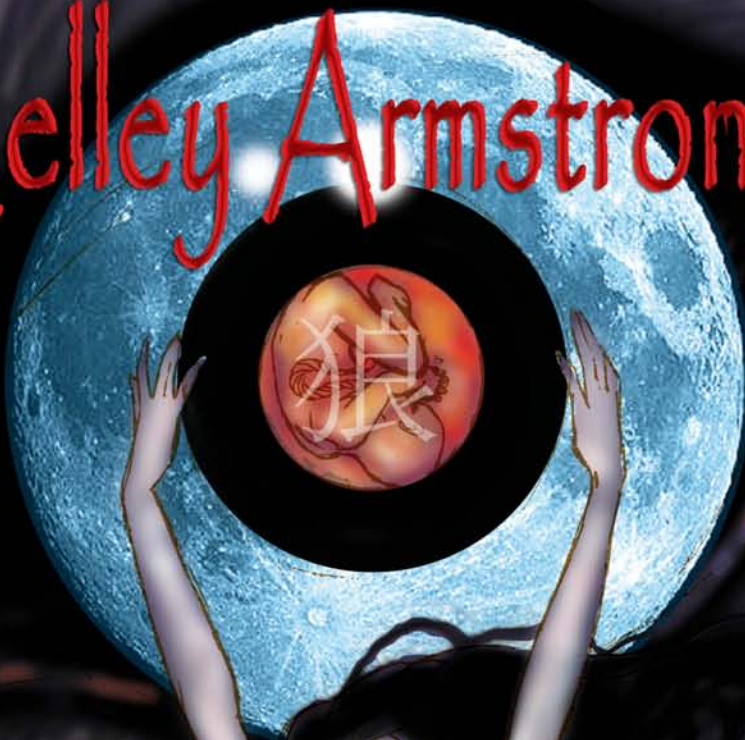


Kelley Armstrong



鬼

巫女

義士

惡魔

神

運命

天狗

公承者

INFUSION

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INFUSION

1946

“Antonio.” Dominic walked to the table and plunked down a bottle of cheap champagne. “I’ve decided to name him Antonio.”

Malcolm sipped his beer as a chorus of “good choice” rose up from the others. Wally and Raymond Santos glanced Malcolm’s way, as if seeking permission to congratulate Dominic, but Malcolm just kept drinking, and let them make up their own minds. After a moment, Wally joined in with a raised glass to the new father, while sixteen-year-old Raymond busied himself cleaning out a thumbnail.

Dominic paused behind the head chair. Billy Koenig scrambled out of it, making a quick joke about keeping it warm for him. Dominic thudded into the chair and dropped his burly arms onto the table so hard Malcolm’s beer sloshed. Typical Dominic—always throwing his weight around, letting no one forget that he was Pack Alpha heir apparent.

“A drink for Antonio,” Dominic thundered, his voice reverberating through the dingy bar. He turned to the owner, across the room, counting bottles. “Vinnie! Glasses!”

Waiting tables certainly wasn’t Vincent’s job, but he hopped to it. As Vincent approached, Malcolm held up his empty mug. Vincent paused, but only for a second, then took Malcolm’s glass. Dominic allowed himself only a split-second scowl, but it was enough for Malcolm. It

was easy to establish dominance when you were bigger than everyone else. Doing it without that advantage was the real accomplishment.

Once the glasses were filled and distributed, Dominic lifted his. “To fatherhood.”

Everyone clinked glasses, even Malcolm. He knew how far he could push the future Alpha, straddling the border of insolence, but never dropping over into insult.

“Now, how about a wager?” Dominic boomed. “Take bets on who’ll be the new father sitting here next. I’ll pick Malcolm.” A quick grin. “God knows, he’s been trying hard enough.”

Malcolm gritted his teeth as the others laughed and called out good-natured jabs. It was his own damned fault. Malcolm had meant to keep his hopes secret until he could show off the goods, but two years ago, sitting around this very table listening to Dominic brag about his boys, he’d announced a pending arrival of his own . . . only to discover six months later, when the child was born, that it wasn’t his. Since then, everyone had known he’d been trying, and hadn’t even sired a daughter. *That* was his father’s fault—the one blood blight Malcolm couldn’t overcome through sheer strength of will.

As they drank the champagne, the cleaning girl stopped by to wipe off their table. She murmured something that was probably meant to be “excuse me,” but her thick accent and whispered voice rendered the words unintelligible.

The girl didn’t speak more than a dozen words of English. Malcolm figured the only reason Vincent had hired her was because he could pay her half what he’d pay anyone else, her being a Jap and all. Still, it had to be bad for business. How many ex-GI’s came in here, saw a Jap, turned around and left? Malcolm wasn’t sure whether the girl really was Japanese, but it didn’t matter—people saw slant-eyes and they saw Pearl Harbor, and five years wasn’t enough to make anyone forget.

