasted Jaimis's tongue, sharp with mint, on her lips. Now, the kiss strangled her, as cloying as his grandiose promises.

Shaking off the unwelcome piece of her past, she cursed the seemingly endless length of the hall, panting as she drove herself forward.

*Another flash.* Jaimis smiled as he forced her to whip Lena, her kidnapped roommate and former lover -- taunted her as he punished her with brutal blows after she helped Lena escape. Then, painted images of her coming death as he dragged her into a blood-blackened circle, an unwilling participant in a deadly witches' duel. She watched in horror as he raised his hands to summon spell-fire and claimed the lives of innocent witches.

With sheer grit, Sky shook herself free of the distracting vignettes. Flying down the stairs two at a time, she rushed toward the back door where she sensed the threat.

"Skyler?" Zach called out from the front of the safe house.

As she was dragged back in time again, light fragmented before her, then reformed into Alec's face, intent with worry as he swept her up in his concealing spell and led her away from the site of the duel, with Jaimis following close behind. Terrified, she'd uttered the faintest whimper. And the rogue witch had followed the sound right to them. Bepelled them. Chained them. Imprisoned them. Drained them of their powers.

*Dark. The crack of a whip. Pain. Alec's frantic, almost inhuman screams.*

*Fuck! Focus!*

She tasted fear on her tongue, sharp and sour. Damned if she'd let the few memories Jaimis had failed to carve away from those three days of hell suffocate her now. Throwing herself around the corner at the bottom of the stairs so fast she almost stumbled, she cursed and fixed her mind on the fact that she and Zach were about to fight one or two of Jaimis's dark lords. With any luck, they'd take them out and be one step closer to protecting other witches from their twisted blood rites.

Zach's footsteps pounded down the hall. Some fucking bodyguard if his reflexes were this slow. Summoning enough energy to send little shocks fizzing along the surface of her skin, Sky ducked into the mudroom to the right of the backdoor. Rather than trying to disarm the alarm system, one of the witches on the other side of the door melted the locks and burst into the cabin.

Half crazy with fear, Sky unleashed her power, ducked, and covered her head with her arms. With a roar, a chunk of plaster over the entryway tore loose and crashed down around the wild-eyed man in torn jeans and a ratty T-shirt who'd breached their defenses. Behind him, a red-haired witch raised her fist, murmured a spell, and steadied the crumbling ceiling.

“Sky, stand down! They’re friends! There’s no threat -- never was.” Rushing toward the crazed-looking witch with tangled brown hair, several days of razor stubble, and a good-sized gash on his jaw, Zach called out his own spell to steady the walls where long, gaping cracks riddled the drywall.

As if a breeze rushed through the room, Zach’s silky black hair rippled when his aura crackled to life, green and brimming with power. He moved with surprising grace for someone so muscular. With a shiver of fear, Sky sensed he’d do anything to protect the scraggly witch who’d invaded their safe house. Even from her.

Zach dove and pinned her against the wall, holding on so tight, she felt as if her ribs would crack. Murmuring words she only half registered, he attempted to soothe her. But her power burned through her brain, wild and fierce, as she called it home. Despite the June heat, she shivered as goose bumps broke out across her shower-drenched skin. She pressed herself against Zach’s chest, seeking warmth and comfort.

Her stomach clenched against the pain of calling back her broken magic. Zach steadied her as she swayed on her feet. A last clump of plaster hit the floor as the red-headed woman in beige pants and a green shirt touched the wild man’s jaw, summoning healing power to close the bloody gash. Shaking, Sky watched uneasily. Fuck, her back would still be a mass of scars if it weren’t for the work of a witch healer, and seeing one in action stirred up a heap of emotions.

“We’ve got to leave. I don’t know how Jaimis’s people tracked us this fast, but three men -- human paramilitary types -- found our base camp. They had maps with the route to this place highlighted.” The healer frowned and gestured impatiently toward the open door.

Zach grabbed a jacket from the mudroom and threw it over Sky’s shoulders. “Move! Follow Laura, and if all hell breaks loose, stay low and out of sight.” He marched her out into the night as the other two darted outside ahead of them.

As night air hit her wet skin, she shivered even more violently and clutched the oversized jacket tighter around her, chilled and longing for the dry heat of Mexico. Why in the *hell* had she come back here? She should have stayed down South -- where she was safe. Sky picked her way across the stone path, limping as she hurried toward the black SUV. She stumbled when a sharp stone poked her heel, and the tall, ragged-looking witch next to her reached out to cup his hand under her elbow.

With that small contact, she read him despite her shields, and recognition rocked through her with the force of an explosion. She gasped. “Sweet goddess, Alec!”

Her throat tightened, and a tide of remorse threatened to sweep her under. When she pulled up short, Laura gave her a not-so-gentle shove. “Reunion later. Fleeing for your life. *Now*. You’ll both be going with Zach. I’ll stay to shut up the house, make contact with Sorren, and lead anyone else Jaimis sends out tonight on a wild-goose chase. Won’t do to let Jaimis’s thugs catch you before we draw the rogue witch himself out of hiding.”

Shaken by the woman's brusque manner, Sky wondered if her life had much value beyond her role as bait. Not a question she wanted to devote much thought to, with Jaimis's dogs already nipping at their heels. When Sky stumbled again, Alec wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close to the heat of his chest as they made their way to Zach's SUV. As Zach started the engine, Alec half tossed her onto the back seat, then climbed in after her and slammed the door.

"Both of you, down on the floor," Zach commanded as he pulled out with a spray of gravel. He glanced at them in the rearview mirror. "My best guess is the only way Jaimis could have tracked you this soon, Alec, is if he's got one of our people working for him. A fucking spy. Just what we need. Hell, we knew the dark witch would send people after you -- hopefully come after you himself, if we play our cards right -- but the bastard must be mighty thirsty for revenge to move this damn fast."

Naked except for the old jacket Zach handed her back at the house, Sky crouched on the floor between the seats and resisted the urge to be sick. Only her determination to help catch Jaimis before he initiated any more dark lords into the art of blood rites kept her from insisting Zach drive to the airport and put her on the first plane back to Mexico. Alec crept forward until his cheek pressed against hers, and with a murmur of encouragement, he reached out to stroke her wet hair.

"They didn't tell me you'd signed on to try to draw Jaimis out of hiding." Concern vibrated through Alec's hoarse whisper.

Sweet goddess, she'd never known more than the reassuring touch of his hand to hers as they lay healing together, recuperating enough so they could travel to a safer location. But the sound of his voice captured her attention like that of a lover, and she fought the irrational urge to throw herself into his arms. Nothing more than a survivors' bond. Big fucking deal. Recognize it for what it was, and then move on. Except logic did nothing to abate the shimmers of enthusiasm that rippled through her when Alec stroked his thumb along her cheekbone.

"Hell, I'd sell my soul to see the dark witch dead. And no doubt Jaimis will come after me himself at some point, seeking revenge for the scars I painted across his chest when we escaped. But Sky, if I knew Sorren planned to drag you into this --"

"No one dragged me into anything." Despite herself, Sky pressed closer to the reassuring heat of his shoulder. "It's not just about Jaimis anymore. The witches he's recruited present an even greater threat. Five witches dead at the hands of Jaimis's dark lords in the past few months, and Jaimis's power base keeps growing. I played a part in creating this mess -- no matter how naïve I was at the time -- and damn it, I'm going to help --"

With a gasp, she swallowed her words as Alec kissed her, long and deep, desperate and searching, as if she stood between him and something too dark to name. Heat flushed her skin, driving away the chill of the night air, and despite herself, she pressed into the kiss. Hungry. Shaken. Eager to taste more of him. Fuck, the chord that trembled deep inside her

insisted that whatever ties she felt with Alec had nothing to do with shared history -- and everything to do with the wild, wanton wail of two souls slamming up against each other in the night. Then he pulled away, creeping halfway up onto the seat to rummage around in the back, and she struggled to catch her breath.

"Here's a blanket. Cover up." Settling close to her on the floor, Alec helped her spread a scratchy wool blanket over her bare legs.

They huddled together, jostled and rattled by every bump as Zach traveled the rural roads at breakneck speed, and she tried to make sense of how Alec had gotten under her skin in a matter of moments. When she rested her head on her folded knees, he wrapped his arms around her and held on so tight she almost believed he could piece both of them back together through sheer force of will.

Never mind logic, or the fact that she was so off balance being back in the States, she might as well be out of her mind -- nothing explained her reaction to the feel of his embrace. Zach's hug on the plane earlier had fairly screamed *sex*, heady and irresistible, but Alec's conveyed something deeper. If she tried to give the elusive, irrational quality of his touch a name, Sky suspected she'd end up one step shy of sane and a few leaps beyond confused.

Any witch worth her spells knew attraction and links between witches followed a chemistry all their own. Trying to decipher the formula would only distract her from the task at hand. With the dark lords on their trail, mistakes could well prove fatal.

\* \* \* \* \*

While Sky struggled to come up with something to ease the awkward silence between them, Alec settled in the armchair at the foot of her bed. Well, someone's bed. Zach said the second safe house belonged to witches who were on a PR trip to Canada, trying to ensure that Jaimis's following of dark lords -- a misnomer, since he'd recruited as many female as male witches -- wouldn't spread north.

Alec shifted awkwardly, as if he were trying to decide what to do with his hands. "You look good."

"Not being cut up to the consistency of hamburger suits me."

Alec winced, and she regretted her cheeky reply. You'd think after everything that happened she could learn to control her mouth. Some time past midnight but a long time shy of dawn -- and still shaken by the evidence that Jaimis knew she and Alec were back in the States -- her self-control seemed limited at best.

"Sorry. It's just strange...seeing you again." If anyone had written an etiquette book on reuniting with fellow trauma victims, she had yet to read it. "I don't know what to say to you -- where to start."

The dizzying pull toward him flared hot again, ripping through her until she clenched her nails into her palms to fight the urge to reach out and run her hands along his chest.

After what Jaimis had done to her, she'd thought she'd lost the ability to feel intense arousal, her lust as broken as her magic.

But in a handful of hours, two men had woken something raw and hot from its year-long slumber. Goddess help her, she didn't want to think about what might happen if the beast came out to play. Sky the Dom had died in Jaimis's basement dungeon, and she had neither the will nor the energy to reinvent herself with the one person who knew exactly what she'd suffered at the rogue's hand. Now Zach...that held possibilities. But Alec, goddess, how could she even *hold* him without sinking back into the horrors?

Alec moved from the chair to the end of the bed, careful not to crowd her but obviously seeking contact. With a shaky breath, Sky reached out and touched his hand. Although her shields held at full force, thoughts and images leaped across at the contact. Mostly she saw fragments from the time he'd spent convalescing in Sweden. Go figure. The senator managed to end up at a mountain resort, and she got a year with a bunch of goats in Mexico. *Guess it was a fitting punishment.*

When Alec winced, she knew he'd picked up that last bit. Whatever fragile connection stretched between them, her psychic abilities latched onto the link and refused to let go.

"Senator Kouklakis died -- I got a new identity to go with the Swedish vacation. Alec Brennan, eccentric drifter."

"You miss it? Political life?" Images of him wheeling and dealing on the Senate floor flooded her head. Of course he missed it. "Hey, I've got my shields up a mile high. Stay out of my head."

"Not trying to get in it. I'm shielded, too." He hesitated, then reached up to push a mass of wavy brown hair away from his face. "And I miss politics less than I thought. What's happening now, dealing with Jaimis, this is more important."

Sky watched in fascination as he worried strands of hair between his thumb and forefinger. With his hair wild around his shoulders, he looked fierce and untamed. Golden skin stretched across lean, runner's muscles, interrupted only by his jade green boxer shorts.

Those first few weeks they'd spent healing at Sorren's estate, Alec had clung to the trappings of civilization, wrapping himself in designer suits, regardless of his raw back and battered psyche. But gone were the two-hundred-dollar haircut, blond highlights, and butter-soft shoes that probably cost more than her house. Strike that -- her former house, long since consigned to ashes by a bunch of anti-witch vigilantes.

"The wild man image suits you." Despite herself, she inched closer, drawn by the musky male scent mingled with traces of soap and shampoo. She hesitated, then rested her palm over his wrist. A riot of heat rose from her belly and spread upward toward her breasts.

"I missed you, after Sorren moved us out of the country to safer ground." Something about him plucked an emotional chord deep inside her.

The man was almost old enough to be her father -- never mind the deceptive youthfulness characteristic of witches. Hell, she was closer in age to his son, Matt, than she was to Alec. And yet, the pull between them was unmistakable.

Feeling vulnerable in the face of emotions she couldn't understand, Sky wrapped the terrycloth robe tighter around her, a thin shield between her and disappointment. Alec regarded her, his clear, brown eyes flecked with amber, and when the silence stretched between them, she looked down at her legs crossed yoga-style on the blue bedspread.

"Your hair's longer. I like it that way, like a black waterfall down your back." Alec swallowed audibly. "You don't wear it long to hide -- I mean, you don't still have..."

The pain in his voice spurred her into action. "No. Here, see?" She untied the loosely knotted belt of her borrowed robe, let the folds of terrycloth drop around her waist, turned, and lifted her hair clear of her back. "The witch healers did their jobs well."

Bending forward, she let him study the unmarred expanse of skin. She shivered when he trailed his fingers along her spine and explored smooth flesh where she knew he remembered a mess of healing lacerations. Relaxing under his gentle exploration, she let her face rest on her arms and enjoyed the liquid fire that followed his touch along her skin.

"Only one lash was too deep to erase the scar." *Never mind the million scars on the inside.* She sat up and lifted the soft terrycloth clear of her left thigh, guiding Alec's hand over the crescent moon-shaped scar no longer than her thumb.

"Mine's here." Alec eased the boxers down on his right side, revealing a jagged scar a hand span long across his hip. "The rest healed clean."

Without thinking, Sky bent down and kissed the tip of the puckered flesh, then trailed a row of kisses along the length of the scar. Startled, she felt Alec claw his way into her head again, hungry and amazed at her casual acceptance of the ugly mark.

"What Jaimis did to us, the way he tied our fates together, it's like he was some sort of dark artist..." Alec's breath came in short gasps as Sky kissed her way along the length of the raised line of tissue again. "And after a point, he'd shed so much of our blood that it was like mixing paint, blending the colors until he left some of each of us with the other."

*Fuck. Damned if she'd let him see her cry.* "Those six weeks when we were too sick to travel, you could always think of something to make me laugh through the pain."

She left the rest unsaid. *And you were the only one who could help me cry.*

"That's what you want? To cry? Or to laugh?" Alec helped her sit up beside him, cradling her chin in his palm, and she leaned forward, seeking a kiss, a caress, anything to ease the thirst she had for him. "Because whatever we do here tonight, I need to understand what you need."

"Zach..."

"Is busy playing guard dog downstairs. He and I go way back, and he's not going to waste any time developing opinions about how we spend our nights." Leaning close enough



that his chest brushed her bare breasts, Alec cradled his palm at the back of her neck. “No tears tonight. Trust me.”

Sky’s spine went rigid, and she pulled away. For a moment, she’d almost been able to imagine this unfolding to its logical conclusion, with her easing into his arms and tasting his skin as he helped her rediscover a part of herself she’d left behind. But *trust*? Thanks to the rogue witch, the word no longer held any meaning for her.

“Gods, Sky, I can’t believe I said that. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to trust someone again myself, not after what happened.” Anguish tinged his words, and he scowled. He scooted back to give her more space, massaging the back of his neck as his breath escaped in a harsh sigh. “Look, forget trust. Will you just let me hold you?”

“The part of me that knew how to love, that tasted wild passion, all that died a year ago. I don’t have anything you could possibly want.” Even as she uttered her protest, heat flooded her cheeks at the thought of fantasizing about Zach in the shower earlier -- and the languid beast waking deep inside her, stretching and yearning to be free.

Besides, even if she didn’t have anything to offer Alec, he had something she wanted more than life and breath itself.

*Her memories.*

Every scene Jaimis had erased from her mind, the cleaving of her power he’d wrought when he carved away entire sequences of time -- Alec had witnessed it all. And the only thing she wanted more than to undermine Jaimis’s ring of dark lords -- protecting others where she’d failed to save herself -- was to reclaim her lost memories. She needed those missing pieces to heal her shattered aura and reclaim her magic.

“I can’t give you what you need,” Alex said, his voice tight. “Jaimis failed when he tried to fuck with my mind, so where you have gaps, I have vivid memories of every agony, every indignity I suffered.”

Folding in on herself, Sky grabbed her knees, pulled them close to her body, and rocked back and forth, trying to defuse the rising tide of panic.

“I don’t *ever* talk about what happened -- not to anyone. And I can’t...” His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard. When he continued, his words were as gentle as a caress. “I can’t even put into words what he did to you. Please, in the name of the gods, don’t ask me to. When all is said and done, you’re better off with the holes in your memory.”

As she rocked harder, fighting back despair, Alec moved next to her again and lifted her onto his lap. Too startled to protest, she let him fold his arms around her, lulled by the heat of his body. Maybe it came down to this then -- the only thing they felt able to give each other. Skin on skin. Simple comfort.

“Not a chance, witch. You’re worth more than a bit of physical proximity.”

She caught the echo of his thoughts drifting past her shields -- *We’re worth more than that.*

Then he snorted softly, and before long, the sound blossomed into a laugh. “The joke’s on me, witch. Because for the first time in a year, a quick roll on the sheets holds more appeal than I like to admit. My body’s ready and eager...”

Sky felt him swell against her bottom, and what had been a natural intimacy became awkward. She squirmed out of his lap.

“But we’re not going to go there tonight. Not with you thinking a quick roll on the sheets is all we can give each other.” His jaw clenched in a firm line, anger and determination surrounded him and lashed against her psychic defenses.

“Right.” With her temper rising, Sky shrugged on the robe she’d borrowed. “No great loss. The dark witch pretty much ruined sex for me, anyway. Can’t exactly enjoy an edge anymore, after what happened, and plain vanilla’s never been my flavor.”

The pain in his eyes lanced through her, eliciting a sympathetic twinge of anguish deep in her gut. He got up and paced the length of the bedroom, then circled back and faced her.

“I can’t give you your memories, can’t offer what you want most.” When he met her eyes, she tried to hide the bitter disappointment mirrored there, but when he winced and looked down at his hands, she knew he’d seen her pain. “But maybe I can do something for you. Wait here.”

Without further explanation, he slipped out of the room and closed the door behind him. Exhausted, Sky sprawled back against the pillows and listened to his footsteps retreating down the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Alec, you all right?” Zach’s voice drifted in from the living room.

Rummaging through the refrigerator, Alec scowled. Gods, he could only handle one piece of his past at a time! Zach had called several times while he was in Sweden, but Alec hadn’t been much for talking at that point. Not even to someone he’d known as long as Zach.

With a noncommittal grunt, he continued to sort through a wealth of food, filled with new appreciation for Sorren’s plan to keep a series of safe houses stocked and ready to inhabit while they played cat and mouse with Jaimis. What Sorren didn’t know was that Alec planned to play the cat, rather than the mouse. But that could wait until later.

Grabbing a container of whipped topping, he set it on the counter and followed it with a container of mango yogurt, a wedge of cantaloupe, some strawberries, and a bowl of blueberries. Piling everything on a platter, he added a banana and a peach from the bowl on the counter and then searched the cupboards until he found a jar of honey. Mumbling good night to Zach as he headed for the stairs, Alec hurried back to Sky.

If he stopped to wonder what in the blessed world he was doing, he doubted he could come up with a suitable answer. But for the first time since Jaimis got his hands on them

after the grand duel, his body screamed for release. And since neither he nor Sky were ready for what he wanted to do with her, *her* release would have to satisfy him for now.

## Chapter Two

Alec knocked on the door before opening it, all too aware of the fact that her nerves had to be as jumpy as his. “Still awake?”

He’d already scared her half out of her mind once tonight. As he navigated the door with the platter balanced on one hand, he wished he and Laura had taken the time to let Zach know they were coming earlier. But the wards were keyed to let them pass -- in case of just such an emergency -- and with Jaimis’s goons on their heels, they never thought twice about crashing into the cabin unannounced.

“Hungry?” Sky eyed the platter, as if the fruit might jump up and bite her, and drew back further into her nest of pillows.

“Starved.” He gave her a grin. “But that particular menu’s going to have to wait. This is all for you.” He went into the bathroom and set the platter on the marble counter between the two sinks.

Kneeling, he turned on the tap and tested the water on his wrist before lowering the drain. As he’d hoped, Sky followed him into the small room, curiosity brimming through her mind like fluttering moths.

“We already showered, in case you’ve forgotten.” She leaned back against the sink and popped a blueberry into her mouth.

“This is about getting messy, not clean. Come on, strip down and hop into the tub.” Although he kept his tone light, she balked. He sighed, though not loud enough for her to notice. *Go slow*. “Look, I won’t make the mistake of asking you to trust me again, but I will promise not to touch you tonight -- no skin on skin.”

A few minutes passed. Finally, she dropped her robe and stepped into the bathtub. His heart crawled into his throat, all but cutting off his air supply. For a moment, images of how he’d last seen her, bruised and bloodied and covered with bandages, threatened to spoil his

chance to get her to relax around him. He forced the uncomfortable memories from his mind and focused instead on the graceful movements of her legs as she tested the water and then lowered herself into the tub.

Sky let out a sigh of contentment. “Feels good. Nice and hot. And I remember you that way too, you know -- broken and bleeding -- when my guard slips. You don’t have to worry about ruining things if I pick up ugly tidbits of the past from you. But do keep in mind that I can’t seem to shake you out of my head. My psychic gifts are formidable to begin with, and there’s also a connection of sorts between us. In any case, you’re not going to get a lot of privacy around me.”

Bless it, interacting with Sky was a sequence of pleasant emotions intermingled with sucker punches hard enough to knock the wind out of him. “Right, thanks for the reminder. Not much privacy for you, either, I’m afraid. And, since you’re wondering, the fruit’s not exactly for eating.”

As he folded a towel and tucked it behind her head, she settled deeper into the filling tub. Her breasts were clear of the water, and her nipples formed chilly little peaks, the flesh around them puckered in the relatively cool air. Her hair floated around her in the bubbling ripples, like little black fish swimming around her body. Her skin shone pale in contrast to the black porcelain tub, and she regarded him with eerily light blue eyes, waiting to see what came next. Watching intently, he shut off the tap before the water covered her belly and ribs. He jumped when she grabbed his wrist.

“I’m so sorry, Alec -- for everything.”

The depth of her regret arced across the touch and swamped him with feelings too dark to name. “The blame belongs to the dark witch, not to you.” Clenching his jaw against his own share of regrets, he forced himself to add, “And not to me.”

For months, he’d second-guessed every move he’d made as he attempted to spirit Sky away from the circle after the grand duel. If only he’d chosen another path. If he’d been faster. If he’d hidden them better...

“Bless it, you’re stewing in just as much guilt as I am. But it’s my choices that brought me to that circle. My shortcomings that dragged you into the whole mess.”

Alec shook his head. “My loyalty to Sorren, and everything the elder witch stands for in his fight against rogues like Jaimis, dragged me into *the whole mess*. You can’t claim the blame for my choices, Sky. But no more of that tonight.” Alec moved the platter of fruit to the floor beside the tub and then settled on the scatter rug within reach of Sky. “Tonight’s flavor is tutti-frutti. Absolutely no vanilla. But no edge, either.”

Sky’s eyes widened when he opened the yogurt container and dipped a strawberry into the creamy mix. She never looked away as he withdrew the coated berry and moved his hand to hold it just out of reach of her lips.

“Remember, I won’t put my hands on you tonight. You’re safe here.” Dipping his hand, he brushed a dab of yogurt onto her lips, using the tip of the strawberry like a paintbrush.

His balls crawled up under his skin as the tip of her tongue darted out to lick away the sweetness. Gods, they were linked so close, he tasted the yogurt through her, the fruity flavor mingling with the tart cream. If their connection -- no doubt formed either as they'd clung together in Jaimis's basement dungeon or during the weeks they spent as Sorren's guests before they were strong enough to travel -- held that strong, tonight might be a lot more interesting than he expected.

"Mmm, interesting is a good word for it. In any case, you may have just tasted yogurt through me, but I got to feel your sac tighten until your balls pulled up against you. A new sensation for me, being a woman and all. Not quite painful, but very tight, very hot, and --"

"Right, enough of that." Lowering his hand, Alec let the tip of the strawberry brush one nipple, then the other, leaving little peaks of cream behind.

She tensed, then relaxed into the sensation, tilting her head back farther against the folded towel supporting the nape of her neck. For a moment, her eyes even drifted shut, shrouded by thick, dark lashes. She looked up at him through half-slits, waiting for his next move.

Choosing a chunk of cantaloupe, he traced a circle over her ribs -- around, but not touching, her breasts. "Okay?"

As she settled back against the sloping porcelain at the far end of the tub, he felt her struggle with conflicting needs, her thoughts and emotions crackling across a link neither of them had tried to form.

Her craving for safety. Her desire for him. And the one that surprised him most -- her urge to crawl out of the tub and curl into a tiny ball on his lap, her knees tucked close to her chest, as he stroked her hair and rubbed her back.

"Not sure exactly where to go with this, but let's try something." He tossed the fruit back onto the platter and picked up the honey jar.

After dipping his fingers into the translucent amber substance, he drizzled a shaky circle over where her belly and hips cleared the shallow water. She moaned softly under her breath, and something inside him came unhinged. Shaking so hard he almost dropped the jar, he dipped his fingers again, painting lines and crazy loops across her breasts.

Her skin glistened under the sticky trails, and with everything in him, he wanted to dip his head and lick the sweetness from her nipples. His cock twitched as he lifted the container of blueberries and placed several around her breasts, using the honey to hold the tiny blue gems in place.

While he decorated her body, her hauntingly light blue eyes remained watchful. He felt her fever rise along with his own. Sensed her desire to feel his mouth on her breasts, to feel his hands on the gently rounded slopes of her ass. Her hunger to know the heat of his chest pressed close to hers, squishing the warm fruit between their bodies.

Awed, he let her thoughts settle somewhere close to his heart. Sure, they felt protective toward each other after what happened, and no doubt during the six weeks they'd spent together they'd become friends. But from the easy way Sky slid into his thoughts, her passion mirroring his own, he recognized the mystical link between witches he'd never expected to experience firsthand. Pure chemistry mixed with magic.

Pushing his hair away from his face with the back of his hand, Alec paused a moment before scattering the rest of the blueberries in a wild riot of color across her chest and belly. When he opened the plastic container of whipped cream, she laughed. But she swallowed back her mirth as he lathered white peaks across each breast using a wedge of cantaloupe as his paintbrush.

"Arch your hips up out of the water for me, I need to --"

Swallowing hard, he watched as she arched out of the water, holding steady so he could coat her triangle of dark curls with the frothy cream. Before he had a chance to lose his nerve, he lifted a strawberry and, careful not to let his fingers brush her skin, nestled it between the lips of her pussy.

"Wow." Skyler sank back into the water. The cream floated up in a foamy cloud, obscuring his view of her pink folds hugging the red, ripe strawberry.

Coating another berry with cream, he held the tip to her lips. He'd expected her to suck off the cream, but she gobbled it down instead. Red juice stained her chin, and her eyes closed.

"More?"

"Mmm."

A dollop of cream smeared across her cheek as he fed her another strawberry. She rocked her hips back and forth. Through the link they shared, he felt the pull of the warm berry at her sex, experienced her craving for deeper penetration.

"You're killing me here, witch." The ache in his balls had long since taken on a special little zing -- a fiery sensation that rose up to envelop the base of his cock and stretched back to slice along his spine. "Do you see yourself through me? Can you see how beautiful you are?"

"Yes -- I mean, your thoughts are flooding mine. I feel you looking at me. See my breasts through your eyes, with the purple berry juice staining my skin." She paused, then shifted to face him. "What you were thinking a few moments ago -- chemistry and magic. I want you to know this is okay, what we're doing together. I feel...safe with you. Like part of me's waking up. And I appreciate you playing it this way tonight. Giving me control -- the kink I'm hungry for, but without an edge."

"Will you do something for me, then? Only if you feel comfortable with it, of course." Handing her the last strawberry, he wondered if she'd be willing to go further. "Will you touch this to your clit, pleasure yourself while I watch."

Although she made a soft, uneasy sound -- almost a protest, but not quite -- she lowered the berry he handed her between her legs and arched up out of the water to offer him a better view. With smooth, even strokes, she brushed the tip of the strawberry over her swollen clit. At first, she darted little glances over at him to gauge his reaction, but soon she lost herself in a series of desperate movements.

Canting her hips, she rose to meet the thrusts of the fruit against her sex, rubbing hard enough to leave a slick red trail across her flushed skin. The moan she let loose made him shift restlessly where he knelt on the soft rug beside her. She crushed the berry against her clit and rubbed until nothing remained of the fruit except a messy pulp.

“More. Sweet goddess, I need more.”

How he could give her what she needed without touching her escaped him. Every instinct insisted he stick to his vow not to bring his skin against hers tonight. *Too soon. Too dangerous. Gods, we're both too vulnerable.*

Lifting the peach he'd stolen from the kitchen, he held it over her arching pelvis and crushed it in his fist, letting the cool juice drip across her ruby red clit and labia. As her hips thrust, mimicking the motions of sex, the berry at the mouth of her pussy came loose and floated free in the water.

“Please? I need...something.”

His heart broke at that, the tentative plea for a release she couldn't put into words. Glancing down at the platter on the floor beside him, he realized he was about out of tricks. The only thing left was a...

“Right. I think I've got something that might help.” All but shivering in anticipation, he picked up the banana -- more green than yellow still, no good for eating, but more than firm enough for the purpose he had in mind -- and peeled away the stiff skin.

Skyler opened her eyes. “No way,” she said, looking at the banana he held. “This is too kinky even for me. There is just no way I'm going to fuck myself with that while you watch.”

“Really?” Reaching out to brush her thoughts, he flashed an image of her head thrown back, her hips rising to accept the fruit, her hand guiding it in a circular motion guaranteed to hit her sweet spot on every stroke.

She made a soft sound and shifted restlessly in the water, as if the caress of ripples might be enough to grant her the release she sought. When he pressed the firm, curved length of fruit into her palm, her fingers closed around it.

His heart pounded against his ribs as he waited to see what she'd do next. His balls ached like fury, and he suspected droplets were beading at the tip of his cock. Finally, she brought her hand down to her pubic mound, letting the pale tip of the fruit nudge against her labia. Shifting her legs, he raised her feet to rest on the sides of the tub, leaving the back of her head partly submerged in the water and her sex spread wide.



Alec reached down to raise the drain, letting some water out so Sky could rest her head on the floor of the tub comfortably. She watched him as he lowered the drain in place again. He ached to touch her.

Instead, he settled back beside the tub with his hands wrapped tight around his knees, his cock straining against the silky cloth of his shorts. When she eased the first inch of the pale fruit inside her pussy, the last of his sanity came unglued, and he mumbled something strangled and breathless.

“Cat got your tongue?” Sky gave him a sexy grin as she plunged the unripe banana deep inside her, then pulled it out and rubbed the firm curve over her clit.

When he didn’t respond, she let her eyelids droop shut and began working the length in and out of her slick, swollen pussy in rapid strokes while humming under her breath. Her thoughts bombarded him. Images of a plump woman, and then a man with kind eyes, who she’d been with during the months she spent in Mexico, followed by disjointed flashes of wild encounters she’d partaken in years ago.

The erotic vignettes from her past came fast and furious. Emotional snapshots of her bound -- a man tied spread-eagle to her bed. And sensations, too -- what it felt like when she wore nipple clamps, hot and wild, hurting just enough to feel oh, so good. The cool metal of handcuffs against her wrists. Her voice muffled by a ball gag, her tongue curving against the hard rubber surface. The erotic charge of dragging her nails along a man’s back. Sinking her teeth into his shoulder... Tying him to a four-poster bed...

And yet, he felt her fear build with each successive image, thrashing through her like a bird caught in a net.

“No,” he urged her, “you don’t need the edge. Look at me.”

With a hiss of frustration, she turned her head and fixed him with a steely glare. “I almost had it.”

“And you will again. Feel the water around you. Borrow some of my heat. Feel it rising in me like thunder and wind and rain. Think of your hands on your body, and the slick feel of the fruit against your sweet spot. No edgy memories. No fear. No pain. Just you, here, in a bathtub, safe.”

Wrapping himself in her thoughts until little sparks of blue flashed at the back of his eyes every time she pleased the hungry spot just beneath her pelvic bone, he reached out to her, sharing the explosive bliss-bordering-on-misery of his aching balls and twitching cock. And when she came, throwing her knees open wider to let him watch as her rich fluid dribbled out of her pussy and her skin twitched in a series of lightning-quick spasms, he held his breath, fighting the inevitable. Desperate to rein in his runaway passion, he pulled back from their connection and wrapped his defenses tightly around himself as he came in his shorts.

Fear lanced through him as he surrendered control, undermining his intense pleasure. He felt light-headed with the unexpected release, startled that he’d relaxed his guard so

completely. His breath rasped in his throat, and his hands shook as he struggled to regain control. Raising his shields quickly, he glanced at Sky to see if she'd noticed his momentary panic, but her eyes remained closed, her lips tilted up in a sexy smile.

When she abandoned the battered fruit and stroked rapid circles across her clit with her fingers, drawing out a second climax on the heels of the first, his cock shuddered again in a series of aftershocks so strong, he cried out with her. Before the last tremors faded, he pulled himself together and moved to turn on the tap. His heart raced as he adjusted the water and eased her into a sitting position, but he had command of his body again and that calmed him.

Her skin felt cool against his burning palms, and gooseflesh covered her back. After stripping off his soiled shorts, he stepped in behind her. Helping her stand, he yanked the shower curtain into place and pulled the lever to switch the stream of water into the shower.

Skyler swayed on her feet as he soaped away the residue of fruit and honey, careful to wash her breasts with no more passion or exploration than he cleaned her arms. Fruit pulp frothed around their ankles, stained purple by the berries, and steam billowed, sweet with the smell of honey. By the time he shampooed Sky's heavy mass of hair and rinsed the lather away, she trembled with fatigue.

He washed himself quickly, with one arm cradling her against his chest, then turned off the spray and helped her out of the tub. She swayed on her feet while he dried her. As he perched her on the edge of the tub to wipe the remaining smears of berry juice off her feet and ankles, she sighed and let her eyes droop shut.

Finally, he wrapped a towel around her dripping hair, and she rested her forehead on his shoulder as he stood and lifted her into his arms. Whispering meaningless words meant to offer comfort, he carried her to bed, eased her still-damp body between the sheets, and pulled the thin, summer-weight quilt up under her chin.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house was dark and quiet as Alec padded barefoot down the stairs. He'd waited until he was certain Sky would sleep through the night, or what little remained of it, anyway. Sorren must have reassigned a batch of guards Zach trusted to watch the warded perimeter of the grounds, because Zach snored softly in the downstairs bedroom. Summoning a white yellow glow sphere over his palm, Alec glanced through the open door at his sleeping friend.

Shit, if running into Sky when he'd thought she was safe in Mexico hadn't packed enough of an unexpected punch, encountering the one person he'd let close to him after Linda died delivered a kick guaranteed to leave him down for the count. He and Zach gave each other a lot of space, but more often than not, their periodic camping and fishing expeditions included sex hot enough to start a prairie fire.

Now he didn't know if he'd be capable of giving Zach the one thing they'd always claimed as common ground. Gods help him, if he detected so much as a glimmer of pity from the ex-cop, he'd summon a stream of power guaranteed to toss Zach flat on his ass. One thing he could count on from Sky -- she wouldn't be throwing any pity his way. But if Zach got weird about what happened with Jaimis, Alec just flat out didn't think he could cope.

He stepped into the room and, moving carefully so as not to hit any creaky floorboards, he watched Zach sleep. Fully dressed in black jeans, a black tee, and black socks, Zach had peeled back the spread and lay sprawled on top of the blanket. It had been years since Alec had stayed with Zach while he recovered from the bullet wound that had forced him to trade in police work for the lucrative security firm he'd started. But cop instincts die hard, and Alec knew his friend would wake at the slightest sound.

Alec felt like a total shit for what he was about to do. But he didn't intend to wait around until Jaimis got tired of sending his henchmen after them and came out to play. In order to find the rogue witch, he needed the information Sorren's people had gathered thus far. After pausing to make sure Zach's breathing followed the regular pattern of deep sleep, he walked silently across the room and located the large backpack Zach had brought in from the slick, black Jeep Grand Cherokee earlier. Digging through layers of clothes, a razor, toothpaste, a paperback book, and a stash of candy bars, Alec found a stack of papers and a spiral-bound notebook at the bottom.

Convinced he'd found what he needed, he lifted the pile free and tucked the papers and notebook under his arm, cradling his glow sphere with his free hand. Turning to back out of the room, he bit back a strangled shout when Zach sat up in bed and kindled a green orb of light over his palm.

Tossing the tightly woven sphere of energy at Alec's chest, Zach climbed out of bed and stretched.

"Shit!" Just barely managing to duck as the light whizzed past his shoulder, Alec sighed as the green glow dissipated harmlessly behind him.

"Alec!" Crashing down the stairs with all the grace of an advancing army, Sky exploded into the room, her eerie bluish-purple aura crackling around her.

"Stand down, Sky. Alec's being a shithead, that's all." Anger rippled through Zach's voice. "Caught him going through my things and tossed a bit of light his way just to make him jump a little."

As Zach glared at him, Alec's stomach clenched. Years of experience told him his friend's temper simmered near the exploding point. *Wouldn't do to get into a pissing match in front of Sky on our first night back in the States.*

Sky stood naked just inside the doorway. Zach leaned across the bed and tossed her a blanket. Never taking her eyes off Alec, she wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and pulled it tight across her chest.

"You guys have some serious history, don't you?"

Alec tried to come up with a suitable reply, but Zach simply patted the foot of the bed and then drew back near the pillows so as not to crowd her. Accepting the invitation, Skyler settled at the end of the bed, her knees drawn up close to her chest. Her hair fell forward in a tousled mass, pooling around her on the blanket.

*Fuck.* Seeing those two on a bed together was just so messed up. Alec fought the urge to flee the room. All too aware that he stood with the evidence scattered at his feet, he suspected his friend would nail him with a light globe for sure if he made a move toward the door. And those suckers stung when they caught you full on.

Choking back what sounded suspiciously like a laugh, Sky turned to Zach. "He thinks you're going to peg him with a tightly spun glow sphere."

"Sneaky skunk tried to take my papers. Serve him right if I did."

"So you two are close? I mean, present animosity aside, that's the vibe I'm getting." Sky rested her chin on her knees, her attention riveted on Zach.

"Hello, still in the room here?" Feeling both very stupid and very naked, Alec wished he'd pulled on a pair of shorts before sneaking downstairs.

Desperate for a distraction, Alec picked up the scattered maps and notebook from the floor and slipped the pile back into Zach's pack. Hell, if the two of them planned to settle in for a little chat, he was so screwed. His life had been far less complicated as a senator, and that was saying a lot.

"Yeah, you could say we're *close*."

Hell, if he'd caught the overtones in that last word, no doubt Sky had as well. Increasingly uncomfortable, Alec growled under his breath.

Sky ignored him, her attention still fixed on Zach. Maybe no one would notice if he crept back upstairs for a little sleep.

"So you go back a ways, and I can sense you care for each other. Sorry if I'm getting too personal here, but I don't want to mess up anything between the two of you. Are you friends, lovers, or something in between?" Sky tossed her head, her hair swishing as she turned to glance at him. Probably making sure she had his attention.

"Enough fun and games. Here's where this conversation ends." Fuck, he couldn't even say what he and Zach were to each other, let alone explain to Sky. Alec's throat felt tight, his palms sweaty, and he just wanted to get the hell out of here before one personal question led to another, and Zach started asking him about the handful of days he spent as Jaimis's very *special* guest. "I'm sorry I went through your shit, Zach. As for you, Sky, I'm not sure what you're after here, but I'm heading up to bed."

"Sit. Not done with you yet."

Damn. No use arguing with Zach once he used his cop voice. Figuring he was on shaky ground after trying to steal the papers, Alec plopped down on the other corner of the bed, as far away from them as possible.

“As for your question...” Zach ran his hand across his short, black hair and scowled at Skyler. “I can’t imagine you wouldn’t be able to answer that yourself after whatever went on upstairs earlier. Seems to me you’ve gotten close enough to Alec to ferret out his past with those psychic talents of yours.”

“Just to make things perfectly clear, Alec and I didn’t have sex tonight, wise guy.” Sky tossed her head, and for a moment, Alec got a flash of the in-your-face, take-no-prisoners witch she’d been before Jaimis got his filthy hands on her.

Alec frowned. “So you’d call that...what, exactly?” Hell, it had been sex for him, and he hadn’t so much as touched her -- or himself.

“Okay, fine, so *I* had sex, but *we* certainly didn’t.”

“Hmm, so the thing with the fruit -- your idea? And me watching -- that didn’t so much do anything for you?” Despite his discomfort, a smile teased Alec’s lips.

“This has all been quite entertaining, and believe me, it’ll keep my mind busy as I drift off to sleep later.” All levity gone from his voice, Zach leaned over the bedside table and tipped a green glow sphere onto the bowl of oil kept there for that purpose. “But it’s time to tell me what the fuck you were doing with my papers.”

The additional light made Alec even more conscious of his nudity. Most witches wouldn’t think twice about being naked, but bless it, sitting here with Sky and Zach on the same bed, unclothed and vulnerable, with his cock hanging limp against his thigh, just felt *wrong*.

Seeking comfort in the shadows, he snuffed out his own glow sphere. Damn thing just served as a reminder of how his aura had changed after the attack. What should shine pure yellow, like sunlight, glowed fucking white yellow, like a dwarf star. So bright, the barest hint of a glow could light up a room.

Alec was half tempted to tell Zach he’d been searching for some writing paper, but lying to witches was never much of an option to begin with, and these two deserved the truth. “Okay, shouldn’t have done it, but I was snooping for information. I don’t intend to play mouse to Jaimis’s cat. I know Sorren wants us to draw Jaimis out of his hidey-hole, keeping us just out of reach of his goons so he’s got to crawl out into the sunlight and come after us himself. My plan’s a bit more *direct* than that.”

No rule saying he had to feed them the whole plan. Let them stew over the bit he’d shared for a while first.

“Thing is, though, Alec and I don’t seem to be able to stay the fuck out of each other’s heads.” Anger simmered through Sky’s words. “And when the big, stupid ass of a hero finds Jaimis, he plans to kill him. *If* the dark witch doesn’t kill him, or slowly torture him to death, first.”

Alec winced at Skyler's rage and channeled the faintest hint of power, putting up a buffer between them. If he'd have known she could read him *that* well, he'd have put up a mile-high shield around his thoughts before mulling over his plans.

### Chapter Three

“You think *I’m* a threat?” Sky rose to her knees and scooted forward, still holding the blanket closed around her with one hand. She slapped her palm against Alec’s chest. “Sorren’s people haven’t been able to find Jaimis for a *year*. But you think you can take a look at some maps and notes, ride out on your white horse, and drag him back for a little Old West justice -- if he doesn’t *kill* you first?”

“I...”

“You think you’re more powerful than a man who’s soaked up the power of at least four slaughtered witches now? A witch who’s become nothing better than a crazed vampire, living off the energy of blood sacrifices? A witch who flayed your back into bloody strips and raped you as you bled?”

Unnatural blue light crackled across her hair, and Alec’s stomach clenched as he recalled what she’d done to the cabin when he and Laura broke in earlier. Avoiding Zach’s gaze and fervently hoping that last bit wasn’t news to him, Alec focused on Sky. She was a more present and compelling threat than any pity Zach might throw his way. “Did you mean to do that -- when you brought the ceiling down around us at the cabin earlier?”

Brought up short, Sky lowered her head and touched her mouth with her hand. “No. I meant to stop you, but I didn’t have any control over how the power would take shape. I can’t direct my own magic, not since...” She shook her head. “But getting back to what’s important, if you march off to feed yourself to Jaimis... And don’t you dare forget that, power-wise, he’s the fierce, rabid cat, and you and I are just little mousies. But for argument’s sake, let’s say you succeed and manage to take him down with you.”