The girl paused at Malcolm's side, and lowered her head. Wally grinned and kicked him under the chair. Malcolm leaned back to let the girl wipe his place. Unlike the quick swipe she'd given the others, she made sure to get every spot, including a few that'd probably been there for weeks.

When the girl finished, she scurried off and intercepted Vincent as he headed over with Malcolm's fresh beer. She took the tray and returned to the table. First, she wiped a spot for the mug, then she wiped off the mug itself and finally laid it before him like a ceremonial chalice. As Malcolm grunted his thanks, snickers raced up and down the table.

The girl pointed to the half-filled tray of peanuts nearest him.

"Sure," he said. "Fill it up."

When she scampered off with the bowl, Wally hooted. "That girl has it bad, Mal. Gets worse every time we come here."

Malcolm only gulped his beer.

"Hey, come on, Mal. Think about it. She waits on you like that in public, imagine what she'd do for you in private."

Another chorus of snickers.

"Not my type," Malcolm muttered.

Dominic leaned forward. "Because she's a Jap? Nothing wrong with that. From what I hear, they're damned eager to please, if you know what I mean."

Billy nodded. "Buddy of mine at work has a Jap girlfriend, on the side of course, and you wouldn't believe the stories he tells. Ever heard of geishas? All Jap girls learn some of that shit, and they'll do anything to make a guy happy. Nothing's too kinky—"

Dominic cut him short as the girl approached.

“What?” Billy hissed. “She doesn’t understand English anyway.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dominic murmured.

When she was gone, they started up again, regaling Malcolm with tales of Asian women.

“And,” Dominic said as they finished. “Unless my nose is wrong, there might be a bonus.”

“Just what I need,” Malcolm said. “A slant-eyed brat.”

Dominic shook his head. “It’s only the mother, Mal. Doesn’t count. Look at Ross Werner. His momma was black and you can hardly tell. With us, it’s the male blood that counts. Women . . .” He shrugged. “Just the vehicle. At most you might get a kid with dark hair and dark eyes, but yours are dark enough anyway. Wouldn’t matter. And . . .” He leaned closer. “You never know. A little foreign matter in the mix might be just what your boys need to get the job done.”

Malcolm gritted his teeth. Dominic always sounded so sincere, like a big brother who really wanted to help, but Malcolm knew he’d like nothing better than to see Malcolm humiliate himself by presenting a half-breed baby to the Pack.

As the night wore on, though, and Malcolm drank more beer, he couldn’t stop thinking about what Dominic had said. Maybe mixing up the bloodline *would* help. He’d never tried that. And Ross’s case did suggest the foreign blood wouldn’t show, which is all that mattered.

The girl was in the fertile stage of her cycle, and she obviously wanted him. An easy conquest. Plus, if Asian women were as submissive as the others said . . . Malcolm smiled. Submissive was good. Especially if it came from a girl who was in no position to complain if things got out of hand.

By the time the group settled the bill, Malcolm had made up his mind. He sent the others on without him, then cornered the girl as she came out of the back storage room. She started, seeing him there, then dropped her gaze and made no move to get past him.

“Been a long night,” he said. “Bet you could use a drink.”

When she didn’t answer, he pantomimed drinking, then pointed from her to himself.

“Drink. You. Me.”

“I—I work,” she said. “Done soon.”

“No, babe, you’re done now. Let me handle Vinnie.”

He reached for her apron and snapped it off. She gave a shy little smile, then nodded.

“Get drink,” she said. “For you.”

She took his hand. Hers was tiny, almost birdlike. He wondered how hard he’d need to squeeze to hear those thin bones snap like twigs. Not very hard, he’d wager.

He turned to let her lead him into the bar, but she stopped at a locked door a few feet down, and took out a key.

“Room,” she said, gaze still lowered. “My room. Yes?”

He smiled down at the girl. “Sure, babe. Whatever you want.”

Malcolm sat on a chair in a tiny room, empty except for the chair and a sleeping mat. A few candles cast the only light—a wavering, sickly light that lined the room with shadows. When the girl went into the adjoining room to get his drink, he’d flicked the light switch, but nothing had happened.

That cheap bastard Vincent probably cut off the hydro when he let the girl take the room. Maybe, if the girl was as good as the others claimed she'd be, he'd see about "persuading" Vincent to spring for lights and heat up here. Wouldn't be any inconvenience to him, and the girl sure would be grateful--she'd leave the welcome mat out for any time he felt like coming back.

The girl slipped from the back room. She'd changed out of her work clothes and into a white cotton robe with an embroidered belt. Her bare feet seemed to glide across the floor. Tiny feet, like the rest of her, slender and hesitant, as graceful and defenseless as a doe. Pretty as one, too. Now that he'd looked past his prejudice, he had to admit she was damned pretty, especially in that white robe, holding a tray like the offering of some virgin priestess. When she bowed before him, the liquid in the glass didn't so much as ripple. He peered at it. The drink was amber, like beer, but clear and . . . steaming.

"Tea?" he said, lip curling. "I don't drink—"

"No, no tea," she said quickly. "Special drink. For you. Make—" A meaningful look at the sleeping pad. "Make good."

"Make *me* good?" He started to rise. "You don't need any damned drink to make me good, babe—"

"No, no. Please." She backed away, gaze downcast. "Not you. *You* good. Yes. Drink make me good. For you. Make you . . ." She seemed to struggle for the word. "Feel better. Make it feel better. For you."

She babbled on some more, waving at the mat, but he got the gist of it. The drink was supposed to make the sex better. He'd heard of things like that, and as the others had said, these girls were supposed to know all there was to know about pleasing a man. This must have been one of their tricks.

Malcolm took the drink and sniffed it. Just herbs. His werewolf nose didn't detect any taint of anything noxious. He took a sip. Fire burned down his throat, like hundred proof whiskey.

He closed his eyes and shook himself. The heat spread to his groin and he smiled. Not like he needed the help, but sure, why not. He took a bigger sip.

"Yes?" the girl said.

He looked up to see that she'd unfastened her belt. He could see a swath of pale skin running from her throat, down between her small breasts, over her flat stomach, to the dark thatch below. His cock jumped and he raised the glass in salute. Another sip, and she let the robe fall off one shoulder. A third sip, and she dipped the other shoulder, and the robe slid down her body to pool at her feet. For a moment, she stood before him, naked and pale in the wavering candlelight. Then, without a word, she knelt and reached for his zipper.

Malcolm rolled over. A moment's sleep-fog of thinking "Why am I lying on the floor?" then he remembered and smiled. Whatever Jap hoodoo that girl had put into his drink, it was something else. He closed his eyes and sighed, the tip of his tongue sliding between his teeth as he stretched. Shit, he almost *hurt*, and it had nothing to do with sleeping on the floor.

After all those things he'd been thinking in the bar, about what he could do to a little slip of a girl like this, he hadn't even tried. Couldn't be bothered. He'd just laid back and let her work her magic. He'd roused himself for a bit of energetic thrusting, but that'd been the extent of his participation. She'd done all the work.

And work she had. Gave him three damned fine rides . . . maybe even four, but he'd been getting hazy near the end. Three times was bragging rights enough. Twice was a given—he

could always go twice, and always did, whether his partner felt up to it or not. The only times he'd managed a third, though, were after a few hours rest. Three—maybe four—bouts in a row . . . He rolled onto his back and grinned.

Whatever was in that drink was some powerful stuff . . . and so was the girl. Masterful, but never dominant, always letting him know he was in charge. After the second time—or was it the third?—he'd thought he was down, but she'd managed a revival, rubbing, licking, cajoling . . . begging. He felt a fresh surge and leaned back, savoring the memory until he was hard again. Then he rolled over for another go . . . and found himself alone.

Malcolm grunted and lifted his head. The simple movement felt like tumbling headfirst out of a tree. He grabbed the sides of the bed and steadied himself. When the world stopped whirling, he opened his eyes and peered around the dark room. Where was that girl? Helluva time to take a piss.

A voice wafted in from the adjacent room. A singsong voice. He chuckled. Singing while she sat on the john—guess she was still feeling pretty good, too. Maybe she was cleaning up for the next round. Another chuckle. Better give her some time—there'd be a lot to clean up. As he lay down, a second voice joined the first. He blinked. What the hell . . .? A radio or record player, had to be. But if there was no hydro up here . . .

Malcolm pushed himself up again, so fast this time that he almost blacked out. He wobbled to his feet and had to rest a moment to get his bearings. His first step nearly sent his legs sprawling out from under him like a newborn fawn's. He'd been hung over worse than this, though. Mind over matter, as with everything else in life. If you have the guts and the will, you can do anything.

He closed his eyes and ordered his muscles to obey. When he took another step, they started to listen. Still, it was slow going. His head pounded, and every fiber of his body urged him to lie back down and sleep it off.

Finally, he made it to the wall, then inched around to the door, inching not out of caution, but necessity. When he reached the doorway into the adjoining room, he peered around the corner. The first thing he saw was the wallpaper. Strange white wallpaper with black geometric shapes. He blinked. No, not wallpaper, someone had drawn on the walls, drawn . . . symbols.