Skyler paused for air, and in a move that surprised Alec, Zach moved forward and wrapped his arms around her. More surprising still, she didn’t put up a fuss about the embrace. Anyone else, and Alec didn’t think he could have tolerated the familiarity. But

Zach... Fuck, the more pertinent question was why the hell he'd be feeling possessive of Sky to begin with. His head ached and his shoulders felt tight, and he didn't intend to give that a lot of thought at the moment.

"So that leaves you and the dark witch both dead. Points to you for heroism. And --" Breathing hard, she pounded her thigh with her palm for emphasis. "It leaves a collection of dark lords, witches familiar with Jaimis's power and practices, running a crime ring that puts old mafia stories to shame and endangers witches and humans alike."

When the last word came out with a sob, Alec felt like a complete, unredeemable shit. Her fear bombarded him, wild and unfettered, but when he reached out to touch her, she slapped his hand away and sank farther into Zach's protective embrace.

"Look, I'm a cop, through and through, even before I'm a witch -- never mind it's been a lot of years since I left the force and set up my security business. And as both a man and a cop, I suck at this emotional shit." Zach sighed and stroked Skyler's arm. "But we've pressed things this far, so I've gotta ask. Just for the record, Sky, you're content to play by Sorren's rules?"

When Sky didn't answer, Zach continued. "You're willing to stay a step ahead of Jaimis's men until the rogue witch gets tired of waiting and comes out of his hidey hole to find you, hungry for a little revenge? And then you'll stand aside and let Sorren's strongest witches go after Jaimis, as planned?"

Silence. A few quick breaths as Sky got her emotions under control. Then a longer, more awkward silence.

"Shit." Leaning forward to rest his face in his hands, Alec pushed his way into her thoughts -- and didn't much like what he found.

"Okay, seeing as I'm not the only one with ulterior motives here, I'll give you an A-plus for that little, 'don't go off and be a dead hero' performance."

Sky shrugged out of Zach's grasp and turned to glare daggers at Alec. "Drop it. Let it rest. If you say another word --"

"About how you planned to get your hands on those papers, too? Sniff out Jaimis's base camp? Because you know as fucking well as I do that either you or I stands a better chance of finding him than Sorren's people. We're connected, the three of us, as sure as death itself. A dark bond -- captive and captor, victim and torturer, name it any way you will -- bottom line, you and I know the feel of Jaimis's death magic, and that's likely to lead us to him if we look in the right area."

"Enough!" Sky moved to climb off the bed, but Zach caught her arm and wouldn't let go.

"So, just to be clear, her plan is to get within a city block of Jaimis's camp." Alec struggled to rein in his anger. "Use her enhanced telepathic abilities to find that evil snake's mind. Read it. And use the information to track down each and every one of his dark lords."



“I’d go to Sorren with the information! I’m not stupid enough to play hero. But once the cavalry comes riding in, Jaimis will lock down his thoughts so tight, I won’t be able to get past his shields with a sledgehammer. I need the element of surprise. Need to be alone. And it’s half a block, asshole. The only one I could read from farther away than that is you -- and that’s only because I can’t get you out of my fucking head!”

A piercing whistle split the air, and Zach followed up by pounding his fist into his palm. “Enough! Look, I’m not trained in crisis management. Not by half. But if you two plan to fall apart on me, I can call one of Sorren’s psychic healers in to help babysit you both.”

“Not necessary.” Sky pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, and Zach let go of her arm.

“No one’s falling apart here. No crisis.” Not yet, anyway. But if Sky tried to sneak off, he’d make sure all hell broke loose.

“Good, now that we’re all agreed that *no one’s*” -- Zach fixed Alec with his best you-are-so-busted glare -- “going off on some half-assed fool’s mission. We’ll hunker down and wait for the next batch of thugs to come after you. Then we’ll run. *As planned*. And we’ll keep at it until Jaimis puts in an appearance himself, at which point Sorren’s guards will take over. They have instructions to take Jaimis alive, and they’ll find out what they can about his ring of dark lords. Any questions?”

When Sky tried to speak, Zach shifted his glare to her. Alec hadn’t seen Zach this worked up since the time he got shot and the nurses wouldn’t let him up out of his hospital bed. With Zach’s eyes flashing dark brown and dangerous Alec didn’t feel inclined to argue.

Alec might have several inches on him, but Zach packed in more pounds in sheer, beefy muscle. Although Zach had his mom’s Asian eyes and light brown skin, he favored his brawler of a dad hands down for physique. When they wrestled for the top, Zach always got that spot, and tonight, he looked more than ready to kick Alec’s butt.

“Look, Zach...” Although Alec extended his hand in what he’d intended as a placating gesture, Zach’s magic flared as if he expected Alec to pick a fight.

His own power rose in response, and he feared they’d reached the point where they might do each other some serious harm. Brawls were one thing, but fighting with the full resources of their power left open the possibility for some seriously fucked-up shit.

Swimming in more testosterone than any woman should have to put up with, and sick and tired of all the male feather ruffling, Skyler shook her head. “The heat I’m sensing between you two seems to have a hell of a lot more to do with him screwing your ass than kicking it.”

“Is this your real personality peeking out?” Alec’s breath escaped through his teeth as Zach called home his energy. Leave it to Sky to find a way to diffuse the tension. “Because if it is, although I’m glad you’re feeling more at ease, I think I’m more afraid of you than Zach.”

Zach shook his head, and Sky regarded Alec coolly.

“You haven’t had sex since what happened with Jaimis, have you?” She watched carefully for Alec’s response, but he didn’t so much as flinch. In fact, she might as well have been evaluating a statue. “Shit, please don’t shut down on me. I crossed a line there -- I’m sorry. It’s just, earlier, when you bent over backward to create a scene where we never actually touched each other, I got the sense that wasn’t just for me. You weren’t ready, either. And seeing you with Zach... It’s as if you’d rather risk coming to magical blows than face a little intimacy.”

“Okay, you win. I surrender.” Grabbing a corner of the white blanket he sat on, Alec flapped it back and forth. “Next topic, please.”

Hunched over, his furrowed brow illuminated by the flickering green light of Zach’s glow sphere, naked and vulnerable, Alec looked like he wanted to be left alone. Which was what she read when she brushed his thoughts. But he’d started something earlier, and dragged her right into the middle of who knows what with him and Zach. The landscape right now was all about survival, and if Alec had issues, best to flush them out into the open where they couldn’t provide a potentially lethal distraction during the next crisis.

“We’ll make this about me, then. Before I left, the healers told me that emotionally, I’m about where a human would be five years out following an attack that savage and prolonged. They did their best with their amulets, sacred baths, healing rites, and daily care of my battered psyche.”

She paused, glancing over at Zach to see if this was all more information than he could handle, but he nodded at her to continue.

“For all intents and purposes, other than the additional benefits of putting more time between me and what I suffered at Jaimis’s hands, this is about as healed as I’m going to get.” She darted a glance at Alec. “Short of recovering my memories somehow, and repairing my damaged aura so my magic works right again.”

“Your point is?” Alec looked half-strangled, his skin more pale than golden, and strands of wavy brown hair clung to his sweaty forehead.

“I made sure I had sex before I left the healers’ care. A couple women, and then a man. Didn’t tilt my universe, and it sure as hell reinforced that vanilla isn’t my flavor, but I did it. As part of the healing process.”

“I’m thinking she may have a point here, friend.” Zach raised an eyebrow in Alec’s direction.

“Right. So just because I don’t do casual sex --” Alec ran his hands over the back of his neck, grimaced, and rolled his shoulders as if he were fighting a mother of a headache. -- “and wasn’t interested in a quick fuck just for the sake of proving I’m able.” Alec glanced at Sky, then down at his hands, and she caught a flood of turmoil that made her want to weep. “That makes me less healed? Less able to cope? More easily distracted during a crisis?”

For all his bravado, she felt his pain like physical blows and knew she'd hit a nerve. Witches were a sensual lot. Sex was as natural as breathing, all tied up with energy and magic. Mess with that, and over time, it couldn't help but throw a witch off center.

"I'm thinking maybe so." Zach's black hair gleamed like obsidian in the green light, and he hunched his shoulders with his hands around his knees, as if to make himself appear less threatening. Not an easy feat for someone with that much muscle. "Sorry, I call it like I see it."

"Whatever craziness is between us, you sure as hell can't call it casual." Skyler inched closer, until her hair brushed Alec's knee.

"Your point?"

"Like I said, what *didn't* happen upstairs earlier -- I think you played it that way as much for your sake as for mine."

Channeling every bit of her old brashness, Sky rested her hands on Alec's thighs and let the blanket fall away from her breasts. "So if casual sex is a problem, we've established there's nothing casual about us. And you blessed well have something solid, something real, going on with Zach."

The room got quiet enough to hear the wind outside and the soft scrape of a branch against the windowpane. But this time, when her instincts raised a red alert, she knew it had more to do with what might happen here than with any of Jaimis's thugs sneaking up on them.

"Look, you've made your point, Sky. Alec knows it. And I know it. He's still got some healing to do -- and despite assertions to the contrary, I'm pretty sure you do, too. But I think the best thing for all of us right now is for you two to head back upstairs and get some sleep. Goddess knows what morning will bring, and we should get some rest while..."

"No!"

Sky and Zach flinched at Alec's shout, and a few moments of strained silence followed.

"I. Will. Not. Accept. Your. Pity." The words rasped out of Alec's throat with the force of wind tearing at a mountainside. A mask of pain settled over his face, his eyes narrowed, and lines furrowed his forehead. "And damn it, I won't have you treat me as anything less than an equal!"

Sky gasped as Alec's aura flared to life, crackling around him white hot and furious. But Zach simply moved closer and wrapped his arms around his friend, entering into the raging field of energy until it encompassed him, as well.

"You're the bravest motherfucker I've ever met. But I don't see any good coming of you and me getting naked and wet together on your first night back in the U.S. Don't see it doing Sky any good to watch, either. And things being as tense as they are, I'm not about to send her back upstairs on her own."

“I’ve watched before. Bless it, there’s not much of anything I haven’t done in the past. Although I’ll admit, the thing in the bathtub with the fruit earlier was a bit of a novelty, even for me.” Her heart pounded, skipped a couple beats, and skittered erratically before settling back into a normal rhythm.

Sky couldn’t for the life of her say what she wanted to happen here tonight. But she knew she didn’t want to think about Jaimis. Or the past. Or being hurt. Or what lay ahead. And she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Alec’s fear would dissipate once he fought his way past it and admitted he deserved a bit of love.

“I thought we were talking about sex and healing, not love.” Although he glared at her, his eyes reflected a heap of pain. “I know, I need to stay the fuck out of your head. But I just can’t seem to manage that. You’re like this magnet, and I’m so caught up in your mind, I can’t escape.”

When Zach started taking off his sleep-rumpled shirt, both of them whirled to watch. Sky couldn’t have called what would happen next if her life depended on it. So she waited. Tense. Alert. All but holding her breath.

When the burly bodyguard of a witch stripped off his shirt, she gasped at the sheer magnificence of his rock-hard abs, his broad shoulders, and the intricate tattoo on his left shoulder. The hawk stretched its wings in living color, each feather outlined with meticulous precision. Inching forward, Sky reached out to trace her finger along the outline.

Zach’s skin felt warm under her fingertips, solid and reassuring. “I bet that hurt.”

“Not as much as taking a bullet. But yeah, it smarted some.”

*Oooh, a tough guy.* Smiling, she leaned into his body heat and waited to see what Alec would do.

“North!”

Well, she hadn’t anticipated that move. As he shifted on the bed, turning toward the east, or rather toward the oversized closets that lined the eastern wall, she raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“East!” When this guy called the quarters, he put everything he had into it.

“South!” White yellow light flared around the bed, shimmering in an incomplete half-dome overhead.

“West!” As Alec called the final point, the circle closed around them, snug and secure as the magic sealed them off from outside interference, a cocoon protecting them from harm, magnifying both magic and emotions within its boundaries.

Sky paused a moment to wonder why she felt safe, rather than trapped, but figured at this hour it didn’t bear examining. Zach seemed to make some sort of decision after Alec created the circle, and he popped the button over his fly, slid the zipper down, and wiggled out of his jeans. No boxers or briefs under there. Just stone-hard, naked witch.

Despite her bravado, having two bare-ass male witches in a sealed circle -- when she didn't have anything more than a blanket wrapped around her -- left her more than a little on edge. Zach's cock jutted out, the swollen veins displayed prominently in the flickering light of the circle.

"Look, I can do this -- watch, I mean -- so long as everything stays sort of..." *Calm? Gentle? Safe?*

Not generally words that applied to sex between a couple of horny male witches. And Alec radiated just as many hot and hungry vibes as Zach. The vignettes flashing through his mind both startled and aroused her. These two owned a lot of history together. No doubt about that.

"Nobody's after a wild roll on the sheets tonight." Zach held out his hand, and after a moment, Alec took it and let his friend pull him up against his side. "Slow and easy. No one gets hurt, and no one gets spooked."

"Treading awfully fucking close to sympathy again."

"No." Zach cut off Alec's protest, and reached out to rest a hand on Sky's shoulder, never taking his eyes off Alec. "Never that, so get the chip off your shoulder before I knock it off for you. Fact is, you and Skyler have more than a little reason to be skittish. No amount of bluster will change that, so let's call it like it is and deal with it. And I'm inclined to agree with Sky that if we get past this awkward bit and release some tension, all of us will be more focused, and thus apt to stay alive when the dark witch throws everything he has our way."

"You don't put up with a lot of bullshit, do you?" Bless it, she liked this guy.

Everything about Zach made her curious, from his tough cop exterior, to the compassion she sensed welling under the surface, even the contradiction of his delicate Asian features and his brawny, broad-shouldered physique. Curious enough to ignore the possessive little whisper at the back of her mind that wanted to jump out and start marking her territory, plastering "No Trespassing" signs all over Alec's golden chest.

"Watch yourself." Alec turned to face Zach. "Sky's got her back up a bit on this one."

Rather than protest once again that he should get the fuck out of her mind, she broadcasted an image of Alec in a very cold place -- naked -- with his cock all hunched up against his body like a teeny little turtle tucking its head back into its shell.

"I don't have any kind of claim on Alec." Her witch's sense for truth detected a shiver of falsehood in her own voice, though she wasn't inclined to stop and examine why. "Okay, fine, even if I did, you two have a longer history, a stronger..."

When Zach leaned forward, cupped the back of her neck, and kissed her, her mind stuttered to a halt. He tasted like licorice, and he smelled like the forest, clean and fresh, like sunshine on trees. Kissing him hadn't been in the plan, but it felt -- right. Good.

When Alec growled low under his breath, she backed away. "Want to give me something to compare it too?"

What was that old cliché? Something about, *Be careful what you wish for?* Alec wrapped his arms around her, his cock pressed tight against her thigh and his chest hot against her breasts. The blanket remained abandoned back by Zach, and she curled into the strength of Alec's arms, naked and warm. His hair brushed her cheek as he leaned closer still, a wild brown mane warm with the heat of his body and rich with the scent of fresh air and forests.

The kiss teased across her senses like a promise, as gentle as the brush of butterfly wings. Once she relaxed into the lulling warmth of his mouth, lost in the taste of honey and the scent of fresh picked berries, he nipped her bottom lip. She gasped in surprise, and he took advantage of the moment to slide his tongue past her lips. Darting her tongue against his, she gasped for air, drowning in the sensual pressure of his mouth moving against hers.

By the time he let her go, little darts of pleasure traveled across her chest and then sank lower, landing in the general vicinity of her clit. Oh, goddess, she'd forgotten this. The heady pleasure of being with someone she cared about. The last time she had feelings like this for a partner, well, she'd probably have to count back to those few months with Lena during college.

"You and I have a lot to talk about later, sweet witch, but tonight, Zach and I need to get some things straight." Alec sat back on his heels and frowned. "For starters, he needs to understand I can take anything he has to give."

"You think?" Zach sat absolutely still, waiting for Alec to come to him. "Because my dick's so stiff right about now, I'm not in the mood to be teased."

Skyler dragged the blanket back over her shoulders and curled up near the end of the bed.

"Not a good plan. Hang out down there, and you're likely to get kicked when things get hot and hectic." Zach patted the spot beside him, on the right side of the bed, and she shifted to accommodate.

Next, he held out his hand to Alec. Time froze for a few seconds, and then Alec moved closer, until his knees pressed against Zach's.

Zach swallowed hard and knotted his fists in the blankets. He didn't have fancy words to describe the shit unfolding here. And he didn't have Alec's fancy education to help him understand it. Never took a philosophy class -- knew Jack shit about psychology.

But as a cop, his instincts never let him down. And as a witch, his foresight often served him -- both as a blessing and a curse. By the Horned God, he couldn't say how they'd all come out of this mess, but he knew deep in his bones they had to do it together. Knew that even before he'd called Sorren to throw in his lot with Sky and Alec, come what may.

"We'll be okay." Reaching up to touch Alec's hair, Zach tried to believe his own words of reassurance.

In the end, he thought they all had a decent chance of coming out of this whole. But first, they needed to raise the stakes. Weave themselves so fucking close together, they'd fight like wildcats to protect each other. Get close enough that the thought of Jaimis's soldiers getting their hands on any one of them would provoke raw, unchecked wrath. Close enough that the fear of losing a single member of this crazy little group would trigger grief strong enough to foster a killing rage. A rage they'd need if push came to shove and they found themselves with their backs against the wall.

*One fucked-up divination, that.*

"Zach?" Skyler inched closer and touched his face, and recalling from Sorren's briefings that she'd picked up telepathic skills in direct proportion to the magic she'd lost, he buried his thoughts so deep she wouldn't be able to knock them loose with land mines.

"Just thinking. Bad habit, for a cop. Can only lead to trouble." Holding back the want bubbling just beneath the surface, he brushed a tender kiss across her neck. "What say you help me tame an ornery witch?"

Her laughter bubbled up clear and light, and as Zach gripped Alec's shoulder and eased him down onto his back, Sky scooted around to the other side and helped pile pillows around him to make a sort of nest. Cozy and secure.

Zach grabbed Sky's hand, held on tight, and bent down to kiss Alec. When his friend flinched and turned away, Zach pressed forward to link with him.

*Easy does it.*

If Alec were the one comforting *him*, he could probably come up with a bit of poetry, a phrase from a song, something perfect enough to soothe away all the hurt. But the only resources Zach had at his fingertips were simple words and touch. He pressed his hand against Alec's chest, felt his heartbeat skitter like a frightened animal.

Sky, bless her messed-up little heart, lay beside Alec with her head resting on his shoulder, as if she were the one seeking comfort. That seemed to do the trick, since Alec whispered soothing words to her, and his heartbeat slowed down to something approaching normal speed.

*You're wrong. I don't have any poetry for this. Nothing to put you at ease. No bits of songs. But I know this is hard for you, too.*

Zach smiled as Alec's thoughts wound through his mind, content that the link they shared still held after all these years. Just hearing Alec's voice in his head did him a heap of good. This time, when he leaned in for a kiss, Alec accepted his tongue, sucking and making hungry noises.

*You taste like honey.* Something new, that. Zach wondered if he was tasting Sky's juices on Alec's lips, and the thought sent an erotic charge straight to his groin.

Sky tossed her head, her black hair lashing out across them, all soft and sweet smelling. “No. What you taste is just that. Honey. We, ah, did some kinky shit in the bathtub earlier. Trust me, Alec hasn’t had a taste of me yet.”

Having Sorren explain Skyler’s freakishly strong telepathic abilities did nothing to prepare Zach for how easily she slipped into his head. The two of them didn’t share any history. Had never met before he traveled to Mexico to escort her back to the States. And yet, he felt her in his mind, as if they shared a link to rival the one he’d forged through years of sex and friendship with Alec.

Sky glanced at Zach and reached out to touch his thoughts. *Who’s overanalyzing things now?*

Zach watched her slide down Alec’s body with easy, sinuous movements and settle between his legs.

A shadow of a frown tugged at Alec’s full, sensual lips. “I hate to ask this, Sky... I know your magic got scrambled. But what about...?”

For a moment, she froze, as if trying to discern what he meant. “Oh.” She shook her head. “Only my gifts got short-circuited. The healers did exhaustive tests, and the other witch traits -- resistance to disease, and my ability to control my monthly cycle -- that part works fine.”

Alec flushed in the shadowed half-light, and before the mood could be lost in endless awkwardness, Sky trailed her hands along his chest. When she took Alec’s cock into her mouth, he jerked as if he’d received an electric shock.

Not sure what to do next, Zach rubbed his hand against his friend’s forehead, brushing back sweaty tangles of wild brown hair. Alec’s eyes shone with eerie intensity, feral and frightened, the flecks of amber brighter than the surrounding pools of deep brown. Nothing of the smooth, polished senator remained. Damned if Zach didn’t prefer the wild man to the slick politician, but it tore his heart out to see his friend frightened.

“Just hold him, Zach. He’ll be all right.” Sky’s voice shook with emotion. “You will, Alec. Only good things are going to happen here tonight.”

Keeping her movements steady, Sky made soft sucking noises as she moved her mouth along Alec’s swollen dick, forward and back, slow and easy. Zach eased down onto his side, burrowing into the surrounding pillows so his body pressed along Alec’s right side, plastered against his chest, hip, and leg. When Alec grabbed Zach’s head, he held on like a drowning man.

“Easy does it. We’re here for you, friend of mine.” Zach tilted his head, wincing as Alec managed to grab a fistful of hair.

Alec looked like a dark angel, a cloud of brown hair framing his face, glowing like a fucking halo with the fierce white yellow light arching and crackling overhead. The unusual energy of the circle Alec had cast around them made little hairs stand up on the back of



Zach's neck. Cupping his hands to each side of the half-panicked witch's face, Zach kissed his friend for all he was worth.

Pain and fear melted away under the gentle strokes of his tongue, and when Alec started sending hungry vibes across the link, rather than near panic, Zach wanted to stand up and do a fucking dance.

Rather than break the kiss, Zach reached out for Alec's thoughts. *Good to have you back.*

*I, ah, I want you both...* Alec's thought came galloping across their shared connection, urgent and hungry. *Bless it, will you just get down there with Sky and make me feel so good I forget about anything else?*

Zach's gut did a quick turnover, and his balls crept up a few notches higher against his skin. After ending the kiss with a gentle nip, he moved down beside Sky. The dark-haired witch released Alec's glistening cock and moved lower to take one of his balls into her mouth, moving it back and forth inside her cheeks, making little wet noises guaranteed to drive any man wild.

Alec's hips curled forward, all but rising off the mattress, and he groaned, long and low. As Zach got comfortable, his head resting on Alec's warm belly, Sky opened her eyes and looked right at him. Gods help him, the fire in her pale blue eyes scalded away what remained of his sanity.

As he took Alec's thick cock into his mouth, Sky never stopped watching, her gaze hot enough to devour them all. And she never stopped cradling Alec's balls on her tongue, first one, then the other, sucking and teasing, gentle and wet and warm.

The link between him and Alec tightened, and he felt the silky caress of Sky's mouth, as if on his own balls, so wet he thought he'd melt. Or explode. Or scream. Or at least spill all over the sheets before anyone even touched him.

As he slid his tongue along the thick vein running down Alec's cock, gods help him if his own dick didn't leak a few tears in sympathy. From the noises Sky was making, purring around her mouthful of flesh, she shared more than a casual telepathic connection with Alec herself.

The two of them had forged a link, no doubt about it. To test his conclusion, he swallowed deep, sucking strong enough to take the whole damn length into his throat, and Skyler groaned right along with Alec. He didn't waste time thinking about the pang of regret -- fuck, *jealousy*, might as well call it like he saw it -- that hit him deep in his gut.

Face-to-face with Sky, her breath brushing his face like a wet furnace, he loved Alec with every bit of skill and affection he could muster. Fuck, he tasted good. Salty and musky, like nights spent rolling around on a bed of leaves under the stars. Alec bucked so hard that Zach held him to the mattress with both hands.

Zach's dick ached, and he didn't know how much more of this he could take. But still Alec held back, refusing to let go. Sky lifted her head, looking up toward where Alec thrashed around on the pillows, and grabbed his hand.

*Both of you!* Alec's silent plea exploded across Zach's senses. *Please. Both!*

Bless it, if this didn't count as both, Zach didn't know what did. But when Sky grabbed his face and pushed until he released Alec's cock, then rested her head on Alec's hips, facing Zach across Alec's straining, wet, purple-veined dick, he finally got it.

Sky licked her way up one side while Zach licked his way down the other. Then they reversed, one moving toward the base while the other lapped the head. Alec let loose a string of obscenities and shook so hard, the light of the circle around them flickered with the psychic impact. But still he refused to give.

## Chapter Four

When Zach's aura flared around them, wrapping them in a cocoon of rich green light, tears beaded on Skyler's eyelashes, but she didn't miss a stroke. She'd thought she might never feel the healthy, clean brush of a witch's aura around her again. She kept hers suppressed, tamped down deep to hide its dirty, battered holes and weak glow, like tattered cloth shining sickly purple under black lights.

Alec's aura flared and swirled around them so hot that sweat broke out on Sky's forehead. She blinked at the blinding white-yellow light, then gave up and closed her eyes, losing herself in the rhythm of her tongue on Alec's skin. Nudging Zach back, she took Alec's cock deep into her mouth, then deeper, so the head pressed into her throat. After a few strokes, she released him, and Zach took over.

They kept that pattern as Alec strained and groaned beneath them, and her heart broke at his struggle. She'd felt the same earlier, up in the bathtub. Afraid to relinquish that last bit of control. Hesitant to trust even that much -- to allow a few seconds when she couldn't defend herself if necessary -- to let heat carry her under and claim her soul.

The more he struggled, the hotter his aura flared. In all her life, she'd never been around a witch whose aura generated actual heat. His energy seemed to be trying to burn away something inside of him -- perhaps cleansing the remnants of horror he suffered under the dark witch's hands. Even his skin felt hot, slick with sweat, as she ran her hands over his stomach and chest, trying to soothe him.

Power itched along her back like a rash, as if her aura meant to tear out of the path along her spine. Cradled by Zach's energy and rocked hard by Alec's, her own rebelled at not being allowed to come out and play. Soon, the discomfort became pain, and she let Zach take over working Alec's cock, trying to drag an orgasm from a man who fought surrender with all his might.

Panting beside them, Sky closed her eyes as knives sliced along the base of her skull.

“For the sake of all that’s sacred, Sky...” Alec panted for air, and his words ripped free in a long groan. “Just -- let -- it -- free.”

“Might say the same to you.” Her breath rasped in her throat, and cramps ripped across her back and shoulders.

“Right. I will -- if you will.” With a tremendous yell, Alec shook so hard, the headboard rattled against the wall.

Unbidden, Sky’s aura ripped free and merged with the healthier light of the others’ to lock them into a circle within a circle. As Alec cried out again and again, fierce and unintelligible, she pressed close, covering his chest with her breasts and nestling her head under his chin. Through her connection with him, she felt his balls pull up so tight they hurt and then the surge of liquid fire through his cock.

Her heart hammered against her ribs in the same rhythm, and she gulped for air as oxygen whooshed out of his lungs. Her pussy clenched and released, spasming as Alec spilled into Zach’s mouth.

When she screamed, Zach moaned along with her, and she tasted Alec’s seed, as if she were the one who cradled his cock on her tongue. Then Zach came, and the heady pressure left her dizzy. She grappled to make sense of the unfamiliar sensations of hot liquid racing through his cock, and the delicious ache of his sac as he rubbed against the wet, tangled blankets. How could she have forged such an intimate connection with Zach, when she hardly knew him?

At some point, she teetered on the edge of faintness when she tried to sit up, and she gulped big breaths of air as the room tilted around her. *Too much. Pleasure. Emotion. Pain. Exhaustion.* But Alec grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled hard enough to call her back, grounding her as air returned to her lungs. She lay across him, as limp as a wet towel, exhausted, all but helpless.

Alec stroked her eyelids with his thumb, traced her lips with his fingers, and slid them into her mouth for her to suck. And somehow, he kept her glued together. Zach moved up beside them, his chest still heaving as he sucked air into his lungs. He lay stretched across Alec’s other shoulder, his face pressed close to Sky’s.

The riddle of links between them hummed with so much emotional static that she couldn’t separate out the various currents. When Zach stroked his hand along her aura, almost, but not quite, touching her breasts, she wanted to absorb his cool, pure energy into herself and somehow use it to mend her own tattered cloak of power.

Holy goddess, how it hurt. Wanting to be whole. Ashamed, she wished she could hide the damaged echo of power riddled with dark holes and sickly shadows. Streaks of light purple laced through the eerie blue light shimmering around her. The faint, healthier shades in her aura were just enough to remind her of the pure violet she used to take for granted.

Still stroking her face, Alec hummed a bit of a tune under his breath, something vaguely Celtic. Images of his Irish grandmother wound through his thoughts, warm and reassuring. Something deep inside recognized the tune and associated it with comfort. Safety.

“See, always there with a bit of a song, or a poem, making things right.” Zach sounded drowsy, though satisfied. “Reminds me of my dad’s sister, with her Celtic lullabies. I forget sometimes that you’ve got a touch of Irish in you, too.”

When Alec paused, she pressed her hand to his chest in a silent plea to continue. But this time, the tune he hummed held the warmth of the Mediterranean and was laced with memories of summers spent in Greece with his relatives. The notes took her away to a place where no one could touch her. Beyond pain. Beyond fear.

*Sky huddled closer, even though the small movement caused them both pain. Their prison was sealed tight enough that she couldn't tell night from day, and Jaimis's dampening spell prevented them from kindling glow spheres to break the absolute darkness. She could feel the slick drip of blood when Alec lowered his face close to hers, and she reached up to touch the gash on his forehead.*

*He'd hit hard when Jaimis flung him back into the room, his head contacting the stone wall with a sickening thud. But his thoughts seemed clear enough, and at this point, blood loss from the lashes on his back presented more of a risk. If they didn't starve to death, or more likely, die of dehydration first.*

*Near as she could tell, they'd been there three days -- brutal payback for what Jaimis perceived as her betrayal in helping Lena, her kidnapped roommate, escape. She shuddered, disgusted at the thought that Jaimis had once been her lover. Fuck, if he hadn't kidnapped Lena in a misguided power play, when would she have figured out what a sick fuck he was? The first time she saw him carry out a blood rite, when he bled a witch to death in order to gain the extra power?*

*She tried to swallow but couldn't seem to manage the simple motion. Guilt choked her as she thought of Alec bleeding out at Jaimis's hand -- simply because he'd gotten caught up in this mess when he'd tried to rescue her.*

*As she worried this through her thoughts, Alec continued to press back with images of Greek islands, white structures and achingly clear blue sky, endless ocean, warm wind. Far away. Beyond where the dark witch could hurt them.*

*The melody lulled her to the point where the tearing pain along her spine seemed almost bearable, and her parched mouth became a torment she knew she could survive. The damp chill of the room -- somewhere underground, that's all they knew of their location -- faded away as she and Alec pressed chest to chest, careful not to touch each others' ravaged backs.*

*As he continued to hum, she knew their suffering would most likely end in death. But she also knew that at least one person cared enough about her to hum a lullaby, even when his throat and mouth were blistered and parched, just like her own.*

“Sky, oh gods, please, Skyler! Come back!”

When Alec shook her, she let out a startled gasp. Zach held a soft, green glow sphere on his palm, but the light of their combined auras no longer surrounded them, and the dome of light no longer shimmered overhead.

“How long...?”

“About eight minutes.” Zach got up and went into the adjoining bathroom. Before she could think to beg him not to leave, he returned with a paper cup full of water. “Felt like fucking eternity.”

“I’m so sorry.” Alec’s face presented a mask of unchecked panic, and tears streaked his cheeks. “I forgot -- that I hummed the same songs when -- oh, gods, how could I be so stupid?”

“No.” Words felt heavy in her mouth, and she shook her head in frustration.

Striving for another way to show him, she called her aura again, letting the energy rise like sap through a tree, until it spilled out of her and added its own light to that of Zach’s glow sphere.

“See?”

For the first time since she staggered out of Jaimis’s prison, she tasted hope. Sweeter than honey, and wilder than country roses, it spilled over her tongue and into her soul. Her aura still shone mottled purple, like a bruise, but the ugly black tears -- disturbances in the field of energy -- were fewer now.

“In back, too. The light’s less interrupted. Not whole yet, but better than before.” Following the path of her spine, Zach ran his hands over her aura, and she shivered at the pleasurable feel of his energy brushing hers.

Alec’s breathing came short and ragged as he sat back on his heels, leaning into the mound of pillows, and he studied her until she blushed under his scrutiny. Even with some of the gashes mended, she knew how hideous her aura must look to him.

“I thought we’d lost you. You just -- went away -- and we couldn’t call you back.”

“I *remembered*. Not a scene of Jaimis torturing you. That’s all the dark witch left me with from our days in captivity, when he wiped my mind clean -- the horrors he subjected you to. I just recaptured one of the memories Jaimis had stolen -- of you and me. When you comforted me. Hummed that song.” When Alec and Zach stared at her, their faces set in identical masks of confusion, she shook her head hard enough to send her hair whipping out against their chests.

“I. *Remembered*.” She grabbed Zach’s hand, pulling him down beside her, and dug her nails into Alec’s thigh. “That’s what’s wrong with my magic. Why my power’s damaged. What he took from me, if I can get it back...”

“I can’t, Skyler. Gods help me, I can’t! Not that. Not even for you. If I go back there, even for a moment, I don’t know if I could survive it. Not sane, anyway.” His words shook with pain and rage, and his loathing for the dark witch battered her with its intensity.

“I know.” Her heart ached for him. Alec had taken more than his fair share of Jaimis’s brutality, distracting the rogue witch a number of times when he’d intended to go after her. “I won’t ask you again. I’m sorry I did earlier.” Hope bled away as she stroked his shaking shoulder, and she let her aura fade until only Zach’s glow sphere lit the room. “Maybe just being around you, like with that bit of a tune you hummed, maybe the memories will start to come back.”

Swallowing hard at what that entailed, she crawled over and curled onto Alec’s lap. For the past year, scenes of Jaimis flaying the skin off of Alec’s back and then raping him as he bled, *begged*, and screamed for mercy, had haunted her nightmares.

On some level, she knew the same thing had happened to her. The small, half-moon scar on her thigh served as a reminder. But even if she could remember, fill in more patches in her shattered aura, how could she find the strength to absorb the horror? Zach moved closer, sandwiching her in their embrace, and she knew they’d hold her like this all night, if need be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still bleary-eyed with sleep, although it was late morning already, Sky paced the length of the living room and eyed the military-style packs Zach had assembled near the door. One for each of them. Enough clothes, first aid supplies, food, drinking water, and blankets to get them through if they had to rough it in the woods for a while. At least her own clothes had finally arrived.

She’d chosen a pair of threadbare jeans, and she wore a dark sweatshirt over her tank top, despite the muggy June heat. Her instincts had been jangling on high alert ever since Zach went out to talk to Sorren’s guards after the three of them finished a hurried, exceedingly awkward breakfast.

As soon as she’d dressed, she packed her clothes into the backpack Zach had provided. If they had to run again, this time she wanted her things with her. Sweet goddess, what had she been thinking when she signed up for this... This what? Fool’s errand? Although to her, it felt more like a crusade, determination fizzing through her consciousness dark and bitter, like --

A chair crashed in the other room, and Alec came pounding around the corner toward her. “Heads up! Zach’s on his way in, and he’s running hard.”

Before she even heard Zach’s frantic warning echo through her thoughts, she grabbed her backpack and sprinted through the door. So much for Zach’s theory that it would take Jaimis’s people a few days to find them this time around.

His own pack slung over one shoulder and Zach's over the other, Alec followed quick on her heels. They met Zach in the driveway, and they all raced toward his Jeep.

Before they could reach the Jeep, though, one of the tires imploded with a hiss. Alec grabbed her close, reached out for Zach, and spun a concealing spell around them before she had time to be frightened.

*The woods!* Alec's order ripped through her thoughts with enough urgency to rock her back on her heels.

Never losing physical contact with the two of them, somehow Alec managed to hand off Zach's pack and get his own situated securely on his back. Sky followed suit, sliding her arms into the backpack straps, careful to maintain body contact with Alec so she wouldn't step out of the concealing sphere of magic. She ran so hard her feet stung, never mind she wore thick socks and a pair of running shoes.

Her breath rasped through her chest, and she struggled to keep up with the two men as they dragged her toward the tree line behind the house. *Heads up. Witch. Powerful!*

Fast on the heels of her silent warning, a blast shook the ground under their feet, and shockwaves of heat followed. Acrid smoke filled the air with the stench of scorched steel, burning gas, and rubber.

Zach's face twisted into a mask of anger. *By the Horned God, whoever just blew up my Jeep's going to pay for it.* His thought echoed through her mind with the impact of all his rage behind it.

Goose bumps rose along the backs of Sky's arms. When they planned this game of cat and mouse, they'd been counting on the fact that Jaimis would want them alive, the better to punish them -- retribution for the scars Alec had inflicted during their escape and for Sky's disloyalty. They'd also assumed he'd send his lackeys after them, not one of the dark lords. The spike of power they'd felt before the blast belonged to a witch nearly as powerful as Jaimis.

And a woman, from the feel of the power. More likely than not, she'd meant to catch them near the SUV and take them out in the blast. With her throat closing around her breath, Sky struggled not to panic. The smell of the burning SUV mingled with pine as they crashed through the brush and small trees, making enough noise that Alec's concealing spell would hardly do them much good. At least they'd be all but invisible, and when they got far enough away to slow down a bit, they could work on limiting the noise.

A branch slapped across her neck as they headed deeper into the dim light of the woods, the sting eerily reminiscent of the lash of a whip. Zach steered them toward an overgrown path, little more than a deer run, really.

*Quiet now.*

Alec's warning simmered through her thoughts, sweeping her back to the last time he'd wrapped her in a shroud of mist and attempted to spirit her away from danger. She



slowed her pace, careful not to snap twigs as she walked. Her lungs burned, and sweat coated her back. Her heart beat so hard against her ribs, she half feared their pursuer would hear it.

*How?*

Zach's silent query echoed her own confusion as to how a witch managed to evade their powerful wards, but if she had things right, he wouldn't like the answer. *A dark lord.*

A witch that powerful wouldn't have to cross the threefold circle of wards around the house -- wouldn't have to sneak past Sorren's guards. What she needed to figure out was whether one of Jaimis's minions was acting on her own -- a power play, perhaps -- or if Jaimis put out orders to kill first and ask questions later.

*Power play, would be my guess.* Zach's assessment didn't do a blessed bit of good to quiet her fears.

Sky winced when she slammed her toes into a fallen log, her fear magnified by the pain. When they'd crafted the plan to draw Jaimis out of hiding, Sorren had been frank about his fears concerning the dark lords. In the space of a year, Jaimis had transformed his power base from almost nonexistent to nearly impenetrable. A ring of powerful, malcontent witches, the dark lords were only too eager to buy into Jaimis's plans.

Alec grabbed her wrist, and the three of them froze in place until he signaled for them to move forward. Whatever had attracted his attention, hopefully it didn't involve more of Jaimis's folks lying in wait in the woods. Every muscle ached with tension as she picked her way through the fallen leaves, trying hard to walk as quietly as the men.

But then, if they had a dark lord on their trail, with the superior tracking skills of a powerful witch, a little noise wasn't likely to make much of a difference in their fates. The dark lords were a far cry from the "harm none" norm of witch culture. Jaimis's followers presented a formidable lot. And if one of them was acting on her own, outside Jaimis's orders...

A stick cracked under her shoe, and Sky cringed at her lapse of concentration. *Too caught up trying to ferret out Jaimis's plots to keep my own blessed ass alive.* Furious, she focused all her concentration on the forest floor underfoot. Alec made no sound as he walked beside her, and despite his muscle-laden frame, Zach's steps fell nearly as quiet.

The woods around them rippled with the sound of wind in the trees and shifting leaves, but no bird cries. No small animal noises. *Trouble.*

*Someone's tracking us.* Zach's warning echoed her fears.

Her pack chafed against her back, and she wished like hell she'd taken time to braid her hair, because it stuck to her neck in a sweaty mess and drifted forward around her face and arms in the breeze.

"Oh!"

Her ankle wrenched, and her foot slipped into a hole beside a mass of roots. Pain shot up her leg, and she clenched her teeth. She'd been watching, bless it. But bushy ferns

covered the dip in the forest floor. Zach wrapped an arm around her waist, steadying her as she extricated her foot, and Alec bent to feel her ankle.

*Sprain, most likely.*

Alec didn't have to explain that they couldn't stop to wrap her injury here, with the forest quiet around them, the absence of bird and animal calls indicating someone either lay in wait ahead or followed behind. If Jaimis's witches were acting independently, then there was no way of telling if the woman who blew up the car was alone or traveled with friends. Alec steadied her as she limped along between the two men, careful to stay within the cloak of shadows and silently cursing the weight of her pack.

Her fury almost stronger than her fear, she raged inwardly at the dark lord for making her feel like prey. If nothing else, at least the motive was clear. *We present as much a risk to the dark lords as we do to Jaimis.*

She felt a shiver of agreement from Zach. In ordinary times, she'd resent knowing both Alec and Zach had been mucking around in her thoughts, but the connection just might help them get out of this mess alive. Three sets of survival instincts had to be better than one.

As they stumbled along over uneven ground, Alec touched her thoughts. *Jaimis is smart enough to know we have a better chance of tracking him than anyone else. But he wants us alive. Revenge.*

When Zach jumped in and continued Alec's reasoning, the three-way connection threw her off balance almost as much as the crisscrossed maze of fallen branches. *The dark lords know you two have the best chance of finding Jaimis. Since he knows the dark lord's identities, they have a hell of a lot to lose if you find him -- and nothing to gain by keeping you alive to hand over to Jaimis.*

Sky bit her lip when her injured ankle jolted on an uneven slope and held tighter to Zach and Alec's arms. When Zach threw her to the ground, she cursed under her breath, but understood when a shot ripped through the air. She fell clear of Alec's concealing spell, and although she scrambled back into the mist, that moment of visibility would give anyone holding a weapon a chance to --

Another shot rang out, and fear clawed at her belly as the three of them crawled through damp leaves and over fallen logs, escaping at a snail's pace. She was half inclined to abandon her pack but knew the supplies it contained could be crucial to her survival. At least being down on her hands and knees gave her ankle a bit of a rest, but that would hardly matter if the shooter caught up with them.

"Stay low. They'll be shooting to wound, hoping to cause enough pain to compromise your powers so they can drag you back to Jaimis." Zach spoke in a hoarse whisper and dumped his pack beside Alec. "Get Sky at least a few miles from here, then set up camp for the night. If I don't catch up with you, move on to the next safe house tomorrow. The list is in my pack."

*What the fuck? Don't you dare --*

Alec's warning broke off as Zach wrenched out of his grasp, darted to the left, and ran hard uphill. Sky felt fear for his friend singe through Alec like a forest fire, but he slung Zach's pack over his shoulder and kept her moving forward, creeping toward safety. Another shot fired, and it took her a moment to realize their opponent hadn't moved in closer.

*Zach the ex-cop. Only goddamned witch I know who'll carry a gun.*

Alec's thought held as much relief as condemnation of the practice. At least Zach wasn't bent on a suicide mission. Unable to help Zach, she focused on getting as far away from here as possible. Only Jaimis's human thugs would carry guns, and the threat of being delivered wounded and powerless to the rogue witch turned her mouth dry and stole her breath.

When the next shot exploded through the quiet of the forest, pain rocketed through her as if she'd been hit herself. Her arm burned, raw and fierce, and her breath shuddered through her in staggered gasps. *Zach!*

Her silent cry exploded through her, followed fast by Alec's. *Think, bless it!* There had to be something she could do to --

*Sorren's people. Some of them have to be closer than half a block from us by now. As soon as the car exploded, they'd have started looking for us. Find them!* Alec's desperation and near-panic hit her like a slap in the face.

As Alec steered them in the general direction of where they'd heard Zach go down, Sky hurried to keep up, ignoring the stabs of pain through her ankle and the ghost pain along her arm where her mind insisted she'd experienced a bullet wound, even though her eyes verified she was unharmed. The clean scent of pine and fresh earth seemed horribly out of place, coupled with so much hurt and fear.