A smell wafted out. Something burning, giving off a sweetish odor so faint even his nose could barely detect it. The voices started up again. Singing, but with no tune. Chanting.

There, across the room, was the girl, sitting on a high stool, naked. But she looked . . . different. There were circles drawn around her breasts and stomach, but that wasn't what gave him a start. It was the way she sat, chin high, gaze steady, her poise exuding confidence, no sign of the shy girl he'd just bedded.

The girl's lips were still. She wasn't the one chanting. It was the two women in front of her, their backs to him, one white-haired, one dark. The white-haired one had her head bowed. The other swung a pendulum in front of the girl's stomach. The girl said something and the dark-haired woman snapped at her. The white-haired woman murmured a few words and the girl sighed, then said something that made both women laugh. The old woman patted the girl's bare knee and they started chanting again.

As Malcolm watched, his legs began to tremble, begging him to go lie back down. When he resisted, all went hazy, and he seemed to float there, the chanting filling his head, lifting him up, symbols swirling around him . . .

A soft growl and he shook the sensation off. Goddamn that drink. First a killer hangover, now hallucinations. That's what this was—a dream or hallucination, caused by the drink. Had to be. His mind set, he stumbled back to the mat and crashed into sleep.

When he woke up the next morning, the girl was gone. He wandered down to the bar, but no one was there. He pushed back a stab of annoyance. Normally *he* was the one to vanish before breakfast. He told himself the girl hadn't taken off for good, just gone to get him something to eat, but he didn't stick around long enough to find out whether he was right.

That night, he returned to the bar alone, but the girl wasn't there. According to Vincent, she was scheduled to work, but hadn't shown up. Malcolm went upstairs to the girl's room, which was still unlocked. He found it exactly as he left it: a small room with a mat, a chair and candles, now blackened stubs.

He glanced at the adjoining room, then hesitated before striding over and walking through the doorway. Inside was . . . nothing. Just another room, even emptier than the first. No sign of what he'd thought he'd seen the night before. No smell in the air, no symbols on the walls, not even the stool. Just as he'd figured—it'd been a dream, induced by whatever the girl had put in his drink.

One thing was for sure, though, the girl had cleared out, likely for good. And she might have taken something of his with her. The chance was slight, he knew, but they'd certainly been busy enough to start a baby and he sure as hell wasn't letting it go at that. Pack Law said that if he bedded a woman during her fertile period, he had to keep track of her. If there was a child, and it was a son, then it was a werewolf, and therefore had to come back to him. That was the

Law. So whatever “pressure” he had to apply on Vincent to tell him where to find the girl . . . well, he was just obeying Pack Law.

By the time he finished with Vincent, he was certain that, when the man said he didn’t know where the Jap girl had gone, he was telling the truth. He did, however, have an emergency contact for her, from when she first took that job.

Malcolm took the address—supposedly the girl’s grandmother’s—and arrived there just in time to find an old Jap lady in the process of moving. He tracked the woman to her new apartment, and saw the girl there. They’d moved only a few miles away, to a larger apartment. Obviously the girl had found a better job and invited granny to move in. That explained why she’d been so eager to get him into her bed, having known it would be her last night at the bar, and her last chance with him.

Malcolm made a note of the new address, and returned to the Sorrentinos’s estate outside New York City. At the end of the weekend, he went home to his own family estate near Syracuse. The next month, when he visited his Pack brothers in NYC, he stopped by the girl’s apartment. He saw her, but made no effort at contact. Finding out he’d tracked her there might give the girl a romantic thrill . . . or it might spook her.

As good as that night had been, he wasn’t interested in a repeat if it threatened his chance at fatherhood. If she *wasn’t* pregnant, then maybe he’d show up, see what happened. Maybe he was being overly optimistic, but when he saw her, something seemed . . . different. Dominic always said he could smell it when he’d knocked up a girl, even before she started to show. Malcolm had always figured Dominic was full of shit, but now he wondered. Something seemed different. He’d just have to be patient, wait and see.

He stopped in again after the second and third month, not because he expected to see anything, but just to make sure she hadn't shipped out. He was compiling a list of details in case she did—where she worked, where they shopped, places and people he could shake down for information if she moved again. But she didn't, and when he came by after the third month, he noticed she was wearing baggier clothing. Still too soon to hope—she might have only put on some weight—but hope he did. On his fourth visit, he was more convinced. By the fifth, he was certain. He was going to be a father.

When the eighth month came, he found excuses to stay at the Sorrentino estate, and went by the girl's apartment almost daily. There was no need for him to be there when the baby came—most Pack werewolves waited a month or so after the arrival before claiming their sons. But Malcolm couldn't be so nonchalant, not when so much could still go wrong. There could be complications with the birth. Or it might be a girl. Or it might not be his again. So he hovered close and waited, and in the middle of the third week, his vigilance paid off. He was there when it all began, when his child entered the world.

Weeks ago he'd found a route up the fire escape and to a window that never quite closed. Normally, he just crouched on the fire escape, hidden in the darkness of night, where he could watch and listen. When he heard that first scream of hard labor, though, he wrenched open the window and squeezed through into the grandmother's bedroom.

The scream, and the voices that answered with soothing reassurances, came from down the hall. He slipped to the doorway and looked out. Risky, but if he was right, and the baby was on the way, intruders would be the last thing on everyone's mind.

From the bedroom doorway, he could see into the living room, and the first thing he saw were the symbols covering the walls—the same black symbols from his “dream.” He inhaled sharply. So that hadn’t been a dream—big deal. They were Japs. Who knew what religion they followed, what gods they worshipped? Painting stuff on the walls and on their bodies, chanting and waving pendulums around, it was all no stranger than a Catholic Mass. No reason for his heart to be thudding like a cornered stag’s.

Another scream. Then a voice, and another, the same two voices from his dream, launching into the same chanting singsong. He moved into the hall, then crept forward until he could see the living room. There was the girl, naked again, her torso covered with lines and circles. She wasn’t lying on a bed, but crouched over a mat, as if she was trying to take a crap, not deliver a child. The old woman—the grandmother—held the girl, giving her balance, while the black-haired woman lit a fire in a small dish. When whatever was in the dish began to smoke, she lifted it to the girl’s nose.

The girl filled her lungs with the smoke, then went still. Her face relaxed. Then she lifted her face to the ceiling, raised her hands and began to chant. Even when a contraction rocked her thin frame, her expression didn’t change—the words only came louder, harsher, more determined.

Another contraction and she punched her fists into the air, her chant a near-howl. The lights flickered. Malcolm shook his head sharply, certain he’d seen wrong, but then the lights flashed again, and again, dimming with each blink. The flames on the candles shifted, angling toward the girl as if she was sucking the energy from them. Malcolm’s gut went cold and he knew then, as he’d known deep down from the start, that these women were another supernatural race, a race of magic-makers.

There were other . . . things out there. Most werewolves admitted this, if only to themselves. They'd heard too many stories to cling to the Pack's claim that werewolves were the only otherworldly creatures. The werewolves kept to themselves, and feigned ignorance of other supernatural races, but they knew. They knew.

An excited chirp from the old woman knocked Malcolm from his thoughts. Between the girl's legs, deep in her dark thatch, another dark thatch had appeared. The top of a baby's head. *His* baby's head. The girl slammed her hands down, her chant now a snarl, face tight and shiny with sweat. But she didn't cry out.

Malcolm held his breath as he waited for the first wail. Dominic, who always managed to witness the birth of his children, claimed that you could foretell a child's strength by his first cry. The loudest of his three had been Antonio, who'd already beaten his brothers' babyhood milestones, lifting his head sooner, sitting up sooner, crawling sooner, and now, at not yet a year, walking, thereby proving his father's theory. So Malcolm braced for his child's first scream, and prayed it would surpass anything Dominic had heard from his.

After one final heave, the baby fell into the waiting hands of the attendant. And it made not a peep.

The child was dead. After all these months, all this hoping . . .

And yet, he couldn't help feeling almost relieved. Having a half-Jap baby was one thing, but this was an interracial mixing he wanted no part of. His gut told him it was better this way, and Malcolm always trusted his gut, so he stepped back—

The baby kicked and made a noise. Not a scream of outrage at being yanked from the warm, dark womb, but only a little gurgle, almost a coo, as if to say "here I am" as quietly and

politely as possible. The woman holding him laughed and said something to the baby's mother, who'd laid back on the mat to rest, unperturbed by her child's silence.

As Malcolm tensed, his gaze traveled down the child's blood-streaked torso. Then he let out a whoosh of breath. It was a girl. Good, he could leave and forget all—

The attendant lifted the child to show the mother. A tiny penis and scrotum fell from between its legs . . . and Malcolm's gut fell with it. There was still one last hope. Maybe the child wasn't his. As the woman wrapped the baby in a symbol-covered blanket, Malcolm closed his eyes and inhaled, and his stomach dropped to his shoes. His child. His son. And a werewolf.

The Law was clear. Father a son and you must claim him for the Pack. They couldn't allow a werewolf to grow up not knowing what he was. And yet that didn't apply here, did it? These magic-makers would know what the boy was when he came of age. They would take care of him, and there would be no risk of exposure to the Pack. He could leave, and never think on this again.

So that's what he did.