*That's not the way my gift works. I can't contact them if I've never met --*

*Laura!* The witch healer who'd mended the gash on Alec's face after she'd nearly brought the ceiling down on their heads in the cabin when she'd wielded her damaged magic. Clinging to the hope that the redheaded woman had been guarding the house when the car exploded and that she'd be able to reach her, Sky lowered her shields and cast outward, seeking a familiar thought imprint.

With her psychic barriers down, Zach's pain all but brought her to her knees. The dark, garbled thoughts of the man who'd shot him swirled through her head in a dizzying spiral. Blackness started to crowd around the edges of her vision, but Zach only had one chance, and she'd be damned if she'd waste it. Trying again, she called out for Laura, a witch she hadn't spent more than fifteen minutes with, and that in the midst of a frantic escape.

This time, she picked up the thoughts of the dark lord stalking them, who was strangely panicked that one of Jaimis's human paramilitary types had also found them. Fear raged through the dark lord at what Jaimis would do if he learned she'd defied his orders. The woman's terror rocked Sky loose from her moorings. Sucked into the dark lord's psychic world, Skyler tried to make sense of the fact that the woman had been trying to scare them

off with the explosion, equally determined that they give up their search for the rogue witch, and that Jaimis not get his hands on them.

Focusing harder, Sky blocked out the chaos of the dark lord's mind and cried out for Laura, over and over, letting the call ring with her fear. When she felt the brush of the witch healer's thoughts, she flashed an image of their location. Staying low to keep out of the line of fire and still wrapped in Alec's concealing spell, they finally reached Zach. Alec's shadowy cloak closed around the fallen witch until he was enveloped in silver mist, hidden from view.

Bless it, which direction had the shots come from? She dropped her shields again, fighting nausea as the psychic babble threatened to knock her senseless. Sorting out the threads, she located the thoughts of the shooter, and then pulled her shields tight around her.

*East of us -- he's shooting from a tree.*

At least he'd have to scramble down before he gave chase, and with Alec's concealing spell, they had half a chance. Zach groaned softly as Alec tore off a strip off his shirt and bound it over the wound. Power rippled around them as Alec drew strength from the energy and half dragged Zach to his feet. As adrenaline hammered through her system, the three of them made painful progress toward the west, away from the shooter.

*Back near the road. There's a hollowed out spot in the rocky hillside, almost a cave.*

Sky nodded her understanding. Enough shelter to tend Zach's wounds until Laura found them, and hopefully enough to keep them hidden from dark lord and human alike. The scent of pine mixed with the coppery smell of blood, and she tried not to speculate on the seriousness of Zach's injuries. She didn't feel his pain anymore, and her relief that he wasn't suffering mingled with fear that he might be going into shock. How he managed to stay on his feet, leaning heavily against Alec, she had no idea. Now that Alec was supporting Zach, she had a hell of a time limping along with her sprained ankle.

By the time they reached the carved out indent in the hill, more of a mess of crumbled earth and rocks than an actual cave, her ankle felt like someone had dipped it in molten lead. And yet Zach, his arm coated with blood from shoulder to wrist, didn't seem to be feeling much of anything. Not a good sign. Working with Alec to make the injured witch comfortable, she pulled a blanket out of her pack and spread it over Zach.

*Alec gave her a look. He's going into shock.*

*Laura!* She cast outward again, carefully picturing their hiding place once she latched on to the healer's thoughts. As soon as she'd passed on the information, she slammed down her shields against the dark lord's agitated thoughts and the frantic ramblings of Jaimis's human thugs. As Alec tore open the first aid kit, Zach closed his eyes, and his head dropped to the side. He'd surrendered to unconsciousness.

For all she'd never been a spiritual sort of witch, she reached out to every goddess and god who might be in psychic shouting distance of these cursed woods. *Please!* Words of

invocation and ritual escaped her, boiling down to that desperate plea. Zach's face looked ashy yellow, and sweat coated his body.

*Please! Hear me!*

## Chapter Five

Sky paced the length of the main room in the hunters' cabin, then paced back to the couch where Zach lay, pale and unresponsive in the late afternoon light. Every time she tried to swallow, her tongue seemed to get in the way, and her throat felt like dry leather. Her ankle, however, felt better than ever after a dose of Laura's healing power.

"Sit!" Alec grabbed her hand and pulled her down beside him on the braided rug. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to shout. It's just..."

"Look..." Laura put aside a bag of herbs and glared at Alec, then Sky. Standing there with her jeans and blue cotton blouse stained with Zach's blood, tendrils of red hair plastered to her sweaty cheeks, she looked about ready to pitch a supernatural temper tantrum. "I've told you, Zach's going to be fine. He needs to sleep, twelve hours minimum, maybe more. You remember that from when you were injured, don't you?"

*Low blow.* But then, they weren't exactly making Laura's job easier with their pacing, worrying, and bickering. "Sure, they told me I slept a few days after Jaimis..." Bless it, any attempt to nonchalantly let the words roll off her tongue vanished when she looked down at Zach's bloody clothes.

Alec rested his hand on Sky's shoulder and fixed Laura with a glare. His power rose to the surface in an ominous warning. "You think we could lay off the painful questions?"

"Not a problem." Laura glared right back at him. "As long as you can show some trust and stop disrupting what I need to do here. Zach's arm is going to need my attention for the next several hours. I give you my word, I can heal him, but negative energy disturbs my focus and therefore limits my healing power."

Sky stood and grabbed Alec's hand, and he moved with her to the ratty armchairs near the hearth. Despite the daring rescue she'd managed, Laura didn't make her list of favorite people. Not by a long shot. In-your-face didn't even begin to describe the healer's attitude.

But she'd pulled them out of an impossible spot, and if Zach's well-being depended on kowtowing to an arrogant witch healer, then so be it.

"Let us know if you need us to help with anything -- cleaning him up, fresh bandages, boiling herbs..." Alec's voice trailed off, but it seemed he'd reached the same conclusion about tiptoeing around Laura for Zach's sake.

"Cleaning him up right now would only disturb him. I've got the wound clean. The rest will have to wait until he wakes."

Sky exchanged a look with Alec as Laura went back to tending Zach's torn skin and muscle. *You don't like her either.*

Frowning, Alec picked a thread from the faded brown armchair and twirled it between his fingers. *More like don't trust her.*

Neither of them had showered yet, and Sky resisted the urge to lean over and rub a smudge of dirt off Alec's cheek. Like hers, his clothes were smudged with Zach's blood. His hair surrounded his face in frothy brown waves, and worry lines stretched across his forehead. What a pair they made. Two wounded spirits unable to trust anyone.

*She's on Sorren's safe list -- his innermost circle.* The thought that they might have escaped the human gunman and a dark lord with a penchant for making things go boom, only to land in the hands of Jaimis's spy, didn't do much for her sense of personal security.

"Look..." Laura spread a layer of salve across where the bullet had traveled clear through Zach's arm. "You may as well go back to talking out loud. At least that way I know what you're up to."

Alec's scowl deepened. "Right. Sky and I were just discussing the fact that Sorren hasn't been able to ferret out the spy yet. Someone's feeding Jaimis information on our whereabouts. Someone close enough to know Sorren's most closely held plans. We were thinking it might be you."

Sky tensed and channeled a thread of power, ready to let her broken magic do what it would if Laura made a threatening move. For someone who'd had a brilliant career in politics, Alec sure lacked tact under pressure.

"Interesting strategy, especially since Zach still needs her care." Sky glanced in the healer's direction. On the other hand, maybe Alec feared Laura might do Zach more harm than good. If so, best to sort out her loyalties from the start.

Rummaging through her bag for another roll of bandages, Laura raised an eyebrow in their direction. "You're right. I'm a spy."

The truth in the healer's voice set Sky on instant red alert. Leaping to her feet, she let her damaged aura ripple free around her, power brimming to the surface like a thunderstorm. Alec tipped the armchair over in his haste to stand beside her, and when he grabbed her arm, she elbowed him in the ribs. Blessed goddess, he hadn't called so much as a whisper of defensive energy to the surface. What the --

“She said she’s a spy, not Jaimis’s spy.”

Calmly, as if the discussion involved no more than which salve to use on the ragged edges of Zach’s upper arm, Laura turned to smile at Sky. “Oh, is *that* what you were worried about?”

Okay, she didn’t just dislike the woman. She hated her. Letting a bit more energy ripple free, Sky twined her hair into a rough braid and planted her hands on her hips.

“Down, girl. The spy deal’s strictly as Sorren’s agent. I’ve been investigating Jaimis’s activities for years. How do you think I got stuck looking after you? Dealing with the rogue witch and the fallout from his dark arts is part of my job description.”

Sky tore away from Alec and returned to her chair, glaring at Laura all the while. “You ever refer to me again -- even obliquely -- as ‘fallout from Jaimis’s dark arts’ and you’re going to find yourself on the wrong end of some very messed-up, unpredictable magic.”

Unable to sit still, she rose and went over to brush a kiss across Zach’s forehead, pleased to find it cool and dry, and then stalked toward the back of the cabin. Unfortunately, it was a damn small cabin, and Laura’s taunting voice chased her down the narrow hall.

“When it comes to *safe*, I’m as close as the three of you are going to get right now. Sorren trusts me, and that’s going to have to be good enough for you. Why don’t you go take a nap? And wake up without the chip on your shoulder.”

Sky headed into the shabby bedroom, hoping she’d heard the last of Laura’s words of wisdom for a while. As fatigued as she was after the morning’s ordeal, she doubted she could actually rest with her mind buzzing with tension. But a little privacy would do her a world of good at the moment.

“This cabin’s not on the original safe house list.” Laura’s bossy tone drifting in from the front room grated on her frazzled nerves. “And Sorren personally screened the three witches guarding the perimeter. No one’s going to find us for a while, so clean up a bit and get some sleep. Or have a good fuck, if it’ll help you relax. But if you question my integrity again, I’m going to nail you for it.”

At that last bit, Sky heard a chair scrape across the wood floor and Alec’s rapid footsteps approaching down the hall. He exploded into the room before she had a chance to disperse the agitated ripple of bluish purple light dancing around her, and as he brushed past her on the way to the bed, his own frantic energy hit her like a slap of sunlight on a stark winter day.

Muttering under his breath, he peeled his torn shirt over his head and tossed it on the bare mattress. No sheets. Sort of went along with the theme of no food in the refrigerator, meager canned goods in the cupboards, and --

“Fuck, there’s no bathroom in here.” Alec turned a full three-hundred-sixty degrees, as if he might have missed a secret passage or something.



Despite everything, Sky couldn't help but grin at his appalled tone. "There's a shack behind the cabin. Pit toilets, I'm guessing. Bathe in the pond, if you want."

Her own dismay at the state of the cabin evaporated in the face of Alec's shock. "Guessing they didn't use pit toilets in Congress, eh, Senator?"

When Alec kicked the ramshackle chest of drawers beside the bed, she wondered if she'd gone too far. Closing the bedroom door to gain at least the illusion of privacy, she sat gingerly on the edge of the grimy mattress.

"I told you, Senator Kouklakis died months ago. Don't *ever* call me that again."

When her life disintegrated around her, she lost a household of belongings and a job tending bar. Stupid of her to forget how much more dearly her mistakes had cost Alec. A world of friends, the career of a lifetime, power, prestige --

"Bullshit." Delivering another kick to the chest of drawers, Alec radiated enough irritation to make her more than a bit apprehensive. "I told you before, I work for Sorren. My own choice. Nothing you did had any bearing on this whole fucking mess."

Right, the good Sen -- witch obviously had a few rage issues. For all she cared, he could spend the night in the outhouse with the rats. Dealing with Laura had her on edge to begin with, and if Alec thought he could pick a -- "Oh!"

Sky shrieked in surprise as he let his aura crackle through the surrounding air with an almost audible snap, blinding and hot with more than anger. He closed the distance between them in two strides and pulled her up against his bare chest.

*I'm sorry.* His thought caressed her mind, whisper soft as he tilted his head down to kiss her.

With the flat of her palm pressed against his chest and his lips traveling over hers like a shiver of wind, his fear and desire raged across her. Fear for Zach, echoing her own. Fear of Jaimis and the dark lords. And fear for her safety.

As for his desire... Her anxiety fanning her lust like a prairie fire, she shivered as his tongue traced her lower lip. Hot, searing, smoky, and blessed near irresistible.

"Hold that thought."

When Alec pulled away, she felt as if a piece of her broke off, leaving her shaky and hollow. Sky listened to his footsteps in the hall and the brief conversation between him and Laura as she worried over the blatant and inescapable fact that she'd allowed herself to get attached to him. No blessed good could come of that. Last one she'd let herself fall in love with was Lena, and look how that ended. With her roommate -- her former lover -- kidnapped as a pawn in Jaimis's power play. She shuddered to think of what might have happened if she hadn't been able to help Lena escape.

"Your relationship with Lena ended a long time before that, from what Matt tells me." Alec stomped back into the room, closed the door with a thud, and dumped their packs on the floor by the chest of drawers.

Right. Nothing like a clear and compelling reminder that she was closer in age to his son than she was to him. Or that his son had paired up with Sky's ex-girlfriend. Fucking witch's soap opera, that.

"Hey!" She tried to shove him away when he wrapped his arms around her.

"If you're looking for reasons not to get close to me..." Alec studied the stained mattress, as if evaluating its potential, and shook his head. "I'd think my feelings for Zach would offer a better excuse than either age or the fact that your ex-roommate ended up with Matt."

"Look, Lena's a sensitive issue for me, just like having left the Senate is for you" Leaning close, she nipped his bare shoulder. "So maybe we could let the topic of her and Matt rest for now, hmm?"

No question where this was leading. Still scared as shit after being shot at in the woods earlier -- not to mention that they could have been blown up along with Zach's car if they'd been any closer -- at the moment, sex with Alec seemed like the safest thing in the world.

Moving closer, until she could feel the heat of his bare chest through her stained tank top, he undid what remained of the makeshift braid she'd fashioned during her altercation with Laura. He ran his fingers through her hair until he hit a tangle, then worried it loose, his movements gentle and slow. Her breath hitched in her throat as he continued grooming her, fanning his hands through her hair and easing the knots free until tendrils floated loose around her chest and back.

"When Zach fell in the woods, I thought..." Bless it, she couldn't even force the words out. One tumble in the sheets with the two men, and the fear of losing either of them paralyzed her.

"I thought so, too. If you hadn't been there to call Laura..." He shook his head. "But you were, and you did. And Zach's tougher than both of us put together. He'll pull through fine. And FYI, 'tumble in the sheets' doesn't even begin to describe what the two of you did for me."

Right, but delving that deep would drag her into a realm of complex emotions she'd rather not explore right now. "You want to --"

"Hell, yes, but not on that bed. Let me fix some blankets on the floor."

As Alec rummaged through their packs and pulled out a couple of blankets, she pulled her filthy yellow tank top over her head, took off her jeans, and discarded both items on top of the dusty chest of drawers. Action beat anxiety hands down, and seeing as they'd be cooped up here for a while, her options were limited. If anything could make her forget this morning's near disaster...

"I aim to serve." Alec tossed a blanket on the floor, raising a cloud of dust, and stalked over to the window to double drape the other blanket over the naked curtain rod.

This guy had to learn to stay the hell out of her head. Either that, or she'd have to remember her thoughts had become public property. "I didn't mean... Look, I'm sorry."

Angry, she undid her bra and tossed it on top of her jeans, then slid her panties over her hips and down her legs, leaving them discarded on the floor. Alec knew just how fucking vulnerable she felt right now -- how dare he get huffy about her need to blow off some steam. Not as if he didn't feel as needy and frightened as she did.

When he turned to her, his face reflected a mix of regret and apprehension. She reached for his arm before she could think better of it. What was there about Alec that made her need to comfort him, made her want to tangle herself in his arms and forget their cursed game of cat and mouse with the rogue witch?

A small sigh escaped as he leaned down to kiss her neck, his hands playing across her naked spine. Then something furry brushed her ankle, and she bit her lip in an effort not to shriek.

"Rat." Sky shivered. The telltale skitter of feet underneath the bed indicated it might have friends, too.

"A little mouse, maybe, but I doubt there'd be a..." Eyes wide, Alec bent to look under the bed, formed a glowing white orb over his palm, and tossed it hard, eliciting a burst of angry chatter and skittering feet. "Rat -- or rather, several. You're right."

Without further explanation, he picked up the blanket he'd dropped on the floor, removed the other one from where he'd hung it across the window, and headed out the door. Sky didn't need any encouragement to follow. This revolting cabin might be the safest damn place in the universe -- and it could very well be, since she was certain no witch had ever stepped foot in here before. Jaimis would have no reason to search for them in an abandoned hunters' cabin. But right about now, she'd give anything for a night in one of Sorren's carefully chosen, clean, fully-stocked safe houses.

Laura glanced at them as they stomped through the living area, and keeping her shoulders square -- *nude, who me?* -- Sky stopped to feel Zach's cool forehead and brush a kiss across his cheek before following Alec outdoors.

The trees grew so thick that it looked like dusk, even though it couldn't be much past midday. Birds carried on in a riot of song, and the leaves rustled in the slight breeze. Mosquitoes be damned, sex in the open air had to be better than spending another moment in rat city. As Alec spread the blankets in a hollowed-out spot between several bushes, she slapped at her legs, already providing a feast to the local bloodsuckers.

"Here, settle in quick, and I'll take care of that." Alec held out his hand, and she joined him on the blankets, stumbling over a fallen branch at the last minute and landing indelicately against his chest.

As she removed a few stones from under the blanket and tried to find a comfortable spot to settle, Alec raised his arms, and the air around them turned shivery silver. Although she'd felt this silken cocoon twice before, as recently as this morning when he used the

power of concealment to usher them away from the burning Jeep and through the woods, goose bumps rose across the backs of her arms.

“I don’t know why, but the temperature drops when I call the cloak of mist. Sounds are muted.” Humming softly under his breath, Alec sprawled on his side and pulled her naked bottom against his jeans. “And the bugs won’t bother you now.”

Holy goddess, she could feel power around her, as potent as a crashing waterfall, and yet, he didn’t even break a sweat. Still humming, he stroked her belly with his palm, smooth and warm.

“This isn’t like a normal spell, or the energy you’d use in a rite. Or even Laura’s healing power. It’s more...” He shrugged. “Like breathing. A part of me.”

“I’m supposed to find that reassuring? That you can summon this kind of power and not bat an eyelash? And for the sole purpose of scaring off a few mosquitoes?”

Alec’s hand strayed to her breast, and she inhaled sharply as his fingers found her nipple. “For safety. Keeping the bugs off is just an added benefit. No one can see us now, and even if someone breached the guards’ wards, we’d be covered.”

While she mulled that over, he scooped her up and turned her to face him. His eyes looked way too serious for a casual encounter, and if she stopped to think twice, she suspected she’d decide this was a bad idea. But when he pulled her closer, and the warmth of his bare chest pressed against her pebbled nipples, she decided some things just didn’t bear further analysis.

“You can maintain this...” She gestured at the silvery mist around them, wondering what to call it. “While we...”

“Yes.” He kissed her nose. “Like I said, no more trouble than breathing. And Sky?”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing casual about this.” His eyes swept her body with a mix of affection and hunger.

Running her tongue along her lips, she let her hand trail lower, her fingers tickling the skin just over the waistband of his jeans. A wave of energy passed between them, power seeking power, and she swallowed hard.

When he reached down to unzip his jeans, her heart kicked into overdrive. Her nerve endings popped and crackled in anticipation, and she felt each nudge and poke of the uneven ground beneath the blankets like a caress. The earth smelled rich and damp, and the aroma of pine mingled with Alec’s own salty, musky male scent.

She grabbed the waistband of his jeans and helped him shove them past his narrow hips, revealing burgundy silk boxers which couldn’t hide his long, stiff cock. “I don’t know how to do this, you know. Me and you...here...now.”

His laugh, low and musical, rippled over her. “It’s been a while for me, too, but I suspect we can figure things out together.”

The silver mist around them shifted and reformed when she smacked his shoulder. Might be as easy for him to weave a concealing spell as it was to fill his lungs with air, but she enjoyed a smug moment knowing she'd ruffled him enough to mess with his all-powerful magic. She gasped when he grabbed both sides of her hips and pressed her mound tight against his cock, only the thin fabric of his boxers separating them.

"If I were so blessed powerful, Jaimis never would have gotten his hands on you."

*Not going down that road, not by a long shot.* "So, if I can't bind you, can't blindfold you, can't call upon the services of a number of helpful sex toys..." -- *don't have the stomach to so much as drag my fingernails deep across your back* -- "then what in the world am I supposed to do with you?"

"How did you ever get so jaded so young?"

Before she could come up with a reply, he scooted down and took her nipple into his mouth, sucking until her universe reduced in size to about the diameter of her areola. Problem was, his question had an answer. And all these years later, it still didn't sit easy.

*Tell me.*

Sucking harder, Alec seemed determined to get as much of her left breast into his mouth as possible. Slick little forks of fire raced from her nipple, down her belly, and across her clit, sending shock waves deep into her pussy. Hungry, she reached down to cradle his sac in her palm, playing the silky fabric of his boxers back and forth until he moaned.

"My first serious boyfriend. Human, a couple years older than my sweet sixteen, and the sick fuck had a veritable dungeon in his van."

When Alec released her nipple with a soft sucking sound, she regretted sharing. She grabbed the waistband of his boxers and liberated his straining cock, all but tearing the silk in her haste to undress him. Tossing the rumpled shorts aside, she slithered toward his groin, hungry to take him in her mouth, but he caught her shoulders and pulled her back until she lay face-to-face with him.

"We played things that way with Zach last night, remember? Tongues and mouths all over, licking and sucking, wet and wild... Though I'd love to feel your sweet little mouth on my dick again, I think we need to explore new territory. And I don't think you were done talking about how you got so jaded that you can't enjoy simple skin on skin, without the bells and whistles."

"Can't say he ever did anything to me with bells and whistles, but ball gags, miles and miles of rope, candle wax, floggers, nipple clamps..." She knew she'd shocked him, but couldn't seem to stop. "Corsets, handcuffs, clothespins, spreader bars --"

"Stop!" Alec winced, as if startled by his own anger. "I'm sorry. I can't picture you like that, being hurt for someone's pleasure. Not after what we went through together."

"That's the problem." Sky cupped her hands to each side of his jaw, enjoying the brush of stubble on her palms. "You see, after a while, I couldn't picture it any longer, either. So I

made sure I held the whip, not the other way around. I traded in the bottom act for the trappings of a Dom. Role fit me better, too.”

*Except with Jaimis.* At the beginning, long before the blood rites and his encroaching madness, she'd thought his ability to top her meant she'd finally found a man strong enough for her tastes. Forcing regret aside, she traced her finger along Alec's arm.

“Look, after what happened with Jaimis, I can't play with an edge. Not anymore. But I started so young. I never had a chance to acquire a taste for vanilla, so I'm afraid...”

*Afraid my sexuality is as broken as my magic.*

“That sounds like an invitation to discover more forms of nonthreatening kink, if I'm not mistaken. The bit in the bathtub seemed to work for you, correct?”

Sky's murmured assent got lost in his hungry kisses.

“And the bit where you and Zach played tongue hockey across my dick?”

Fear quivered through her senses at the reminder of how close they'd come to losing Zach today, and she pulled away from Alec's mouth. “Yes. And when he's better, I'm going to give him the best welcome-back sex of his life. You're invited.”

Alec's cock twitched against her thigh. “It's a date. But for now, let's see what we can do here, on the level of kinky but safe. Now close your eyes.”

At which she sat bolt upright and knotted her fists in the blankets.

Alec groaned under his breath. “Okay, wrong approach. I know better than to ask you to trust me, but I promise that nothing you experience with me tonight will involve pain. Unless you count the ‘I'm going to die if I don't come soon' feeling.”

His eyes looked so serious, amber brown in the half-light of the forest, and his tone was so earnest that she couldn't bear to disappoint him. Breathing slow and deep, willing her body to relax, she lay down on her back and let her eyes droop shut.

“There we go.” He eased his hand under the arch of her neck, kneading away any remaining tension. “I'm going to use a bit of magic, so don't be startled. Simple parlor tricks, but I think you'll like this.”

Feeling exposed with the June air on her skin, her legs splayed open on the soft blankets and her world shrouded behind closed eyelids, she waited. Although she felt a gathering of power and heard Alec murmur a few unintelligible words to cue a spell, when something touched her flesh, it had nothing to do with magic.

Tiny whispers of sensation tickled her neck, and the scent of pine became stronger. Identifying the object, she smiled. Alec dragged the sprig of long, delicate pine needles, fanlike and soft, over her collarbone and up across the mound of her breast until the tiny points teased her nipple.

“This isn't going to be like the thing with the fruit, is it? Where you'll touch me with a sprig of pine, an oak leaf, a fern, and all manner of forest paraphernalia, without ever letting me feel your skin?”

In answer, the warmth of his palm cupped her other breast as the pine sprig continued to tease the first. The warmth of the day and the scent of the woods cradled her, and the tingling cocoon of his concealing sphere kept every inch of her body in touch with his magic. With her eyes closed, she imagined him leaning over her, his wavy hair moving through the hoary mist, the thin braid with the green bead at the end hanging close to his cheek as he bent forward.

“Oh!” Something fluttered between her legs, birdlike, and instinctively, she spread wider to welcome the sensation. “Guess that explains the spike of power a minute ago. What...?”

“Shh. Just feel. As I said, just parlor tricks. Nothing that can harm you.”

The feeling of feathers brushing against the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs made it almost impossible for her to keep her eyes closed. She wanted to see. Both his magic and his face. When the feathery wisps of power shifted, she groaned as what felt like wings brushed her clit. With each stroke of delight, her body warmed, loosened, opened itself farther in preparation to take him. Her pussy throbbed with pulses of heat, little spasms just strong enough to let her know how fucking great it would feel when she finally came.

Distracted by the heady sensations creating a slow sizzle across her pubic mound, she flinched when a leafy fern trailed across her breast. Alec shifted his hand to splay his fingers across her belly, exerting just enough pressure to hold her to the ground. When the fern tickled the underside of her arm, she laughed, but soon lost herself as the featherlike touches of whatever form he'd conjured this time sent her into a dizzy spiral of desire.

Softer, more fragile now, but centered directly over her clit. “A butterfly.”

If it weren't for the telltale crackle of energy, she'd swear an actual butterfly perched on her clit, fanning its wings on the summer breeze. She curled her hips upward, arching into the oh-so-light sensation, and whimpered when she met the delicious counterpressure of Alec's hand holding her down.

## Chapter Six

Alec's thoughts remained quiet, and without the distraction of being pulled into his head, Skyler focused on her body's responses. Her nipples felt tight and hard, sensitized by the touch of fern frond, hand, and silvery power. Alec's hand on her belly made her want so much more of him, all of him, covering her like a blanket, warm and comfortable.

The incessant buzzing over her clit, fairy-soft brushstrokes fanning air across her increasingly slick skin, left her breathless and panting. Her pussy felt swollen, more than ready to share space with Alec's body. Heat flickered across her skin in strange patterns, warming her eyelids, her neck, her knees, her ankles. Alec's aura. Even with her eyes closed, she could picture him bathed in a white yellow glow, could feel the heat radiating from him.

Alec made a small sound, and the quivering sensations between her legs eased. "I'm sorry. I know it's strange, to have my energy throw off heat like that."

"No, please. It's okay." *Don't stop.* "I feel at ease with you, in a way I hadn't imagined I would with anyone again. The warmth, it feels healthy. Like sun burning away filth, leaving everything clean again."

If only she could pull off a trick like that, using her energy to burn away impurities. *Broken. That's what I am.*

"I'm thinking if you're heading into the realm of self-pity, I'm not doing a good enough job of holding your attention." Still pressing her down with one hand, Alec moved his other to her inner thigh, letting her know he was coming. "Can I touch you, Skylark?"

Startled, she felt heat rush to her face at the unexpected endearment. In her past life -- leather, spiked boots, whip in hand -- no one would have thought to compare her to a small bird with an enchanting song.



“Yes. You can touch me.” No one had ever asked her before, and her throat tightened at his consideration for her skittishness, his gentleness, and most of all, his affection. “It’s been so long, since I’ve been with someone who...”

Her throat tightened, and he saved her from having to explain how long it had been since she’d had sex with someone who really cared for her. Not since Lena. And in her stupidity, she’d frightened Lena away.

Alec eased his hand closer to her swollen folds, and when she tilted her hips and moved her legs wider on the blankets, he stroked her damp folds as gently as the magic he’d called. Moving in rhythm with his fingers, the whisper-soft caresses of magic continued, sending little buzzes of satisfaction along the dripping channel of her pussy to the very core of her being.

“It just wasn’t the right time yet, with you and Lena. Regrets can fill your heart up with rocks, if you let them.” Alec hummed under his breath, something vaguely Celtic, as he eased his finger inside her. “You’re a different person now. Me too, for that matter. No use grieving for who we were. All we can do is move ahead.”

When he leaned forward to rest his head on her belly, a little sob caught in her throat. His aura pulsed against her skin, and as she reached down to tangle her fingers in his hair, the energy reshaped to include her. Sweet goddess, he smelled so good. Salty, as rich as the air in the forest, and oh so male.

Distracted by the delicious pressure of his head on her tummy, his hair spreading wildly across her skin, it took her several moments to realize the delicious strokes across her clit had stopped. In its place, a second finger slid deep inside her, warm and probing. When he shifted to his side, his stone-hard cock pressed against her thigh, and she shivered in anticipation.

With one hand she caressed his scalp, enjoying the feel of his hair on her fingers, and with the other, she grabbed onto his shoulder to steady herself as he pressed upward toward her pelvic bone and dragged his fingers along her sweet spot. Wet didn’t even begin to describe her pussy after that little move. And the heat of his aura around her couldn’t compare with the gush of molten liquid inside her.

When she thought she couldn’t stand another minute of him pressing there -- *oh, yes, right there!* -- he shifted position again and brought his mouth down directly over her clit. She held tighter to both his hair and his shoulder and half wondered if she’d come unglued and float off into the atmosphere. His tongue danced along the hood of her clit, lifting and teasing, and then stroked delicious circles around her drenched folds, touching everywhere except her swollen clit.

Just when she thought she might have to exert a little pressure to the fistful of hair she held, easing him back where she wanted his mouth, he claimed her clit again, sucking for all he was worth. When she felt her aura tear free, dark and twisted, she hardly cared. Even broken energy felt good mingling with his clear, clean power.

As their auras entwined, his thoughts coursed over her in a waterfall of images. He added a third finger to her pussy, envisioning his cock plunging inside her, filling her until they shared as much space as two bodies can. She smelled herself, rich and tangy on his tongue, felt the pressure on his sac as his cock twitched in anticipation, and reveled in the link that made it possible to feel not just *with* him, but *through* him.

*Skylark.* When he thought of her, she was his little bird, soaring free above the earth.

“You’re a hopeless romantic.” Her thighs tensed in warning, and when he let his teeth graze her clit, red flashes exploded behind her eyelids. “Little bird my -- ooohhhh -- ass!”

Beyond speech now, she gave in to the shuddering bliss as her body clenched tight around his fingers in rapid spasms, her clit throbbing double time under his tongue. She curled her shoulders off the ground and then arched her head back so hard that it hit the earth with enough force to hurt. She threw one leg across his shoulders as he continued to lick, prod, suck, and caress the last shivers of her climax out of her. Even when she thought the fury had passed, he coaxed aftershocks of pleasure from her, so strong her arms trembled, and she moaned at the heat of it all.

When she quieted, he eased his fingers free, but stayed with his face pressed between her thighs, breathing hard. She drifted, aware of the buzz of his hunger for her, but desperate for a few minutes to fall back into her body. Reclaim the boundaries of her limbs, and sort out which thoughts were hers and which his.

Then he shifted back, half sitting, and mumbled a few words under his breath. Goddess help her, the delicious butterfly wing caresses of his magic started up again, and her oversensitive clit shivered in near panic.

“Too...” *Too much. Too intense. Too hot.*

The shiver of energy vanished, and Alec lay down beside her, his head just above hers, so that her face pressed against his neck, her head tucked protectively under his chin. He held her, the wiry muscles of his arms secure across her body. Despite herself, and despite the edge of hunger she felt searing through him, she felt herself drifting, drowsy and sated. Too weary to fight, she surrendered to the cloudy, dark pull of sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gods, he could watch her forever. At some point, he’d lost track of time, uncertain how long they’d lain here together. Her breasts rose and fell gently with each breath she took, and her hair spread out across her pale skin like a silken black cloak. He’d never held someone like this, sleeping in his arms with their auras still merged.

Linda had liked a lot of space when she slept, and she’d died so young that they’d hardly had a chance to sort out the compromises that make up a marriage. Besides, his magic had made her nervous, so he’d been careful not to let his aura show when they were in bed together.

As much as he wanted to wake Sky, to sink his dick deep inside her and ease the fiery ache in his balls, he knew she'd given him something more precious than sex. She might not be able to trust him, not completely, but she felt safe enough with him to sleep in his arms. Surprised at how much that meant to him, Alec stroked her shoulder, playing his thumb across her smooth skin. She smelled like honey, rich and warm, and now and then, she made little noises in her sleep.

A stolen moment, he knew. The mere illusion of peace. And even now, surrounded by the embrace of leafy bushes and the safety of his concealing spell, he caught himself scanning their surroundings for trouble. He sensed the reassuring presence of the guards, not far off, and Laura and Zach inside the ramshackle cabin. Nothing to alarm him.

When Zach woke later, they'd all need to have a serious talk about strategy. Between the dark lord's exploding car trick and the human gunman's near success at ending Zach's life, the cat and mouse bit was officially over. Whether the others agreed with his plans was another matter altogether. But they'd be blessed fools to sit waiting for Jaimis's people to take another swipe at them.

"S everything okay?" Sky stirred and rubbed her eyes, the childlike gesture creating a lump in his throat about the size of Minneapolis.

"Sorry, just thinking too loud. Beyond the obvious, everything's fine." He watched as she sat and stretched, raising her arms high above her head and swaying from side to side.

When she scrambled on top of him, kneeling with her bottom resting near the tip of his cock, his breath escaped through clenched teeth. "I hope you know what you're getting yourself into."

Smiling, she bent down, and her hair cascaded across his body, eliciting shivers of approval. "I think it's more about what *you'll* be getting into."

*Fuck.* His blood supply rushed south, flooding into his already swollen dick. "Now?" Much as he hated the note of pleading in his voice, it had been a long, long time.

The thought of losing control still twisted his gut into knots, but the thought of *not* seeing this through spurred a red haze of panic. He tensed in anticipation as she raised her body and came to rest with her pussy lips splayed wet and slick over his rigid cock, teasing him but stopping short of penetration. She moved against him, sliding her wet folds along his shaft, then leaned forward so her clit rubbed against the sensitive spot just beneath the head.

Alec hummed under his breath. "Nothing I could say right now could express how fucking wonderful I feel."

"Hmm." She shook her head so her hair lashed across his chest in a cloud of silky warmth that smelled like honey and wild blackberries.

When she scooted back to take his cock in her hand and guided him inside her, he bit his lip and hoped he wouldn't embarrass himself by spilling like a fifteen-year-old virgin. Sky laughed, and he knew she'd caught that thought, but couldn't find it in him to care as

she pressed her knees and calves tight along his sides and lifted herself, then dropped back to engulf him in wet heat.

With him buried so deep inside her that her pelvic bones dug into his groin, she froze, statuelike, and reached up to touch his nipples. He wanted her to move again, rising and falling, to provide the friction he craved. And yet, he found himself enchanted by the sharp sensations as she rolled his small nipples between her fingers.

When he let out a sharp, hungry sound, she bent forward and covered him with her body, her breasts warm against his skin. He reached between them to cup the soft flesh in his palms, then gently played her nipples between his fingertips as she began to slide forward and back, pulling almost free of him before sinking back down and taking him deep inside her.

Her aura pulled at his, disturbing the field of light with the tattered spots. But despite the damage to her magic, nothing compared to this. The sex, the heady pull of her thoughts, the riot of their combined energy fields. Just when he got used to the rhythm she'd set -- thought maybe he could last long enough for them to climax together -- she pressed her hands against his chest and pushed herself upright.

The sudden pressure as the angle of his cock changed, combined with the over-the-top sexy vision of her breasts swaying with her movements, knocked the wind out of him and set every muscle in his body on edge, tense and ready to explode.

"I can't --"

"Sure you can." Sky smiled, her pink lips curling upward and her unearthly, light blue eyes sparkling with pure devilment. "My line at this point is usually, 'Don't you dare come until I give you permission,' and I've never had anyone disobey me yet. I'm thinking you're not likely to be the first."

*Oh, fuck.* That little glimpse of her former personality, brash and bold and in control, simmered through him like an aphrodisiac, which was the last thing he needed at the moment. Counting backward from one hundred, he waited to speak until he'd regained control.

"And I suspect my line is supposed to be, 'Yes, ma'am,' but given extenuating circumstances, specifically the fact that I haven't done this in over a year and never with someone as wonderful as you..." *Treading awfully close to dangerous sentimental territory there.* "You'll have to settle for, 'I'll do my best.'"

"I prefer 'Yes, sir,' but I'll go easy on you, given the circumstances." Giving lie to her promise, she raised and lowered herself so rapidly that he lost his breath trying to keep up with the thrusts and counterthrusts, tilting his pelvis to bury himself as deep as possible every time she brought her hot, wet pussy down around him.

The silver mist of his concealment sphere shimmered as his concentration broke and then dispersed completely. His body shook like a branch in the wind, and the sudden visual

rush of having the forest unfold around them, sunshine filtering through the branches, undiluted by the cocoon of magic, left him dizzy and short of breath.

“You...” Sky panted as she pressed hard against him, leaning forward and grasping his shoulders to create more friction between their pelvic bones. “Okay?”

Alec couldn't speak. Couldn't frame a response. Instead, he reached out and drew her closer into his thoughts as his aura crackled around them like the white and yellow hues in the Northern Lights. He ached with the need to come, but he couldn't let go. Not without the protective sphere of his spell giving him at least the illusion of security. And for the life of him, he couldn't focus enough to call the mist back.

“We're safe.” Sky nipped his chest, sharp and hard. “No one nearby but the guards, Laura, and Zach.”

His senses confirmed her conclusion. But still, some dark, wounded part of him fought release. Sweat slicked his brow, and his hair stuck to his forehead and cheeks, matted and damp. Sky reached up to brush a few strands away from his mouth, and the tenderness of her fingers brushing against his lips lent some degree of comfort in the midst of near panic.

“Right.” She tangled both hands in his hair and held tight. “Me first then.”

When she unraveled on top of him, her body and spirit uniting in the frenzy of her climax, he felt the alien heat, the unexpected sensations of spasms where he'd never felt them before, as her pussy clenched and released around his cock in rapid succession. Feeling through her -- *being her*, for those few moments -- his own body and mind gave up their bitter battle.

Crying out in a long, guttural yell, he filled her with liquid heat, bucking against her as he succumbed at last to the fierce pleasure his body demanded. Fire and water and wind and fertile earth, lightning and storms, soaring birds and endless oceans, images fired through his brain in rapid succession as he shook beneath her like a wild man.

Alec felt her thoughts brush his as he relaxed, spent, lying weak and shaken beneath her. Knew she'd experienced each sensation that rocketed through him, the bliss and the pain, along with the random images that flooded his mind.

*So close.* He didn't know how else to describe this, lying limp beneath her as she pressed drowsy kisses across his chest, still connected. Damp and warm.

*So safe.* Her answering thought undid him, and he suspected that if he wasn't drenched with sweat, she'd spot a tear or two.

When she eased off him, he wanted her back, but before he could complain, she sat up and pulled his wrists until he eased himself upright, facing her. That accomplished, she wrapped her arms around his back. Answering her unspoken request, he embraced her and pulled her against his chest, her head nestled close, and her hair splayed out across his lap. Together, they rocked back-and-forth, each giving and receiving comfort in equal amounts.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they made their way back to the cabin, Sky picked her way around stones and fallen branches. The earth felt soothing under her bare feet, and she held the leaf- and-soil-spattered blanket close around her to keep the bugs off. Alec had folded the other blanket in half and tucked it around his waist, and if the mosquitoes were bothering him, he didn't say so.

As they approached the cabin, Sky broke into a run. "Zach!"

Flinging herself toward the injured witch, she drew up short at the last minute so as not to jostle him and settled for leaning down to kiss his forehead. He reached up to grab the back of her neck with his good arm and pulled her in for a lingering kiss on her lips. Alec nudged her aside to claim a kiss of his own, and the two of them settled on each side of him on the wooden steps where he sat.

Sneaking glances at Zach, Sky decided he looked pale and weak, and the sight of his right arm bound in gauze up to the shoulder and secured to his side with a sling made her shudder. But all in all, he looked a hell of a lot better than he should. Leaning in to touch the head of the magnificent hawk tattoo on Zach's left shoulder, Sky traced her fingers over the outstretched wings.

"The good healer's inside throwing glow spheres at a nest of rats. She's a force of nature. Pronounced the one mattress infested with bugs and dragged it out to the rubbish pile. She's been cleaning ever since."

Alec rested his palm on Zach's knee, tracing his thumb over the frayed denim of his jeans. "Sky and I didn't hit it off so well with 'the good healer' this morning, but it looks like she's done right by you."

"Can't complain. Pain's under control, and she says the flesh should finish knitting in another twenty-four hours." Zach reached up to brush his hand across his shiny black hair. "She boiled water from the well, gave me a sponge bath, helped me put on a pair of jeans, and plunked me here so she could tear apart the cabin."

All three of them startled as a red-winged blackbird scolded them from the trees, and a few moments of silence followed.

"You've been out here a while?" Sky wondered what he thought of them tangling on leaf-covered blankets while he lay wounded in the cabin.

"Long enough to get an earful. But nix the guilt. I enjoyed the sound effects, and I can't think of any better way to shake off the edge of what happened earlier."

"You and Alec..." Sky wasn't even sure what she meant to ask. "You..."

Alec reached across Zach to stroke Sky's arm through the blanket. "You want the nutshell version?"

"I guess I want to know how we all *fit*. How the two of you met, a bit of history." *And where in the blessed world I belong in all this.*

Zach uttered a cryptic grunt, then slid his good arm behind Sky's back and pulled her against his side, pressing her blanket-clad body close to his bare chest. "How we fit is as close as damn possible. Not sure if Alec told you the Sight's one of my gifts. Sorry, but even I can't see how this all comes out in the end, and if Sorren does, he's not telling. But one bit I keep getting, screaming as loud as a banshee with a megaphone, is that we've got to cling together in order to walk out the other side of this mess."

Alec opened his mouth to speak, but Zach shook his head.

"Together, as in, as close as damn possible. Don't know why, or how, but it's the only chance we've got."

Well, that one would take some mulling over. Sky shifted restlessly against Zach's side, overly warm under the thick blanket but not quite at ease enough to let it drop.

"Right. While we digest that last bit, I can answer the part about my history with Zach." Alec chuckled under his breath. "Met for the first time in a schoolyard brawl. I was the new kid, second grade. First of many times Zach got the best of me in a fight."

"Before long we figured out we both came accessorized with grandmothers who spoke strange languages and held stranger customs. Never mind we both had a good dose of Irish blood, as far as kids were concerned, Alec was the Greek kid, and I was the Korean kid. In that small town, 'apple pie on the fourth of July' life, about the only chance we had was to get along."

Alec leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, chin in hand. "Didn't figure out we both had Irish roots for a while. Just paired up as a couple of loners looking for company."

"Then we hit our teens, and as we came into our power, we caught the faint glow of each other's auras." Zach's lips curled into a smile. "That sheen only another witch can spot."

"And all hell broke loose." Alec laughed out loud this time. "We couldn't figure out if we wanted to show each other up with bigger, badder spells or just plain jump each other."

Zach pulled her close with his good arm when she tried to put some space between them. "Once we got past the pissing match, powerful witches not playing so well with others and all, we gave in to the inevitable -- power seeking power, hot and raw -- and swapped virginities."