When Malcolm returned to the Sorrentino estate, he went straight to Emilio, and asked whether there were any "tasks" the Alpha needed done. It wasn't a surprising request. Malcolm was always ready to serve the Pack, if it meant boosting his reputation. This time, though, he had an ulterior motive—to wipe from his brain all thoughts of that strange, quiet child and those magic-makers. Emilio gave him a job—hunting down and terminating a troublesome mutt—and Malcolm was out the door before the Alpha could say goodbye.

Two weeks later, the mutt dead, Malcolm went home to Stonehaven. He barely got through the door before he heard the familiar thump-scrape of his father's footsteps. Malcolm tensed and ran through his mental list of infractions, things he'd done that grazed the boundaries of Pack Law. If his father was so quick to welcome him home, he wondered which of these "infractions" he'd found out about this time.

Edward Danvers rounded the corner, his bad leg dragging behind. In public he used a cane, but in the house, he never bothered. He stopped at the end of the hall and straightened. He always stood straight in Malcolm's presence, those couple extra inches of height being the only physical advantage he had on his son.

Edward looked around the vestibule, his frown growing. Then a flash of sadness behind his dark eyes.

"It was a girl, then, was it?"

Malcolm froze. He'd told no one about the baby, certainly not his father. He opened his mouth to protest, but Edward cut him off,

"I know you well enough to know when you're up to something, Malcolm, and when you're excited about something. The obvious reason you'd be *that* excited and take off to New York for over a month would be to watch for the birth of a child. So, it was a girl, then?"

Malcolm considered saying yes, but knew even this lie was risky. A werewolf was supposed to take no interest in his daughters, logical because they were not werewolves and therefore could stay with their mothers. But his father was rarely logical, and more than once Malcolm had suspected that when a lump sum went missing from the bank account, the money—part of *his* inheritance—was going to Edward's only other child, a daughter a few years

younger than Malcolm. If Edward thought he had a granddaughter, it would be just like him to go looking for the girl, to make sure she and her mother were well cared for.

“Died,” Malcolm said as he pulled off his other shoe. “In childbirth.”

“Did he?”

Malcolm nodded.

Edward limped closer. “So it was a *he*? A son?”

Malcolm hesitated, then nodded and tossed his shoes onto the mat.

“Your first-born son dies, and you aren’t the least bit upset. How . . . odd.”

Malcolm shrugged.

“Was it the Japanese girl Dominic mentioned? The timing would certainly be right. Let me guess, Malcolm. The babe didn’t die. He just looked a little more . . . foreign than you’d like.”

With another shrug, Malcolm turned away to hang his coat on the rack.

His father’s voice hardened. “If you had a problem with a half-Japanese child, then you shouldn’t have bedded the girl in the first place.”

Malcolm grabbed his suitcase and tried to brush past his father, but Edward stepped into his path. One good shove, and the old man would topple. Hell, a *really* good shove, into the wall, and he’d topple and stay down forever. As much as Malcolm longed to do it, longed to do it almost every day, he couldn’t. Edward had made sure of that the moment his son became strong enough to best him—rewriting his will so the estate would be held in trust by the Sorrentinos, meaning someday Malcolm would have had to go crawling to Dominic for money. And that would be a fate worse than putting up with Edward.

“He’s your child, Malcolm. Your son.”

Edward's voice had softened. Malcolm's fists clenched. He hated that voice worse than the angry one, hated the reminder that whatever he did, his father still saw him as his son, needing only attention, firmness and love to "redeem" him.

Edward continued, "There is nothing wrong with a mixed-race child."

Not this mixed race, Malcolm thought, but he said nothing, just let his father continue,

"I don't care if the babe is purple, Malcolm. He's your son, and my grandson, and probably the only one we'll ever see."

"There'll be more."

Edward shook his head. "I only had two children, and you've shown no signs of faring any better, and certainly not for lack of trying. It's in our blood."

Malcolm met his father's gaze. "In *your* blood. Granddad had three sons and a whole passel of daughters. So the problem, *father*, is clearly yours. Not that it surprises me."

He saw the barb strike home and smiled. If the bloodline was weak, it was clearly Edward's fault. He was weak. Not just weak, but a coward. As a Danvers, Edward had been expected to fight for Alphahood but when the opportunity arose, he'd somehow managed to cripple his leg. No one was quite sure how it had happened—the story changed with the teller—but whatever the cause, the injury permanently took him out of the line of succession. As a mediocre fighter, Edward had stood no chance of winning a fight for Alphahood, so he'd intentionally taken himself out of the race. And everyone in the Pack knew it.