*Right. Sorry I asked.* Sky tucked her knees up close to her chest under the sweaty blanket. Talk about too much information. No matter what she'd just shared with Alec, all hot and bothered on the forest floor, no one could compete with a history like that. And bless it if it didn't burn her that she cared.

"You picking all that up, Zach, my friend?" Alec got up and walked around to the other side of the step, settling beside Sky instead of Zach.

"Loud and clear. Witch has a psychic broadcast like a warning siren."

When both of them snuggled in close, packaging her in the middle of a witch sandwich, she huffed her protest. To deaf ears. And what in fuck was Zach doing, picking up her thoughts so easily, anyway? Bless it, she barely knew the guy.

“Like I said, witch, we’ve got to pull together. So tight, there’s no room for privacy, or hidden thoughts.” Zach grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled gently. “Or jealousy, or sulking. The hard-ass cop in me definitely isn’t putting up with any sulking.”

When he dragged her blanket free, dropping it around her waist, she resisted the urge to smack him. Wrong to hit an injured man. Just not fair.

“Oh!” Although she saw it coming, she hardly had time to do much more than bat ineffectively at each of the men’s heads as they leaned in and covered her breasts with hot kisses. “No, Zach, you’ll mess up your arm!”

They withdrew with the “No,” but both looked too damn smug. She took a deep breath, winding up to let them know just what kind of behavior she wouldn’t tolerate from a pair of oversexed witches, when Zach’s face went all serious and introspective on her.

“Hey, are you okay?”

When she reached out to touch Zach’s wrist, Alec caught her hand and shook his head.

*He’s picking up a shadow of what lies ahead -- a little piece of the future -- I can tell by the look on his face. Let him see it through.*

Sky shivered as Alec’s warning echoed through her mind, and she watched helplessly as Zach withdrew further into himself. The wind shifted through the trees, and birdsong filled the silence. Indecipherable emotions flickered across Zach’s face, and after what seemed like an eternity, he shifted and shook his head.

“Okay?” Alec reached across her back to rest his hand on Zach’s shoulder.

“Wouldn’t be worth much if I let one of my strongest tricks rattle me. Been seeing ahead since I hit twelve. Nothing I can’t deal with.”

Rolling her eyes at Zach’s bravado, she leaned into him and rested her head against his shoulder, sensing his need for comfort. “Want to tell us?”

“Wouldn’t do much good if I left it unsaid. What I said a few minutes ago -- about pulling together -- that’s what triggered the foreknowledge. That part I’ve known all along, although without a hell of a lot of information to back it up.”

Frightened of what might come next, Sky leaned harder against Zach’s shoulder, seeking comfort herself now. Alec shifted closer, as if by physical proximity, they could weather whatever prediction Zach planned to share.

“A lot of this won’t make any sense, but what I saw -- we need to share pieces of ourselves. Not sure if that means someone’s been keeping a secret that can save us, or what. But somehow, the missing pieces will strengthen us, and without them, we’re lost.” Zach reached up to touch Sky’s cheek. “You, specifically, are at risk if we don’t follow through with this -- sharing.”



“Fucking seer, always has to speak in riddles.” The humor in Alec’s tone did little to lighten the tension.

“Down to specifics. I saw a bowl of water and a ring of candles, with Sky staring into the water.”

*Scrying rite.* But until she understood what they had to gain -- or lose -- with that particular piece of gray magic, she’d keep the information to herself.

“Then some out-of-this-world sexual capers.” Zach paused. “Ah, I mean between the three of us. Wilder than anything we’ve done to date.”

Sky frowned. *Oh, goody. Perverted presentiments.*

“And crackling through the sex came a rush of power so fucking strong, it stole the wind from my lungs. Not sure what, but we gained...something. Somehow, all said and done, when we came out the other end of it all, we’d sealed the connection we need to survive. Meshed so tight, it was as if...”

As Zach’s voice trailed off, Sky felt goose bumps form along her arms. Foreknowledge gave her the creeps on the best of occasions, and any presentiment involving both edgy sex and life-or-death predictions -- well, she’d just as soon Zach had kept this to himself.

With a sigh, Alec leaned forward and picked up a stone, tossing it at the nearest tree trunk. As she waited for him to say his piece, a volley of curses issued forth from the cabin, followed by a sharp squeak. No doubt the pain-in-the-ass healer chasing off another rat.

“I think I can fill in some of the gaps. Matt talked a lot during those six weeks last year before Sorren packed me off to Sweden. Fucking silver lining, you know? I tried for years to establish some kind of connection with a son I hardly knew. But he...” Alec shook his head, his hair brushing his shoulders. “Then, after what happened with Jaimis, for the first time in my life, Matt wanted to spend time with me -- couldn’t talk fast enough to fill me in on the details of his life -- anything to take my mind off the pain.”

A long stretch of silence followed, and Sky wrapped her shields tight around her to grant Alec the privacy of his thoughts.

“Here’s the part that’s relevant to us. Matt said he, his friend Kenji, and Lena accomplished some sort of power sharing.”

Uneasy at the mention of her former roommate, Sky drew the blanket back up over her shoulders and fidgeted with the soft cloth. She’d pretty much destroyed Lena’s life last year when she ran to the press and babbled on about witches working magic to heal the environment, and then went so far as to hand over a list of names.

Hell of a thing to do -- and the beginning of this whole rotten mess. But she’d believed Jaimis when he insisted crediting witches for ending the drought would lead to legal protections and the freedom to wield magic openly. Only time in her life she’d been so fucking naïve. But back then, she’d trusted him.

“Hey, you with us?” Zach shifted the blanket aside to rest his hand on her bare knee. “You look a bit shaky.”

“Just lost in the past for a moment.” She turned to Alec. “So, they swapped powers somehow. What’s that have to do with Zach’s vision?”

“The *somehow*, for starters. Swap took place in a rather dramatic ménage, according to Matt. Though he didn’t sketch out any details, of course. Basic elements seemed to be that he, Lena, and their friend Kenji were cooped up together after having taken part in a forbidden rite. They were on the run, edgy as hell, and fighting through some jealousy. During a tense moment, they combined their light spheres, mingling magics, and the ménage followed. Next day, they discovered they’d picked up some of each other’s strongest skills. Never heard of anything like it.”

“That’s it, then.” Zach bolted to his feet, dragging Sky’s blanket half off her lap. “Has to be. Trading magic would sure as hell make us stronger, and in keeping with my foreknowledge, Sky would have the most to gain, seeing as her power’s unbalanced. And for all of us, any increase in power would give us an edge against the rogue witch.”

“You’re leaving out that the two of you would have the most to lose, assuming we were crazy enough to attempt something like this -- if it’s even possible to duplicate the event. What if I got nothing in the attempted swap, and my off-kilter magic damaged your power in the bargain?”

“Thing about my gift is, once I see something, it’s more like than not to follow through that way.” Zach’s eyes were way too serious. “We may be left with a bit of ambiguity, a little wiggle room, but more or less, we’ve got our marching orders.”

“Look, I’m having trouble processing all this right now. I need a good soak in the pond. After that, why don’t we take over the cabin, chase Laura off with the rest of the guards where she belongs, and sort this out together?” Not waiting for a response, Sky abandoned the blanket and headed for the pond.

## Chapter Seven

“Hey, what’d you do to get rid of Laura?” Sky padded barefoot and naked through the main room of the cabin to the bedroom area and pulled her bra and panties, jeans, and a fresh tank top over her pond-wet skin. Her hair hung to her waist, dripping down her back toward her butt, but it felt so good to be cool and clean she didn’t give a damn.

“Told her we were going to try our hand at some dark arts and offered her the chance to participate.” Alec made his way into the bedroom and pulled Sky close for a kiss. “She beat a quick path out to join the rest of the guards, after checking Zach’s arm and pronouncing him as fit as he should be this soon after an injury that serious. Seems our healer’s a straight shooter. No gray areas for her, when it comes to magic.”

“Works for me. Can’t stand her watching me out of the corner of her eye.” Sky ran her fingers through her hair and then rummaged in her pack for a comb.

To her surprise, Alec grabbed the comb and started untangling her hair from the bottom up, teasing out the snarls. The proximity to his bare chest sent little zings of pleasure sliding through her senses and directly to her pussy. At least he’d pulled on a pair of shorts. Tight running shorts that didn’t hide much, but nonetheless...

“So, a scrying rite.”

“How in the name of Diana did you get that while I was thinking about your unwashed, sex-smelling body, your tight shorts, and --”

“Earlier, on your way to the pond. You let it slip.”

*Privacy? What privacy?*

“Zach’s cool with it?” She knew Alec felt the same way she did about the cat and mouse shit. Although their goals would come into complete opposition, once they knew where to find Jaimis.

“Why not ask me to my face?” Zach stalked down the hall and entered the room, looking every bit the pissed-off cop, despite being shirtless with one arm in a sling. “I think it’s too fucking dangerous. But Alec has a good point when he argues that Jaimis seems to ferret out our location quick enough anyway, and our best chance at evening up the odds is to find out where the hell he’s at.”

Alec tossed down the comb. Slowly, he ran his fingers through her hair to check for missed snarls -- or more likely, just to brush his fingertips along her spine -- and then headed back toward the front of the cabin. Sky followed, with Zach close behind.

“What do we need, then?” Alec glanced around the large, sparsely furnished room, as if expecting the tools for an arcane ritual to appear out of nowhere. “I’m assuming you’ve tried this before?”

Sky shook her head. “No. But I’ve got the process memorized. My great-grandfather had a taste for gray magic, and I inherited his Shadow Book. Memorized a lot of the spells, just in case I ever needed them in a pinch.” Sky’s stomach knotted up at the thought of the book vanishing in the flames the night angry vigilantes burned her home.

“Hey.” Zach sat gingerly on the ratty, overstuffed sofa, careful not to jostle his arm. “First off, nix the self-pity. As for the rite, we’ll manage.”

Pulling herself together, Sky plopped down on the couch beside him. “Okay, a bowl of water. Some candles would be good. But mostly it’s a psychic thing. That’s the only reason I have a shot of pulling it off, since my psychic abilities grew when my other gifts got fucked over by Jaimis’s memory tampering. We’ll be merging our common will to follow any connection we have to the dark witch. If we’re lucky, we’ll catch a glimpse of where he’s hiding.”

“And if our luck sucks?”

Sky frowned at Zach’s uncanny ability to reduce plans to worst-case scenarios. “Then we don’t see anything. And Jaimis might catch us nosing around, follow the thread of power, and pinpoint our location. Are you well enough to move if we have to turn tail and run?”

“Arm’s still sore, but Laura did a bang-up job of patching me back together. I can run if we have to. Though I’m thinking we’re due for a break. Be nice if we could pull this off without tipping off the rogue witch.” Zach leaned forward to glare at Alec, who’d settled in an overstuffed chair, then turned to scowl at Sky.

“Thing is, I know you” -- he shifted position to point at Alec -- “plan to go off on a suicide mission once we know where to find Jaimis. And you...”

Pausing, he stared at Sky until she gave in and looked down at her hands in her lap.

“You’ve got your head full of plans to run off and use your uncanny psychic talents to try to ferret out information on the dark lords. Since you’re in complete disagreement on how to deal with Jaimis and the dark lords, I’m counting on the two of you to rat on each other, keep me informed if either of you changes plans. And I want you to know that the

only way either of you is sneaking off on your own for a fool's mission is over my cold, dead body."

"So, Laura must have found a bowl somewhere when she bathed you earlier, right?" Alec got to his feet, shifting his weight like a bear ready to attack.

"Oh, for the sake of the goddess, if this is about to turn into some kind of male contest of wills, I'm out of here. Alec, the bowl's sitting out by the steps. Fresh water from the pond, please. I'll try to find some candles. Cabin's got to have candles somewhere." Without waiting for a reply, she stalked off and started rummaging in the row of built-in storage boxes that lined the far wall. She heaved a sigh of relief when Alec's footsteps retreated toward the door, and Zach kept his mouth shut and didn't fire off any parting shots. When the time came, she'd do what needed to be done. Whatever that might involve.

For now... "Ugh!" She shifted aside a poorly cleaned pelt -- from what animal, she couldn't even guess -- and opened what looked like a tackle box underneath. "Got 'em. Candles, and some mean-looking steel traps, too, so I'd watch your step."

"Yes, ma'am." Zach bent forward in a mocking half-bow as Sky dumped the stubby, white emergency candles onto the upturned crate that served as a coffee table.

"I prefer 'sir.' Carries more authority, don't you think?" Sweet goddess, why was it so easy to slip into cheerful familiarity with him?

"I'm guessing you'll be slipping into more than that before the night's through." Alec clumped through the door and into the center of the room, the force of his steps more than enough to convey that he still had his feathers ruffled, even if she hadn't been able to feel the edgy energy spilling off him.

"Why don't you ward the doors and windows before we form the circle?" Sky had no intention of acknowledging Alec's mood.

Best to move ahead and get this done with before the sun got any lower in the sky. Jaimis loved the dark, often sleeping late into the day so he'd wake closer to evening, when his power strengthened. She understood now that the blood rites had something to do with that. The deeper he traveled into the realms of death magic, the less he seemed able to tolerate the light of day. But back then, before she knew he'd been killing witches and siphoning off their power, she'd found his predilection for sleeping in most of the day an endearing quirk in her virile lover.

With a shudder, she paced across the room, staring out a dirt-streaked window at the leafy trees. Out in the middle of nowhere, they wouldn't have to worry about covering the windows. But she'd still have preferred a locked house with blackout shades. Not that locks or window coverings could protect them from Jaimis. But the emotional security would have been nice.

"Wards are up." Alec moved the makeshift coffee table to the side of the room, then shoved the arm chairs against the wall and rolled up the braided rug, leaving a large bare area between the couch and the far wall. "Might as well get on with this and be done by dark."

Zach got up and unzipped his jeans, and out of habit, Sky turned away to give him the illusion of privacy as he undressed for the ritual. What was it about shadow magic that required unencumbered bodies, anyway? The magic was purely psychic, so was the nude thing merely tradition or vital to the task at hand?

“Interesting line of inquiry, but since we’ve both seen you naked, just strip and let’s do this.”

Alec’s irritability advertised his uneasiness like a bold, red flag, and she didn’t have the heart to tell him to back out of her thoughts. Any gray magic put her on edge. But this time, her throat felt dry, and her stomach churned as if she’d eaten old tuna at a cheap restaurant. She didn’t think Jaimis held enough power to get a grip on them if they managed to scry out his location, but still...

“Okay, if you’ll light the candles, and then drip the wax to secure them to the floor in a ring around the bowl.” Vexed that she couldn’t so much as summon a simple spark to kindle flame, Sky wondered if Alec might be onto something with the power-sharing plan.

Stripping off her tank top and jeans, then deliberately turning to catch Alec’s eye as she discarded her bra and panties, Sky tossed them onto the pile Alec and Zach had created on the couch. With a few deep breaths for courage, she sat cross-legged by the basin of water as Alec and Zach saw to the candles.

Their movements were graceful, the muscles in their arms rippling as they lit the candles and stood them in the hot puddles of wax on the wood floor. Zach tried to use his bad arm now and then, and she took that as a good sign. Couldn’t hurt too much if he kept forgetting it was bound by the sling.

The candles set, she eased into the flow of energy surrounding them, evaluating the psychic landscape in preparation for the rite. Alec radiated nervous energy. But Zach’s dark brown eyes held a thread of calm strength. Reaching across the ring of candlelight, she clasped his hand, and he offered a reassuring squeeze. Goddess, the two of them were beautiful. One golden and tightly muscled, with hair like a wild Greek god, the other built like a boxer but with the face of a Korean prince. What a pair.

*Her men.* She fought the urge to laugh aloud at Alec’s suggestion that they engage in a wild ménage, with power sharing the goal. Goddess, she couldn’t even summon a simple sphere of light without risking her magic backfiring on her. Let alone meld her magic with theirs. But they had the forbidden rite prerequisite covered -- if Alec was right in his assumptions about what led up to Lena sharing powers with the two men. Psychic scrying made the “don’t” list of every book of ethics she’d read.

Alec smacked the flat of his hand down on the floor. “So we’re bad. Got that. Now let’s get this over with.”

*Oh, goodie.* If he got that last bit, no doubt he’d caught her introspection on her delicious pair of princes. “Circle first. I’ll start.”

Grounding herself to the earth below, then opening to the sky above, she found her center. “North.”

“East.” Alec’s voice held more confidence than she’d expected.

Zach sat with his eyes closed, his face serene. “South.”

“West.” Light flared around them, although a few spots in the sphere held dark smudges, no doubt the product of her damaged aura.

Hopefully, the incomplete areas wouldn’t weaken the protection of the circle. The thought of Jaimis getting his claws on their unprotected psyches...

*No fear.*

Alec’s admonishment brushed her thoughts like dark velvet.

“I’ll lead, since I’ve got the spell down. Basically, we stare into the water until the candle flames start to blur and our eyes relax their focus. Alec and I have a deathly strong tie to Jaimis, like it or not, and we’ll use that to track him. Won’t be pleasant, but if this works like Great-Grandpa’s book said it should, we’ll catch images in the bowl. Hopefully a clue as to where the rogue witch is hiding.”

With a deep breath, she cleared her mind and plunged ahead. “First, follow the link from soul to soul, your heart be bare, your spirit true.”

Sky let her mind drift back to the feel of Jaimis’s hand on her shoulder, a lover’s kiss, and progressed gradually to more forbidding impressions. The sound of Alec’s screams. Jaimis’s harsh laughter. The smell of death magic. Blood. Pain.

Drawing back before she fell too far into the chasm, she stared at the clear, unmarred water in the large bowl. *Nothing.*

“Next, follow the trail, blood to blood, beyond the body’s bounds.”

Jaimis had done that for them, created a blood tie with his relentless whip. Now if they could follow that trail back to him... She felt Alec shudder beside her but didn’t look up from the water. The candles melted into a blur of light, and she felt alone, just her and the rippling surface of pond water, still barren of images.

“Seal your thoughts and guard your soul, lest watcher become watched.”

Fuck, she hated that bit. Staring into the basin, she cut herself off further from the world around her. Alone and invincible. Protected by the circle and her own resolve.

“Water show what watchers call.”

She flinched as a shadow rippled across the surface.

“Binding vision and truth, wisdom and wanting.” She clapped her hands together, and the candles flickered, pulling her back into herself.

*Nothing.*

When Alec gasped, she tensed and reached out for him, but her hand brushed velvet curtains. *Holy goddess!*

No water. No candles. No circle. A darkened room, sealed off from light by thick velvet. A bed. She froze, afraid to look.

*Jaimis.* Alec's thought, projecting from what felt like the midst of nowhere, steadied her.

That established, she did her best to ignore the bed and focused on the window. She could feel the brush of velvet, soft on her palm, but couldn't displace it. Hell, of course she couldn't, this was a vision. Frighteningly real, but her body remained safe back at the cabin.

She hoped.

When the man on the bed rose, her blood chilled, and she fought back a scream. She tried to pull away, break the psychic bond she'd forged and escape back to the hunters' cabin. But something held her there. *Trapped.*

Jaimis strode across the room and parted the drapes, so close she could reach out and touch him. If she was really here. The hills and pines could be part of any landscape. No clues there. A few boulders lined a grassy slope, and in the distance she saw a row of bluffs, the rock face craggy and forbidding.

*Jaimis's Craggy Rock Estate! Right here in fucking Minnesota. Keeping the mice in close range, I guess. Doesn't that figure? A man with estates scattered across the country, and he chooses to hide right under Sorren's nose.*

Having identified Jaimis's location, she renewed her efforts to break away, but she made the mistake of looking at Jaimis's face. The left side remained unspoiled. Dark hair and aristocratic cheekbones, sensual lips, nothing to hint at the fathomless evil within. Scars ran along his right cheek, as if worms had tunneled under the skin, raising the flesh in ugly pink lines. His neck bore brown patches, knotted and twisted where no healer had been able to mend the damage. No doubt the scars Alec had inflicted during their desperate escape extended beneath Jaimis's robe.

Scars the rogue witch would kill for. As if Sky's disloyalty in freeing Lena during Jaimis's power play of a kidnapping last year wasn't enough to provoke a killing rage in and of itself. Fear clouded her mind, and even detached from her body, Skyler felt her fingernails digging half-moons in her palms and sweat beading at the back of her neck.

Despite her efforts to clear her thoughts, time dragged her back to those last desperate moments before they escaped. Her first clear memories of her own experiences during those three days of hell. The look on Jaimis's face -- aroused, evil, victorious -- as he tossed Alec, bloody and beaten, onto the floor and grabbed for her. Her exultation when she realized the rogue witch hadn't bothered to secure Alec's restraints, giving him freedom to creep away from the keystone that secured the power dampening spell. The explosive surge of energy when Alec reclaimed his stolen magic. Jaimis's screams. Their frantic escape from hell.

Sky blinked away the memories and stared once again at the familiar face of her torturer. She'd tasted the man's anger, the witch's power, and terror overwhelmed her as she stared at Jaimis's marred profile. With everything she had, she struggled to return to the



candlelight, but he held her there, bound by the blood he'd shed. Her blood on his hands, crimson and horrible.

"Noooo!" She fought as arms clasped her waist, but she couldn't break free.

"Sky, stop! You're okay. Open your eyes and look!" Zach's cop voice dragged her out of her panicked stupor.

Struggling out of Alec's embrace, she wrapped her arms around her chest and stared at the spilled basin and the blackened wicks of the tipped-over candles. She felt like heaving the contents of her stomach up onto the floor, but managed to ward off nausea with a combination of deep breathing and iron will. That had to have been as bad for Alec as it was for her, and if he could ride it out without puking his guts up, then bless it, so could she.

"Please, let me hold you?" The note of pleading in Alec's voice cut through her defenses, and she eased into his embrace.

Zach scooted closer and leaned against them, using his good arm to encompass both Sky and Alec in a protective hug. "Shit, the two of you just went blank. I could see things in the water -- curtains, trees, a bed, then the rogue witch -- but you were *gone*. So far away, I couldn't reach you. Don't ever fucking pull a stunt like that on me again!"

The caress of his palm against her bare side took the sting out of his anger, and she ran her hand over his thigh, half to soothe him, and half to convince herself she was really back, safe and whole.

"You froze, and when I couldn't pull you with me, I found my way back and tipped the bowl, hoping to break the spell." Alec held her tighter, his body slick with anger and fear. "Fuck, just seeing him again like that. I swear, Sky, if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to kill him for what he did to you."

"*To us*. What he did to us." No use arguing about the rest, with him so upset.

A quick psychic peek at their surroundings revealed bored guards, a very horny Laura lusting after one of the younger witches, and the various echoes of wildlife, prey and predator alike. The circle held strong around them, and as far as she could tell, they'd succeeded, hopefully leaving the dark witch none the wiser.

As her heart rate returned to something approximating normal, she eased into the rhythmic brush of skin on skin as both men stroked her arms, her back, and her face. Shielding with all her might, she tried to work through what they'd gained. Zach would assume they'd failed, since Alec had to tip the basin in a last ditch effort to drag her back. But Alec would have heard her mental shout when she identified Jaimis's mansion.

He'd watch her, determined not to let her sneak off on a psychic eavesdropping mission. And she'd watch him, determined not to let him run off and get himself killed -- perhaps taking Jaimis, and all the secrets he held, down with him. And Zach, he'd watch them both, with his cop's eyes and witch's gift of foresight. And goddess only knew how the whole mess would sort itself out in the end.

“Maybe this is a good time to focus on your foreseeing, Zach -- not to mention Alec’s somewhat wild suggestion about a power-sharing rite. I don’t know if it could work, don’t even know if it’s worth the risks, but I figure we should talk about it some.”

And provide a hell of a distraction in the process. If she didn’t leap into a discussion on what to do with the information she and Alec had just gained about Jaimis’s location, maybe Alec would cut her a bit of slack. Relax his guard enough that she could... Detecting a familiar nudge at her thoughts, she slammed her shields down tighter, hoping Alec would end up with a headache for snooping.

Sky’s stomach lurched, but she did her best to ignore the sour lump of fear lodged in her belly. “Jaimis is close by, keeping watch through his minions. If we have to face him, I’d like to do it from a position of strength. That said, I have a hell of a lot to gain from this. And both of you may have everything to lose if my broken magic unbalances your power.”

“If what happened with Matt and the others can be duplicated...” Alec hesitated. “It seems there’s a fair chance it might pull your power back into balance, fix what got broken.”

The fact that Alec was interested in pursuing the possibility set her on edge. If they were game to try, she honestly didn’t know if she’d have the guts to go through with this. A stronger bond. Less privacy. The risk of damaging their power, tainting it with hers. And then there was the bit about a ménage with Alec and a wounded witch. Farfetched, at best.

Sky glanced from Alec to Zach, their expressions equally serious in the dim light. “I don’t know. Maybe it could work, but it’s risky as hell.”

“No. The larger risk lies in not trying.” Zach fidgeted with a corner of gauze on his bandage. “This is it -- I recognized that as soon as Alec described what happened with Matt and the other two gaining each others’ gifts. It fits my foreseeing that the three of us can only walk out of this if we join together so tight, there’s no room for failure. Bound together so close that each of us would sooner die than see harm come to another of the three.”

All cheerfulness and light, that. Sky shivered, and Alec smoothed her hair under his hands, petting her like an injured animal.

“How do we start?”

Holy Hecate, this cop had the heart of a lion, and more courage than common sense. “Injured arm, ménage, see any problems there?”

“I’m sure you’ll both be gentle with me. And the healing sets more every hour. I swear I can feel the flesh knitting together.” Zach shuddered. “Laura’s got quite a gift, but the process gives me the willies. Anyway, what’s first?”

“A small dose of common sense.” Alec eased her closer to Zach, and as Sky leaned against the ex-cop’s chest, Alec stood up and stretched. Moving to the edge of the circle, he raised his arm and cut a clean doorway, stepped through, and sealed it behind him without even disrupting the energy flow. “I’ll be back.”

As he disappeared down the hall into the back of the cabin, Sky struggled with the logistics. Even if the guys were game to try this, she didn't know how to trigger the event. No doubt they all had their insecurities and petty jealousies, if Alec's interpretation of what happened with Lena and the two men was right, and those were among the prerequisites for a power-sharing rite. Hell, it ate at her every time Zach and Alec brought up a bit of their past, and she didn't doubt it galled Zach to see her monopolizing Alec's attention. How Alec felt was anyone's guess.

"You're thinking too loud. Oversharing. And I suspect Alec's feeling a bit torn, so you might want to go easy on him. As for me, I like you well enough. Just sort of strange, all getting thrown together like this."

Ignoring Zach, Sky continued to fret over the details of a power-sharing rite. No doubt with their pesky three-way psychic connection they fulfilled the requirement of a strong bond. But what in the blessed world could they use for a catalyst to get the whole thing rolling?

"Alec said Matt and the others combined light spheres. I can't summon one without risking a short circuit, and goddess only knows what my energy will do if I let it out to play."

"The point's combined magic, not combined light spheres. Your psychic gifts are stronger than ever, so if we use that as a jumping off point..."

Zach trailed off as Alec strode back into the room, naked and gorgeous, all bluster and determination. He carried an armful of folded blankets and a clear glass bottle full of amber fluid. Shifting his armload, he pointed at the sphere of light and created a door, stepping through as easily as he'd enter an everyday room. One fucking powerful witch. Again, the circle settled back into a shimmering, uninterrupted dome, just as if he'd never broken the pattern of power.

"Filched a bottle of Laura's massage oil. I'm sure she intended it for medicinal purposes, but Matt let slip a few too many details about what happened that night, and I think we might need it for other reasons."

That sent a shot of pure fear through her. No one had so much as touched the sweet little rosebud that guarded her ass since what happened with Jaimis. Even without her memories intact, she knew from the injuries she'd borne that she'd been violated. Raped. And every instinct bristled at the thought of adding an edgy element to sex. Let alone introducing a potentially frightening move into the mix with *two* men.

As Alec placed the bottle of oil on the floor and set about spreading the blankets, one on top of the other, she felt a trickle of anxiety rippling over him. This wouldn't be any easier on him than on her. Or on Zach, with his injured arm. "Well, don't we just make a messed-up little threesome?"

"We'll all be careful, no matter what happens. No one's going to get so out of control that we end up hurting each other."

She wished she shared Zach's confidence, but from Alec's brief description of what happened during the prototype for what they were about to try, she got the impression that *out of control* would be the name of the game. Still, with the potential return of her powers as the prize, she couldn't back away from this opportunity. The thought of her aura, glowing pure violet around her, unsullied by ugly dark smudges and tears, filled her with hope. Not to mention the return of her ability to kindle flame, call a light sphere, and work spells. Craving those things brought tears to her eyes.

"This can work, Sky, I know it can." Alec smoothed the third blanket onto the pile and held his hand out to her. "We've just got to come up with a starting point."

Right, something making use of her undamaged psychic gifts that would produce a collision similar to exploding light spheres. *No problem.*

When Alec pressed at her shields, trying to ferret out how frightened she was, she laughed at the obvious solution. "Okay, so we drop our shields, our minds bare-ass naked like they haven't been since we were kids. And then we throw ourselves at each other, linking thoughts so hard and fast we -- hopefully -- create some sort of disturbance." *Or just plain knock ourselves unconscious. That would be fun.*

Sky sat, legs folded yoga style, and faced the two men. As she took several slow, deep breaths, she conducted another mental security check of the area and suspected Alec and Zach were doing the same.

Although she almost wished for an intervening event, she sensed nothing more than the thoughts of the guards around the perimeter of their forest stronghold. *Nothing. No sign of danger -- unless you count what we're about to do.*

"We're good to go." Alec sat with one knee touching Zach's thigh, and the other pressed up against her shin.

Instinctively reaching out to grasp Zach's hand, closing the circle flesh to flesh, Sky forced herself to peel away the layers and layers of mental barriers. When she got down to the bare bones protection, she balked.

"We won't hurt you, Sky." Alec sat before her, as naked and vulnerable as the day he'd been born, without so much as a whisper of power protecting his mind.

That level of trust sent erotic warmth simmering through her, along with a contradictory swarm of cold, clear terror. *I can't do this.*

"Sure you can. Alec's right. We won't hurt you. And you won't hurt us." Zach grimaced, and she felt the remnants of his shields crumble like dry sand.

It hurt, baring herself so completely. Hurt until her teeth ached, and her eyes stung. But when she sloughed off the last bit of protection, leaving herself open to them, she knew there was no going back.

"Seems wrong, throwing ourselves into each other's minds with everyone so defenseless."

Fuck, if her tough cop caved on her now, she'd never see this through. "Second thoughts?"

"No."

"Let's do this, then. On three, press outward, or rather inward, with all you've got, diving deep, holding on strong. The rest..." She shrugged. "Who knows what'll happen. But it's worth a shot."

"One. Two." *Oh, fuck.* "Three!"

## Chapter Eight

Plunging into Alec and Zach's minds with every bit of mental energy she could muster, Sky slipped inside their skin, felt their awe as they pressed inside her. Everything froze for a moment, caught in the confusion of seeing through three sets of eyes, hearing through three sets of ears. And then, as she'd hoped -- and feared -- nature rebelled at the impossibility of what they'd accomplished.

Light pulsed around them as the circle swallowed the extra charge of power, and for a few seconds, everything went dark, blurred behind a veil of midnight fog. The room seemed to tilt under her, and then with the force of an explosion, she felt herself ripped free from her connection with the men.

"No!" Trembling at the loss, she groped around for them, fumbling blindly, but came up with no more than fistfuls of blanket.

"Sky, stop! I'm here. We're here!" Alec brushed her thoughts again, but gentle this time, asking permission to enter.

She pulled him in, reassured by the familiar presence.

Alec grabbed her around the middle and pulled her up against his body. *We're okay. Just got knocked loose by the surplus of power.* He lay panting on his side, stretched out on the blanket. Before she had a chance to sink further into panic, her vision cleared, and she stared up at Zach's concerned face hovering over them.

*Come back?* Brushing up against his mind like a starving kitten, she shivered with relief when he completed the connection.

*I'm here.*

Back in contact with both of them, she felt more solid. Safer. The circle flared around them like the Aurora Borealis on crack, and with her shattered sense of equilibrium, the

floor felt more like the rolling deck of a ship than wood anchored to earth. But with Zach and Alec close, she felt secure. *Cherished.*

Alec slid his hand down her stomach, coming to rest over her pubic mound, and her body answered with a feral urge so strong, it left her reeling. With Zach *and* Alec close, and her body hell-bent on a one-way mission to close the remaining distance between them, she felt like the wolf and the rabbit, all wrapped into one.

Rather than the wild free-for-all she'd feared, the men moved with caution and sensitivity, careful not to spook her as they pressed skin to skin. Zach pressed his hand just below her breast, and her heart hammered against his palm.

"Boys first, then. Hate to make you wait, Sky, but I'm not going to touch you until you're calmer. Less frightened." With that, Zach clasped her hand but leaned down to kiss Alec, long and wet and hot enough to singe the hairs along the back of her neck.

Alec reached up to clasp his friend's face between his palms, murmuring soothing sounds against Zach's mouth. Sky flinched when Alec grabbed the bottle of massage oil and thrust it into her open palm. He pulled away from Zach's kiss and met her gaze, a world of uncertainty reflected in his eyes.

"Just touch us? Anywhere, just so we know you're with us?" The note of little-boy pleading in Alec's voice had her swallowing hard, trying to cope with the shimmer of fear he projected along with his request.

With shaking hands, she opened the bottle and tipped oil into her open palm, then set the container to the side. Rubbing the thin fluid along Alec's calf, she kneaded the tight muscles until that part of his body gave in and relaxed under her hands. Moving up to his thigh, she started again, kneading and soothing, rubbing and stroking.

Once she relaxed into the rhythm of her task, she reached out for Zach. She didn't bother to readjust her aim when the first bit of skin her hand came into contact with was his ass. Rubbing the smooth, tight curve of his flesh, she stroked from butt to thigh and then back up again, whimpering under her breath at the backlash of pure lust she felt from the contact.

Sweet goddess, he was hungry, so eager to crawl inside them, she felt his need like the heat racing ahead of a prairie fire. Her body trembled with delight, warm and pliant at the thought of satisfying him. But when Zach fumbled around until he found the bottle of oil, then set to work slathering it over the crack of Alec's ass, she figured her inner lioness would have to wait a bit to come out to play.

"Alec?" How to ask... *Are you ready for this? Will you be hurt? Frightened?*

"I'll take care of him, Sky. Always have." Easing himself down beside Alec, Zach handed her the bottle, and she set to work soothing Alec as best she could, scooting up near his head and rubbing warm, sweet-scented oil over his knotted shoulders.

“I want this, you know.” Alec assured her. “Scared shitless. But damned if I don’t want this.”

Alec’s voice shivered across her senses like an aphrodisiac, and Sky wondered if she’d survive watching them have sex without bursting into flame and burning down to a pile of ash.

“Tell me how.” Zach nuzzled his head against Alec’s neck. “Gentler for you if you roll over onto your stomach, but if we’re face-to-face, you’ll know for sure it’s me.”

Alec reached up to grab Zach’s good arm, pulling him down behind him on the blanket, but he remained on his side. Wondering what he had in mind, Sky hesitated, unsure of her role until he reached out and grasped her wrist, urging her down alongside him. Face-to-face with him, she stretched out on the blankets, her body too high up against his for sex, but just right to make sure he’d look into her eyes.

Zach nudged Alec’s leg until he lifted it and brought his knee up to rest on Sky’s hip, hot and sweaty. The combined scent of them, musky and salty and oh, so delicious, sent her half out of her mind. Summoning some shred of control, she set about stroking Alec’s arm, soothing him for whatever came next.

Zach crooned a soft monologue as he stroked and petted Alec’s back, thighs, and ass. Alec’s body started to relax under their hands. He never closed his eyes, hardly even blinked, and Sky stared into their amber-flecked depths. His thoughts wavered hot and cold, hungry and scared, and she offered a mental nudge. *Warmth. Reassurance. Comfort.*

The only hint that they’d set powerful magic in motion was the continuing flare of the circle around them, wild and bright and fierce. But inside its boundaries, Sky made peace with whatever might unfold between them and felt her body grow heavy, almost sleepy, as she snuggled close to Alec.

When she slid her hand down his belly and found his cock, he moaned. She stroked her finger along the soft spot, root to tip, and then back again. When she tickled her fingers lower, cupping his sac in her hand, she felt the backs of Zach’s knuckles as he stroked the crease of Alec’s ass.

“Sky first.”

Unsure what Alec meant, she reached out to Zach, seeking guidance.

*Smaller fingers.*

“Oh.” Not like she’d never had her fingers in a guy’s ass before, just not for a long time.

Scooting down a bit so she could reach, she leaned her head against Alec’s chest, losing herself in his scent, the warmth of his skin, and the press of his thoughts inside hers, twined together like mating cats.

When she stroked his anus, Alec flinched. But Zach kneaded his shoulders, and soon Alec relaxed against her. Applying the slightest bit of pressure, she let her finger warm against the puckered flesh. Quivers of anticipation raced through her as she wondered what



it would feel like to have Alec touch her there. Everything they could do here tonight felt new. Not like revisiting things she'd reveled in during hundreds of past encounters. More as if, just this moment, they'd invented sex.

Alec slid his hand along her spine, and then lower to stroke her bottom.

*Right, fair's fair.* "Okay. But please, be gentle."

Not like he'd be eager to startle her with her own finger pressed just shy of entering, but the frightened child inside her demanded she ask for reassurance.

"No one's going to hurt anyone tonight, remember?" Alec's voice sounded sleepy and far away, half drugged with the intoxicating power of what lay ahead.

Alec shivered as she eased her oil-slicked finger into his ass. He pressed his leg tighter against her hip, his body trembling as she slid her finger forward another inch.

"Mmm. Feels good." *There!*

Stroking the telltale swell of flesh, she managed to elicit a full-fledged moan on the first pass. As he melted into her, drunk with pleasure, she felt almost smug. Until he increased the pressure against her own little asshole.

"I don't know..." Fear surfaced again, edging out the ease she'd won.

"You're safe, Sky." Zach wiggled out of his sling and reached his injured arm across Alec's shoulder to touch her face. "Alec won't hurt you."

"Never. Only good things here tonight, witch of mine."

For a moment, she forgot to breathe, but when his finger slid past the tension-tight ring of muscle, she inhaled sharply and nipped his chest. Where that gesture came from she had no idea, but he seemed to like it, so she followed with a nuzzle and another love bite, gentle and teasing.

Ripples of heat spread through her as he circled her tight channel with his finger, applying gentle pressure, stretching her ever so slightly. She echoed his movements, stroking him in the same manner, and he rewarded her with a low, hungry moan.

"Occurs to me I'm the only one not getting any action at the moment." Zach's voice held a mix of anticipation and amusement. "You think you could add another finger, Sky? Make him ready for me?"

Gently, she eased a second finger in next to the first. Alec followed suit, filling her enough that she suspected she might come if he kept moving his fingers just like that, back and forth, easy and slow. Zach made an impatient sound and squeezed her shoulder, and she tried to focus on the task at hand, scissoring her fingers to prepare Alec to take Zach's cock.

Everything seemed to be going as planned, with Alec making little thrusting motions, accompanied by unmistakably happy noises. And then he spread his own fingers wide, stretching her enough that she hit the boiling point in seconds flat.

“More.” She uttered the word through gritted teeth, frustrated when he refused to offer more thrust, more penetration, more delicious stretching sensations.

But he did slide his hand between their glistening bodies, grab her pubic mound, and offer a nice, firm palm for her to thrust against. With the feel of his hand on her clit, her world fragmented and broke into a thousand pieces, and she cried out as her body spasmed, and her ass clenched tight around his fingers.

She'd barely caught her breath before he eased his fingers free, giving her wrist a gentle nudge so she'd do the same.

“I'll go slow.” Zach snuggled closer to Alec's back, but rather than make any attempt to initiate sex, he resumed the pattern of long, gentle massage strokes along Alec's shoulders, neck, back, and thighs.

Sky lay basking in a haze of postorgasmic stupor, lazy and content. For the moment, anyway. Alec moved his leg higher up on her hip, offering Zach easier access. A ripple of uneasiness tickled through her thoughts, her own or Alec's, she couldn't tell.

“Just my finger.” Zach's whisper came out low and seductive, calm and steady.

Alec relaxed then, and when he sighed, she figured everything would be all right.

“Been a long time.” Zach again, crooning to his lover in soft tones.

Alec sighed again. “Too long.”

A pang of regret surfaced. Not quite jealousy, but not an easy feeling, either.

“You'll get your turn, witch. No one's pushing you to the side tonight. Just let's get Alec over the rough spots first.”

Embarrassed that Zach picked up on her moment of disquiet, she murmured something to the effect of “sorry.” But Alec squirmed against her, humming under his breath, and she doubted anyone heard.

“Sliding my fingers out now.” Zach rested his gauze-wrapped arm across Alec's shoulder and tangled his fingers in Sky's hair. “Feel me against you, nice and slow, warm and easy.” Although he spoke to Alec, Sky shuddered as if he pressed against her own ass, ready to enter.

“Okay?”

“Mmm.” Alec grabbed her arm, just below the shoulder, and held so tight that she gasped.

When Zach released her hair and grabbed Alec's hip, she trembled with anticipation, fear, and raw lust. She leaned into Alec to steady him. Not like she hadn't been in his position in the past. Not always easy to get the balance right, and with Alec nervous to begin with... A sharp gasp from Alec startled her, but then he laughed, and relief washed over her like cool, clean rain.

“Just like all the times before. You and me.” Alec chuckled again and tilted his head back against Zach’s. “Oh fuck, that’s good. I thought... Never mind. Just you and me. And the sexiest little witch in the universe pressed hot against my dick.”

Relieved to be included, Sky wiggled lower, careful to continue offering countersupport to Zach’s gentle thrusts as she lined her soaking pussy up with Alec’s erection. With Alec on his side, facing her, this position offered too much potential to neglect the possibilities. The wild passion flowing off Zach and Alec had a firestorm flaring deep in her belly. Her clit beat a tattoo of anticipation as Alec grasped her bottom and guided her closer.

Not the easiest thing, with her legs pressed together and Alec’s leg stretched across her hip, but she managed to separate her thighs enough to wriggle onto the head of his cock. When both Alec and Zach sighed in response, she basked in the glow of male appreciation. They were so blessed linked, she swore she felt every silken, well-oiled movement as Zach loved Alec. And as she thrust downward, engulfing Alec with her slick warmth, she had no doubt Zach shared the experience. *So blessed linked.*

“Oh!” She cried out as Alec surged forward, spurred by a deep thrust on Zach’s part, and her thoughts gave way to pure, animal need.

“Witch was...” Zach moaned under his breath. “Thinking too much. She needed a bit of a reminder...”

“To pay attention.” Alec laughed again, throaty and wild, and plowed farther into her slick, soaking wet pussy.

Sky’s hair tangled along her sweaty back, sweeping across Alec and Zach’s sides when she tossed her head. Wanting to fill every one of her senses with them, she lapped at Alec’s salty chest, licking and nibbling as if she could consume him. Swallow him into her heat. Her wanting. Her affection.

She trembled as Alec’s iron-hard cock hit her sweet spot again and again, until finally she bucked against him, every muscle taut, and screamed through her climax.

Zach grabbed her arm as she writhed through the after spasms of pleasure, his grip surprisingly strong for someone so recently injured. As for Alec, he crooned something in Greek, and though the words were strange to her, their bond conveyed his deep gratitude, his joy in sharing this experience with her. And his love.

Tears welled behind her closed eyelids, and Sky pressed her forehead hard enough against Alec’s chest that he grunted in surprise. *His love for both of them.* When did that happen? And what in the name of the goddess was she supposed to do about feelings she’d neither sought nor expected?

*Beautiful thing, that much affection. Zach’s thoughts swelled through her mind. Accept it without fear. No one’s asking anything in return.*

Profound, especially coming from the street smart ex-cop, but...

*Just keep fucking me like this, sweet witch, and we'll leave it at that for now.* Alec managed to convey that line without giving into laughter again, but humor rippled through his very soul.

Soon, the rhythm quickened, the men no doubt having decided she'd had enough time to catch her breath after her climax, and now hungry for their own. Her clit stung with the friction, and her pussy ached, but she hadn't felt this free, this *whole*, since before Jaimis's attack. Mumbling in a mix of English and Greek, none of it intelligible, Alec quivered against her as if he were filled with electricity.

Sweat beaded down her forehead and into her eyes, and Zach deepened his thrusts to the point where Sky wondered if they'd all tip over with her on her back, lying on the bottom of a pile of sex-crazed witches. But somehow, they maintained a fragile sense of balance, with Alec bucking and cursing in the middle, fighting his release now.

*Let go, friend.* Zach filled the mind-touch with care and concern, not just for Alec, but for her, as well. *Safe with us.*

Molten shivers erupted across Sky's skin as she felt Zach yield to his body's needs. She felt through Zach. The searing tightness in his balls, the exultation of filling Alec with his cum, and the heightened edge of having her here to share this moment. But through Alec, she felt the panicked battle to let go, and the contradictory struggle to hold on to every bit of self-control he could muster. The wrenching conflict playing itself out across his body and through his soul threatened to tear him apart.

Zach whispered something meant only for Alec's ears, and Alec choked out a half-sob as he strained, bucked, and finally melted into the inevitable. He called out both their names in quick succession, loud and fierce.

The hot rush of fluid trickling out along the creases of her thighs made her want to join in again, spill her own wet juices over Alec's willing body. For a moment, she almost thought she'd manage it, her breasts full and tingling with that "almost there" heaviness, her back tensed to accept the pressure of another climax. But Alec relaxed against her and eased away in the process of trying to separate from Zach, and she all but whimpered her disappointment.

"Not to worry, witch, we're nothing resembling done yet." As Zach flopped onto his back, pulling Alec half on top of him, his fatigue seemed to undermine his promise.

But going on a wealth of experience -- male witches had blessed good rebound time, and with any luck... Alec dragged her on top of them, snuggled in a crisscross pile of sweat-drenched bodies, and the two men moved as one to caress her breasts and clit.

When she attempted to speak out loud, her voice cracked, and she had to clear her throat a few times to manage a hoarse whisper. "Zach's arm, we'll hurt him."

"Arm's as satisfied as the rest of me right now. Healer did a damn fine job."

“Mmmph.” When Alec treated her to a pussy full of fingers, her body temperature shot up several degrees, and rational speech became a non-option.

“Want to take this to its logical conclusion tonight, witch?”

Only one thing that could mean. Alec had faced his demons tonight, and she’d fought back a few of her own. But one wounded little corner of her physical self had yet to make peace with past experience.

*Not sure.*

Ugh, the little girl quiver in that thought filled her with rebellious fury. If Alec could do this, then so blessed well could she!

Alec slid his fingers free of her body and kissed her forehead. “Not a contest, Sky. Healing comes on its own terms.”

*My terms!* Having made up her mind, nothing could sway her from her course.

Well, except maybe the lack of currently available male equipment. Alec laughed and reached up to ruffle her hair, but Zach just groaned.

“My rugged cop friend seems done in at the moment, but I believe this witch could accommodate.” Alec dragged her hand down to cover his swelling cock.

Goddess help her, she couldn’t see why any female witch would want to play with human men. After a moment of mirth, the impending reality set in, and she wondered how to negotiate this scene without scaring up any unwanted memories. Now would not be an opportune time to fill in any of the holes Jaimis had carved out of her battered mind.

“I, ah, I’m not sure how I want to...”

Zach cupped the back of her head with his palm, and Alec tilted her face toward his and brushed a butterfly-soft kiss across her lips. As soon as Alec let go of her chin, Zach eased into position with a kiss so silvery full of moonlight and wonder that she felt a brush of divinity, as if the goddess had just swept through the boundaries of their circle.

“Here, Zach, roll onto your back again.” Alec gave his friend a nudge to accomplish this. “And Sky, we’ll spread you out right here.”

She loved the feel of his hands on her sides and bottom, strong and confident, soothing and masterful. Alec positioned her lying across Zach’s hips on her belly, so her ass was raised just enough to make entry easy, and Zach would be included, at least indirectly, in their coupling. As she tangled her hands in the damp, rumpled blankets, Alec stroked the path of her spine in long, easy motions, from her neck down to her tailbone and back again.

Zach shifted slightly, and the warmth of his body underneath her hips and stomach soothed her further. No doubt she’d feel him grow hard underneath her once she and Alec got into this. Maybe Zach would even come warm and wet on her belly when they climaxed. The thought did a lot to whet her appetite and diminish any remaining fear.

Smiling, she let herself enjoy the moment, and the delicious sense that Alec had again managed to create a new scene for her without pushing things beyond her current comfort

levels. Of all the threesomes she'd been included in, she'd never taken one witch in her ass while draped crisscross across the sweaty, satisfied body of another.

When Alec grabbed the half-empty bottle of sweet oil and tipped a generous amount across the crease of her bottom, she murmured her approval. His finger followed, and she let out a little squeak of surprise when Zach slid a finger alongside Alec's.

"Okay?" Zach's voice held steady, but she sensed his growing arousal.

"Mmm-hmm. Just surprised me."

Together, they stretched her, and she eased back into the pressure, enjoying the attention. Zach's cock pressed firm against her belly now, and the added little rush of pleasure elicited an appreciative moan on her part. Zach added his own groan of approval when she squirmed against him.

Soon, the men slid their fingers free, and despite her resolve, she tensed. Would this hurt? Would she remember things at the worst possible time? *What if...*

"Slow and easy is the rule here." Alec knelt with his legs between hers, and she shivered when she felt the head of his cock pressed against her anus. "No pain. No fear. No memory. Only us. Only now."

## Chapter Nine

Sky nodded, and Zach reached up to stroke her shoulders as Alec held her hips, entering her with care and compassion, using small movements designed to prevent discomfort. The oil did its job well, and their bodies merged like silk on silk, with only a momentary twinge as tight muscles loosened enough to accommodate Alec's cock. When Alec treated her to another sequence of mixed Greek and English, she grinned, wondering if sex always broke down the divisions of language for him.

*Fool just can't think for shit when he's loving someone.*

The thought was so quintessentially Zach, filled with gruff realism and brimming humor, that she let loose a girlish giggle.

*Wouldn't have taken you for a giggler, witch.* Alec eased forward until his hips pressed against the curves of her bottom, and he buried every last inch of his cock inside her warm and willing ass. *Blessed good to hear it, though. S'agapo, Skylark. S'agapo.*

His simple declaration of love washed over her like a healing balm. Maybe that's all it took, in the end -- two men who were willing to go as slow as she needed, the ability to laugh away her fears, and love she'd neither sought nor expected. She arched upward, asking for more, and Alec quickened the pace. When Zach's shimmering, green aura broke free, surging around them to include her and Alec, she whimpered at the added rush of sensation.

Energy caressed every inch of her skin, sizzling through her being, and soon Alec's aura flared free as well. More yellow than white hot this time, she wondered about the change at first, but the distracting pull at her ass, and the delicious press of her slippery clit against Zach's body, did away with further attempts at speculation.

At some point, her own aura crackled to life and escaped like a willful child. By then, she didn't even care if the men saw the smudges or felt the imbalance, because her eyes were screwed shut with passion, and her world shrank to the size of three pounding hearts.

Zach made satisfied little sounds every time she dragged her body across his cock, and Alec treated them both to a long string of Greek-English. The only Greek she understood was the frequently repeated *s'agapo*. A hint of worry wriggled its way through her thoughts as she wondered if she'd end up disappointing him -- betraying his love -- in the end. But then, her body took over, and she gave in to the dance of give-and-take, push and pull.

At some point, her fingernails got tangled in a corner of gauze from Zach's bandaged arm, but he brushed aside her concerns and freed her without further comment. Alec leaned forward, bringing more weight to bear on her back as they raced toward the point of no return, and she entertained the fear that Zach might be getting squished on the bottom of the pile.

"In the best possible way, witch. I can take anything the two of you have to give me."

At which point she stopped attempting to keep her weight off him, let all tension leave her knees and elbows, and sprawled limp across Zach's hips and stomach as Alec covered her back with his chest.

*Warm. Wet. Safe.*

*Powerful.* Zach's thought crackled with energy.

"Yes, powerful." The power of three, sacred to witches. And if luck was with them, the Three-formed Goddess would see them through the battle ahead. *Together. Strong.*

Alec cried out then, pumping against her in the throes of pleasure he hadn't bothered to fight this time around. His voice tore through her like a chant, free and beautiful. And as she trembled under his thrusts, Zach brought his hand down under her pubic mound and stroked her clit. In seconds flat, she keened along with them as Zach spilled warm and wet against her stomach, and Alec shivered again, dragged along with them in their passion.

They lay still like that, plastered together and limp with exhaustion, until their auras faded and their bodies cried out for sleep. Somehow, they managed to disperse the energy of the circle, do a quick mental check of the wards, and sweep the perimeter with their magic, hunting for hints of danger. With their safety established, they gave into the call of fatigue and met each other again in their dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shrill ringing of Zach's cell phone dragged Alec out of a deep sleep, achy but satisfied. He smiled at Sky and Zach's tangled bodies as he climbed over them to reach the phone, banging his shin on the doorjamb in his race for the back bedroom.

Digging through Zach's pack, he unearthed the cell phone from under a stash of Hershey Bars. "Alec here."

"Nothing else has happened to Zach, I hope?" Sorren's voice communicated authority, brisk efficiency, and concern.



“Sleeping.” No chance the elder witch would get more of an explanation than that. Alec grinned as wanton memories played through his mind. “Have we got more trouble?”

“No, just reinforcements. I’m sending a few more guards from my innermost circle. Scott, especially, you can trust with any needs or concerns. Tara, Jeremy, and Margaret will be with him. There’s strength in numbers, and I feel things are coming to a head soon.”

Scott -- Alec wracked his brain until he put a face with the name. A powerful young witch, and a member of Lena’s younger sister’s current love triangle, if Matt had his gossip straight. “Zach insists the three of us have to stand tight to come out safe on the other end. But we’ll make use of the reinforcements as well as we can. Any new insights?”

“No foreseeings, if that’s what you mean. Just that Matt’s been wild to get back here and help guard you.”

Alec tensed. “No!”

One of the criteria he’d set when he agreed to come back to the States and draw Jaimis out of hiding was that Matt be assigned in Canada for the duration, kept busy safeguarding witches there from the lure of Jaimis’s message. And more importantly, *safe*, if this whole plan went to shit.

“He’s doing important work for me, and I’ve been able to hold him off. I just thought you should know.”

Alec nodded, never mind Sorren couldn’t see the gesture. Much as he’d insisted Sorren keep his son out of this, after years of estrangement, the knowledge that Matt wanted to help meant the world to him.

“We’ll stay in touch, then. I’ll let the others know you’ve sent more guards.” Wouldn’t do for anyone on their side to catch the wrong end of a defensive spell when they walked into the jittery forest stronghold.

“Stay strong.”

Alec stood looking at the phone after Sorren disconnected, wondering how his life ever strayed so far from the political path he’d crafted with such care and skill. But then Sky made a soft, waking-up noise in the front part of the cabin, and he tossed the phone back onto the pile of candy bars without a second thought, eager to join her.

His bare feet slapped against the cool boards of the rustic wood floor as he walked back to her, and he put his fingers to his lips as she scrambled to her feet. *A moment alone?*

When Zach woke, there’d be the necessary business of sorting out whether they’d managed to exchange powers in that wild, delicious ritual. But for now, he craved a moment with his honey-sweet, dark-haired witch as the sun rose.

*Yes.*

Without grabbing either a blanket or her clothes, she stepped over Zach, who was still sleeping like a hibernating bear, and took his hand. With her hair mussed with sleep and her

long limbs graceful in the shadowy, predawn light, she looked too blessed tempting, and his morning hard-on twitched in the cool air.

After a warm, wet kiss, they scurried outdoors and headed for the pond. The guards' tents were set far enough out that he could smell their morning coffee, but could neither see nor hear them by the pond. That meant he and Sky had all the privacy they needed.

Sky waded into the still, deep water, shivering in the morning mist, and set about scrubbing herself with the bar of soap she'd dragged along from the cabin. Taken aback by her beauty in the gray half-light, he dove into the chilly water. After a couple quick laps to get his blood flowing, he swam over to her and washed her hair with the coarse soap, letting the black tendrils spread out around them in the murky depths as he combed out tangles with his fingers.

The world lay quiet around them, with only an occasional birdcall marring the silence, and by unspoken consent, they didn't disturb the peace with their voices. Sky wrestled the soap away from him, though, and made quick work of washing the remnants of last night's lovemaking off his skin. Her fingers felt like dragonflies darting over his thighs, light and warm, and her kisses sent a surge of heat direct to his groin.

Before he could pull her close, she managed to deliver a rough but thorough washing to his eager cock, and the effect did nothing to lower his body temperature. The sense of danger ahead only made this sweeter, only added to the honeyed taste of her kisses, the satin touch of her tongue on his skin. A stolen morning, before they had to plan, plot, and in the end, perhaps betray some loyalties.

Tamping that thought down so hard she'd never be able to ferret it out, he wondered how this could possibly unfold. They both knew where to find the dark witch now. And in the end, it would come down to who acted first. With a blood debt sharp on his mind, he swore it would be him.

"Alec?" Sky reached up to touch his cheek, but when he met her gaze, her light blue eyes darted away.

Wary, he wondered if she'd been mulling over her own plans. They'd built a fragile trust, but each knew the other favored opposing tactics when it came to dealing with Jaimis and his followers. Had his introspection alerted her to the fact that he'd pulled away, seeking a moment to plan?

*Too quiet to talk. Don't want to ruin things.* Her mind touched his like a kiss.

And wasn't that the blessed truth? One morning. One more stolen moment of peace. He needed that to stay strong.

The scent of the forest surrounded them, so powerful, he felt as if he were one with the trees, lulled by the familiar smell of damp earth enriched with layers of last fall's leaves. And through it all, Sky's berry-fresh scent rose around him, heady and rich.

Alec swallowed hard, losing himself in the sensual heat of being close to her. *Fucking irresistible.*

*You've got a way with words, witch.* Smiling, she attempted to squirm out of his arms, splashing water up toward his face.

Too hungry to join her games, he pried the soap from her hand, tossed it onto the shore, and then pulled her even closer in the waist-deep water. She hummed a sigh of approval. Lifting her into his arms, he helped her twine her legs around his hips, lifted her to align their bodies, and then buried his aching cock deep inside the warm depths of her body.

Her hair spiraled around them, drifting on the surface of the pond as she threw her head back, her face set in a mask of pure bliss. Bending his knees, he brought their joined bodies deeper into the cool water, feeling weightless and free as he made love to her. The pond reflected shades of shimmering gold as spears of sunlight broke through the trees, and their soft moans mingled with birdsong and whispering leaves.

Rocking together, they clung like longtime lovers, friends who'd shared a lifetime of sacred moments like this. Not for the first time, he wondered how such a strong bond could follow from all the hell they'd shared. Gods, he wished things could be different, without so many loose ends threatening to strangle them.

"Stop thinking..." Sky bucked against him, and her fingernails pricked ever so lightly against his shoulders. "And love me."

No doubt she'd meant to say, "Make love to me," but he reveled in the slip. They swayed together like pond weeds in the current, his feet planted firmly on the bottom as he supported her in the chilly water. When he spotted Zach on the bank, leaning against the trunk of a tall pine with his dick in his hand, Alec chuckled and nudged Sky's shoulder until she turned to look.

Her answering laugh trilled across the water, as light and clear as the sunrise. Having Zach join them upped the heat, and he knew he wouldn't last long as he watched his friend drag his fist across his cock in long, rough strokes. Zach had left both sling and gauze bandage behind, and from here, Alec couldn't spot much more than a pink, puckered scar marring the honey-tan skin just below Zach's shoulder. The glorious hawk tattoo stretched across his other shoulder, a visible manifestation of the side of Zach that was all witch, leaving the rule-abiding cop behind.

As Sky clenched tight around him, close to her climax, he felt both her and Zach's thoughts swell through his brain like a tidal wave. Raw, overwhelming anticipation rocked through him, stealing his breath as Sky clenched around him. Gasping for air, he felt through her -- the sensation of his cock burrowed so deep, the heat rocked her, scalding her senses bare despite the caress of cool water. At the same time, he experienced his own hunger, her pussy gripping him like heated honey, so tight his entire being seemed to shrink down to a boiling mass of pleasure, heavy and primed to explode.

Urging him higher, Zach's desperate plea rocked through his mind. *Now! Now! Now!* Holding Sky so tight he feared he'd leave bruises, he quickened the pace as he felt through Zach, experienced the mounting desperation as his friend watched them coupling in the water -- the furious pace as Zach stroked his hand over his swollen dick, gripping so hard it hurt.

Wilder still, he sensed Zach's awe as he experienced the give-and-take thrusts of coupling through both of them. Sensed Sky's dizzy bliss as she felt Zach jerking off and reveled in the alien sensations.

And then Sky added her own plea to Zach's, echoing his words. *Now! Now! Now!*

Alec came thick and hot inside her as Zach spilled onto the carpet of pine needles. "So good. Blessed gods, so good!"

When Zach joined them in the water, their morning bath turned into a free-for-all of splashing and laughter, with a large dose of sexual touching thrown in for good measure. One thing about Sky, the witch sure as hell didn't have a shy streak. She tickled Zach's balls, grabbed a handful of Alec's ass, and danced with them in the chilly water. Sated and shivering, Alec felt drunk with pleasure by the time the three of them stumbled onto land, and he wondered if the ability to join with them so easily would leave him permanently off balance.

"Stronger." Zach's muscles rippled beneath his skin as he walked naked through the misty, shadowy morning, glints of sunlight painting shiny streaks in his wet, black hair. "The bond leaves us stronger. What we'll need to survive."

"Well, that about kills the mood." Sky sounded more pragmatic than upset.

"We'll see what the cabin has to offer in terms of canned goods, start a campfire, have some breakfast, and then talk through the rest of our business." Something in Zach's voice hinted that he planned on reading them his own special version of the riot act.

Alec shrouded his thoughts behind a wall of white static, hiding from them as he worried things through. He might be able to slip away with Sky none the wiser, if he used his concealing spell, but Zach knew him too damn well by half. And was gung ho on seeing this through as a trio, besides.

Come what may, Alec would just as soon chew off his own hand before he let Sky anywhere near the rogue witch again. And he and Jaimis had a deadly dance to finish. One that would end with the dark witch's blood spilling on barren soil and Alec walking away free and whole.

\* \* \* \* \*

Canned ravioli heated over a campfire might not be a breakfast designed for queens, but Sky didn't have any complaints. Her stomach growled as she worked on a second bowl. She hadn't even realized how blessed hungry she'd been until Zach dumped a few cans of the

savory mess into a pan over the campfire Laura had built near the cabin, the aroma mingling with the scent of bitter coffee and burning wood.

Laura fussed over Zach's arm as he ate, smoothing thick salve over the pink scars. The ripple of healing magic stirred up Sky's own power. She glanced from Alec to Zach, wondering how they could convince Laura to return to the guards so they could figure out if their little experiment last night had worked. Despite her high hopes, Sky didn't feel any different. No sign that she may have managed to heal her own powers, let alone picked up anyone else's.

"That'll be Sorren's reinforcements." Zach tilted his head toward the west, where a rough road, really no more than an old hunters' path, wound through the forest.

Sky couldn't hear anything, but Laura stood and wiped her hands on a cloth. Alec poked at the fire with a long stick, rearranging the embers, and his shoulders rippled under his tight, black T-shirt. With her hair still damp from the pond, Sky snuggled into her sweatshirt and wondered when she and Alec would have a chance to swap body heat next. Not a good line of inquiry for someone who should be focused on when the next attack might come, but he presented a heady distraction.

In a sudden imbalance, the world seemed to tip off center, and Sky put her hands to her face, startled by the sudden sense of vertigo. Something drew her attention inward -- listening. Alert. Her psychic senses seemed to be running on overdrive.

"Tired?" Alec's voice reflected concern, and she nodded.

"You'll want to watch that arm. Rub more salve on it at least once an hour. As long as you take it easy, normal movement's fine." Laura turned away from Zach, dumped her supplies into a simple black bag, and piled her breakfast dishes beside the fire. "Skyler?"

The healer's puzzled expression dragged Sky back from the uneasy inner world that demanded her psychic attention. "I'm sorry, what?" She felt uneven and vague, and the world tilted out of kilter again, but she couldn't identify the source of her disquiet.

Alec moved closer, and Zach scrambled around to her side of the fire and rested an arm across her back. Laura's brows knit into tight lines of concern, and Sky tried to brush the healer's hand away as she tried to feel her forehead.

"...the unusual events...being shot at. Perhaps...stressors...magic." The voice belonged to Laura, but Sky couldn't sort out what the words meant.

Alec held her in his arms, tight and secure, as the odd sense of unease exploded into a series of horrific images, the vision so real, she felt as if she were there. The three rogue witches swooped down so fast; the unsuspecting couple hardly had a chance to summon a flicker of defensive magic before they met their end. With a flash of silver and a swell of blood, screams, and the stench of death magic, the dark-haired man and the petite woman coughed out their last breaths.

Sky thought she recognized the woman, but couldn't say from where. A child screamed, calling for his parents from the next room. The small voice, terrified and insistent, rattled through her brain, no matter how hard she tried to shore up her shields.

*Mommy! Daddy! Stop -- don't hurt Mommy and Daddy! Stop! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!* The child's psychic screams hit her with the force of an avalanche.

"They have the child! Goddess help him, they have the boy."

"Who? Sky, tell us. What child?" Zach rubbed her wrists, fear showing in his dark brown eyes. "Alec and I saw it too, just now through our link with you, but we need you to help us understand your connection to what's happening."

Sky shook her head. "I have no idea. Never seen... Never met them before. Shouldn't be linking to the boy." Somehow, she stumbled along with Alec and Laura as they helped her into the cabin. "Not nearby. No obvious connection to him."

By the time she settled on a pile of blankets with her face clutched in her hands, the images had disappeared. But somewhere at the back of her brain, the small voice remained, commanding her attention. *Can you hear me?* She lowered her shields, trying to reach out toward the desperate spark of will.

"I can't reach him. Goddess help me, I can't reach him." Nausea left her weak as Laura pressed a cup of coffee into her hands. "A little boy, no more than six. Don't know why I can hear him. His parents..."

She shook her head, blocking out the horror.

"We were attempting to exchange powers...foresight...maybe..." Alec's words pulled her in, gave her a thread of focus as Laura barked back at him, scolding against unnecessary risks and irresponsible actions.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, the rage, fear, and confusion left her. Save for the soft whisper at the back of her mind, the ever-present calling of the boy.

"I think I'm all right now. Mostly."

Laura managed to get in Alec's face every time she moved in to check on Sky. Zach looked done in with worry, and Alec held enough of a thread of power that Sky had a hunch Laura was going to find herself on the wrong end of a spell if she didn't back off and give him some room.

"Everyone okay in here?" Adding to the general sense of chaos, a guard pounded on the thick wooden door, and Laura excused herself to go speak with him.

"What happened just now..." Skyler shivered and spoke softly, for the men's ears only. "It wasn't foresight. I know that's what we were trying to do last night, swap tricks, but whatever sucked me in just now did so as the raid unfolded. I felt the ill intent first." Sky took a swig of coffee and tried to catch her breath. "Then the scene unfolded. Two witches murdered, a boy taken, and the dark lords right at the center of it all."

She couldn't figure why in the world she'd been pulled into the fray. She'd never met anyone involved, and her shields had been set firm at the time. *Unless the scrying rite last night had somehow made her privy to Jaimis's plans.* With a shudder, she quickly rejected that theory. The link seemed to be with the child himself and his parents before they died, not the perpetrators of the horrific scene.

But how -- and why -- would she have linked with a boy she didn't know?

"Look..." Alec paced the length of the room, a bundle of dangerous energy in frayed jeans and a black cotton tee. "Whatever just happened -- and even though I viewed it through the link the three of us share, it made no sense to me, either -- we need to assess what may have changed in terms of our powers after last night. If the rite even worked."

Sky felt sick at the prospect of trying to sort out whether she'd made any gains with her damaged skills, and Zach shook his head.

"Let's leave Sky out of this until she has a chance to get her feet under her again." Zach got up from his perch on the arm of the tattered sofa and walked over to join Alec. He hadn't bothered to pull a shirt on after their swim, and he looked more than a little dangerous in his denim cut-offs, with the hawk tat on one arm and fresh scars on the other. "We know each other's strongest talents -- Sky's psychic abilities, your concealing spell, and my gift of foreknowledge. Let's do a quick inventory to see if we've picked up anything new from each other."

Half focused on Zach's voice, Sky shivered. The boy called out to her at frequent intervals, powerful enough to cut through her defenses with the force of a scalpel blade. *Help me! I'm Eric. They've got me. Please, help.* Always, at the end of his plea, after he clamored for her attention, his thoughts trailed off, replaced with incoherent sobs.

She'd never been around kids much, and didn't relate to them terribly well, but goddess, the child was breaking her heart. His pleas would undermine her sanity if she didn't find a way to help him soon.

If it weren't for the small, terrified voice yammering at the back of her mind, Sky would have been tempted to laugh as Alec and Zach tried to use each other's gifts. In the end, Zach ended up kicking the sofa in frustration, unable to summon so much as a hint of silver mist to mask his presence. And Alec failed eighteen times out of twenty to predict what card she pulled from an old deck they'd unearthed at the bottom of a tackle box. When she played with Zach, he called out correct predictions with uncanny accuracy.

"Nothing, then. We failed." Her heart felt battered, torn by the grief and fear of a child she'd never met. The taste of defeat all but choked her.

"You can still hear him, can't you." Alec settled beside her on the mound of rumpled blankets, scented with the sweet oil they'd spilled last night as they'd attempted to mingle their magic. It looked like they'd only succeeded in mingling their bodies.

"Yes, but faint. I can't for the life of me tell where he is, or who he's with. And he doesn't seem able to hear me. I feel so helpless." Damn, she hated that word. Hated the

feeling, too. "Since it appears we failed miserably at altering our gifts last night, I'm at a loss as to why I'm picking all this up. The child, his parents' deaths..."

"Actually, we haven't established last night didn't change things for you." Zach smiled, and for a moment, she wished they could forget this entire mess and curl up together right here on the pile of blankets again. "Just that Alec and I didn't manage a power swap. We know you're at least a bit changed, because of your aura."

That got her attention. "Explain."

"Let it out and see for yourself. Zach and I noticed last night, but your eyes were squeezed shut pretty tight at the time."

Warily, she let her power rise to the surface, and then let it spread past the boundaries of her skin in a wash of pure, healthy violet. No sickly blue shades, no dark smudges or holes. Just rich, glowing light. She stood and twirled around for the joy of feeling the energy move with her, and Alec and Zach smiled indulgent smiles.

Her heart hammering against her ribs, Sky cupped her palm upward and urged the energy into a firm ball, only to duck as sparks of light shot off the ceiling and fizzled out amidst a cloud of dust. "Fuck!"

Tamping down on her aura, she paced over to the dirty window and stared out at the pines. *Can you hear me?* Calling to the child, she tried to get a fix on his direction. Her gifts might still be broken beyond repair, but her psychic talents were stronger than ever. If she could just figure out why she'd latched onto this lost little soul, maybe she'd be able to help.

"It's a process, Skylark." Alec walked up behind her and rested his chin on her shoulder, nuzzling her neck. "Mending takes time."

She attempted to shove him away, but Zach cuddled up to her on her right, sandwiching her between two hard, stubborn bodies. They rocked her between them as she glared out the window, as if the pines could offer some explanation for this morning's disturbing events.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jaimis smiled indulgently at Nicole as he hung the string of diamonds around her neck. She trembled before him as he latched the necklace, setting the stones shimmering at her throat. He couldn't say whether her startling beauty or her fear appealed to him more.

"Why, dear, no need to fret. I've only asked the others to bring you to me so we have a chance to get to know each other better. Power such as yours deserves recognition, don't you think? Not many could cause an explosion from that distance."

As she looked up at him -- and the wee thing hardly stood more than five feet tall despite her awesome magical ability -- she seemed to be grasping for an appropriate response. Jaimis smiled again, and the unpleasant stretching sensation where scars riddled the right side of his face deepened his resolve. No one crossed him without paying a blood price.



“Don’t tell me you don’t like my gift?”

Having long since tired of using dull rocks to key his power-dampening spells, he delighted in finding decorative keystones. The diamonds gracing Nicole’s naked body were a stroke of brilliance. The gems graced the delicate swell of her breasts with their glory, shimmering above her heaving bosom as her breath stuttered fast and ragged. Delighting in the scent of her fear, he felt his groin tighten in anticipation, but that would have to wait for later. After he’d dealt with the boy.

He’d secured her wrists behind her back with leather cords, and her chest thrust forward, forced into a position that displayed her pert, ruby dark nipples to their best advantage. The scent of leather, and the appreciation for its cruel bite around her wrists, sent blood flooding into his cock. But the spell that stole her power came with the kiss of diamonds at her throat, and the brilliant weaving of magic served as an even greater aphrodisiac.

“I plan to keep you, my pet. Until I grow tired of you. Cunning like yours should be studied, don’t you think? I learn a trick or two from each of my followers. The dampening spell, for example...” Jaimis trailed his fingers along the string of diamonds, and then grabbed a fistful of Nicole’s thick, auburn hair, his cock swelling against his leather pants as she shivered under his touch.

“Why, that ill-fated little witch Skyler, the very same one you frightened off yesterday with your impulsive pyrotechnics, taught me the binding spell with which I’ve neutralized your gifts.” He yanked her hair, forcing her head back until she whimpered. “Even the weakest witch has something to offer. And you, my dear, are hardly weak.”

*Rash, yes. But not weak.* Lifting the doe-eyed beauty and dropping her hard enough that she sprawled flat on the red-satin coverlet on the bed, her arms trapped beneath her back, Jaimis fed on her fear. She’d have herself figured for a blood sacrifice, after her bold disobedience.

But he had the boy for that. No, his beautiful, cunning dark lord could serve him in ways a witch child’s sacrifice of power and blood could not.

“Please, once you’re done with me, let my mother and baby go? Call off the guards you sent to my home? I don’t care anything for myself, but please, they’re no good to you as hostages once I’m gone.”

Disgusted, he straddled her hips and struck her across the jaw with the back of his hand. Groveling represented the worst form of weakness. As she wept, he backed off the bed, turned away from her, and left her to brood over her fate -- and that of her family -- slamming the door behind him without bothering to secure the lock. With her hands bound and the keystone for the dampening spell fixed around her neck, Nicole would remain as powerless as a kitten.

The dark lord’s mother and brat meant nothing to him, short of securing Nicole’s cooperation, so long as it lasted. But capturing young Eric, now that had been quite a coup.

Jaimis strode through his mansion with the taste of success urging him on. Taking the stone steps to the cellar two at a time, he licked his lips in anticipation.

Brilliant, really, his plans for the boy. Killing Gillian last year during the grand duel had been sweet, and he'd never forget the rage and grief on Sorren's face as the elder witch watched his lover draw her last breath.

But to succeed, he needed to destroy Sorren. Demoralize the elder witch until he couldn't summon either sanity or order among his misguided followers. Sorren would have discovered the death of Gillian's daughter by now and would know that the boy was missing.

The child held formidable psychic talents, unaffected by the dampening spell. Guaranteed to bring Sorren riding in on his white charger, determined to rescue the boy. This time, he'd be ready. The power of so much innocence, absorbed in a blood rite, would secure his dominance. Destroyed by his grief, Sorren would be no match for him.

Clearing the last of the winding stairs, Jaimis called out to Sondra, an attractive witch with ebony curls who he'd chosen to guard the boy's cell. The glass partition in front of the sealed room offered a clear view of the action as the lad fought off a cluster of rats with the short stick Jaimis had left him. It added to the sport, as it were, giving the child a chance to do battle.

"He's been fighting all the while." Sondra linked her arm through Jaimis's and nodded toward where the fair-headed child swung fiercely at one rat, then another, only to succumb to a fierce bite on his left ankle as a third evaded the blows of the frantically wielded stick.

Dribbles of blood lined the enclosure, and in his other hand, the child gripped the stuffed bear he'd been clasping when the dark lords brought him in -- the toy which now concealed the dampening stone to quench the lad's power. Eric wore cotton pajamas, printed with cartoon images of brawny superheroes out of keeping with his thin, bespectacled appearance.

Never taking his eyes off his furry adversaries to glance up at the witches who watched through the thick glass, the child's face twisted into a mask of pain and fury. Jaimis fed off the residual energy created as the river-smart rodents spilled the boy's blood.

Ingenious, really. This way he could benefit from the rush of power long before he raised a circle for the blood rite and slit the lad's throat.

Sondra nuzzled his neck, positioning herself so he couldn't help but notice her generous breasts under her clingy peach top. Sycophants, all. Without exception, his followers sought to gain from his rise to power. But nonetheless, his sweet guard could prove an enchanting diversion. Taking her arm, he led her away from the glass walls of the cell and bent her to her knees on the cold stone.

She worked eagerly to free his cock, and as her tongue sent pleasure spiraling through him, he listened in on the boy's terrified psychic chatter.

*Brilliant.*

Somewhere deep within, a twinge of disquiet bloomed, and Jaimis envisioned his sister's disapproving frown. Too innocent for a world with so much violence, if Evie had lived, she'd no doubt condemn his means. He shook away his sister's disapproval. In the end, it was Evie's dream he sought to realize. A world where witches could proclaim their talents, protected from crass human elements like the monsters who'd killed her.

Jaimis smiled. Without Sorren standing in his way, his political goals would soon come to fruition.

## Chapter Ten

Sky pressed her head against the wood beam and tried to block out the rising panic. Not her own -- the boy's. Succumbing to fear wouldn't help her locate the little lost one. Using every bit of mental control she could muster, she distanced herself from the incessant calling of the witch child and tried to get a read on distance or location.

"Hey." Zach rubbed her shoulder and moved her hair to brush a kiss across the back of her neck. "Still can't find him?"

Shrugging, she eased out from under his arm and, never mind the heat and humidity, pulled her sweatshirt hood up to shadow her face. "I hear him calling me, so afraid, but he can't seem to hear me when I project thoughts. He's well outside my range. Don't have any idea why I can even pick up his cry for help -- although I can tell he has strong psychic powers himself."

"Right, distraction time, then. Here's the thing. I know we're coming up on the point when either you or Alec will try to bolt, determined to do things your own way." Shifting restlessly, Zach toyed with a thread on the frayed pocket of his denim shorts. "I know that not just with my gift of Sight, but because you're both stubborn fucks determined to go this alone."

Sky waved out the window, trying to get Alec's attention as he chopped firewood. With the world's greatest migraine eating at her and the soft voice of a frightened boy chattering in her thoughts, this conversation qualified as some sort of colossal last straw. "Zach, I can't..."

"And this you need to know. In the end, we do things together. Only way to make it out of this alive. So if you run, we follow. If Alec runs, you and I follow. In the end" -- he gestured toward the window, to include Alec -- "we fight back-to-back, side by side. The

part I thought needs pointing out is that Alec's starting to trust you. Careful with that. Might end up hurting yourself as much as him if you bolt."

*Fuck this shit!* Aggravated as hell at the ex-cop with a knack for guilt trips, Sky started toward the back of the cabin but pulled up short at the sound of strange voices. Not the one in her head -- though damned if it didn't worry her that she stopped to wonder -- these were outside the cabin.

"Calvary's arrived." Alec's cheerful call stayed the rise of edgy power the strangers' arrival had triggered, and Sky shivered as energy settled uneasily, jangling already frayed nerves.

Stomping toward the door without so much as a backward glance at Zach, she headed out into the morning warmth and scattered patches of sunlight. Alec had abandoned the ax and was helping a trio of witches stack crates against the cabin. With any luck, the supplies would include toilet paper and some decent coffee.

"Scott!" Despite her headache, anxiety for the boy, and the continuing urge to wring Zach's neck, she grinned at the scruffy, blond-haired man wearing black jeans and a "Coed Naked Lacrosse" T-shirt. She had a soft spot a mile wide for Serena, Lena's sister, and from what she'd heard, this witch made the willful teen happy. "Any news?"

"Walk down to carry up more supplies with me, and I'll fill you in. Got a few more crates to move. New plan's to make this our base camp, come what will." Scott bent down to brush dirt and old leaves off his jeans, and then straightened and started around the back of the cabin without waiting to see if she'd follow.

A ripple of disapproval radiated off Alec and Zach, both men reluctant to let her out of their sight. Pissed, she shook her head and strode after Scott. *Haven't needed a babysitter since I was nine, and I don't expect I'll get into trouble carting supplies to the cabin.*

Although the men didn't follow, Alec sent off an overprotective *Watch your back*, and she felt irritation brimming through them as she retreated. Glad of the chance to get away -- they didn't seem to know what to say to her since she'd acquired the little voice in her head -- she kicked through piles of rotting leaves and stepped over fallen branches as they headed down the trail toward the dirt road.

"Anyone fill you in on what I saw this morning?"

Scott nodded and delivered a vehement kick to a fallen log. "Zach's been calling in every hour or so to talk with Sorren. Both of them -- you know, with the Sight -- agree all hell's about to break loose. The people you saw murdered..."

*Oh fuck, just get on with it.* No one ever stumbled over good news like that. The child wailed, and she paused to reach out again, closing her senses to the world around her and dropping her shields as much as she dared.

*Please, where are you?*

*Eric! I'm Eric!*

*Where are they keeping you? Anything, Eric, let me see where you are!*

Nothing. The forest closed in around her, insects buzzing, leaves rustling in the summer breeze. With her shields down, the clamor of psychic chatter from the guards and other witches nudged her headache into the red zone. As she raised her defenses back into place, shutting out all but the child's terrified murmurs, she clenched her teeth in frustration.

"Skyler?" Scott doubled back and touched her elbow.

"I'm okay. Tell me. Just spit it out." She headed toward where his dirt-encrusted, silver SUV was wedged into the narrow opening that served as a road, covered in brush and no doubt bearing more scratches than an hour ago. The backseat held piles of bags and boxes. Looked like they'd be stuck out here for a while.

"The couple who died... You remember Gillian?"

"Of course. How could I possibly forget her?"

Sky shivered as she flashed back to the grand duel, the horrific day when Jaimis captured her and Alec. Reliving the horror, she watched in slow motion as Jaimis lifted his arms, readying his power for an illegal strike after he'd lost the duel. Just as before, her mouth formed a silent O of horror and disbelief as the healer, Gillian, crumpled to the earth like a bag of dry leaves, and Sorren cried out in rage and grief.

Scott didn't seem to notice she'd slipped away for a moment. "Sorren believes Jaimis ordered the dark lords to strike this morning. The murdered couple, Gillian's daughter and son-in-law, were powerful witches. But caught off guard like that..." He clenched his fists and kicked at a pile of stones. "They never had a chance. And now, as far as we can tell, Jaimis's people have their son."

"Eric?"

"Yes, have you been able to..." Cocking his head to the side as if listening, Scott froze and then shoved Sky so hard she fell into the side of the SUV on her way to the ground.

Sky felt it too, a sudden quiet in the forest, as if the very trees were holding their breath. Scott motioned for her to stay down, and summoning a channel of power strong enough to raise goose bumps along Sky's back, he took a few hesitant steps, scanning the surrounding area for signs of danger.

Only a witch could manage to get around the wards they'd set, but Jaimis's minions seemed to work in packs, a strong witch paired with human thugs. Although she didn't sense the imprint of a malevolent spell, there was no telling if the disturbance might be human in origin, or what weapons Jaimis's people might carry.

A rush of power swelled around them, heavy with the signature of death magic. As Scott's face contorted, he fell and rolled onto his back, his hands grasping his neck. Following the thread of power, Sky traced the spell back to its maker, pushing wildly with her damaged, unpredictable magic. She couldn't even say what she was trying to do, other than

save Scott, but the harder she pushed, the more she felt the original spell double back on the witch who gave it birth.

So be it, then. Pushing harder, she fought to shove the line of smothering magic free of Scott's neck, her mind thrashing back like a wild thing, determined to save the fallen witch. A strangled scream issued from somewhere deep in the woods, and part of her brain grasped the fact that the witch must be a dark lord, powerful and desperate enough to wield death magic from such a distance.

Then, the dark lord's spell snapped, imploding with enough force to throw Sky flat on her back, and she felt the death cry of the witch who'd launched the attack. *Alec! Zach! We've got intruders. Scott's down.*

She crept forward, staying low in case humans with guns lurked nearby, pleading under her breath for Scott to move. But when she reached him, fingers shaking as she felt for a pulse, his skin was as cold as if he'd lain out overnight in the snow.

*Oh, goddess, no!*

A branch snapped to the west, and as her survival instincts kicked in, she fumbled in Scott's pockets until she found his keys and then bolted for the SUV. She wanted to cry, or scream, or at least stop and grieve. But someone was out there, more likely than not a human with a gun. Beyond thought or planning, she scrambled into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut, and floored it backward down the narrow trail.

By the time the rutted path widened enough to turn around, tears stained her cheeks, and she had a plan. She knew where to find Jaimis's Craggy Rock Estate, had been there in the past. And she had the power to intercept the rogue witch's thoughts if she could get within half a block of him.

Jaimis was one scary fuck, more than half mad from the blood rites that fed his power. But with Scott's death, in her book, the dark lords officially became a greater threat. A supernatural mafia who seemed to have shrugged off "harm none" as an antiquated guideline, they'd run unchecked if Jaimis died before anyone had the chance to get a list of names. Swinging onto the highway with a spray of gravel, she wiped her nose on the back of her hand and tried to choke back her grief.

Although she'd hardly known Scott, Serena was a damn good kid, and the news of his death would rock the young witch's world off its axis. Despite the queasy feeling that came with having inadvertently caused the dark lord's death as she'd forced the forbidden spell back toward its sender while trying to free Scott, she stole a bit of comfort from knowing that particular witch couldn't hurt anyone else.

As for the rest of them, when she had the opportunity to learn their names she was going to scream them from the rooftops, until every fucking witch in North America knew who'd been breaking the rules that formed the very foundation of their belief system.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alec cursed under his breath as he hacked at the underbrush with a sharp blade. Two humans caught, toting enough weaponry to start their own militia, and two to go. After discovering they were too late to do anything for Scott, they'd found the dead dark lord fast enough, a handsome man who looked like he should have been presiding over a boardroom rather than wielding death magic in the north woods.

The man and woman they'd rounded up babbled out the details of what their comrades had planned once Zach summoned some showy lights and issued vague threats. And despite his fear on Sky's behalf, he couldn't let the two witch-savvy humans still at large, packing poisons and explosives with mayhem in mind, regroup and get a fresh set of orders from Jaimis.

*Fuck!*

Knowing Sky had been with Scott when he died didn't help Alec's mood any. Finding fear unpalatable, he opted for fury. He'd tried to reach her every few minutes since she called out to him from the woods, with no luck. If he knew her as well as he thought he did, what started out as blind, panicked flight had probably turned into a run right for Jaimis's estate.

Forcing himself to focus, he brushed his fingers across a swath of broken brush and bent to look for footprints, keeping his concealing cloak of mist around him. Damn trick made him the ideal one to track these bastards and kept him from taking off to follow Sky. With any luck, Zach would catch up with her before she made it to Jaimis's lair. With better luck, he'd be done here and could catch up with both of them before anything hit critical mass.

But damned if his luck wasn't shit lately.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keeping to the shadows, Sky darted from tree to tree, approaching Jaimis's estate from the rear, where it bordered the woods. She'd only been here once before, when she and the rogue witch first became lovers. But she remembered the layout of the place well enough to stay away from the main gates and service entrances.

Her mouth felt parched, and she wished she'd thought to bring a bottle of water with her from the boxed supplies in the SUV. The sun shone directly overhead, and sweaty hairs clung to the back of her neck under her sweatshirt hood. Hiding her face wouldn't do much good if she stumbled into a nest of Jaimis's guards, but the instinct to cover herself proved too strong to resist.

As she approached a seldom-used back entrance, she squinted at the flux in power. A cart of spilled flower pots lay near the gate, with soil and seedlings spread haphazardly over the ground. And for a four-foot stretch, the entrance remained unwarded.