Malcolm had spend his life wiggling out from under the shadow of his father's cowardice. After Dominic, he was now the best fighter in the Pack. Among the mutts, Malcolm's reputation for ruthlessness surpassed that of every other Pack werewolf. No one could call him his father's son . . . except in this one thing, his inability to carry on the line.

“Perhaps you don’t want the child, Malcolm, but I do. Give me my grandson and I’ll never trouble you with a moment of his care.”

Malcolm hesitated, but knew his father would never give in so easily. As weak as Edward was, he could be relentless when it came to something he wanted, pursuing it as single-mindedly as Malcolm had pursued his reputation. Tell him no, and he’d go out and find the boy.

Malcolm couldn’t allow that to happen. The thought of claiming that strange baby as his own made his skin creep, and made his gut roil with something almost like fear. No, not fear. Contempt. Contempt for those women and their petty magics and that peculiar child. He knew then what had to be done, and that he should have done it when he’d first laid eyes on the boy. There was only one way to eliminate the problem—by *eliminating* the problem.

Malcolm shrugged. “You want him, fine. I’ll go get him, Just don’t bother me with the brat.”

His father smiled. “I won’t.”

Malcolm’s father insisted on accompanying him to New York. That he hadn’t foreseen, but it turned out to be a minor bump, not the road block it could have been. Edward was quite content to stay at the hotel and wait for Malcolm to deliver his grandson. He never suggested helping Malcolm take the child. Didn’t have the stomach for it, Malcolm figured.

He often wondered how his father got him away from his mother. Pack Law was clear on that—a son had to be taken and all contact with the mother severed. Ideally, you’d convince the unwed mother that this was for the best—take the boy, and leave her free to marry without the burden of an illegitimate child. If that didn’t work, kidnapping was the next option. The missing

child of an unwed mother was a low priority for police. If she caused trouble, though . . . well, there was a final solution, though Malcolm had never known a Pack werewolf to resort to it. He didn't know why—it seemed the easiest route to go, and safe enough if you were careful. He knew all about being careful—had enough practice at it.

When he reached the apartment, only the grandmother was there. It was growing dark—night was always the best time for this sort of thing. He could have waited outside the building, taking care of the girl and the child without ever setting foot in that apartment, and leave the old woman alone, but that would be the soft way, the coward's way, his father's way. Strength meant doing what needed to be done—all of it, no half measures or short cuts that could come back to haunt you.

He went in the window again, and saw that he'd come not a day too soon. The room was piled with boxes—moving boxes. He could hear the old woman in the kitchen, where he'd spied her through the other window. It would be easy to slink down the hall, slip up behind her, and snap her neck. So easy . . .

He strode to the kitchen door, and shoved it open so hard it banged against the counter. The old woman spun around. Seeing him, her eyes went wide. He expected her to lunge for a knife, but she only stood there, wide-eyed.

“Where's my son?”

As he spoke, he advanced on the old woman, backing her into the corner. She went willingly, as if it never occurred to her to do otherwise, to fight back.

“Where's my son?” he said, slower, enunciating the words.

“He—he is not here, “” she said, her voice heavily accented, but her English good. “We didn't think—”

“That I’d be back? That I’d want him?”

She swallowed. “I know this—this is your way. To take the sons. But this one—you do not want this one. He will be different. Better for us to take him.” She managed a strained smile. “You will have more sons. Many more sons. Big strong boys like yourself.” The smile grew and she tapped her temple. “This, I see.”

He hesitated. “See?”

Her face relaxed and she nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes. I know this. I know many things.” Her eyes grew crafty. “You have not heard of our race, have you?”

“But you’ve heard of mine.”

“Who has not heard of the mighty werewolves? That is why we came here. No accident, this. We chose you. We are a rare race, a dying race. We needed a . . .” Her eyes rolled as if searching for a word. “An infusion. Stronger blood to mix with ours, and what is stronger than the werewolves? We chose your race, and then we chose you from your race, to strengthen our blood.” Her gaze met his. “We honored you in this.”

“You did, did you? Well, maybe it’s not an honor I asked for, a freak of a son, a half-breed—“

“And no concern of yours.” Her voice took on a tone at once soothing and authoritative. “This child need not be any concern of yours. We will take him.”

She waved at the boxes on the counter. “We’re already preparing to leave. We will go and never trouble you again, and you will have more sons and grow to take your rightful place as Alpha, unencumbered by this child.’

Caught in her gaze, he felt the urge to give in. Why not let her to take the child? It would be easy. So easy . . .

He reached out and snapped her neck.

He'd barely finished stuffing the old woman under the sink when a sound came from the front hall. A panic-choked shout. The girl and the child. She called again, in English this time.

“Grandmama!”

A whimper cut through the silence. The child. Not screaming or wailing, just giving one soft whimper. Malcolm heard a torrent of foreign words as the girl tried to calm the child, then a bustle as she laid him down.