Sinking back into the dense brush, she tried to think this through. Everything about that setup screamed *trap*. But since she'd parked off the road and walked the last several



miles through the woods, it's not like she'd advertised her presence. If in doubt, sit back and sniff out the locals' intentions.

Curling in on herself, with her hands grasped tight around her knees, she snuggled into a little hollow at the foot of an oak. Carefully, she peeled away the first few layers of her shields, not reaching for Jaimis, just seeing what the general chatter would hold.

*Anger.* A hell of a lot of anger. Then terror, with a decidedly feminine flavor. Her stomach curdled to think Jaimis might be treating someone to the very special hell he'd created for her and Alec. Peeling back a few more layers, she all but whimpered under the miasma of ulterior motives, plots and counterplots, and evil intent.

*Eric! I'm Eric!*

Holy goddess, that mental cry carried an imprint as strong as if he were standing next to her, shouting in her ear. Sky had never entertained the possibility that Jaimis would be bold enough to bring the child back to his estate. Hell, every witch in Sorren's employment would be looking...

*Oh, fuck.*

Sorren would be wild to find Gillian's grandson. The child would be like family to him. And with Sorren's gift of Sight, and Eric's uncanny ability to project his psychic plea, with time, no doubt the elder witch would trace Eric's presence here.

Thus, the trap. Jaimis hadn't lowered a seemingly haphazard section of his wards in attempt to lure her inside. The rogue witch had set out the red carpet for Sorren himself. And more likely than not, planned to kill the child and use the power from the blood rite just as Sorren drew near.

*Eric, I'm Skyler. I'm a friend. Tell me where you are.*

Static, and more rumblings from the guards and several witches with a power signature strong enough to belong to dark lords. Then, more fear from the woman. But nothing from the child.

Her stomach clenching with dread, she dug her nails into her palms and tried to keep thinking. Let terror take charge, and she and the boy would both die here. Simple as that. Jaimis might be insane from feeding off others' power, but even crazed, the man's intellect bordered on genius.

She may as well face down a fiercely intelligent serial killer with a psychiatric disorder. Come to think of it, with the blood rites, that about described Jaimis these days. And as a witch who'd messed with him in the past, she fit his victim profile better than just about anyone.

*Right, if I'm going to go in there after the boy, may as well get what I came for first.* Centering and grounding herself until she felt connected to the roots of the trees, she followed the psychic blood trail to Jaimis. The man's shields rivaled anything she'd encountered, but rather than try to push head on, she followed the cracks.

Like a vampire, the rogue witch had a nose for blood and fear, and sure enough, before long she found the psychic tendrils he'd connected to the child, and the woman over whom he wielded a small blade. Through him, she saw the thin line of blood spring up on the woman's silky white calf, a delicate flower design, almost as if Jaimis were creating a tattoo. She smelled blood. Heard the woman scream, long and hard, thrashing against her bonds. Saw Jaimis's hand move to cut again, expanding the design on her snowy white flesh.

Fighting to block out details, she rode the connection deeper into his thoughts, undetected given his fascination with his macabre task. *Names*. She just needed names. Sorren's people could sort out who was who later, if she could only offer a list to investigate.

Probing gently, she knew she was violating just about every ethical rule in existence. But desperate times, and all that... *Alana Hoffman*. The name floated amid images of the bloody rose Jaimis outlined with his razor-sharp blade on his victim's thigh. Then, a confusing image of huge, bloodied rats. *Nia Johnson*. *Christopher Engleman*. *Nicole*. He spoke that one aloud, simultaneous with the thought. She must be his victim, then.

More rats, and a sickening wash of arousal, the lust mixing with images of droplets of blood beading near the woman's knee. *Bryan*. She pushed harder, desperate to get this done and move in to find the boy. *Tyrell*. *Adrienne*. These would be witches -- the ones Jaimis filed by first name only. She repeated the list to herself like a morbid fairy tale.

*Amanda*. *Devan*. *Josh*. Terrified he'd detect the intrusion once he lost interest in his prey, she scrambled for more information. *Adria*. *Dee*. *Jacob*.

With the force of a blow, shields slammed down, and she felt herself thrown from his mind. Trembling as if she'd fallen down a flight of stairs, she rocked back-and-forth and hoped the goddess favored fools' missions.

*Zach! Alec!* As if she were throwing a filmy net, she cast outward, seeking the two men who'd stolen small pieces of her heart. Finding them -- Zach not far off, but Alec easier to connect with despite the distance -- she reeled off the list of names three times in a row. Then, she cut the contact before they could so much as send a thought her way.

*Right, then. Zach's not too far away, so maybe I'll have backup if I can't get out of this on my own.* Fear clawed through her, a predator ripping out her gut. She stood bent over with her palms pressed to her knees and fought the urge to vomit into the underbrush. Every invisible scar Jaimis had carved into her back stung like fire, and she wondered if she had the will to see this through.

*Eric! I'm Eric. Please, the rats're eatin' me!*

Blessed goddess, that's why Jaimis had been thinking about rats. The sick fuck liked to bleed people, bit by bit, like he'd rhythmically flayed skin from her and Alec's backs. Like he'd been busy carving a mural on that poor witch's skin. And the child...

*Keep fighting, Eric! I'm coming.*

Keeping low, she scurried through the neglected gate and felt the wards slam down behind her. Damn, she'd known it was a trap, but she'd hoped they'd keep it open so Zach could bail her ass out of here if necessary. Only thing in her favor, Jaimis would be expecting Sorren and a posse of pissed-off witches. He'd be all geared up for direct confrontation, counting on the blood energy from the child to carry him to victory.

Instead, he'd get her. She knew the estate layout, and the rogue witch had never been able to predict her next move. Plus, the child was still alive, with Jaimis hopefully still distracted with torturing the other witch. Unless he'd sensed her picking through his thoughts and that's why she'd been thrown from his mind.

Bless it, too much introspection in a situation like this could leave her off guard. A good way to end up dead. Feeling around her for psychic echoes, she found a clear passage and ducked through the backdoor down a narrow hall.

*Eric, tell me where to find you. Please?*

Nothing. She felt his fear, heard him whimpering for her, but he seemed too frightened and exhausted to communicate. Well, she knew from experience that Jaimis had a flair for drama and liked to keep modern dungeons in his basement. Couldn't be a bad place to start looking.

A flurry of activity lay between her and the basement stairs, if she even remembered correctly where to find them. Not just mental chatter, but shouts and scuffling feet. The alarm had been raised. Moving faster, she detoured down a servants' corridor, heading toward the kitchens and the meager accommodations where Jaimis had the maids sleep.

"Thought it was the elder witch himself, at first, but no sign of that. Hardly sense any power at all, as if a human slipped through rather than a witch."

The men caught her off guard, and as they approached at a run, she backed into the closest room without doing so much as a mental sweep of the surroundings, praying she'd find it empty. The footsteps hurried past as she whirled around to face the person behind her.

"Oh." Her breath caught in her throat as she took in the stark naked, auburn beauty strapped to the bed, her body coated with sweat, and lines of blood covering her legs in elaborate patterns from ankle to thigh. Acting on instinct, she crossed the room and started loosening the ties. "Fuck, I know you, don't I?"

The anguished mental chatter bore the telltale signature of a dark lord, the same woman who'd blown up Zach's Jeep in the woods the other day. At least she hadn't been trying to kill them, so much as frighten them off. Being sucked into the woman's panicked thoughts while she'd been searching for Laura after Zach got shot had made that much clear. More points for her that she hadn't planned on turning them in to Jaimis.

"Nicole, right? Do you know how much time we have? Did Jaimis say where he was going?" Freeing the straps across the woman's chest and legs, Sky left Nicole's hands bound behind her back, though she loosened the ties and rubbed at the witch's chafed wrists until

her hands took on a healthier hue. She'd be damned if she'd leave someone here to become another blood sacrifice, but she wasn't stupid enough to let the dark lord remove the keystone to the dampening spell.

Sky touched the necklace. "Diamonds, very creative. Twisted bastard's always had a flare for drama. Come on, can you walk?" She grabbed the witch's arm and managed to pull her to her feet.

Nicole seemed to snap out of her stupor when her feet touched the floor, either sensing the potential for survival, or simply jolted awake by the pain as she moved her bloody legs. "I don't know." She managed to get out. "He's got a boy witch downstairs. Maybe he went to check on him."

"Hope not, because that's where we're headed. Any luck, he's looking for me near the gate where I came in. With my magic damaged, I don't present much of a power signature for him to track down." Talk about your mixed blessings. "Here's the deal. You help me find the boy, fight beside me if it comes to that, and I'll do everything in my power to get you out of here alive. Even put in a word for you with Sorren if you help save the child."

Nicole nodded, and Sky felt relief and hope pour off her like summer rain. Somehow, despite trembling hands, she managed to tear strips from one of the sheets and bandage Nicole's legs. She helped the injured witch into the skirt she found on a chair, but since freeing the dark lord's bound wrists could well prove suicidal, she settled for draping the rest of the torn sheet around Nicole's shoulders.

That accomplished, she guided Nicole toward the door, wondering if bringing along an injured but fiercely powerful witch hurt or helped her chances of getting out of here with Eric. She'd witnessed Nicole's dark magic, and there was one point in her favor. If Jaimis attacked, she could always pull off the diamonds and hurl them as far away as possible, unleashing the dark lord's power.

The journey to the basement seemed to take decades, a painful progression of near misses, detours, and long stretches spent hiding when Jaimis's people got too near. The pain must be close to unendurable for Nicole, but she never complained. Sky gave her credit for the fact that she seemed committed to rescuing the boy. Despite what she'd been through, Nicole hadn't so much as suggested they escape themselves and leave the child behind.

By the time they made it down the basement stairs, flashbacks to what little she recalled from her own basement captivity all but paralyzed Sky, never mind that her hellish experience had played itself out at one of Jaimis's other mansions. Each step set off quivering explosions of terror, as if Jaimis would hear the muted footfalls of her running shoes and swoop down upon her, whip in hand. The stone corridors blurred around her.

*Alec cried out, begging for mercy. Blood flew off the tip of Jaimis's braided bullwhip as he cut a fresh line along Alec's back. When Jaimis lowered his pants, Alec pleaded with him, his voice raw and panicked...*

*This way. Round the corner.* Nicole's hesitant mental touch jolted her back from the horror.

Until they rounded the corner and she saw the bloodstained glass wall at the end of the hallway. Sky clenched her hands into fists, barely able to contain her fury and loathing. *Jaimis will die for this. I swear. I'll see him dead.* She rushed toward the glass-walled cell where Eric lay wrestling two rats with his bare hands, his pajamas no more than bloody tatters.

"Electronic controls. Here, there's a code, but I don't remember..." Nicole frowned at the keypad while Sky tried to wrench open the glass doors.

Sweet goddess, if she only had the power... Desperate, Sky stopped trying to force the doors and jerked the diamonds from around Nicole's neck, throwing the broken strand as far from them as she could. Within seconds, she managed to free the leather straps binding the witch's wrists.

*I'm trusting you. Don't betray us.*

Moving with more grace than her injured legs should allow, Nicole placed her hands against the latch on the doors and murmured under her breath. Even before the doors sprang free, two of the rats went limp on the bloody floor. Sky ached to use her own power, but as unpredictable as it was, she might hurt the child rather than the rats.

They were into the cell in a manner of moments, but those final seconds before Nicole dispensed with the surviving rats and Sky pulled Eric into her arms felt like years. *I'm here, Eric. It's me, your friend, Sky. We're here to help you get out of here.*

The child lay still in her arms, and though she didn't have enough medical knowledge to say whether he was going into shock or dying from the blood loss, they didn't have much time to speculate.

"Convenient, having you let yourselves into the cell like that." Jaimis leaned against the wall at the end of the hall, his right hand tracing the furrowed lines marring his face.

Nicole let out a crazed sound, like an animal makes when it opts to die fighting rather than endure capture. Sky prepared to follow the dark lord's lead. If she died here today, she'd die whole, without Jaimis's seed in her body, or the mark of his whip or knife on her skin.

Nicole clenched her hand in a gesture to key a spell, and fire shimmered along the hallway, green, blue, and purple, but stopped several feet shy of Jaimis and then disappeared altogether. Calling on her own power, Sky figured they had nothing to lose if it backfired. She let it free with a wrenching jolt, to do what it would. A section of wall collapsed near Jaimis, and though untouched, he turned toward the chaotic burst of energy.

Holding the little boy cradled against her, she reached deeper into herself, sorting out the threads of energy seething within her. Nicole raised her hands and hurled a glowing red sword at Jaimis, but the rogue witch sidestepped the attack and rushed toward them, hands raised as he worked his own spell.

*Now or never, then.* Sky had an acute sense of the moment. She'd either find her power and wield it strong and whole, or the three of them would die.

Rather than try to force energy into its former shape and signature, she let it weave itself anew, following the threads wherever they seemed to want to go. The boy's breathing came slow and shallow, and she felt his warm blood seeping through her sweatshirt. Nicole launched more barbs of power and light, but Jaimis sidestepped and followed with a burst of energy that knocked them back against the wall and left them panting for air.

Disappearing into the cool, silver paradise she'd shared with Alec on the forest floor, loving each other as his magic caressed their sweaty skin, she felt her power follow that path, forming itself to mimic the safest moment she could call to mind. The air cooled around them, and Sky reached out for Nicole's hand.

*Don't let go. No matter what, you have to stay close to me.*

Silver mist swirled around them, filling the blood-spattered cell with its healing touch. *Once we're in the hall, back into the far corner, away from the stairs. He won't expect that. When he comes into the cell to look for us, we'll run for it. Don't stop for anything. He can't see us as long as I can hold onto the mist.*

## Chapter Eleven

They inched out of the cell as Jaimis searched for them, no doubt sensing their presence and the telltale signature of Nicole's power, but unable to pinpoint their exact location because of the concealing spell. Trembling, they waited with their backs pressed to the far wall, and then broke for the stairs when he stepped into the cell to look for them. The unconscious child grew heavier with every step she took, never mind he couldn't be much older than six and was thin as a twig. Nicole panted beside her, and Sky couldn't imagine the pain of the bandages rubbing against open wounds as she ran.

Somehow, they made it out of the house together and breathing. *Alive!* But as they raced for the gate, a circle of guards closed in on them. *Fuck!*

Several had guns. Human. Some didn't, but had power crackling at their fingertips. Ordinary witches, or dark lords? Acting on instinct, Sky led Nicole toward the spot where she'd entered the lowered ward earlier. If she could convince the guards they'd slipped through somehow...

*Can you create a sound on the other side of the ward?*

Nicole clenched her fist, and a stick snapped on the far side of the barrier. One of the witches moved over to check the ward near the gate, and then someone shouted for him to search the other side.

Cornered like a coon surrounded by hounds, Sky trembled as Jaimis strode out of the house to direct the search. Once Jaimis's people realized they had her and Nicole encircled...

As a tall, golden-haired witch in leather lowered a small section of the ward and stepped out to look for them on the other side, hell itself exploded through the opening. In a riot of light and noise, witches raced from the woods and threw themselves past the lowered ward.

*Where the hell are you, witch?* Zach's anger was laced with fear for her, and she'd never heard anything more welcome than his thoughts seeking hers.

*Exiting, fast. Tell Sorren's crowd to look out, so we don't get caught up in the backlash of their assault on Jaimis's people.*

Dragging Nicole along with her, she clutched Eric and ran for all she was worth, not stopping until she stood well within the shadows of the trees. *Laura! Here. Please, an injured child!*

With any luck, Sorren's people had brought the witch healer along, because she had a hunch Eric wouldn't make it without immediate help.

*Keep low, Sky, and don't for anything let loose of the concealing spell.* For once, Alec wouldn't get any argument from her.

Fast on the heels of relief at her own escape came dread at how far Alec might be willing to go to take down the rogue witch. *Be safe. Jaimis's death means nothing if it means yours as well.*

She swallowed hard as she rocked Eric in her arms, and Nicole clung close, perhaps going into shock herself from the pain. Chaos thundered through the estate, yells, the crackle of magic, and everyone running -- with Alec at the center of it all. Despite Alec's determination to see Jaimis dead, the dark witch was the stronger of the two, fed by blood rites and doubly dangerous because they'd surrounded him on his own ground.

"I know you're close." Laura kept her voice low, even though the pandemonium seemed confined to Jaimis's side of the wards. "Could you make a noise or something, so I can find you and treat the boy?"

Sky cleared her throat. "Here."

As Laura stepped inside the mist, Sky reached out to touch her, including her in the protection of the spell. "Turns out that bit with our power-swapping rite worked after all. Or it did for me, anyway."

As Laura set to work, Sky stroked the child's sweat-and-blood-encrusted hair. *Hold on, Eric. Please, just a little longer.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Moving with the wrath of a summer storm, Alec watched for a glimmer of movement, a telltale shadow where no shadow should be. He kept his cloak of mist around him, evading both Jaimis's and Sorren's witches as he focused on his prey. Just ahead, near the boundaries of the estate, he felt Jaimis's presence like a needle under his skin, sharp and unwholesome, carved in blood and pain.

Didn't it fucking figure that the one other witch he'd encountered with the ability to cloak so completely would be the one he needed to see well enough to put him six feet



under? But he knew what to look for, and every fiber of his being tensed, waiting for a faint glimmer to give away the dark witch's location.

Stopping to get his bearings, he listened to the background chaos as Sorren's and Jaimis's people fought. Despite the dark connection of their blood tie, Jaimis moved with stealth and purpose, and Alec's frustration grew with each passing minute.

Fixing on a bit of mist across the rolling gardens, he fell into an all-out run, his heart pounding, his mouth dry with anticipation. His power rose of its own accord, and he felt ready for what he had to do. Bringing harm, let alone death, remained as foreign to him as sprouting wings. But some hurts could only be repaid in blood.

Unleashing a torrent of energy, he fashioned it into a burning sword and flung himself at the sparkling shadow -- only to meet the mist of an illusion, rather than a concealment spell. As he whirled, expecting a trap, the telltale sound of helicopter blades whirring to life drifted across the fields behind Jaimis's estate.

As the helicopter rose and flew off over the trees, Alec plunged the sword into the earth and threw his head back in a long, keening howl. Through the dark-blood bond, he felt an echo of Jaimis's exultation as he escaped.

Alec shook with rage, unable to accept that he'd lost his chance to buy his freedom -- his dignity -- back with Jaimis's blood. The thought that the dark witch would continue to feed on others' power, to wield the tools of torturer and rapist, shook him to the center of his being.

*Lost.*

Everything was lost. A thousand memories welled up and obscured his vision as he knelt by the ring of scorched earth where he'd discharged the useless reserves of his power. This much he knew -- as long as the rogue witch lived, a small piece of him would remain captive, shackled with the horror of memory.

As Sky reached out to him, pressing against his tortured thoughts, his fury found a target. Sky, who'd put her goals above his. The meager list of dark lords above the larger prize, the dark witch himself. Who'd loved him, and then betrayed what little trust he'd been able to offer.

Alec let out a long yell of defiance, his fury ripping through him bitter and hot. *You knew what this meant to me! Knew I had to see him dead!*

Slamming his shields down with brutal force, he shoved Sky away. In that moment, he hated that he'd given her a piece of his magic. A piece of himself. Thinking of her draping herself in a cocoon of silver mist seemed horribly intimate, as if she'd stolen a piece of his soul. Pounding the earth with his fists, he screamed his outrage at the rogue witch. At Skyler. At the gods. And at his own inability to heal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Feeling ill at ease in the luxury of Sorren's private residence, Sky ran her hand across the silky coverlet. Her things sat piled in the corner of the guest room, the contents of a single backpack, the sum total of her earthly possessions. Her shoulders were tight from the day's events and from hours of sitting rigid at Eric's bedside as Laura tended to him.

Shaking off today's assortment of horrors would take a hell of a lot more than her half-hour soak in the huge, sunken tub. Even with her shields clamped down so tight she might as well be alone in the universe, the reverberations of Serena's grief over Scott's death penetrated her defenses. Lena had arrived back from Canada near midnight, and she was with her sister now. With Eric sedated and under Laura's careful watch, and Serena with family, Sky felt at loose ends. Even Nicole had finally drifted into a fitful sleep with the help of Laura's herbs.

As she combed her damp hair, she listened to the chirping of crickets through the open window, feeling vulnerable in the shorts and oversized T-shirt she'd chosen as pajamas. Her jeans and hooded sweatshirt had been her battle gear, and now she had trouble abandoning her armor.

"Hey." Zach's voice accompanied the soft knock on the guest room door.

Eager for any distraction, she tossed aside the comb and let him in. "Any news?"

When he closed the door and clicked the lock into place, Sky raised an eyebrow.

"Call me paranoid, but this isn't over. Lock won't keep a witch out, and I know we should be safe here, of all places, but the cop in me feels better knowing the bolt's in place." He crossed the lushly furnished room, scuffing his bare feet on the Oriental rug as he headed for the open window, slammed it shut, and slid the lock into place.

Sky shivered at the swell of magic as he set wards at the door and windows. "You really are spooked."

"Seeing ahead can be a blessing and a curse." Apprehension clinging to him like a dark cloud, Zach plopped down on the end of the bed, his rugged good looks out of keeping with the delicate silk spread. "I told you Jaimis might have dug his burrow deep -- and I believe we've seen the last of him for a while -- but shit's not over yet."

"Alec...?" Fear slithered through her, dark and unpalatable.

"What I've been telling you all along, witch. When push comes to shove, we'll face the threat together." He lay back against the pillows, and even though his half-buttoned shirt covered the hawk tattoo and the fresh scars, he looked out of place among the backdrop of Impressionist-style paintings and plum-colored drapes. "Seeing as Alec's off chasing dark lords with Matt, we're not together. That mean's whatever shit remains won't happen until he's back, more likely than not."

Suddenly exhausted beyond words, she sprawled next to him and rested her head on his shoulder. "And if he doesn't come back?"

Alec's rage had seared through her with the force of a nuclear explosion, blasting at the link they'd formed. She had no hold on him, no claim to his affection or loyalty. With their cat and mouse game officially over -- and the cat running free -- she didn't expect to see Alec again.

"Watch it, witch. You're forgetting I was along for the ride when we strengthened our ties during that little power-sharing trick. Psychic overflow's a bit strong at the moment, and self-pity's never been my style. Stop fussing. He'll be back when he's ready."

Sky managed to land a slap on Zach's side before he rolled her onto her back on the silky spread and blew a raspberry on her stomach. When she squirmed to retaliate, he raised his head and nuzzled her breasts, which felt good after a hellish day. Very good.

But taking this any further seemed like a bad idea. "Look, Zach, I need to relieve some stress as much as you do, but you and Alec have been friends too long for me to come between you."

"Right, if you're worrying about screwing things up for *me* and Alec..." He trailed a row of kisses across her tummy. "Then you're further gone than I thought. Here's the landscape -- *you* and Alec. Give him time to work through his own private hell. He'll be back. And keep in mind I'm pretty fond of the son of a bitch. Wouldn't be here with you right now if I thought there was the slightest chance of making his life any harder than it is at the moment."

As she worked through that, Zach nudged her onto her side and kneaded her shoulders until she resisted the inclination to purr. "Since you're so damn fond of him, why didn't the two of you ever settle down together?"

"The obvious answer would seem to be his political career, but that had nothing to do with it. Bottom line -- Alec's too champagne and caviar for me, and I'm too beer and peanuts for him. Friends? Absolutely. Lovers? You bet. But the first time he wanted to watch some PBS documentary on brine shrimp, and there was a game on, we'd slaughter each other in the battle over the remote."

Underneath the humor, she picked up a note of pain. "You tried, didn't you?"

"One summer, when he was home from college. Lasted six weeks sharing an apartment before we ended up in a pissing match so big and bad and ugly it left both of us smarting under a barrage of mean-ass spells." Easing her shirt up over her breasts, Zach licked a line of delicious warmth around her areola. "Which is the true answer to your question, by the way. Too much testosterone, too much power, too much pride. Just couldn't compromise enough to make a go of it together."

The pain simmering across the link they shared spurred her to action. Undecided until now, she sat up and pulled her shirt the rest of the way over her head, then tossed it onto the floor. Shimmying out of her silky running shorts, she decided to leave her panties on. Preserve a little mystery.

Now to steer the conversation away from uncomfortable history. They'd suffered enough hurt today. "What's the most outrageous thing you've ever done in bed?"

"You mean with Alec?" Nudging her onto her back, Zach traced lazy circles around her stomach.

"Even better."

His low, throaty chuckle made her wonder if she'd wandered into dangerous territory again. But when he bent to lick a warm, lingering circle around one breast, then the next, she figured he'd decided to keep that particular bit of the past to himself.

Propping himself up on his elbow, he shook his head. "When we were kids, Alec and I used to dare each other to do stupid stuff. 'Betcha won't steal a candy bar from the corner store.' 'Betcha don't dare run naked through old Mr. Bronson's field.' That kind of dumb kid shit."

Her heartbeat skittered into overdrive when he reached down to trace the outline of her bikini panties, toying with the edges of the elastic. Something about this felt off balance, not having Alec here. But she trusted... *Fuck*. She really did. She *trusted* Zach's assurance that no one would be hurt by this.

"You okay?"

"Mostly. Just thinking about the two of you. Hardly know anything about you, but I'm more comfortable with both of you than just about anyone else at this point." Longing so strong it all but choked her rose up at the thought that she'd cut ties with Alec when she carried out her plans to find the list of dark lords at the expense of Alec's determination to seek revenge.

"You *know* us. It's not all about being able to say what our favorite beer is, or how we like our steak. You've been in our minds so much lately, I feel like I'm going to start painting my nails and watching chick flicks if I don't watch out."

Wow, it felt good to laugh. Wrong, maybe, with Scott dead and Eric hurt so bad, but Zach set free a part of her she thought had died the day Jaimis picked up his whip.

"Don't go there. And don't feel guilty for needing to laugh. It's like breathing. Reminds us we're alive, even when the world's going to shit around us. So, like I said, Alec and I were big on daring each other. The 'betcha won't' game led to some..." Hesitating, he shook his head again. "Truly outrageous sex. Ask Alec sometime. If he's cool with sharing, I'll handle the embarrassment."

Right, but Alec was gone. And she'd stolen a lot more than his concealing spell. It galled her that Jaimis ran free, but in the instant Alec had raged at her earlier, she'd felt the world crumple around him.

"You saved a child, Sky. Ease up on yourself. May have saved Alec, too. Head-to-head with Jaimis, there's no guaranteeing the good guy would have been the one to walk away."

Desperate to forget for a while, and turning to the world's best solace for grief, she toyed with a button on Zach's light blue shirt. "Betcha can't make me come."

His snort conveyed a world of male bravado.

Her lips parted, Sky ran her fingers over the smooth cloth of her panties. "Three times..."

Zach snorted. "You underestimate --"

"With your mouth." Teasing him with her best seductive smile, Sky waited for him to bite.

"Gonna be four, then."

"Because?"

Chuckling, Zach slid her panties down past her thighs, then clear of her legs, and abandoned them at the end of the bed. "Don't want to come alone. Fourth time, I'll be deep inside you. Now what about hands?"

"No sexual touching. Other touching's okay." Her stomach fluttered in anticipation, and her nipples tightened into hard little nubs. The world might be caving in around her, but her body remembered this game as easy as breathing.

When he took her face between his hands and kissed her, she decided the touching might be the best part. She felt lost tonight. Hollow and wrung out. And his thumb stroking her cheek told her someone cared. Been a long time since she could say that.

*You like to cast yourself in the role of loner, Skylark. But you deserve loving as much as anyone else.*

Something about having Zach brush his thoughts against hers -- and use the nickname Alec had given her -- undid her. She closed her eyes, determined that not so much as a single blessed tear would sneak out, and thankfully Zach didn't comment on her dark mood. Instead, he moved down between her legs, rubbing his silken soft hair against her inner thighs like a puppy.

As the knot of sadness eased loose, she reached down to touch his head. Zach provided exactly half of what she needed right now. The other half wore his hair as wavy and wild as Zach's was downy soft and neatly groomed, and pretty much hated her at the moment.

"Hey!" She flinched when Zach nipped the crease of her thigh, catching her off guard.

"I'm here. I like you plenty. Stop wallowing and come for me."

While she tried to decide if she should be pissed off or amused, he dragged his tongue directly over her clit, then swirled it lower, dipping into her pussy like a hummingbird sipping a flower. He stroked her thighs and stomach, teasing patterns of pleasure across her skin, and under his touch, her entire body felt like an extended erogenous zone.

She clenched up and rose off the bed, pulling his hair for all she was worth. He took her clit between his teeth and shook his head ever so gently, teasing the tender flesh until

blue sparks exploded behind her eyelids. She screamed as her body bucked under his mouth. When the world returned to its normal shape, Zach detached her fingers from his hair and moved up to kiss her, his mouth wet and tangy with her scent.

“Making this too easy for me, witch.”

When he got up to turn out the light, then lifted her to pull the coverlet out from underneath her, she watched him move with a mix of awe and curiosity. “No guy ever brought me off that fast.”

Of course, she didn't add that Lena used to be able to, all those years ago. She watched as he summoned a swirling green orb over his palm and tipped the glow sphere onto the bowl of scented oil on the bedside table. As the sphere floated on the sweet-smelling oil, the room filled with the scent of lavender, and green light cast wavy patterns on the walls.

With his shirt unbuttoned halfway, he reminded her of a partially unwrapped present. Something about the combination of sleep deprivation and emotional pain made her insatiable, desperate to lose herself under his body and block out a world of harsh reality.

“Shirt can come off if you want. As for losing yourself for a while, no harm in that. I can do with a little less reality myself, at present.” Settling beside her on the bed, he brought her hands up to the buttons. “And FYI, I'm not competing with Lena, or Alec, or anyone else. Tonight's just about being together. Feeling good. Caring about each other. And forgetting the details of the lousiest fucking day I've had in years.”

Making quick work of the buttons, she tossed his shirt aside and traced the outline of the hawk tattoo with her fingertip. “Sorry. Never going to get used to being linked so close...oh!”

His aura flared to life with so much energy that hers shimmered free of its own accord. Her clit twitched at the joy of being able to mingle power like this again, her pure, healthy violet intertwining with his emerald green. He used his hands to touch the energy in all the right places, sending a ripple effect through her body.

Drunk with pleasure, she settled back against the pillows as he once again took up position with his head between her legs. Worry and stress melted off her as he dragged his tongue across her clit in a side to side motion guaranteed to make her come in about two minutes, if only he kept moving *just like that*.

*What about this?*

Shifting tactics, he rubbed his face against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, his stubble providing just enough friction to make her squirm. He reached up to hold her hips between his strong hands, pinning her to the bed, and rather than feeling trapped, she felt *safe*. Before she could dwell on why, he plunged his tongue inside her with an upward stroke guaranteed to send her senses reeling. Liquid and trembling, she rolled with the movements of his mouth, arching into the heat, wanting him to fill her with more than just his tongue.

*Patience. Two more first, remember?*

Moving back to her clit, he teased with the tip of his tongue, featherlight and so fast, she squealed under the intensity of the caresses. Then, he covered her throbbing, swollen lips with his mouth, sending shock waves rippling all the way up to her nipples. She knotted her fists in the sheets to avoid tearing at his hair again, and with a sharp nip, followed by more rapid strokes of his tongue, he sent her crashing into nirvana.

Before she had a chance to stop shaking, he sat up and pulled her onto his lap, his cock pressing hard against his pants as he settled her bottom against him. This felt good, the holding part. Screw Alec for rushing off to hunt down dark lords, without so much as stopping by to see if she was okay. Served him right, missing out on this.

“Hey.” Zach’s voice touched her the same way his hands cradled her, with warmth and affection. “Alec came undone earlier, while we waited outside Jaimis’s wards. Knowing you were inside -- in danger, maybe hurt -- but unable to enter. I thought he’d go insane with worry. Thought I would too, for that matter.”

Her anger toward Alec melted away, replaced by a dull ache. Didn’t pay to let people get close. Just hurt more when it came time for them to leave.

“You really got hurt when Lena left, didn’t you?”

*Fucking link.* “I hurt *her*, scared her off. Then all but destroyed her life when I went to the press after the pentacle rite.” She couldn’t even talk about the part when Jaimis made her hurt Lena, marking her former roommate -- former friend, former lover -- with the bite of the whip.

“Want to explain why it all happened? Sometimes it helps to have a sympathetic ear.”

“Stupidity and naiveté. Jaimis is charismatic as hell, or was, before he started going mad. He presented a compelling picture. A world where witches could openly embrace our true natures. I fell for it all -- thought humans would rush to thank us for bailing them out of an environmental mess with the pentacle rite. Jaimis had me that blinded. Didn’t figure out the part about the blood rites until too late. By then, he intended me and Alec as his next sacrifices.”

Shuddering, she fought back a wave of bile at the thought of the rogue witch drawing their power into him, taking their energy as his own as he dragged a sharp blade across their throats. But that hadn’t happened. She clung to Zach’s salty scent, and the warmth of his body against hers, as an anchor to the present.

Zach rocked her for a while, stroking her face and running his hands through her hair where it pooled around him like a black shawl. “Ready for number three?”

“Hell, yes.” She kissed the side of his neck, shivering as their auras danced around them. Anything to chase off the after tremors of horror from having faced Jaimis on his own turf less than twelve hours ago and her creeping fear when she thought about what could have happened. “And thanks for listening.”

As she settled into her nest of pillows, she expected him to move back between her legs. But instead, he snuggled in beside her and covered her breasts with wet kisses.

*You said mouth, no hands. Didn't say where my mouth had to be.*

As he nibbled her flesh, working his way inward toward the areola, she felt the painful tightness in his balls as if she inhabited his body. The more heat they built, the more the link overwhelmed her shields. She felt the press of his zipper against his cock through his thin boxers, painful and irritating, and wiggled out from underneath him to free him from his pants.

When she fumbled with the zipper, he moved her hands away and did it for her, discarding his silk boxers as well as his pants. Then he lifted her and laid her back on the pillows, her hair spreading out around her on the sheets. He moved back to her breasts, his brown eyes serious every time he looked up to check on her.

“Worried I’ll get bored?”

“More like I’m concerned I asked too much. Maybe shouldn’t have dragged you back to relive painful choices. Especially after what you went through today. Or I guess that’s yesterday already, since midnight’s long past now.”

Taking his head between her hands, Sky guided his mouth toward her right breast. “I’d rather you understand -- Alec too, for that matter -- than have you think I’d followed Jaimis out of greed, seeking power or prestige.”

She sighed when he took her nipple into his mouth and sucked, sending zings of sensation across to the other side, then directly down to her clit. “My family was big on hiding who we were. They were so ashamed of me. Not just for what they called ‘tramping around,’ but for how much I used magic. That I’d snap my fingers to stop the plunge of a dish toward the floor. Kindle a light sphere rather than turning on a lamp.”

Ever so gently, he took her nipple between his teeth and pulled away from her body until the flesh flattened out and delicious stretchy-burning sensations raced across her chest.

*And then Jaimis offered you acceptance -- and not just for you, but for all witches.*

“A very...” She panted as he moved to the other side, stretching her nipple until the areola flattened out, and she squirmed at the almost unbearable bliss. “Compelling argument.”

*Which is why the maniac has picked up so many followers. He may be evil, insane even, but the rogue witch has a vision.*

“I’m getting creeped out...” She hissed through her teeth as he nipped her hard enough to send tingles racing across the surface of her skin. “Having this discussion...while...”

*What discussion?*

Ending the conversation right there, Zach finally scooted down and settled between her wide open legs. Just as he’d pulled at her nipples, he took the swollen tip of her clit



between his teeth and stretched until she keened with the urgency of her need. “Now! Oh, fuck, now!”

## Chapter Twelve

*One, two, three* strokes of his tongue, warm and insistent on her burning flesh. *Four.* Her world collapsed to the size of a robin's egg. *Five.* Energy exploded outward, and their auras expanded to encompass the entire bed. *Six.* Her body convulsed under his mouth. *Seven.* His tongue drew wrenching aftershocks from her, triggering another round of spasms. *Eight.*

"No, oh goddess, no more!" She grabbed his hair and pulled him away, still twitching as he moved up beside her and took her in his arms.

"Shh. You're okay. It'll be better next time, with something inside you to clench around. Felt that through you. Nearly spilled on the sheets." Stroking her face, he continued crooning to her under his breath.

"Why don't you ever lose control enough that your English breaks down, like Alec?" Her heart ached as she said his name. He belonged here, with them. Not off doing something hard and dangerous, after they'd all risked so much already.

"Not a matter of control. You drive me far outside the bounds of that. My parents are big on blending in -- apple pie on the Fourth of July, and all that. Never let my grandmother teach me Korean." He smoothed her damp hair away from her face, stroking her with so much tenderness that she wondered what she could have done to deserve his affection.

"Not a matter of deserving, witch. Just is. And as for the bit about Alec, he needs a chance to collect himself. Piece himself back together. Meant a lot to him, when Matt asked for help tracking down some of the names on your list of dark lords. Something else I should tell you, too. Much as Alec's been clinging to the idea of revenge, it's a damn good thing he didn't get his hands on Jaimis earlier."

Trying to sort through all that, she nuzzled her head against his shoulder, like a cat asking for more petting. He obliged, stroking her hair.

“Alec’s not a killer. Damn witch and I have gone round so many times about me carrying a gun, it’s a wonder we managed to stay friends.”

With a shudder, she wondered if Alec would be able to accept the fact that she’d killed. The ugly reality of taking a life wasn’t sitting too well with her, for that matter. Her stomach clenched as she slid back into the past, pressing furiously with her own energy field to try to free Scott. The dark lord would have died horribly, victim of the same fate he’d subjected Scott to, once she deflected the spell back his way.

“Self-defense, witch. Hard to live with after the fact, but deflecting a spell’s accepted in every book of ethics our people have written. As for Alec, he didn’t intend to slay Jaimis in self-defense. Blood debt’s a hard, cold thing. If he’d managed it, I think it would have destroyed him.”

Unable to keep up with the swings between carnal bliss and cold, hard reality, she let out a distressed sigh, wondering if it was time to call it a night and roll over and go to sleep.

“Just thought you should see the whole picture. Alec thought he could make himself whole by killing Jaimis. But the witch who finally manages it -- she’ll do it in self-defense.”

Sky shivered, feeling the weight of precognition.

“Not you. And I don’t think it’ll happen for some time yet. But at some point, the rogue witch will strike out at someone capable of fighting back.” Silence loomed between them, thick and heavy, and Zach continued to stroke her, soothing away stress and fear. “Hey, what’s Sorren serving for dinner tomorrow night -- or tonight, I guess, since we’re well on past midnight?”

“Poached salmon. But why...?”

With a shift in mood that left her reeling, Zach sat up and clapped his hands together like a little boy on the last day of school. Grinning like a fool, he pulled her close for a hug.

“Right.” Sky raised an eyebrow, startled by Zach’s abrupt change in mood. “We’ve all been under pressure, and you’ve finally snapped. I’ll go get Laura and have her mix up some herbs.”

“So you asked the cook? Discussed the menu with Sorren?”

“No, I just...oh!” Too much sex must have addled her brain, or at least slowed the reasoning process. “He really will serve salmon, won’t he?”

“You know he will. I think what we accomplished at the cabin was more of a balancing of gifts than a power exchange. Alec and I, we balance pretty well to start. My gift of Sight, his disappearing act.”

“But my magic was broken. So I’m the one who benefited, picking up each of your strongest gifts.”

“The Sight can be a valuable tool, though it’ll find you on its own terms and often speaks in incomplete riddles. But it’s saved my ass a time or two. As for who benefited, I’d

argue Alec and I got a hell of a lot out of getting closer to you.” He pressed her flat against the bed and eased into position, his cock pressed against her pubic mound.

If she'd had a reply in mind, it got lost as he nudged against her lust-swollen pussy, sinking just the first inch of his cock inside her as she whimpered for more. He slid his hands under her ass to pull her closer and surged forward, hitting her sweet spot on the first pass. Although he wasn't quite as long as Alec, he was wider. Lots wider. Achy and swollen from climaxes one, two, and three, she experienced every movement as an almost-too-full, slick, velvet rush of energy and heat.

Her aura crackled like sheet lightning, sending violet waves rippling through the room. Zach swirled his hips in a dance guaranteed to bring his pelvis into contact with her clit, and she lost her head enough that she grabbed his injured arm and held on tight. She remembered herself when he grunted, moving her hand safely to his shoulder, but he didn't seem to mind as he quickened the pace, his balls slapping against her with the force of his thrusts.

She saw herself through his eyes -- her head tossing on the tangled sheets, eyes shut tight, dark hair shimmering with sparks of energy from their auras. As her orgasm rushed up at her, swallowing air and light, she dropped her shields. Their link catapulted her into the center of him, molten fire and exquisite need as his body tensed, convulsed, and finally exploded inside her in a hot, wet rush.

They lay together, sweaty and utterly spent, and his heartbeat pounded against her as their auras faded, leaving just the glow of the green sphere floating in the bowl beside the bed. When she could take a breath without panting, she gave him a gentle shove, and he rolled to his side, pulling her close with an arm curled around her shoulder.

“What I told you tonight...”

“Mmm?” Zach sounded sleepy, sated.

“It's okay to tell Alec -- I mean, if he comes back. A lot of it I'd like him to know, and I'd just as soon not have to say it all again.”

Rather than answer, he pulled her even closer and kissed her hard enough to bruise her lips. Then he snuggled his head against her breasts, and as his breathing drifted into a slow, even pattern, she wondered if he'd fallen asleep.

*He'll be back, Skylark. Rocky path ahead, but he'll be back.*

Sky appreciated his attempt to reassure her. But given Alec's rage after Jaimis escaped, this time she suspected Zach offered empty comfort, rather than actual insight into the future.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shivering in the chill of the morning, Sky wriggled out from under Zach's arm and tiptoed across the room to her pack. Since she didn't have a robe, she put on sweatpants and

a sweatshirt, not wanting to disappear into the tub until Zach woke up. As she reached into the bottom of the overstuffed backpack, searching for the pentacle pendant Lena had given her one solstice, her hand brushed a sheet of paper.

Hope flared as she lifted the unmarked envelope. When would Alec have had a chance to slip a note in with her things? It went a long way toward making up for the fact that he hadn't taken time to talk with her first before running off with Matt to chase the bad guys.

Fear ratcheted through her, though, when she pulled out the note. A message of words pasted together from magazine and newspaper clippings, like something out of a bad horror novel, wavered in front of her. "Zach?"

Pulling a channel of power, he rolled out of bed, glancing frantically around the room as he searched for the threat. "What's wrong?"

When she handed him the note, his face shifted into a mask of anger, dark and forbidding. "No one's been in here while we slept. Door and windows are still warded. When would someone have had access to your things?"

"Funny. My first question was, 'Who?' not 'When?' This is personal. Damn personal."

She scanned the childish pasted words again, seeking information regarding who could hate her that much. *The brazen witch will die, afraid, alone, abandoned. With none to hold, none to claim, save dust and bitter longing.*

"At least it doesn't have the flavor of a spell. I asked when, because we're in a heap more trouble if someone put it in your pack here, in the heart of Sorren's stronghold, rather than back at the cabin."

"Jaimis's spy?"

Zach pulled on the boxers and pants he'd discarded the night before and eased his injured arm stiffly into his shirt sleeve as he finished dressing. "I'd like to say yes, because the alternative is that we've got two people out there who want to bring us harm. Possibly both here, in Sorren's private residence. But like you said, this is personal."

"I'm not exactly popular among witches, after going to the press and outing a bunch last year."

Zach shook his head and paced the length of the room, then stood and stared out the window before returning to stand beside her. "Sorren's got his people shouting from the rooftops that you saved Eric yesterday. Said he wanted to be blessed certain you'd be free to settle wherever you want, without your own kind giving you shit. And most folks who got bent out of shape about you talking to the press lost their head of steam around the time the media declared the whole thing a hoax. The holdouts figured you'd suffered enough once they heard what happened with Jaimis."

"Maybe someone who participated in the Wisconsin rite, someone whose life I fucked up beyond repair just because they tried to do a bit of good and turn back the drought?"

“Or a pissed-off husband or wife, or a relative, who had their own world rocked when one of the witches who participated in the pentacle rite had to go underground after you talked to reporters. Possible. But a year’s a long time to hold a grudge that strong, let alone follow through and act on it.”

“I’d like to think it’s the witch who’s been feeding Sorren’s plans to Jaimis. One hateful psychopath out to do me harm, rather than two.”

Zach walked over to her pack and rummaged around until he found her cell. “Time to call Alec back to the fold.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“But if we move out to one of the guest cottages, we’ll be able to dig in and defend our position without dragging you into this.” Waving the note as if it could convince Sorren, Sky got up from the leather sofa and paced across the sea of frothy white carpet.

Zach followed, catching her around the waist and pulling her back to sit beside him in the intimidating luxury of Sorren’s great room. “My gut instinct is not to let the threat separate us off on our own. Most likely, whoever wrote it intended to set us running scared.”

Startled, Sky sprang to her feet as the doors between the foyer and great room opened and Matt entered, his wavy brown hair tied back with a leather band, his shirt torn, and blood staining his jeans. Alec’s son was a blessed powerful witch, and she’d earned his contempt when she’d included his and Lena’s names among the witches she’d outed.

“Alec...?” Fear skittered through her as the moments ticked by, and he failed to appear.

Matt turned back toward the foyer. “He’s just...”

“Taking some extra time to make our *guest* comfortable.”

Alec strode around the corner, and for a moment, she thought he’d close the distance between them, bridge the gap he’d created when he tried to break their link yesterday. Instead, he stopped beside Matt. Father and son looked so alike, with their hair tied back and leather jackets covering their bloodstained T-shirts, that it was hard to imagine they’d ever been estranged.

“The dark lord’s sedated and under guard. We left him at the gatehouse, not wanting to bring him further onto the estate. This one’s every bit of trouble we expected he’d be when we searched his police records.” Alec approached Sorren, and they clasped hands. Sky shifted awkwardly where she stood.

“The physicians are working on a mix of psychiatric meds, enough to keep him from accessing his power, and yet still answer questions coherently.” Matt’s gaze was less than friendly. “That power dampening spell you taught Jaimis last year would be damn useful in *our* hands --”

“No!” Her protest brought Zach to his feet beside her. Struggling for calm, she turned to Sorren. “That spell -- Jaimis used it on Lena, on me, on Alec! And again to subdue Eric and Nicole!”

To her surprise, Alec closed the remaining distance between them and grasped her arm. Ignoring her struggles to free herself, he led her toward Matt.

“I don’t believe you’ve been properly introduced.” He wrapped his arm around her back, and she stiffened under his touch. “Sky, meet Matt, my son. I understand you two didn’t get off to the best start in the past. I expect things will be different this time around.”

After a few awkward moments, Matt offered his hand.

“What Sky said about not teaching anyone that spell...” Zach glanced from Matt to Sorren. “That stands. Not sure she could if she tried, since her power’s short-circuited, but regardless, that option’s not on the table.”

“Agreed. Some spells are best left alone.” Sorren gestured toward the sitting area. “Please, we have important matters to discuss.”

In his jeans and blue cotton shirt, with his long white braid hanging over his shoulder, Sorren could have passed for someone’s grandfather. But the elder witch radiated power, and Sky moved with the others to settle back on the sofa and chairs.

With his emotions brimming dark enough to make Sky shiver, Alec sat beside her on the sofa, and she handed him the threatening note. They might not be on the easiest of terms, but the fact of the matter was, the only way she could die “afraid, alone, abandoned” would be for someone to get to Alec and Zach first, a thought that scared the shit out of her.

“Which is why we stay together, twenty-four seven, until this resolves.” Zach glanced up at Matt’s puzzled expression. “Sorry, Sky was mulling over the intent of the threat. I’ve known from the start that Sky, Alec, and I have to see this through together in order to come out alive at the end. As of now, that means no one runs off on any missions.”

Expressions flitted across Alec and Zach’s faces so fast that she could hardly keep up. Whatever they had to say to each other, their defenses held so tight she couldn’t catch the discussion. But Alec’s red face indicated Zach might not be much happier than she was that he’d run off on his own.

“I get the sense I’m intruding on private conversations here.” Matt stood and glanced at Sorren. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to check in on Serena, and then spend some time with Eric.”

Sorren nodded and waved him away. “We’ll speak of what you found in St. Paul when I’m done here.”

As the door clicked shut behind Matt, the air around Alec and Zach crackled with a mix of anger and erotic energy. When Zach leaned over and delivered a jab to Alec’s ribs, she tensed, waiting for all hell to break loose.

“Ease up! I took a few kicks when we broke up that hellhole outside St. Paul.” Scowling as he rubbed the corded muscles at the back of his neck, Alec clamped down tight on his shields, closing himself off in his own private misery. “Found two teen witches alive in the abandoned property the dark lord used as base camp. Too late to save the other two from becoming blood sacrifices.”

“What will happen to the dark lord they brought in?” She couldn’t stand for Alec to have Sorren witness his pain and latched onto a distraction.

“This one has a police record, complete with outstanding warrants.” Sorren let a glimmer of power rise to the surface. “We’ll question him, find a balance of psychiatric drugs to nullify his powers, and turn him over to the authorities. We have the connections to make sure he continues to receive the correct meds for his *schizophrenia*, once he’s in the human correctional system.”

Sky couldn’t decide whether to be impressed or frightened by the elder witch’s realm of influence.

“Back to the matter at hand. Both Zach’s and my foreseeings indicate the three of you” --Sorren pointed at her, Alec, and Zach -- “need to pool your gifts to emerge unscathed.” He scowled, and sparks of energy danced along the staff he’d balanced against his chair. “We’ll have to hope for more foreknowledge before the spy makes her move.”

“Her?” That got Sky’s attention. “And you’re certain it’s the spy who’s been leaking information to Jaimis?”

“That much the Sight has revealed. I’ve arranged for the three of you to move into one of the larger suites upstairs. You’ll have room to maneuver if our scheming witch gains access to your quarters. I’ve cleared my guests to the outlying cottages, and Eric and Nicole have been moved as well. I’ll do my utmost to come to your aid when the rogue makes her move.”

Alec stood, shoulders squared for battle. “If anything happens to Sky --”

“On that, we’re agreed.” Catching Sky by surprise, Sorren turned to her and smiled. “Eric’s parents named me guardian, and I’ve spoken with Lena and Matt, who’ll be stepping in as surrogate parents. Eric means the world to me, and I owe you a debt beyond ordinary gratitude. I’ll do everything in my power to keep you and your friends safe.”

“And Nicole?” No doubt she was pushing her luck here, but Sky didn’t want to see Nicole punished beyond the torture she’d already endured at Jaimis’s hands.

“Is healing as well as can be expected. I’ve sent for her mother and baby, hostages Jaimis used to secure her cooperation. Once Nicole recovers, I’ve asked her to sign on with me to help corral the dark lords.”

Zach snorted. “Following the age-old advice to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.”

“That and I have a soft spot for spirited witches who make rather dramatic mistakes.” Sorren glanced at Sky. “The approach has worked well in the past.”



\* \* \* \* \*

Alec's ribs ached like hell and fury, and his jaw stung where he'd taken a punch. Worse -- though he tamped the images down tight under layers and layers of shields so as not to share with Sky and Zach -- he couldn't stop seeing the carnage that greeted them when he and Matt made their way into the dark lord's St. Paul stronghold.

Zach rejoined them in the hallway outside one of Sorren's luxurious guest suites. The elder witch's mansion made his old Washington, D.C., accommodations look downright rustic. As Sky paced another circuit of the hall, Alec shifted uneasily. When she finally let loose and told him what she thought of him, things were going to get ugly.

Not that he hadn't earned her wrath. For someone who'd spent a lifetime working toward compromise and consensus, he couldn't possibly have made a bigger mess of things with Sky.

Zach cuffed his shoulder. "Room's clear. No sign of spells or traps."

Brushing past him, Sky headed into the suite. By the Horned God, he might as well share a den with an angry badger as stay cooped up in a room with the furious witch. Not that Zach was too thrilled with him at the moment, either. Doing his best to ignore the crackle of anger that seeped past his shields, Alec strode into the room and stripped, eager to be out of the bloodstained clothes. A swell of power surged around him as Zach made a methodical survey of the oppressively cheerful, blue and white room, setting wards at every possible entrance.

Sky shook her head, her hair swishing against her yellow shirt like midnight on sunshine. "Seems you could have undressed in the bathroom."

More anger, laced with hurt and betrayal -- whereas Zach projected a mix of concern and thinly suppressed amusement. *Well, fuck this.*

"Look, I saw things today that rivaled anything you and I experienced at Jaimis's hands." Alec stepped in front of her and grabbed her wrists when she tried to move away. "I've been clamping down on the images of what happened to the two teens who didn't make it so fucking hard my teeth hurt. I figured you and Zach didn't need to share the horror up close and personal."

Pausing for breath, he felt shivers of power building around Sky and wondered if he'd gone too far. Wouldn't do to have her attempt a spell and bring part of the ceiling down on them. "I'm wrung out from using my concealment spell more consecutive hours than I've ever employed it before, and the fact that I took a few kicks to the ribs when Matt and I barged into that dilapidated crack house of a power stronghold isn't helping my disposition any, either."

Sky twisted her wrists, attempting to free herself, and stains of pink spread from her chest to her cheeks. *So be it, then. Sky can rage all she wants, for all I care.*

After the nightmare of being stuck outside Jaimis's wards, knowing she was on the inside... Maybe hurt. Maybe raped again. *Maybe tortured*. That kind of hell didn't go away on its own. She might be mad, but he held such a huge core of "pissed off" inside right now, it threatened to tear him apart.

Zach walked up behind Sky and stroked her hair, and his, *Back off and let go of Sky*, message penetrated Alec's mental defenses loud and clear. In the next heartbeat, Sky wrenched her wrists free and shoved him away -- right where he'd taken a brutal kick to the ribs from one of the dark lord's human cohorts. Even more painful, he detected a gaping hole where he should have sensed their link.

*Nothing*. Just numb, empty space where he should have felt an unavoidable connection. His link with Zach held strong, bristling with aggravation. But from Sky, an empty void.

"You pushed me away when I needed you most." Her voice shook with ice-cold rage. "I sat with a bloodied child on my lap, hoping Laura could piece him back together. I'd just gotten a firsthand look at Jaimis's work carved across Nicole's legs in intricate, bloody patterns. I faced the man who'd raped and tortured me. Even found some magic inside me I didn't know I possessed."

As she spoke, the color left her face and her pale blue eyes may as well have been frozen ponds under the winter sky. Alec wanted to turn away and ease his battered body into a hot bath. Anything to avoid facing the damage he'd done.

"We're all on edge." As Zach rubbed Sky's back, he reached out to take Alec's arm. "Go soak in the hot tub, Alec. This isn't the time to poke at painful wounds."

"No!" Sky shrugged off Zach's hand and placed her palm flat on Alec's chest. "We'll finish this here. Someone means to kill us. Most likely it's a witch who's been clever enough to spy on Sorren and avoid being detected for months. Let's get this all out in the open, so we can focus on saving our necks."

Furious, Alec stepped away from Sky, avoiding her touch. "You left. With Scott dead, and who knew how many armed humans crawling the area, you took off to --"

"I panicked." Sky's face crumpled. "I failed to save Scott, but killed the dark lord during my attempt. You can't imagine what that felt like."

"I can't imagine? After what I saw today, the carnage left behind from a blood rite so dark, I can't even put the horror into words, you say I can't imagine?"

Zach's dark brown eyes reflected a heap of hurt and anger as he lifted Sky into his arms. "Right, this argument is officially over."

"Put me the fuck down!" Kicking and raging, she struggled as Zach carried her toward the open door to the bathroom.

"Believe me, my first inclination was to go for Alec, but I can't carry him. And he's already taken a beating today, so it wouldn't do much good to wrestle him to the floor."

Against his better judgment, Alec followed. Warm air hit him as he crossed the threshold into the bathroom. The room was larger than some bedrooms, and the hot tub looked like a small swimming pool. Potted trees, planters of miniature roses, orchids, and hanging ferns filled the area with the scent of flowers and growing things. A clear glass shower filled the corner of the room, and a bamboo screen shielded the sink and toilet from view.

Sky hung her head down over her knees as soon as Zach set her on the blue tile near the edge of the sunken hot tub. After he got her undressed and slid her into the water, Zach switched on the jets to create a sea of bubbles. About now Alec hardly cared whether the witch who'd composed the threat got his sorry ass or not, but he wasn't so far gone that his body could resist the siren call of that bubbling, warm water to soothe his hurts.

As Zach stripped and climbed into the water, pulling Sky onto his lap, Alec eased himself into the opposite side of the huge tub. For a while, he sat with his eyes closed and his head tipped back to rest against the cool tiles. The pounding ache in his ribs faded to an uncomfortable throbbing, and some of the tension sloughed off under the thrumming caress of the jets of water.

"I..." Sky's voice startled him out of his exhausted stupor. "Trusted. I *trusted* you."

Oh gods, what to say to that? Where a moment ago he'd felt an absolute absence of bonding, a psychic void, now pain singed a path between them, hot and reckless, and he had a hard time separating himself off enough to know the anguish didn't originate within him.

Zach brought his hand down hard on the water, sending a barrage of spray direct at Alec's face. "You can't destroy a link like the one we forged, asshole. Not even when you try. Sky's been hiding, dug in deep underground like an injured fox. But you're stuck with each other. Now fix the damage you've done."

"The damage *I've...*" *Hey, buddy, you're the one who was here to offer comfort -- and a few other things besides. Maybe you should fix...* Alec pulled up short when Sky leaned forward and slapped his shoulder.

"Don't you *dare* turn on Zach. This is between you and me."

Oh, blessed gods, he'd give anything to turn back time. The three of them back at the cabin, before sanity and wisdom unraveled into chaos. Sky close in his arms, far from Jaimis, plotting spies, and a world gone mad. Beneath her bravado, he felt threads of fear twisting through her, cutting off air and light.

"Our link's not broken?" Stating the obvious, but he didn't seem to be able to come up with much else at the moment.

"Can't." Sky's eyes conveyed a world of hurt. "A link like ours, what the three of us strengthened when we balanced powers, it just is. For all you *tried*."

Zach grabbed his arm and jerked him forward, catching him off guard. The deep water made him next to weightless, and as his feet slipped against the bottom of the tub, he fell

face-first into Sky's chest. She grabbed him to lift his head above the water, and though he tried to retreat back to his own territory, Zach moved in and wrapped them in an embrace he'd learned on the wrestling mats.

## Chapter Thirteen

Pressed against Sky, he felt the remnants of the emptiness between them melt away, replaced by a mass of fear and betrayal. Alec had known she'd needed him. And he'd pushed her away -- lashed out with the full force of his fury over Jaimis's escape, and tried to break their link out of his terror at having almost lost her. Just like he'd lost Linda so many years ago.

Zach kissed him then, hot and probing. *You need to talk to Sky about Linda sometime. You need to speak with her about a lot of things.*

Hell, at the moment, he and Sky could hardly exchange a civil word. Discussing his late wife didn't even begin to make the cut for potential topics. Yet despite being thrown into a hot tub full of animosity and angst, with both of them pressed closed, skin on skin, his body reacted. Never mind that what he wanted most right now was a bit of solitude and time to think this through.

When Zach released him, he took a deep breath and tried to get this right. "I lived each day of the past year for one thing -- to hold myself together long enough to hunt Jaimis down and claim a bit of justice. When you faced the rogue witch on your own, leaving me and Zach to flail at the wards, unable to help you..."

Sky moved in closer and laid her head on his shoulder, and he slid his arms around her back. Someone wanted her dead. What if he failed to protect her again? And what if that someone succeeded? The thought turned him to ice.

"You said you panicked, after Scott died. Panic doesn't begin to describe what I felt, knowing you were with Jaimis. Between that, and hearing the helicopter blades whirring -- knowing the rogue witch will bury himself so deep it'll be ages before anyone can dig him out again -- I lashed out. Pushed you away. You didn't deserve that, and I'm sorry."

Sky bumped his aching jaw when she moved in to kiss him, and his mouth stung as her teeth and tongue explored areas too recently bruised. But as she shed the outer layers of her defenses and trailed her hands across his face, he didn't give a damn about the pain.

When she came up for air, she traced his eyebrows with her finger and then brushed her palm across a day's growth of stubble. "Zach said you and he have this 'Betcha won't' game you play. Said if you're willing to tell me about some of your wilder experiences, he's okay with that."

*Holy gods, just like that, she's willing to drop the rest and talk about sex?* Alec targeted that at Zach, and flinched when he felt the brush of Sky's thoughts.

"Not just like that. I'm sick to death of being afraid. Don't want to think about who wrote the threatening note. Or if Eric will ever be whole and strong again. Can't stand imagining everything that could have gone wrong when you and Matt stormed into a dark lord's stronghold and rescued a couple of intended blood sacrifices." Breathing hard, she tilted her head back to let her hair fan out around the three of them in the water, then sank below the water and blew out her breath in a whoosh of bubbles before surfacing. "Given the alternatives, I'm seeking a bit of a diversion."

Maybe not such a bad strategy. Disconnected images flashed through his mind as he searched for a tale he could get out without too much embarrassment. Flashes of tangled limbs, the taste of salt on his tongue, the sounds Zach made when he came, and a wild assortment of locations and positions. His balls drew up tight against his skin, and his dick strained toward his belly despite the lull of warm water.

"Okay, here's one." He settled on a sunken ledge provided for seating, and Zach and Sky sat on each side of him, their thighs brushing his as warm jets of water bombarded their backs. "We were hiking together out West."

"When you were young, or during your political years?"

"When it would have been a royal pain in the ass if Senator Kouklakis was spotted having sex with a burly cop stretched across a flat rock formation in broad daylight."

Zach chuckled, and the throaty sound lodged somewhere in Alec's gut and upped the heat another few notches. Sky squirmed around so that the water jets hit her breasts, rather than her back, and Alec reached out to steady her as she perched on the ledge. Her spine felt slippery under his hand, and the scent of her, as wild and sweet as blackberries, combined with the thick aroma of roses.

"I'm thinking Zach wouldn't have been hiking in uniform."

"Not the point." Gods, he could still feel the August sun beating down on his skin, the bite of smooth rock under his fingernails as he clawed the surface and screamed Zach's name. "The dare was all about the risk. Didn't sense anyone in the area, but out in the open like that, the threat of discovery's going to be a factor."

Zach touched Sky's cheek and shook his head, as if she'd asked something privately. "Never got along for shit cooped up under one roof together. But put us outside, with the whole wide world around us, give us a tent, a tree to lean against, a shallow stream, a sandy beach. That's the part of him that's mine, Skylark. And I don't see you getting in the way of that."

Right. Quite a jump from her throwing psychic barbs of fury his way to Sky and Zach reasoning out how to share him without stepping on each others toes. Alec struggled to regain his equilibrium. "Do I get a vote in this?"

Ignoring him, Sky spread her arms and pulled herself through the water, as if she were about to start swimming, and propelled herself into Zach's lap. Resting her head on his shoulder, she made a soft humming sound as her wet hair clung to his shoulders.

Detaching her hands from his back, Zach handed Sky off to Alec, warm and wet and protesting, and climbed out of the tub. "Back in a minute."

Unsure what to do with Sky, who'd gone all rigid and prickly as soon as Zach thrust her his way, Alec let her float free. His ribs ached where she'd caught him with an elbow in her struggles, but he couldn't find it in him to care as he watched her breasts bob in the bubbling water. She did a quick somersault in the deepest part of the hot tub, her hair floating wild around her, and settled on the sunken seating opposite him, well out of reach.

When Zach returned, he set a bottle of oil on the tile near the edge, within easy reach. But his frown and creased forehead indicated he had other things on his mind.

"What just happened?" Sky's voice projected alarm, and she didn't bother to mask her uneasy thoughts.

"Another note. Tucked into my pack near the bottom." Zach slid back into the water and dunked his head, then surfaced, shaking water droplets all over them. "But we're not having that discussion until later. Didn't say anything new, and we know the room's clean and warded. Probably slipped the note in when we were down talking with Sorren earlier."

To his surprise, Sky forced a smile and picked up the bottle of oil. "Whoever it is wants us running scared. So anxious that we'll make mistakes. Best thing we can do right now is unwind a little. I'm new at this, and everything comes in blurry flashes, but I keep getting bits of the three of us summoning an unbelievable rush of power together. Scared shitless. Fighting something."

Zach paddled over to Sky and rubbed her neck, and she leaned into the caress.

"You filched this from Laura?" Sky opened the bottle and tilted a dollop of amber liquid onto her palm before placing the container back on the tiles, and the scent of gardenias mingled with the potted miniature roses.

Alec massaged his temples, trying to catch up. "Hold on a minute. I knew you picked up the concealing trick, but this is the first I've heard about..."

When Zach laughed, he realized how pompous he sounded. As Senator Kouklakis, he'd insisted on being the first to hear about new developments. Rules he evidently couldn't enforce in their little threesome. "Sorry. So, you picked up Zach's gift of Sight?"

Paddling closer so fast he drew back in surprise, Sky reached down and rubbed her slick palm against his cock, stroking the full length until the oil negated the water's natural friction. "Competitive, aren't we? Couldn't stand knowing I'd stolen your concealing spell, and now I've gone and picked up Zach's best trick, as well."

His breath hissed through his teeth as she slid a finger into his ass, stroking deep enough to shatter his concentration. "Sorry. I can be a competitive jerk sometimes. Ask Zach. He can tell you. Think you can put up with me?"

A second finger joined the first, and with his arms wrapped tight around her back, he moved into deeper water with her, until they could stand and still have water coursing around their ribs. Zach's breathing quickened, and he lifted the oil and poured a stream onto his hands, rubbing them together once he set the bottle down.

Her breath warm against his neck, Sky nuzzled close, and Alec groaned as she worked a third finger into his willing ass. Around the time Zach moved in and started massaging his balls with his oil-slick fingers, Alec abandoned the struggle to speak. Their hands made up for the last twenty-four hours of hell, and then some. No one had a right to feel this good. When Zach shifted Sky to the side and slid his arms around Alec's waist, pressing their cocks together, and Sky reached down and cupped his balls under her slippery palm, he groaned as the rest of his blood supply headed south.

"Laura's going to be pissed we employed another bottle of her medicinal massage oil for erotic purposes." Sky slid her fingers free, and he resisted the urge to beg her to put them right back where they'd been. "But good thing we've got it. Water's not exactly conducive to adequate lubrication."

*Fuck.* Just hearing the word lubrication made him want to sink himself so deep inside her, they'd end up sliding underwater in the heat of the moment. "If she's our spy, the last thing we've got to worry about is her anger over a missing bottle of oil."

When Sky drew back, he realized his mistake. Should have left his suspicions for later. This time belonged to them, to paste themselves back together individually and as a unit. At least Zach kept up the delicious rhythm, rubbing their cocks together as water swirled around them.

"It's not Laura." Sky's voice came out a bit strained. "If you'd seen her with Eric, soothing him as she tended his wounds... Laura may have her rough edges, but she's not the one pasting together threats."

"Hate to go there, but Nicole blew up my Jeep the other day, and she's demonstrated just as much compassion for Eric as Laura has. Just because Laura's a competent healer and has a soft spot for children doesn't mean she's not our spy." Zach trailed off when Sky pulled herself up out of the water and wrapped a towel around her shoulders.



“Look, Laura’s not the one out to see us dead. And neither is Nicole.”

Sensing an argument brewing, Alec pulled away from Zach, climbed out beside Sky, and pulled her against him. Warm terrycloth pressed against his chest as he cradled her against his dripping body, and he wrapped the towel tighter around her to keep her warm. Her hair hung heavy around her, midnight dark against the white towel. When Zach climbed out beside them, he figured he’d succeeded in derailing the discussion, at least for now.

“What I have in mind is best played out on a bed, rather than attempted in a hot tub.” Zach leaned close to kiss Alec, then Sky. Grinning, he picked up the container of oil and tilted his head in the direction of the bedroom.

Intrigued, Alec clasped Sky’s hand and they followed Zach into the master suite, dripping water across the plush, white carpet. Zach pulled back the thick duvet and piled it onto a chair, then rolled back the blankets to reveal satin sheets. Bless it, he’d have to buy Sorren some new sheets after this, but taking time to towel off didn’t seem like an option at the moment.

Sky abandoned her towel and bounced on the bed, and something inside Alec squealed for the sheer joy of seeing her playful side surface. As he tumbled beside her, he reveled in the feel of satin under his skin, so different from the rough kicks and punches he’d taken earlier.

Zach tossed a pillow into the center of the king-size bed and managed to get his arms around Sky. She shrieked and put up a mock struggle, laughing as Zach flipped her onto her tummy with the pillow beneath her hips. When Zach grabbed his hand and pulled him over, Alec took a moment to process what his friend expected.

“You sure you want to sit this one out?” Lest Zach actually have second thoughts, Alec lowered himself onto Sky’s back, supporting his weight on his elbows.

“Only fair. You missed out last time around.” Reaching underneath her from behind, Zach spread oil between Sky’s legs, massaging the slippery stuff into the swollen lips of her pussy. “Besides, I like to watch. And more importantly, Sky put in a request.”

Uneasy as he might be at the thought of them sharing mental chatter behind his back, knowing Sky still wanted to be with him after all the anger and betrayal melted away a heap of worry. Sliding forward until the head of his cock rested against her warm, slippery folds, he shivered under the force of his need. Not just for sex. *For Sky.*

“Need you too, much as I hate to admit it.” Sky trailed her fingers along his arm. “Now will you --”

So hungry for her that he trembled with need, Alec buried himself inside her, the last of his sanity rocked loose by her satiny heat as her pussy clenched around him. He reined himself in, all too aware that she couldn’t see him in this position and wary of spooking her. Crooning bits of an Irish lullaby, he moved like rain over the surface of a glass-still pond. Slow. Gentle. Wet.

Zach stroked his spine as he made love to her, from his neck to his tailbone and back again. At some point, he eased down beside them and nuzzled close, and in response to Zach's caresses, Sky murmured soft, passionate noises. As Alec continued to move in a rhythm slow enough to leave him panting with impatience, Zach grabbed a handful of his hair and held on tight.

Sky lifted her bottom against his stomach, tilting to invite him deeper inside her warm, tight pussy. When her shields came crashing down and her lust swamped across his senses, mingling with his own, Alec struggled to sort out the carnal images.

One rose to the surface, sharp with its intensity and fierce with its hunger. Sky, lying on her tummy as he made love to her doggy fashion, and Zach entering his ass from behind, creating an erotic chain, front to back, front to back. "Zach?" Alec felt him with them, knew his friend had seen what Sky wanted.

"Fuck, yes!" Zach touched Sky's shoulder. "Don't worry, Skylark, I'll make sure to support my own weight -- no worries of getting squished under a couple of horny witches."

At that, Sky laughed, free and wild. But Alec tensed when Zach poured oil between the cheeks of his ass, wondering if he could do this without gazing into someone's eyes. Moving slowly, Zach knelt behind his raised ass and grasped his hips. Without either Sky or Zach facing him, anchoring him to the present and making sure he didn't succumb to bitter memories, he wondered if he'd lose himself in the violence of the past.

*We're here in your thoughts.* Sky's whisper-soft contact steadied him. *Can't get any closer than that. And you know Zach would never hurt you.*

"Same as you and Sky, my friend. Gentle as rain." Kneeling between Alec's legs, with Sky's legs pushed wide to make room for both of them, Zach supported himself on his hands and knees as he angled closer.

Alec held still, deep inside of Sky, as Zach eased past the outer ring of muscle. The nudge of pressure turned to stretching, and after a moment of uneasy discomfort, to intoxicating pleasure. Slicked up with that damn oil, Zach slid deep inside his ass -- moving almost too easy, lacking the friction he suddenly craved.

"Another time, friend. This one's about trust, not intensity."

Alec shook with the gentle rhythm of Zach's thrusts as he claimed the last few inches. Sky milked his cock with a series of clenching motions that just had to be intentional, and he felt himself start to come unglued.

Seeing both the back of his own head and Sky's against the blue sheets through Zach's perspective made him dizzy. And hungry as hell. Forcing himself to keep his movements slow, he pressed into Sky as Zach withdrew, then pulled back to press into Zach's downward strokes. When Sky reached down to stroke her clit, whimpering and bucking beneath him, the world unraveled, and he felt the inevitable rush of liquid fire.

“Can’t hold off much longer.” Desperate, he tried to think of something mundane. Shoes. Spells to find lost items. The almanac predictions for this fall’s weather.

“Now!” Stroking herself so hard, he could hear her fingers sliding through her slick juices, Sky shook like a tree in a hurricane.

By now, he should be accustomed to feeling her orgasms through her, wound up so tight in her mind he might as well *be* her, but the frantic spasms rocking her body knocked the wind out of him and hurtled him over the edge.

Never mind he’d wanted to make this last, his body shook and bucked over her -- and under Zach -- and he came so hard, his bruised ribs burned and his jaw ached from clenching his teeth. Damned if he didn’t feel like weeping at how fucking good it felt to come in a fiery rush -- buried deep inside Sky’s frantically clenching pussy -- as Zach filled him with cum.

The threefold link dragged them under and pulled them past the boundaries of ordinary release, their bodies still twitching long after they’d been sated, carrying things to the point where it just plain hurt. Came too hard. Breathed too hard. Gasping for air and grabbing at each other, as if they were drowning in the hot tub and not safe on a satin-covered bed.

At some point Zach collapsed on top of him, and he grunted as his bruised ribs pressed into Sky’s spine. And through it all, they laughed like maniacs. Laughed so hard that disentangling themselves became three times as difficult.

“Come on, you big oafs. You’re squishing me.”

Sky’s pronouncement precipitated another round of helpless laughter, days of stress unraveling and letting go, until all that remained were three sweaty, sated bodies on wrecked sheets. Somehow, Zach managed to roll off him, and Alec grunted at the tug of separation. Rolling to the other side of Sky, he lay on his back staring at the white ceiling and waiting for blood to find its way back to his brain.

When it did, he cupped Sky’s hand in his and wondered if he could manage this with some degree of grace. Here with Zach and Sky, damp and drowsy, he felt about as safe as safe could get lately, with his life turning upside down at every turn. Like it or not, Zach had been right when he’d tried to get him to talk about Linda.

Seemed wrong, bringing so much hurt into their quiet, sweaty nest, with their hearts still racing and breath coming in drowsy stutters. But he needed Sky. Needed her like blood and air. And bless it, if she didn’t understand why he went into a crazed fury every time he thought of losing her, more likely than not, he’d end up driving her away.

Stroking her arm, Alec took a deep breath for courage. “What Zach wanted me to tell you earlier... No easy way to talk about this, but years ago my wife, Linda, died in a car accident. In my arms. She’d been driving late at night and missed a curve.” The pain surfaced, but this time he didn’t try to push Sky and Zach away. Didn’t try to hide.

“How many years ago?”

“Forever. I was so young. Didn’t know one of my youthful encounters had led to Matt’s birth at that point. Had hardly started my political career.” Alec wiped the back of his hand across his face. “Getting back to Linda -- she was human. Knew about my gifts, but couldn’t really understand. Bless it, I loved her, though. The part you need to know is I never let myself get close to anyone after that. Hurt too fucking much to lose her.”

“Zach?”

“I was faithful while Linda was alive. She didn’t understand witches’ ways, how power pulls at us, how complex our relationships can get. Afterward, Zach was around to help me piece myself back together. Damn fool’s too tough to kill, so with him, I didn’t feel so --”  
*Vulnerable. So fucking vulnerable.*

Oh, gods, this hurt. “With you, with what Jaimis did to you, what I saw, and someone out there trying to kill you -- it’s so hard to let myself love you.”

Sky’s breathing slowed, and she rolled onto her side, facing away from Alec with her knees drawn up close to her chest. But she didn’t bring her shields crashing down, and he felt his own fears reflected back at him. Her hesitance to let anyone get too close and risk the kind of loss that could split someone in two with no chance of picking up the brittle pieces left him cold and empty. He sighed and let her be.

*Don’t we just make a fine pair?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Rain lashed against Sky’s face as she headed back from the forest cemetery. With Alec striding ahead and Zach lagging back with the other mourners, she felt isolated and weary. Farther up the path, Matt carried the bandaged child. Despite Laura’s efforts, the bites hadn’t yet healed completely, and Eric’s face was about the only part of him not bundled in gauze.

“You okay?” Lena pulled up beside her, touching Sky’s elbow.

Serena had been escorted back to one of the guest houses after Scott’s funeral, accompanied by Dane, the witch who composed the third part of their former love triangle. But Lena had remained with Eric, comforting the child as he said good-bye to his parents.

“Been better.”

Eric’s inner voice wound its way through her thoughts like grief itself, the psychic tendrils twining her heart in a stranglehold. Laura had declared him sound enough to attend his parents’ funeral, and though the boy was still groggy from pain meds, without the sedating herbs his thoughts raced through Sky’s mind, a miniature whirlwind of gaping loneliness.

“You and Matt have your work cut out for you with Eric. Can you hear him, the psychic chatter? He’s so frightened. Alone.”

Lena nodded, her sodden blonde hair clinging to her shoulders and water beading off her black jacket. “You’ll stay and help, won’t you? When Eric mentions you, it’s ‘my friend

Sky,' or 'when Sky and Nikki saved me from the rats.' With what he's been through, I'd appreciated any extra help..."

"I'll be around. For a while, anyway. Anything I can do, just let me know." Picking her way along the muddy path, Sky sighed as they came into view of Sorren's impressive estate. The small family cemetery where they buried the three witches had been filled with sadness, but for some reason, she'd felt safe there.

"Whatever happens, it's going to be at Sorren's house."

Realizing she'd spoken that last bit aloud, Sky winced. No use worrying Lena, with her sister grieving hard and Eric still trying to come to terms with recent horrors. "Forget I said that. Funerals make me morbid. I'm feeling like shit that Scott didn't make it, that I didn't push back at the death magic just a bit faster."

Up ahead, the sound of sobbing joined the steady patter of rain, and Eric's distress echoed through Sky, fierce and bewildered. "Go, I'm fine. The little guy needs you."

Before she saw it coming, Lena embraced her and kissed her full on the lips. Standing numbly in the downpour, Sky tried to make sense of the gesture.

"Thank you -- for what you did for Eric. I don't think I could have gone into Jaimis's place alone like that." Lena wiped rain away from her eyes and grabbed Sky's hand. "As for Scott, don't blame yourself. Eric needs me, but we'll talk later."

Jogging to catch up with Matt, Lena left her wondering what just happened, trying to make sense of the kiss.

*Just seemed to me you needed a friend, witch. I could use one, too.* Lena slipped in and out of her thoughts as easy as sunshine on water, shrinking the distance of years and betrayals between them down to nothing.

"Sky?" Alec doubled back to join her and cupped his palm under her elbow.

*Light filled the room, and at the center, a point of blackness threatened to swallow them. Sky felt the floor under her shoes, smelled roses, heard Zach cry out...*

"What's wrong?" Zach joined them, urging her forward on the path and breaking her concentration.

"Not sure. Something ahead, but no details. Scary, though."

They walked the rest of the way to Sorren's mansion in silence, and the soft leather dress shoes she'd borrowed from Laura skidded on the wet cobblestones. Everything about the day felt heavy. Ominous. The skirt she'd borrowed clung to her legs, hampering her movements, and she cursed under her breath.

Finally, Zach threw open the double doors, and once they stepped past the threshold the cheerful interior surrounded them, and the air carried the scent of baking bread. Her earlier sense of foreboding seemed unfounded amidst the calm security of Sorren's home, and she wondered if perhaps she needed more practice separating out anxiety from genuine premonitions.

“What I saw outside, something dark swallowing light and air, how do I tell if it’s real?”

Zach took her hand and led her toward the stairs. “If you feel the need to ask, more likely than not you just got a glimpse ahead. Trust your instincts. They’ll guide you true.”

Alec maintained his silence as he tromped up the stairs beside her, lost in heavily guarded thoughts. Well, funerals never made anyone cheerful. But the heaviness of the day seemed to arise from something more than either weather or grief. Eager to get into dry clothes, she quickened her pace, leaving the men lagging behind.

“Don’t go in until I get a chance to check the room.”

Zach’s reminder got her hackles up, but it wasn’t like she could check for spells with her magic still off center. She paced in front of the door to their suite, and when something whizzed past her ear, close enough to touch her hair on the way by, she didn’t process what had happened until the men shouted “Knife!” and “Get inside!”

A second blade flew by as she threw open the door to their suite and stepped to the side, pressing her back against the wall. Her blood roared in her veins, and fear tightened her throat until she could hardly swallow. The metal might be ordinary enough, but no blade could soar that fast and true without the aid of a spell.

*Oh goddess, please don’t let them go after the witch who threw those blades unarmed and unprepared.*

## Chapter Fourteen

Shaking more from the onslaught of adrenaline than the chill of her rain-damp blouse and skirt, Sky crouched low and whispered a plea for aid to any god or goddess who would listen. The men were out there with whoever had made the death threats, and that witch had been damn clear that Alec and Zach would die first, leaving her horribly alone.

*Please, please, please let them be okay.*

The hallway remained eerily silent, though she felt fierce anger as the men hunted for the witch who threw the knives, and echoes of malevolence from the dark lord swamped her senses. After what seemed like years, Alec and Zach dove into the room and slammed the door behind them.

“Fucking witch got away. Nearly clipped Alec with another knife. No choice but to take cover.” Zach raised his hand to set wards.

Before Zach could complete the warding, Alec whirled toward the center of the room. “Heads up!”

*Oh, shit!* Evil pulsed obsidian dark from a marble-sized ball at the center of the white carpet, clouding out light with dusky waves of energy. Panic rooted her to the floor as she felt death welling up from the spell, but she retained enough presence of mind to realize they couldn’t face this kind of power alone.

*Sorren!*

“He’s down at the clearing talking to the other mourners. No time.” Alec took a wary step forward, his hands extended in front of him, and she sensed his struggle to understand the waves of power crashing through the room.

Alec’s approach triggered a backlash of chaos, and he staggered back as wind tore through the room, upending lamps, tearing pictures from the wall, and stirring the scent of roses from the bathing room beyond. What had smelled like paradise during their joyous

ménage took on the cast of death and funerals. The scent grew stronger, and Zach cried out when a chair tipped over and flew against his shins.

What the fuck good was the curse of Sight if she'd foreseen this, but not gained so much as an inkling of information on how to survive?

"Doesn't work that way. Fickle gift." Zach shoved the remnants of the chair aside and rubbed his shins. "Alec!"

Alec ducked as a large vase took flight and hurtled by his head. As Sky shielded her face with her hands and crouched so low her hair whipped against the sea of wood splinters and broken glass covering the carpet, she opened herself to the men. Her fledgling Sight might not offer any help, but Zach had been going on about clinging together to survive since this whole mess started.

"Never felt something that strong before." Leaning into the unnatural wind, Zach limped across the room, dodging flying pillows and shards of whirling glass on his way to the door. When he reached the exit, he tried to turn the doorknob, and then delivered a vicious kick to the wood. "Sealing spell. Room's locked down tight. We're trapped."

Fear sliced along Sky's spine as she flashed back to Jaimis locking the door behind him and bearing down on her, whip in hand. She hadn't been trapped in a room since the rogue witch had held her prisoner. Despite the tumult around them, other images, surfaced through the chasms Jaimis had carved in her memory. The pain of the whip. The taste of her own blood. The violence with which Jaimis dug his nails into her skin as he forced her...forced himself inside her.

Trembling, she fought the memories she'd sought so desperately to reclaim for the past year. That thing in the center of the room stank of death, and her life depended on staying calm and present. Here. *Now*. The obsidian sphere shimmered and pulsed, growing to the size of an ebony ball, then doubling again, until a swirling, boulder-sized chunk of death graced the center of the room. The scent of roses grew so thick, she gagged. Not just the scent from the potted plants in the bathroom, but a perverse manifestation of the spell itself.

Sky whimpered when a splinter of wood pierced her calf, but when Alec tried to make his way over to her, she shook her head and yanked the barb free herself. "What in the name of the gods..."

Alec knelt as close as he could get to the pulsing mass and not be blown over backward, and though she felt his fear and fury ripping through her like a scream in the night, he was too wrapped up in evaluating the spell to answer.

"Larger version of what killed Scott." Still walking with a limp and bent double to fight the wind, Zach paced like a wounded bear, angry and desperate. "My guess is we don't have long before it sucks the air out of the sealed room."

Alec got down on all fours and inched closer to the pulsing, raven-black sphere, now almost as tall as he was. His hair whipped around his head as he circled the area, his face set



in a mask of strain and fury. As the death magic took hold, color leached from the room, and Alec's black funeral suit and starched white shirt seemed to fade to dusky gray.

When no more than a couple feet separated Alec from the throbbing mass of darkness, he beckoned to her. "Sky, come here."

Reluctant, she forced herself forward, creeping on her belly to avoid the debris whirling above her, until she stood beside him.

When a hurtling picture frame almost clipped his shoulder, Zach dropped to his hands and knees and crept toward the windows. But when he stood and tried to press against the glass, he yelped and pulled his hands back. "Sealing spell's got a vicious kick to it. Hope you've got a plan, friend, because I'm fresh out."

"The concealing spell." Alec crept closer to her and grabbed her arm to make sure he had her attention. "Haven't had time to show you yet, but you can weave it around a space, with something else at the center. Hide an object or person other than yourself, as long as you're close by."

"Right, so if we hide the damn thing, it can't suck the air out of our lungs." Zach crawled back to the door, and Sky winced as she felt broken glass pierce his hands, but he didn't even slow down. When he reached the door he launched a spell, but the sparks of energy fell away half a foot shy of striking their target, deflected by whatever spell sealed the room.

The breathlessness of Zach's voice amplified the pain in her own air-starved lungs, and she couldn't tell if the blue sparks in front of her eyes heralded the onset of panic or the beginnings of oxygen deprivation.

"Watch me, Sky!" Gasping, Alec gave up the attempt at spoken language. *Focus!*

Beyond terror, she meshed her thoughts with Alec's as he spun silvery mist outward, streaming away from him to surround the huge obsidian sphere. More an absence of light than the color black, chilling in its ability to swallow space, horrifying in its power to create a whirling vortex, the death magic gobbled oxygen as the speed of the winds increased. With no time to request an explanation of his plans, she offered Alec blind trust, hoping he'd found a way to get them out of there alive.

*Like spun silk, or fog, but you can shape it as if you're handling clay.* As Alec continued to shroud the sphere in mist and Zach struggled to break out of the room, Sky added the silvery magic she'd gained from their power-sharing rite. She felt their lungs constrict along with her own, their lightheadedness magnifying her own nausea and fatigue.

The mist clung to her at first, and she cupped her hands around empty space, urging it outward. Thought reduced itself down to disjointed bits of sound. The crunch of glass. Tearing wind. Fluttering cloth as the curtains tore from their rods. And always, the cloying scent of roses.

Fighting the urge to lie down and surrender to sleep, she marshaled her nascent magic, and soon her own silver web joined Alec's. Bit by bit, the obsidian sphere disappeared, swathed in the combined effects of their concealing magic. As the mist buffered the spell, the room quieted, and bits of torn cloth fluttered to a rest across Zach's back. But the air remained thin, and she didn't know how long they'd be able to maintain consciousness.

*The magic mutes things -- light, noise, power. A cushion of sorts, like wrapping the spell in cotton. Now here's the tough part.* Alec paused, pressing his hands to his mouth as he gave in to a wracking cough.

Zach picked up where Alec left off. *We cast a circle so fucking tight, it'll hold when the implosion comes. The concealing spell will absorb some of the backlash when the death spell detonates, and our circle...*

*Will do the rest.* Still coughing, Alec staggered to his feet and motioned for Zach to stand opposite him. Sky forced herself to stand and, swaying, fought to put one foot in front of the other until the three of them formed a triangle, with the concealing sphere centered between them, its presence marked by faint glimmers of light.

*This is where we take the 'perfect love and perfect trust' of spell craft to a whole new level.* Alec's face looked ashy gray, and her fear ratcheted up a few notches as she watched his chest heave. *It won't work if we don't act in perfect unison.*

As counterintuitive as it was to strip away her psychic defenses in the face of death, Sky joined the men in dropping her shields. Racing against time, they raised their hands and gasped out "north" together.