The girl shouted again. Light steps ran up the hall, racing for the old woman's bedroom first.

Malcolm slipped from the kitchen and headed for the living room. There was the child, in his bassinet by the sofa. His dark eyes were as wide and worried as the old woman's had been, and he writhed in his tightly wrapped blanket.

Malcolm stepped toward the child. The patter of light running footsteps sounded behind him. Then a shriek.

Malcolm turned. The girl stood in the doorway.

“Get away from my son,” she said, her English perfect and unaccented.

“*Your* son? Oh, I beg to differ on that.”

She stepped toward him. “Where is my grandmother?”

Malcolm only smiled. Her jaw worked and she spat an epithet he didn't understand.

“Get out,” she said. “We've done you no harm.”

“No harm? You hid my son—”

“My son. Your only part in his making is long over, and you were well compensated for that.” Her lips twisted. “Not exactly a hardship for you.”

“Nor for you, as I recall.”

“You think I enjoyed—” She spat another foreign word, and pulled herself up straight. She barely reached his chest, but acted as if she stood on eye-level with him. “You weren’t even my choice. You were theirs. I wanted the big man, the one who’d proven he could sire sons.”

Malcolm swung at her, but she seemed to expect this, and nimbly dove to the side and raced for the child. He wheeled and shoulder-slammed her out of the way, but she kept coming, clawing, kicking, fighting to get to the child, stopping only when he reached into the bassinet and grabbed up the tiny body.

She went still. “Give me my son.”

She held herself rigid, every muscle locked tight as if to keep from flying at him. Her eyes blazed and her lips were parted, teeth bared in a frozen snarl. She looked . . . magnificent, pulsing with fury and hate. A worthy mother for his son.

Malcolm ripped his gaze from hers. It was a trick, some magic, just like her grandmother had used on him, trying to bend him to her will, to break *his* will.

He looked down at the child in his arms. The boy gazed back at him, bright-eyed and calm. Malcolm’s hand moved to the child’s throat.

“Stop! He’s your son!”

“I’ll have more. Your grandmother said so.”

“My grandmother—?”

“She foresaw it.”

“Foresaw—?” The girl let out a bark of a laugh. “Is that what she told you? We have our gifts, but that is not one of them. No one can foresee the future, and that child you hold may well be the only one you’ll ever see.”

“Maybe I’m willing to take that chance.”

He put his hand around the baby’s throat. The girl flew at him. One good shove, and she hit the wall hard enough that she should have gone down and stayed down. But she didn’t. She pushed herself up and, blood dribbling from her mouth, came at him again. Her nails ripped furrows down his bare forearm. So he dropped the child. Just dropped him.

The girl screamed and dove for the baby. He kicked her, kicked her with all he had, square in the gut, and she sailed backward into the wall, arms still outstretched toward the child. When she hit the floor this time, she lay there only a moment, then started dragging herself toward her son, her nails scraping the floor. Malcolm reached down to scoop up the baby up.

The front door swung open.

“Malcolm!”

He stopped, bent over the silent child, and looked over at his father. Edward’s gaze was riveted to the girl.

“Oh, my God. What have you done?” Edward’s cane clattered to the floor, and he limped to the girl, then dropped down at her side. His hands went to the side of her neck. “Malcolm! Call Emilio. Now!”

The girl’s eyelids fluttered. She said a word and reached for the child. Edward gently laid her down, and scrambled over to the baby. As he picked up the baby, the child kicked and swung his fists, but didn’t make a sound. Edward hurried back to the girl and pressed the child to her.

“Help is coming,” he said.

“Don’t—” Her tongue flicked over her bloodied lips. “Don’t let him . . .”

“He won’t hurt the boy. Ever. You have my word on that.”

“Take—” Her voice was ragged, eyes almost closed. “You. Take . . .”

Edward squeezed the girl’s hand. “I will.”

The words had barely left his lips when she went limp. Edward’s head fell forward. Then the baby whimpered and he looked up sharply. He slipped the child from his mother’s arms and gathered him up in his own. Then he pushed to his feet.

“Clean this up,” he said, his voice tight.

Without a glance Malcolm’s way, Edward limped to the door, then stopped, his back still to his son.

“Get a blanket. It’s cold outside. He needs a blanket.”

Malcolm looked at the blanket at his feet, the one that had fallen from the child. It was the one covered in those damnable symbols. He kicked the blanket under the sofa. If his son had to live, then no one could know about this “infusion” of magic-maker blood. He’d been used by these women, but that would be his secret, his shame, and his alone.

He grabbed a plain blanket from the bassinet, walked to the door and handed it to his father.