She felt fear drop away at "East," replaced by the stubborn hope that their bond could get them through this. As the three of them called, "South," pulling the circle tighter around where she and Alec had woven the concealing spell, something furry brushed her ankle.

*Fuck!*

The sadistic bastard who'd set up the spell designed to kill the three of them the same way she'd watched Scott die -- robbed of air and gasping for breath -- had thought to let a rat loose in the room as well. Forcing away images of Eric's bloody arms as he fought off the rodents, Sky drew a pitiful gasp of air into her lungs and murmured, "West" with the men, weaving a circle tighter than any she'd ever cast.

*Hold fast. All hell's about to...*

Alec never got the chance to finish his warning. Sky tried to scream but couldn't draw enough air to do much more than whimper as raw power assaulted the circle they'd woven, tearing at her mind with iron claws.

Heat and hell and fury didn't begin to describe the pain. Searing, icy fingers ripped through her, shredding her hold on the circle. Alec and Zach's agony multiplied her own, and she experienced a threefold assault as the death spell tore at them, the dark magic seeking a way out of its confinement.

Somewhere in the center of the misery and terror, their love buoyed her up. She felt darkness closing in around the edges of Alec's vision, saw the room grow dim through his eyes, and she redoubled her efforts. *Don't you leave me! Together, remember? Zach said we can do this -- together!*

Intimate vignettes raced through her mind, and her love for them flared hotter than pain or fear. *Zach's smile as they pressed nose to nose, sucking and licking Alec's straining shaft. Alec's string of endearments, murmured in a mix of Greek and English. Alec loving her within a sphere of silver mist. The heat of three bodies piled together on damp sheets.*

So much affection. So much to lose.

The connection through which they shared each other's suffering acted as a rugged source of strength, jarring her to take breath after gasping breath. When she felt the torrent of energy dwindle, she hardly dared hope. But with each tortured breath, the assault from within the circle ebbed, until finally, the death magic dwindled to a dull malaise.

*Not yet. Hold the circle!* His face a mask of pain, Alec clutched his sides, and Zach glanced longingly toward the door as he swayed on his feet.

Her mind and body ached beyond all reason, and her lungs burned, but her faith in Alec had carried her this far, and damned if she'd back out now. Minutes ticked by, until the center of their circle held only the benign imprint of their own concealing spell, and air seeped back into the room through chinks and cracks around the door and windows.

After what felt like an eternity, Alec dissolved the projection of concealing magic, and Zach closed his fist to call home his share of the energy they'd raised. Without formality of any sort, they released the circle.

Moving unsteadily, Zach crossed to the nearest window and opened it to welcome more air into the room. "Seal broke after the spell dispersed." His voice shook, but color was starting to return to his face.

When something skittered under the bed, Sky took a wobbly step toward the door, unable to remain in the room another second. Glass and wood crunched under her feet, and her rain-damp skirt clung to her legs, hampering her movements. She almost fell twice before she reached her destination. "Got to get out of here!"

Her throat burned, and her lungs felt tight despite the abundance of fresh air. *The rats. Can't stay in here with them. Not after what happened to Eric.*

As she reached for the doorknob, Alec dove for her and grabbed her hand. "More likely than not, whoever set that spell is waiting out there to see if it worked."

"I've got to get out!" Panic simmered as something crashed in the bathroom, followed by more scampering.

"I know, but we'll do this right." Alec stroked her arm, and although his voice was still raspy, his touch conveyed strength. "No use slipping out the windows and climbing down the trellis, because they'd only take another shot at us down the line. This stops here."

Zach picked his way through the debris until he located his backpack, and when he pulled out his gun, her first thought was that Sorren would be enraged that he'd brought a weapon into his home. Relief quickly followed, since in their weakened state, magic alone might not be enough to protect them from the dark lord.

Zach picked his way back toward the door, kicking aside torn pillows and the shattered arm of a chair. "Stay behind me, and whatever you do, keep your defenses up. Fucking powerful witch out there, and we're half dead on our feet as it is."

Casting outward, Sky sought reinforcements, but as she expected, the witches on the estate had wrapped themselves in rock solid shields, seeking privacy in their grief following the funerals. She hardly dared to breathe as Zach eased the door open, the three of them standing to either side of the opening. When no assault followed, he ducked low and headed out with Alec close behind. Sky followed, preferring to take her chances with the witch who'd just tried to kill them rather than face the rats, though she doubted her broken magic could do much good as back up.

Sky froze in horror as Laura raised her hands to launch a spell from the end of the hall. "Look out!"

Time froze as light coalesced around Laura's hands, her face set in a grim mask, ugly with the effort of calling a torrent of power. Zach had been looking the other way, toward the stairs, but he spun, gun raised, at her warning. The feisty healer's betrayal ripped away Sky's last bit of faith, reaffirming that trust only led to defeat. Tangles of red hair swept across Laura's face, moved by the energy she raised, as Zach pointed his weapon at her chest.

"No!" Plowing into him, Alec knocked Zach's aim off center before he had a chance to fire. "It's not Laura! Power surge at the other end of the hall -- that's our spy!"

"Witch. Death magic. Around the corner!" Laura's frantic warning echoed through the hallway as she let loose a barrage of energy.

The stream surged through the hall like liquid silver, and a woman shrieked near the stairs. Running hard, Sky's lungs burned, and she gulped air as she followed Zach toward the sound, desperate not to let a second rogue escape this week. A lash of power caught them midstride, tumbling them to the carpet. Pain darted along her leg as her knee smashed into the floor, but she rolled and struggled to her feet.

Zach and Alec were up and running by the time Sky took her first strides, and Laura caught up with her as she panted, unable to keep up with the men. She felt Zach's lungs pinch and his shins ache where the chair hit him earlier, and Alec's breath seemed to rasp through her own throat as he raced to catch up with the dark lord.

*Together.* Bound so tight there was no room for doubt or fear between them.

Cursing the winding hallways that made up Sorren's vast home, Sky latched on to the psychic imprint of loathing up ahead, and touched Alec and Zach's thoughts to direct them toward the main stairway. *She's trying to get away. We'll lose her!*

But as they raced around the corner and pounded toward the winding staircase, a tall woman dressed in black keyed a spell and formed an obsidian sphere on her palm, her long brown braid swinging behind her as she rounded on them. Recognition teased at the edge of Sky's memory, and she recalled seeing the witch speaking with Sorren at the funerals. Death dark, the spell pulsed as the woman murmured words to set its power imprint.

Zach raised his weapon at her, but cursed and dropped the gun before he had a chance to fire. A wisp of smoke drifted up when it hit the carpet. As Alec and Zach split up and moved closer to the witch, their magic simmering around them like a rising storm, Sky's fear crowded out hope and reason. She lashed out in desperation, letting her magic do what it would, and the witch screamed as an overhead chandelier crashed down, hitting her shoulder.

Somehow, the woman held on to the small orb of dark magic, her face creased with pain and effort. "I'll take them first, just like you took Daniel! You'll die with no one to hold you."

"Elisa, don't do this!" Laura's cry went unheeded, and the woman offered nothing more than a scowl in response.

Zach and Alec added their pleas, addressing the witch by name, but Sky suspected the death magic had such a hold on the woman that nothing could dissuade her. Laura inched closer to the dark lord, and Sky watched in horror as the black sphere on the witch's palm swelled to the size of a sooty apple. Alec fashioned a glowing sword and threw it like a knife, spinning end over end, but the woman dodged to the side, and it lodged harmlessly in the wall before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

"Everyone down!" Laura's cry brought an instant response, and they plastered themselves to the floor as a wild torrent of energy coursed above them.

As Laura's magic spent itself, Sky sensed Alec and Zach's hearts pounding, alive and fierce, and her hope swelled along with theirs. A desperate shriek tore through the air, and a pitiful series of gasps followed. Laura closed the distance between herself and the fallen woman as Sky struggled to her feet. By the time she and the men scrambled to join the healer, the brown-haired witch lay lifeless on the floor, her eyes frozen open, and her mouth twisted into a startled O.

"I'd only intended to knock her off her feet." Laura choked back sobs as she knelt to feel for a pulse. "Her spell must have triggered before she had time to reabsorb the power."

*Or cast it outward, taking some of us with her.* Sky shivered and glanced at Alec and Zach to reassure herself they were all right. Nothing had ever been sweeter than the sight of her two princes standing whole and strong in their ruined suits.

"Rest easy, troubled soul." Zach bent down to close the woman's eyelids, drawing his hand across her forehead and down over her nose as gently as he'd touch a child.

Sky had seen one too many dead bodies lately, and she turned away, covering her mouth with her hands. She hurt all over, and her lungs stung with each breath she took. She

didn't think she'd ever forget the pasty color of the dark lord's skin, or the rigid cast of her mouth locked in a scream. Worse, Alec, Zach, and Laura had known this woman, and she didn't have the heart to ask how -- didn't want to know how close the witch walked within Sorren's inner circle.

"Goddess help me, I'm a healer. I've never... I can't... Not even defensive magic..." Laura lowered her head, her red hair pooling around her face as her shoulders heaved with wracking sobs.

Fighting back nausea, Sky knelt beside the healer and wrapped an arm around her back. Lena had shown her friendship earlier when she'd neither expected nor deserved it, and it wouldn't kill her to do the same for Laura. Alec disappeared into a nearby bedroom and returned with a blanket to cover the dead witch. Downstairs a door slammed, and footsteps echoed through the silence.

"Show yourself! Who dares raise destructive power in my home?" Sorren's voice boomed out with the threat of violence to anyone who crossed him. "Zach?"

"We're here. Stand down. Danger's past." Zach went to greet the elder witch as he pounded up the stairs, staff raised and white braid twisting behind him like an angry serpent.

Matt followed fast on Sorren's heels, and power crackled around both of them like a cyclone on an August afternoon. Sky swallowed hard, battered by the psychic imprint of their fear and rage.

"Please, stand down! We're okay." Alec held out his hands, open and upright, and Sorren released the thread of energy. Never taking his eyes away from Sorren, Alec inclined his head toward the corpse. "I'm so sorry, Sorren. She got caught up in her own spell. There was nothing we could do to stop her."

Confused, Sky clung tighter to Laura, stroking the healer's back as she cried. Every instinct insisted Sorren presented a threat.

"Who? What happened?" Sorren's voice held all the warmth of a January blizzard as he knelt and touched the blanket covering the fallen witch's forehead.

Matt knelt beside Sorren and the dead witch, his rain-drenched hair glistening around his face, and when he pulled the blanket away to identify the fallen witch, Sorren dropped to his knees and uttered a piercing cry.

"No!"

Light whipped around the elder witch, and trembling as magic thickened around them, Laura clung to Sky. For a few moments, everyone stood frozen in place, hardly daring to breathe.

Pain creased Sorren's face, and the psychic impact of his grief raged through Sky's senses. But when Alec approached and held out his hand, the elder witch grasped it and released the thread of power he'd summoned. Somehow, the fury of suffering surrounding

her seemed magnified by the fact that the witches were already dressed for mourning, as if death had stamped its mark on this day and refused to let go.

Tears staining his face, Sorren cupped his palm against the fallen woman's cheek. "I'm so terribly sorry."

Unable to bear Sorren's pain, Sky eased out of Laura's grasp and walked over to join him. She felt Alec and Zach tense, but didn't press them for explanations -- figured if she knew the whole story, she wouldn't have the guts to do this. Kneeling beside Alec, she joined him in tracing soothing circles over Sorren's back.

"My cousin, Elisa." Sorren's voice cracked. "Her husband, Daniel... You'll remember him as the quiet, heavysset witch from the pentacle rite last year."

Sorren touched Sky's arm, and she felt his grief sear across the contact. "After the publicity surrounding the rite, he lost his chiropractic practice. They sold their home and moved into a house on my estate."

"Sorren, I'm so sorry." No matter how far she traveled from the day she spoke to the press and named the witches involved in the rite, her mistake came back to haunt her. No wonder Elisa had hated her.

"It's I who am sorry." Sorren's back shook as she rubbed circles across his spine. "Family ties blinded me. I knew she held anger in her heart after Daniel's death. Yet I excluded her from suspicion due to family loyalties."

Not about to press a grieving witch for details, she glanced at Alec, seeking clarification.

*Elisa's husband, Daniel, downed a bottle of Scotch and ran his car off the road six months ago.* Alec shifted uneasily, and she felt agitation ripple through him, fear that Sorren would lash out in his grief.

Sky shook her head. *No, I'll be okay. Sorren needs our support -- he won't hurt us.*

"If I'd known she blamed me and Skyler for Daniel's death and would resort to working with Jaimis for revenge..." For the first time since she'd met him, Sorren looked old.

*Or if I'd had the sense to keep my mouth shut after the pentacle rite. But neither of us can change things now.* With a deep breath for courage, Sky took Sorren's hand. "Please, come with me and Alec. Matt and Zach will gather the others and bring Elisa to the cemetery."

No day should end with a fourth funeral. But no sense waiting and drawing out the suffering. Alec helped her pull the elder witch to his feet, and Sorren accompanied them without resistance as they made their way down the stairs, through the great room, and back out into the rain.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they made their way along the sun-dappled path, Sky felt Alec's eyes on her like a caress. They hadn't spent much time together since the funerals last week, and under his appraising gaze, she felt next to naked in her sheer blouse, silk camisole, and white shorts. Bless it, the teal and white scarf she'd used to tie her hair back was downright girly. When she'd received her first check after signing on with Sorren in his fight to corral the dark lords, Nikki and Laura had dragged her shopping, and they'd stridently vetoed every choice she made involving leather or the color black.

"Stop fretting." Alec slid his hand to the small of her back, the warmth of his palm penetrating her filmy blouse. "You look great."

For a moment, she thought he'd raise the issue of her hanging out with Nicole, but evidently, they'd been around that subject enough times that he'd decided to let it rest and trust her judgment in befriending the former dark lord. She and Nikki had both been hurt -- horribly -- by the same man. And they'd both made mistakes. Somehow, she found that kinship comforting, and with Lena busy caring for Eric, she appreciated Nikki's company.

As they picked their way over fallen branches, their silence stretched into the realm of awkwardness, and she wondered if they'd manage to bridge the gap. Somehow, taking Sorren up on his offer to rent one of the guest cottages seemed to have been a misstep, as far as Alec was concerned.

"I understand you need some space." Letting his hand drop away from her back, he pointed ahead at what looked like an old tree fort. "That's where we're heading. As for the rest, I guess I'm at loose ends with Zach organizing Sorren's enforcers down in St. Paul, and you busy settling in at the cottage."

"I got a call from Zach this morning." With a grin, Sky recalled Zach's tirade over the details of organizing a group of enforcers for the elder witch. "Sounds like he and Sorren are still going around about the issue of whether or not he'll carry a gun when he's looking in on dark lords and their followers."

"He called me, too. But what I got involved a heap of unsolicited advice regarding you, and warnings not to fuck things up." Grabbing her hand, Alec led her toward the tree that housed the fort and glanced down at her new white tennis sneakers. "Guess I should have warned you we're dining in the rough today."

Sky eyed the lowest branch, just above chest level, and frowned when Alec held out his intertwined hands to give her a leg up. "You're serious? Lunch is up there?"

Hell, for someone Zach had insisted was a champagne and caviar kind of guy, Alec seemed to need some basic instruction on how to arrange a date. Like no tree forts. But his nervousness coursed across their link like a cry for help, and they may as well talk here as elsewhere. Sliding her foot onto his hands, she pushed up and grabbed onto the branch. He followed once she scrambled up, spotting her as she pulled herself through the opening that served as a door to the old wooden fort, long since abandoned by whoever had built it.



“Found this place years ago, when I needed some time off by myself,” Alec said, balancing on the branch right behind her. “Used it as a thinking spot after that, every time I stayed at Sorren’s place.”

Sky caught her breath as she scrambled into the wooden structure. Large, uncovered windows let in light and offered a view of the swaying, leafy branches. But what stopped her in her tracks was the satin coverlet draped over an air mattress, and the table covered with white linen, a silver ice bucket to chill the wine, crystal glasses, and plates overflowing with sliced fruit, cheeses, a loaf of crusty bread, and chocolate truffles. A large crate and pulley ropes lay piled in one corner, along with an empty backpack and a collection of Tupperware containers.

“You must have taken all morning getting this up here.” She looked at him. “It’s beautiful.”

Alec waved his hand over the pair of thin blue tapers, and soon the yellow glow of candlelight cast flickering shadows on the rough plank walls. As she stood staring, amazed by the care with which he’d planned this, he turned on a portable CD player. The sound of a throaty saxophone joined the birdcalls and the wind rustling through the trees.

“This morning, I told Sorren I’d join him in policing the dark lords. I wasn’t sure at first.” Alec poured white wine into the glasses, and the tangy scent mingled with the smell of pine and old wood. “Part of me -- I just wanted to disappear and start over somewhere else. But this mess won’t go away, will it?”

Settling on the satin-covered air mattress, Sky waited, hoping he’d finally start talking. Since she’d signed on to Sorren’s payroll and taken him up on his offer to make use of one of the guest houses, Alec seemed to have trouble getting more than a few words out when she was around.

“Elisa -- she wasn’t a bad sort. I knew her for years. I figure if Jaimis can play off hurt and anger, recruit witches as close as Sorren’s own kin -- maybe you were right about the dark lords being the larger threat.”

Sky sipped the glass of wine he handed her, and he moved the small table closer to the makeshift bed so they could reach the food. Alec sat close enough that his thigh brushed hers, and she found the steady warmth reassuring.

“In any case, with witches getting bolder about revealing their magic, the ‘harm none’ ethic has broken down to the point where someone has to step in to keep rogues in line. With my concealing spell...” He glanced at Sky and frowned, then shook his head. “Same as you, I’m perfect for the job.”

Alec’s angst bled across their bond, thick and dark. Part fear that she’d be going after dark lords with her magic still unstable, part fury that Jaimis had managed to slither deep under another rock, escaping justice. For now, at least.

“I’m so sorry he got away, but Jaimis will crawl out of his burrow eventually, and with every law-abiding witch in North America outraged over the blood rites...” Sky touched his

cheek when he winced. "He's not for you, and I'm sorry you won't get the closure you were looking for, but the blood he's sown will find its way back to him. No one can slay as many witches as Jaimis has and not have someone call in the debt."

Silence stretched between them to the point of discomfort, and Sky sliced a wedge of cheese and popped it into her mouth, closing her eyes as the smoky flavor filled her senses. Washing the rich taste down with a sip of wine, she waited.

"What I told you about Linda the other day, losing her... It's going to half kill me every time you go after one of the dark lords. Each time I'll wonder if I hadn't shared the concealing spell, then maybe you wouldn't be in the line of fire."

"Because if I hadn't stolen your best trick, then you could wrap me in cotton and lock me away for my own safety. Get over yourself, witch."

Leaning over, he nipped her shoulder. "Just bear with me, okay? I'm a work in progress."

"We weathered the worst part and walked out alive. Sure, there's scary shit ahead, but..."

"Do you mind if we eat later, because if I don't say this now, I may never..." Alec scooted into the center of the bed and pulled her with him, then curled up with her in the nest of royal blue satin. His heart pounded against her back when he spooned himself against her, cradling her in his arms. "The part you can't remember -- the whipping, the torture, and the...rest of it -- Jaimis alternated between us, roughing one of us up and then switching to the other for a while, probably so he wouldn't push too far and kill us before he meant to."

"You don't have to do this." Squirring around to face him, Sky pressed her fingers to his lips, but he caught her wrist and kissed her palm.

"I do. Because someone I love still can't kindle a glow sphere, or launch a defensive spell without bringing down the roof." He stroked her hair, and she wrapped her arms around him as if that would be enough to protect him from his memories. "If I can help fill in the holes..."

Sky shivered as fear radiated off him, sliding through his thoughts like death itself. "Doesn't have to be now."

"Most of what happened to you mirrored what he did to me, the memories he left you with when he erased the rest. But you figured out early on that he liked it when we pleaded for him to stop. So although you remember me begging him to drop the whip, to back off and leave me alone when he came at me hard and hungry over my spilled blood, you cried out, but you refused to give him the satisfaction of hearing you plead for your life."

Sky felt sick, and flickers of gray darted through her mind, incomplete but gaining substance.

"You're remembering?"

“Some. He had a glass of wine once, after he finished whipping me. I was so thirsty. That hurt almost more than the wounds. And when he saw me looking at the glass...” No need to say the rest, Alec would remember, too, since the rogue witch hadn’t been able to erase any of his memories.

She felt the burn of the alcohol as Jaimis spilled his wine across her bleeding back, the agony of knowing, in that moment, that she’d die there. “Enough for today, okay? Thank you. It’s horrible, but not so awful as the gaps he left when he raped my mind.”

Alec eased back and slid his hand into his pocket. “I haven’t known how to talk to you these last few days, where to go from here. But I want to give you something.”

Opening a slender box, he slid a gold and silver bracelet onto his open palm. A pentacle charm hung from the sparkling band. “The way the patterns in the links alternate, the flow of gold broken and spliced in with sterling, then gold again, weaving through each other...”

When he peeled away his defenses, inviting her into his soul, she saw the two of them together, each broken, but weaving through each other, making something new.

“Zach’s right, you think too much.” She blinked back tears as she unfastened the catch, slid the soft chain around her wrist, and secured it, completing the circle. “I don’t know what to say, how to tell you what I’m feeling.”

But of course, with him wound up so tight in her thoughts, he already knew. Putting things into words only complicated matters. Alec smiled, his wild curls surrounding his face like a mane, and as he unfastened the top button on her blouse, she hummed under her breath, content to feel the deft movements of his fingers against her chest.

The breeze through the windows stirred the heavy, midday air against her skin, and despite the heat, her nipples hardened as his fingers brushed her silky camisole. “What you said about you and Linda the other day, the part about her not understanding our ways, I don’t know what exactly you and I are to each other yet, but Zach...”

Alec froze with his fingers on the clasp of her shorts. “Okay, you’ve got my attention.”

A series of erotic images flashed through her brain, clouding her attempt to explain. They’d healed together, with Zach’s wry humor and zero tolerance for bullshit grounding them, keeping them sane. The memories they’d created, arms and legs and bodies wrapped around each other so tight there was hardly room for air, she couldn’t let that go.

“I’m not sure what you and I have yet, but I want to find out. As for Zach, I can’t shut him out. He’s part of us.”

The tension went out of Alec’s shoulders, and he finished unzipping her shorts. “Zach likes a lot of space, and he seems determined to see you and me hook up together. But you can’t imagine how relieved I am to hear you say...”

*Don’t have to. I already know.*

Alec slid her shorts past her thighs, letting his fingers brush her skin, and then lifted her feet to pull the shorts the rest of the way off. Returning for her panties, he grazed his fingers over the surface of the silky cloth before removing them.

With shaking fingers, she pulled his black T-shirt over his head, revealing golden skin stretched over tight, lean muscle, and fumbled with his shorts. Bless it, she'd been with men in every imaginable circumstance, and none of the encounters had brought on the slightest case of nerves.

"What am I picking up from you that's making me so edgy?" She couldn't name the emotion for the life of her, but something velvety and midnight still eased across their bond, and the way he stared at her made her feel more naked than she'd ever been before.

As she slid his frayed denim shorts, then his burgundy silk boxers, off his slender hips and tossed them at the foot of the mattress, Alec eyed her like an incubus evaluating his meal. Never mind that he rubbed her arm in a gesture she guessed he meant to be soothing. Goose bumps sprang up at the touch, and her belly felt so hot, she may as well be the candle wax pooling at the base of the tapers.

"Here." Tearing off a piece from the crusty loaf of bread, he broke off a bite-size piece and slipped it into her mouth.

Calmed by the simple task of chewing and swallowing, she watched him lift his glass and sip some wine. Shadows from sunlight filtering through leafy branches drifted across his face, and the candlelight shone golden on his skin. Methodically, as if he were trying to tame a wild creature, he fed her bites of fruit, cheese, and bread, and held her glass for her as she drank.

The smell of fruit evoked memories of their first encounter, with her coated with sticky juice as she lay in the warm bath, and Alec hard and hungry but determined not to spook her. "Why are you making me so nervous? Why today?"

With his tousled hair and amber brown eyes, his body dappled with leafy shadows and as hard and hungry as a satyr dancing through the forest, he could have been the Green Man himself, part of the woods that surrounded them.

"Because this is where we start." Moving slowly, Alec brushed his hand over the curve of her breast. "No one trying to kill us -- for the moment, anyway. No ritual or purpose other than our feelings for each other, and simple pleasure. And no Zach to get us over the rough spots with his keen wit and general intolerance of bullshit."

Right. When he put it like that, the midnight-velvet feelings rising off of him made some kind of sense. Passion, apprehension, and either new beginnings, or a precipitous end. He reached behind her to untie her scarf, and her hair cascaded down her back. When he moved his hands up to her face, letting the silky fabric brush her cheek, she inhaled sharply.

"I can't."

“What if I just do this?” he said softly. Stroking his thumbs down over her eyelids, he smoothed them closed.

## Chapter Fifteen

The warmth of Alec's hands on her face eased her fears, and his familiar salty scent soothed away her anxiety. When he balled up the scarf and stroked her neck with the fabric, she shivered, but she didn't protest when he shifted his hands and held the scarf up to her eyes.

"Still okay?"

"So far."

"Because I think today is the day we start talking about trust. Before, that wasn't for keeps, so it didn't matter that neither of us was ready. But if we're going to make a go of this, you and me, then the one thing we both have trouble giving becomes what it's all about."

Still holding the cluster of silk against her eyes, he leaned forward, and a moment later, he touched her lips with a cool slice of melon. As he fed her, she shifted and relaxed into the warmth of his chest, her spine pressed tight against him. He had an uncanny knack for alternating flavors, following sharp cheese with red, ripe strawberries. Sweet berries with dry wine. And always the comfort of the freshly baked bread.

When he'd sated her appetite for food, he pulled her farther back onto the mattress, the smooth satin coverlet rippling beneath her bottom and thighs. "Keep your eyes closed for me."

Sky did as he asked, and the silk scarf brushed against her belly as he folded it into a thin strip. She knew from his thoughts what he intended, but the meal had soothed her, and his heartbeat against her back -- not to mention his stone-hard cock nestled close to her skin -- spread flutters of warmth through her belly, crowding out fear.

Tilting her head back, she kept her eyes closed as he placed the band of silk across the bridge of her nose, pressing against her cheekbones on the bottom, and her forehead above.

Rather than knotting the cloth, he held it in place as he hummed something vaguely Celtic, and she listened to the sound of branches scraping the wood plank walls.

With her eyes covered, the smell of the woods flooded her senses, joined by the scent of wine and fruit. Alec's thoughts felt as gentle as his fingers stroking her face around the unfastened blindfold, warm and safe. Nonetheless, when he moved to connect the loose ends of the scarf and tied a simple knot, her shoulders tensed, and air hissed through her clenched teeth.

"I'd never hurt you, Skylark. And I trust you'll never hurt me. Your senses are sharper like this. I can feel that through you. The forest sounds. How my hands tingle against your skin. The scent of fruit and wine. The shivers of sensation when a breeze comes through the windows, drying the thin sheen of sweat on your skin. How your hair slides across your back, making you shiver even though the temperature's pushing ninety."

"Your voice should be illegal. Makes me want to do all sort of things against my better judgment."

Tension sloughed away under the influence of his throaty laughter, and she reached down to tease her hand along his swollen cock. He groaned as she tickled her fingers across his skin, then captured him in her fist, stroking from base to head and back again, applying just the right amount of pressure to make him wild.

"Enough, witch." Gently, he held her wrist and moved her hand away. "My plan involves a long, leisurely afternoon up here. Not five minutes of frantic groping and a quick roll on the sheets."

"And here I thought witches had better self-control than other men."

"Not when it comes to you." Sliding his arms around her, he lifted her and eased her down onto her back.

When she crossed her legs at the ankles, he chuckled and nudged them so far apart, she felt as if he'd put her on display, a visual feast he planned to savor. The erotic images flitting through his mind did little to disabuse her of the notion. Through his eyes, she saw her pink folds spread like orchid petals before him, her triangle of wispy dark curls a stark contrast to her pale skin. Her breasts flushed pink in the heat, and her nipples puckered into tight little points.

"Someday..." Alec stroked his palm along her side. "I may even get used to you stealing into my thoughts like that."

"Hotter than hell, seeing myself the way you do." Warmth eased across her body, radiating from her clit and nipples in waves of melted honey, and he'd hardly touched her yet.

"Mmm, now you see why I wouldn't let you keep stroking my dick. You make me wild, Skylark."

The endearment caught her off guard, and she swallowed back a lump in her throat. “No one did that before, either. Never had a pillow name until you, though Zach does borrow it some.”

“Long as it’s just Zach.”

The impact of that statement sizzled through her, and she took a minute to decide whether to feel caged by the unexpected streak of possessiveness or touched that he wanted some sort of commitment between them. Thinking of him with another witch set her teeth on edge. But...

“I’m sorry.” He stroked lazy circles around her stomach with his palms, and she wished she could see his face. “I didn’t mean to blurt that out yet. Figured we could talk about the rest later on, after we --”

“Shh.” Grabbing for his hand, she gave it a reassuring squeeze. “You’re right. Later, okay?”

For now, something inside her ached to see this through. To explore what they could do together given a bit of solitude and safety. To find out how he planned to ask her to trust him, and how she could pay him back in kind.

When he bent down beside her and his mouth found her nipple, she gasped at the liquid warmth as his tongue caressed her flesh. “So good.”

Each pull of suction sent darts of sensation over to the opposite breast, and for a moment, she wished they had Zach there to cover her with his mouth, a matched pair. But then Alec teased his hand down her belly, through her curls, and over her clit. She sighed in satisfaction as he slid one finger, then another, into her soaking wet sheath.

With the blindfold stealing her sight, every stroke of his hand seemed magnified, more intimate than any of her past erotic adventures. She wanted to roll him onto his back, climb on top of him, swallow him deep inside her, and rise and fall to milk every ounce of passion from him.

After pulling away from her breast, he nipped the side of her neck. “Gods, you keep thinking like that, and I’m going to abandon my resolve to take this slow.”

Sky laughed when he buried his face between her breasts and blew a raspberry against her chest. “Right, that’ll kill off any erotic intentions I might have been entertaining.”

“Then this should get things back on track.”

Ever so slowly, he wiggled a third finger into her swollen pussy and stroked upward until she mewed and her spine turned to liquid as he stroked her sweet spot. Settling with his head on her belly, he toyed with the nipple of her left breast, tugging in the same rhythm he stroked her deep inside.

Behind the blindfold, she could detect light and shadow, but the world remained hidden to her. As the heat closed in, magnified by the proximity of Alec’s body and the fire



inside her, time seemed to shrink and buckle in on itself, as if that single stroke deep inside lasted hours. And all the hours of the day folded into this moment.

“More.” Sweet goddess, she didn’t even know what she meant. More fingers? More pressure? More stretching, rolling bliss across her nipple and areola when he already had her tender flesh squeezed between thumb and forefinger to just before the point of pain?

When he stroked the slick opening between her folds with a fourth finger, she arched upward so his head pressed against her tummy, his hair damp with sweat and his soft humming vibrating through her to the center of her being. The Celtic tune didn’t match the throaty sax still playing in the background, nor the languid heat of the day.

“Yes, to the fourth finger. But please” -- with a shiver, she wondered if she could share this bit of his culture and history without flashing back to the first time she’d heard a similar tune -- “something Mediterranean, if you’ve got to hum? Something as hot as the forest, as sexy as the wind through the trees.”

For a moment, he froze, curled tense against her side. “You’re certain?”

“Nothing can pull me away from your arms right now. Nothing can pull me into the past. If this, *if we*, have a chance, you need to be able to love me without worrying that you’ll hum a bit of a tune from your childhood, something that will drag me back to darker times. I first heard those tunes when I needed comfort more than breath or food. Comfort me now.”

For a while, he lay silent against her, and she stroked her fingers through his damp hair, wondering if she’d gone too far. When he finally started to hum, images of sandy beaches filled her thoughts, the sand pinkish white like the underside of seashells. Next he shared scenes of him diving into water so blue, it blended with the sky.

“I’d love to go there with you someday. You still have family in Greece?”

*Crete, yes.*

The images kept on coming, giving the tunes new meaning. When he added thoughts of them making love on a midnight beach under the full moon, lulled by the sound of the waves, she took things a step further and answered back with vignettes of Zach tangled up in their arms.

At which point Alec chuckled, and finally penetrated her with the fourth finger. *You’re okay? You’ve done this before?*

*Done everything before, and with you, it’s all new.*

Arching up to meet the pressure, with her pussy filled and stretched and still hungry for more, she tried to pick up the gist of the song and hum along with him. But she only managed to add a discordant note, and between that and the soft jazz playing in the background, she gave up in a fit of giggles.

“You don’t do that much. Laugh easy and free like that. I like it.”

Mulling that over, she lifted her hips off the mattress, and he sank his fingers inside her until his hand itself brushed her swollen lips. For a few heartbeats, he maintained the intensity, stretching her so tight, her hips ached, and she murmured her approval.

“You ever take more than this?”

*Oh, wow.* “Sure. I, ah, I’m pretty sure I’m wet enough. If you want to, that is?”

“Oh, hell, I didn’t mean -- I was just curious.”

Right, curious, and so freaking hot at the thought of his hand buried inside her that when she reached out to him, she could feel pinpricks of molten fire raging along his cock.

“All about trust, right? I do, Alec. Trust you. Didn’t plan on it. Scared the living shit out of me when I first figured out how deep you’d managed to crawl past my defenses and into my soul. But I know you won’t do anything to hurt me.”

For a while, he toyed with her nipple without so much as wiggling his fingers inside her, and she resisted the urge to groan in frustration. Little zings of apprehension tickled through her belly, but the overriding call from her pussy for more pressure, more penetration, more heat, drowned out the cry of reason.

“Just go slow. I’ll let you know if it’s too much.”

For a moment, she wondered if maybe he hadn’t tried this before, but then she caught an erotic image that sent her reeling. “Oh! Hey, I mean, wow.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean for you to see that. That time with Zach, it was pretty intense, and I’m not sure we should...”

“What we’re talking about here with you and me is a very different situation -- believe me. So was that one of those ‘betcha won’t’ experiences?”

“Hell, yes. Only with Zach, and only once. Very hot, and I came so hard, my world exploded into tiny fragments, but...”

“It hurt?”

“That too. He went slow, and we used a hell of a lot of lube, but still, by the time he -- damn, I’m sorry. This isn’t a conversation I planned on having today.”

“You ever fist him? Pay him back in kind?”

“That, my sexy witch, you’ll have to ask Zach. Now can we *please* drop this and...”

Chuckling, Sky traced her hand over his shoulders and then cupped his face in her palms. “You’re blushing, aren’t you? Don’t. I’ve fisted guys before. Not for today, but if you’re ever up for it, keep in mind I have smaller hands than Zach. As for you and me, it’s an entirely different thing with a self-lubricating, stretchy pussy. Very intimate, and definitely intense, but you won’t hurt me.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, because Linda was conservative in bed. After she died, something like that seemed too earthy for casual encounters.” Scissoring his fingers, he

spread her flesh until she crooned her approval and bucked against his hand. “You really want to do this?”

“Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much in bed?”

“Zach. All the time.”

*Let me feel you, witch. I want to feel your hand inside me.*

When he pulled his fingers back, she groaned her disappointment, but he flattened his thumb against his fingers, bringing them to a narrow point, and began the unhurried slide forward. He fingered first one nipple, then the other, and the sizzle across her breasts distracted her from the uneasy moment where his knuckles stretched her at their widest point.

“I love you, Skylark. Love you like earth, air, fire, and water. Like the moon’s pull on the ocean tides.”

In a moment of panic, she reached up for the blindfold, but he got there before her, releasing the knot and uncovering her eyes. She couldn’t decide if the fierce stretching inside her or the swelling of her heart against her ribs when he told her how much he loved her tipped her over the edge into fear. But once she could see his face, his forehead furrowed with worry lines as he watched her for signs of distress, she smiled and shook her head.

“I’m okay. Just hold the poetry until we finish this, okay? Too many things to absorb at once.”

“Sure.” Settling back beside her, he stroked her face as his other hand pressed forward.

She felt so languid splayed out on top of the satin coverlet that she didn’t think she could move if her life depended on it. Alec started humming again as he rotated his hand slightly for easier access. The tune carried her back to the pink sand beach, and she let her body drift, floating on the ocean under the hot sun.

Alec sat up, careful not to jostle her in the process, and turned his head to watch what he was doing to her. “I’ve never seen anything so sexy. Almost there now. You’re still okay?”

“Mmm.”

When she felt her skin contract around the base of his wrist, she risked a careful squeeze, clenching around his hand. Bliss. Scary, wonderful, fucking awesome bliss. “Only with you, Alec. Only for you.”

His other thumb grazed the surface of her clit, brushing over her as soft and light as the caress of a moth’s wings. With the second stroke, he rubbed harder, sliding his thumb through her slippery juices at the same time he drew his fingers up to form a fist inside her.

“Oh!” Fire flashed behind her closed eyelids, and she swallowed huge gulps of air.

The next stroke of his thumb on her engorged clit brought her to the edge, so desperate to come, her stomach clenched, and she screamed his name. Slowly, without unclenching his fist, he moved his hand, and her body heaved and convulsed in on itself, her vision going red

and then black, and she cried out his name again and again as her body shook with fierce pleasure.

Afraid he'd think he'd hurt her, she reached out and pressed into him with the full force of her being, sharing the delicious aftershocks of her climax. "Best. Best ever..."

Giving up the struggle to speak, she tried to relax as he slid his hand free and pulled her onto his lap. Content, she curled into a ball with her hands tucked around her knees. Her hair covered them like a blanket, warm and damp.

As she struggled to catch her breath, her pussy still spasming with after quivers, she held his hand so tight, her fingers pressed against bone. Not because she was afraid, or hurt. Far from it. Just because she never wanted to let him go.

"I shouldn't have -- at the end -- too much -- I'm so sorry."

Alec's remorse brought her back to herself as sure as if he'd thrown a bucket of ice water in her face. Struggling upright, she pressed both hands against his chest until he lay back. Climbing astride him, she pressed her dripping wet pussy over his cock, straddling him and coating him with her fluids.

"You make me strong, witch." Her face felt warm, flushed, and she hoped the full extent of her joy showed in her goofy smile. "With you, I'm free."

Using her hands, she guided the head of his cock inside her, and his eyes clamped shut as his aura broke free, surrounding them with yellow light. Her own power flared around her in a haze of violet, and as the two colors joined, she engulfed him in her slick heat.

Through him, she felt the desperate ache as his balls tucked up tight against his skin, and she laughed when he complained she'd be the death of him. Folding her body onto his, she rode him in smooth stokes, easing forward and then sliding back down to surround him with her wet, swollen flesh. Bits of broken Greek and English tore from his lips, his voice hoarse and low, and she caught the note of pleading, as well as the frantic endearments.

"Now. Come for me, Alec."

No man had ever refused that command, but Alec shook his head, his hair shifting in damp tendrils on the blue spread. "Make it last. Make it forever."

With each stroke, as he arched up to meet her movements, her body ached with an irresistible thrum of passion, and she rode him harder for the sheer delight of seeing his face lined with concentration as he struggled to hold off the inevitable. Not because he feared losing control -- his easy confidence shimmered across their link -- but to ensure that when they did, it would be together.

With each movement, their combined energy whipped against their skin, and she felt the caress of power with him and through him, as he felt it through her. Her breasts pressed so tight to his chest her nipples stung with the friction, and she forced her arms under his back to pull him even closer.

Sensation gave way to color, and color to pure heat. Panting, she sank down on him so hard, their pelvic bones clashed together, and Alec screamed and grabbed her arms, holding tight enough to bruise her skin as he bucked and trembled beneath her, filling her with more wet, more warmth, more pleasure.

His final thrust dragged her over the edge, her climax as sharp and hard as falling off a cliff, and she bit his shoulder to hold back her cries. When the spasms eased, she collapsed on top of him limp and exhausted, with her face pressed to his chest. His heart beat hard and fast, and his chest heaved as he gulped air.

"I'm not going to survive you, witch."

With a weak laugh, she found the energy to bring her hand to his face, but when she tried to stroke his cheek, he turned his head and slid her fingers into his mouth, suckling in a gentle rhythm that lulled her into deep relaxation, drowsy and sated beyond reason.

\* \* \* \* \*

Careful to cradle her head in his palm, Alec rolled her off him, loathe to separate but fearing she'd panic if she woke up with him still half hard inside her. He thought he'd managed the maneuver without waking her, but as he curled into the heat of her body, she reached out to tangle her fingers in his hair.

Faint violet light, the soft aura common around sleeping witches, still clung to her. Her raven dark hair shone like polished stone in the candlelight and broken sunlight that made it past the branches. "I never brought Zach up here, Skylark. This is just for you."

Although he'd kept his voice to a whisper and thought she'd drifted back to sleep, she clutched tighter at his hair and made a soft humming sound.

*For us.* Releasing his hair, she pushed herself up on her elbows and rested her chin in her hands. "What you said earlier, about no other witches, other than Zach, I mean..."

Alec tensed, and waited for her to continue. He didn't want to cage her, but the thought of sharing her with anyone other than Zach made him wild.

"Good plan. I don't know where we're going, but what happened here today -- how tight we wedged into each other's souls -- we're past the point where either of us could have a fling with a sexy witch or two and not hurt each other."

"Agreed." Afraid to press his luck, he raised his shields, eliciting a sharp slap on his chest.

*No hiding.*

"Okay, then, I, ah, looked at some land this morning, an old farm adjacent to Sorren's estate. He'd been thinking of buying it to expand his property now that so many witches are staying in his cottages on a long-term basis." He paused, brushing against her thoughts to see if he'd spooked her. But calm curiosity greeted his efforts. "When I decided to stay on, he sent me over to see if I'd be interested."

Friends or no, he and Sorren needed more space between them than the elder witch's vast estate could provide. "Sorren and I get along all right for short visits, but settling on his land would strain our friendship. I'm smart enough to know if it came down to a pissing match between territorial witches, he'd leave me panting in the dust."

"And you're so nervous about telling me all this because?"

"I love the place -- would like to buy the land and build there. There's a pond, and a hill that would be a perfect place for a house. But..." Gods help him if she bolted at this part. "I'd like you to take a look with me tomorrow. See if you like it. Decide together."

Her eyes were way too serious in the dappled light, and he fought the urge to take it back -- make a joke, get her laughing, have some more wine.

"What are you asking, Alec?"

"For now? That we spend a lot of time together. Like this, what we have here today. Later, some point down the line, I want to know I've made my home in a place you've helped me choose. A place you love as much as I do."

Leaning forward, she pressed her forehead to his chest. "No one's ever wanted to be with me like that before. I don't even know what to say."

"Say we've earned a little piece of happiness, and you'll hike out there with me tomorrow, have a picnic, and tell me what you think of the place. Then take it day by day, hanging out together when we're not either chasing dark lords or coping with the next crisis, whatever it may be."

Sky sighed, and her forehead dug harder into his chest as she pressed against him. Her unease surrounded him, and he stroked her back to calm her.

"Big scary world out there, isn't it?" And he had to go and invoke the specter of dark lords, blood rites, and the rogue witch who oversaw the hell he'd created.

"Frightening as hell." She tipped her head up to kiss him so fast that they bumped chins before they got it right. Her tongue darted over his, and she held him with enough heat and passion that by the time she broke away, ending the kiss, his blood simmered at a low boil. "I'll go look at the land with you tomorrow, and we'll see what happens after that. All that hell and death out there?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

Shaking her head, she brought her fingers to his lips. "All the more reason to grab on and hold tight, laying claim to our own bit of magic."

 THE END 

## **Eden Rivers**

Eden lives in the Midwest with her husband and daughters, but has roots in the Northeast. Growing up in New England, she developed a fascination for things that go bump in the night, and her stories often have paranormal elements. Everyone needs a little magic in life. In addition to reading and writing, Eden enjoys gardening, yoga, listening to music outdoors, and watching the moon rise over water.

Check out Eden's latest news by visiting her website at <http://www.edenrivers.com>.